

## *Death of a Song*

Autumn winds rake the Oregon alders and bigleaf maples, carpeting my forest path with a damp yellow mat, leaving the few and dying to cling to their stems against the inevitable. Just as inevitably my musician's mind begins to consider why songs should die, why beautiful things must become messy trash to rake away.

What a curiosity it is that the unchanging God created a changing world to be managed by its most changeable creatures. Birds build nests and beavers, dams; but man is a true expert, and true megalomaniac at adjusting his environment to taste. *Homo Sapiens*, some call us. *Homo*, "alike"; *Sapiens*, "to be wise, or to taste." We are alike in that we taste, we examine - and create new things to tingle our taste buds! Of the many creatures who sing, only one tastes ideas and invents beautiful phrases to share with our fellows and with our Creator.

Birds are smart, but not terribly inventive in music. If there were bobwhites in Eden, they sang "bobwhite!" while Adam dug his furrows; they merrily chirped "bobwhite!" while the Huns sacked Rome the Eternal; and they entertained your grandmother with that cheerful "bobwhite!" while she was putting up her wash on the line. A mockingbird can go one up on that by mocking the bobwhite, or any other neighbor. A parrot can even imitate a human being. But that's the limit for birds. Now take a person. A human three-year-old can invent a hundred songs, while her eight-year-old brother dreams up an entire world, with cities, soldiers, and stories that no one else has ever imagined!

This is because we invent. We dare to ask the question: "is there something better than this?"

A cat may seem creative while it investigates over a ball of string, leaping, growling and twisting, making a mouse of it; but tomorrow she is bored with the game. Perhaps next week she'll bat at it a few times and walk away. But a human being asks the question, "where is the joy?" The joy comes, flourishes, and is gone with the autumn wind. And the human being asks, "is that all there is? Or is the whole thing just a ball of yarn to bat around?"

As I walk, a gust fills the air with a whirling cloud of golden leaves, and then all is quiet. Now there are a few more leaves on the ground, and fewer on the branches. All trees lose their leaves. Only city people value a clean driveway; in the forest, you can sweep clean in the morning and by dinner time not believe you swept. The ginkgo drops most of its golden triangles in twenty-four hours; the subtle evergreen sheds its dead needles behind new growth on the tips of the stems. In either case, the tree is very much alive, even if it looks like a sheaf of gray sticks. During these dark northern winters I nourish my hope in the reality that each naked

stem harbors dozens of buds - the old leaf is actually pushed out by a bud, and the branch grows out with a bonus bud for spring.

Thus the dying of the autumn leaves is really the glorious flourish of a first movement of a symphony - the second movement not a funeral dirge at all but soft music under a quiet snowfall while the internal energy builds and the world waits for the bursting forth - the symphony's finale, the *recapitulation*, when a vigorous tempo is restored and a new melody is introduced: the musical theme reborn, with a new outline and new energy, racing to springtime.

Just as a symphony's recapitulation teaches us that a song doesn't stay dead forever, springtime restores hope in our hearts. There is an answer to the question, "where is the joy?". The answer is: 'Right here! - right here in my heart, where God is'. This response does not come as predictably as the onset of spring or the traditional movements of a symphony. Nor does it last all that long, if joy is all we seek. Sometimes our joy is revived with the full passion of the cat and its ball of string; but before long we lose interest, needing the catnip mouse for a shot of fervor, until that drug goes stale. We try to stimulate the resurrection of joy through the wonderful power of memory - but that too fades into brown along with our pressed leaves, photos and antiques. Certainly, if we are part of an eternal kingdom, there must be something with more sustaining power for our lives!

God's songbook, the Psalms, contains wonderful pictures of what is better. The first Psalm envisions the wise as "trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit in each season without fail, whose leaves never wither." This is not a painting of some mythical magic tree that bears apples twelve months a year and whose leaves are constantly green. This is about real people whose great love for fellow man outvotes the impulse for mischief. It's about real people who don't just suck life from God, but who take delight in the giver of life - Jesus, the Christ, the fountain of the Holy Spirit. This delight keeps a person's soul as fresh as a spring-green leaf.

I am a music-creator, a composer. My seventy-five year-old leaves are yellowing, but the sap is still flowing. The fingers of my left hand have lost strength and flexibility, and they tremble; so writing music down becomes even more important. One day not that far away, I will die, and surely my wife will put my songs in a cherished box; and maybe a friendly choir director, if there still are choirs, will find one in the file cabinet at one of my former churches, and pull it out and sing it. Or maybe I will write a "hit" during my remaining years! But two or three generations down the line that song and all the others in the box will surely, inevitably land in a dumpster or an atomic recycler or whatever they have by then. The Cloud? Will our stuff float in cyberspace forever? Not. Sooner or later the Cloud will be destroyed or superseded; and what is not saved on some tiny digital ark will perish in a nanosecond.

As I walk along my soggy, leafy path, I find myself humming “Majesty” by Jack Hayford, a song which changed the face of Christian music. He was once famous as the father of the contemporary praise song. Today, many might ask, who is Hayford? Did he have a band?” Only a very few bands stay famous for ten years. But neither Hayford nor the thirty-four other writers who have published a song called "Majesty" wrote theirs in vain. Songs "decompose" slowly, through repetition inducing boredom; but they have fertilized the imaginations of a new set of writers.

So Autumn - when the leaves are turning into brown mush on the ground and the buds of spring are nothing yet but bumps on the ends of twigs - autumn is a great time to prepare for the joyous outbursts of color, warmth and rain – a new season. If you are a writer, get that pen making scribbles, not sappy contrived stuff but something about where you are now. Go visit somebody for no reason. Buy some chocolate and romance your wife. Depressed? Get a coat on, go out into the dull gray world with a Bible and read the stories of Jesus out loud. Not soft out loud. Loud, out loud. To the wind and the rabbits and raccoons. I don't know what you are supposed to do; you decide. Just don't try to put yesterday's yellow leaf back on the tree. Springtime is coming, and it is not about a revival of fashion. Springtime is about resurrection.