

POTPOURRI

Fall-Winter, 2016

SYMPHONY IN A(utumn) MINOR

a poem under construction

Fall, 2016, was a minor event in central Arkansas. Temperatures hovered in the low eighties through October, and rainfall was well below normal. By early November trees that mark the beginning of fall for me had turned brown and dropped their leaves. I gave up on autumn. Then an old-timer told me occasionally the leaves turned as late as Thanksgiving. Sure enough, autumn arrived mid-November. Late and brief, it was a restrained season: a symphony in a minor key.

I SONATA



The first colors were dramatic

II ADAGIO



The season progressed slowly

III MINUET



As leaves fell, trees retaining color danced in the breeze

IV RONDO



Turning last, Bradford Pears ushered out the season with boisterous color

- **CAT TALES: Shimmer's Christmas**

Shimmer, my rescue cat with Affection Deficit Disorder, had a tough fall. Whenever she wasn't in my lap she paced and cried, paced and cried. (You can imagine what kind of fall I had.) Kitty tranquilizers had no effect. In November I received a postcard inviting me to bring Shimmer in for her six-month checkup. At first I dismissed the idea. But then it struck me that pain might account for her restlessness. I made the appointment: 12/20 at 9 a.m.



The vet checked her over from stem to stern and returned a verdict of completely healthy. Dismayed, I described Shimmer's behavior. Knowing she was a rescue cat, Dr. Bilby asked if there were multiple cats in the home she came from. When I told him thirteen, he said, "There's your answer. Shimmer's looking for someone to play with."



Up until the last couple of years, I've been a dog person. I've had the occasional cat, but it's been a companion to my dog. I studied Shimmer. Was she really pining away for the company of one of her own kind? "I've never had two cats," I said hesitantly. "I don't have any idea about how to go about it." Dr. Bilby smiled. "Not a problem. Just call Nancy at the Shelter. You got Shimmer from her, didn't you?"

I did, indeed. When I got home, I called Nancy and described the situation. "That makes sense," she told me. "I have just the cat for Shimmer. His name is Scamp. He's a couple of years younger than Shimmer, friendly and docile. We'll give it a try and see if they like each other." I agreed.



Remember the appointment at 9:00 a.m.? By 3:30 p.m. Tuesday, Scamp was installed in my living room in his crate. That evening I called my daughter and told her about the new addition to our family. Her response? Laughter. And then a quiet, "Sucker..." Coming from someone who has two cats and two dogs (all rescue animals), this evaluation didn't seem quite fair. "Oh, Mom," she said. "Being a sucker is a good thing. It means you have a warm heart."

Scamp has been with us for almost two weeks. Watching the two cats get used to each other through the open wire crate was quite interesting. At first Shimmer hid. Then she came out and hissed at Scamp. Scamp just sat and watched her. After a couple of days, Shimmer started hanging out by the crate without hissing. That was when I started letting Scamp out—a few hours at first. Now the crate is gone and Scamp is making himself at home. I woke up this morning with a cat on each side. *Prrr...*



- **A BOOK TO READ EVERY YEAR**

Usually I read a book only once. Occasionally, if I particularly like the author, I read a book a second time. But there's one book I read every year. Now, that is. When I first encountered *Life of the Beloved* by Henri Nouwen, I read it once a month. In fact, I did my best to memorize it.

Remember *Fahrenheit 451*? In this futuristic fantasy, Ray Bradbury described a society where all books were banned and burned. To preserve the books for later generations, book-lovers would choose one book and memorize it. They would, in a very real sense, *become* the book. So you might meet *A Christmas Carol* or *Wuthering Heights* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In a society like that (perhaps not far off) I would want to become *Life of the Beloved*.

Subtitled *Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, this slim volume began as Nouwen's attempt to explain his life as a Christian to his long-time friend journalist Fred Bratman. Ironically, the book failed in that goal, becoming instead a classic for Christians already on a spiritual journey. I leave you with a recommendation and a quotation: "All I want to say to you is, 'You are the Beloved,' and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being—'You are the Beloved.'" (p.26)

- **WHY ARKANSAS?**

The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra



You might be surprised to know we have world-class musicians in Arkansas. I certainly was! Unexpected as it is, Philip Mann, music director of the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra (ASO) in Little Rock is gaining a worldwide reputation. In the five years he's conducted the ASO, it has seen audience and artistic growth as well as achieving financial health. (It's one of only five symphony orchestras in the U.S. that runs consistently in the black.)

The ASO Masterworks series has two performances—Saturday night and Sunday afternoon. Since Little Rock is an hour's drive on freeway from Hot Springs Village, I'm happy the Symphony Guild takes a bus to the Sunday afternoon performances.

This year's programs include Mozart and Schubert; Beethoven's *Symphony #7*; *The Pines of Rome*; Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto #3*; Mahler's *Resurrection*. The final Sunday afternoon event (April 9) "Beethoven and Blue Jeans" has become a yearly tradition. Aimed at drawing in people who might ordinarily be intimidated by classical music, it features a street fair with brats and beer before the concert. Everyone from the conductor to the audience dresses in blue jeans and come for a fun time.

So if it's culture you crave, y'all come to Arkansas, hear?

- **MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS: THE ELEPHANT IN MY LIVING ROOM**

I don't like to talk about it. I do my best to ignore it. Most of the time I pretend I don't have it. *It*, of course, is Multiple Sclerosis (MS). So why bring it up now? Because for the last couple of months I haven't been able to ignore my MS or pretend I don't have it.

First, a little background. MS is a progressive disease in which "rogue" white blood cells cross from the circulatory system (where they're supposed to stay) into the nervous system. Once there, these vagabonds go about their business of attack. Not finding any foreign bodies in the nervous system, they attack the protective sheath of the nerves and create lesions on the brain or the spinal cord. These lesions play havoc with messages the brain is trying to send to various parts of the body. Like most neurological diseases, no one knows what causes MS or how to cure it. Current medications vie for the title *Best at Slowing Down* the progression of the disease.

Because doctors are required to do something with diseases they can't predict or control, neurologists study MS and

do their best to describe and diagnose it. At the moment, specialists use three major categories:

- ✚ Relapsing/Remitting: The most common form of MS, approximately 85% of people with MS are diagnosed with RRMS. As its name implies this form the disease is characterized by relapses in which symptoms worsen. Relapses are followed by periods of remission in which symptoms disappear, either partially or completely. Over time disability can worsen or remain relatively stable.
- ✚ Primary Progressive: The most severe form of MS, about 15% of people with MS are diagnosed with PPMS. This form of the disease is characterized by increasing neurological disability usually without periods of remission.
- ✚ Secondary Progressive: Most people diagnosed with RRMS eventually transition to SPMS. In this form the person has had the disease long enough to have sustained permanent damage to the particular nerves (different for each person, of course). Typically the level of disability will remain stable for an unpredictable amount of time. Then suddenly, for no known reason, the level of disability increases. The disease then plateaus for some unknown period. Another increase in disability usually occurs later, etc.

So—on a global level MS is completely unpredictable. The only way to actually diagnose it is with an MRI, yet the relationship between the images on an MRI and the actual disability is not yet understood. On a daily level, MS is just as unpredictable. MS Fatigue (think “nervous system fatigue”) is the symptom most people list as the one that controls their lives the most because of its unpredictability. Given the mysteries of the disease, ignoring it is a pretty good technique for living with it. You deal with it when you’re forced to. You ignore it when you can.

But back to *The Elephant In My Living Room*. Perhaps you’ve wondered what happened to all the promised newsletters. December, 2015-April, 2016 they came once a month. Then there was a gap of four months (to early September). Then came another four-month gap, bringing us to January, 2017. The explanation: I’m in the Secondary Progressive stage of MS, and I’ve taken a couple of tumbles off what had been a seven-year plateau. I fatigue more frequently than I used to, and walking has become significantly more difficult.

The good news is I’m still walking and still driving with hand controls. In addition, I have help coming in one afternoon a week. I’ve passed through denial, anger, and bargaining to arrive at acceptance. I even experienced flashes of joy over Christmas.

- **MY WRITING LIFE**



Writing is more than a mental exercise—it’s physically demanding as well. So the challenges I’ve faced with my MS have had an impact on my writing life. The rewrite of *Guardians of the Canyon* stalled out after chapter 3 and then again after chapter 7. I’m happy to report that I’m back on track with chapter 8 finished and chapter 9 well under way. I had hoped to be finished by Christmas, but that deadline was my own. My agent, Jim Hart, assures me it’s the quality that will matter when I finish this rewrite, not the date.

I’ve kept up with “Twitter Bible,” my weekly scripture-reflection blog, but only with a lot of help from other writers. Dr. Paul Stroble and Gail Kittleson have written one entry a month for me and other friends have helped out with occasional reflections. If any of you have a favorite scripture you’d like to share, please let me know. I welcome other voices as we try to keep scripture at the heart of our lives.