

I stand in the silence of a late-winter wood as sparse flecks of snow drift down. The light frosting of white outlines each barren branch, each dried bush and fallen log. There is not a sound. All around is the gentle wrap of solitude and quiet. Through the trees, perhaps one hundred feet away, two does munch upon straggles of old grass still taller than this bare wisp of covering. Hearing my footstep, a nearby squirrel dashes upward to the safety of her nest, high in the upper branches of the oak. All is quiet. All is serene.

But there *is* a sound. What do I hear? Is it the stomping of deer, irritated by my invasion of their dwelling? Is it the squirrel, chattering and scolding from high overhead? Is it the rush of my own breathing in the frosty morning air? What is it I hear?



In the Late-winter Wood

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. (C.S. Lewis)

Do I, LIKE THE DIMINUTIVE HOBBITS IN *LORD OF THE RINGS*, hear the voices of the trees and their mysterious Ents? Do I hear my own thoughts amplified, projected into the stillness as if emanating from a different source? Do I hear God? Perhaps not—not precisely, at least.

In the quiet there is the rare opportunity for my spirit to commune not only with His, but with the "spirits" of His creation.

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;

Let the sea roar, and all it contains;
Let the field exult, and all that is in it.
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy.
(Psalm 96:11-12)

Man's Creation

All around are the things of creation—things which man cannot create. Man cannot create an acorn, and have it grow into an oak. Man cannot make, from nothing, a squirrel that will mate with another to give birth to a baby squirrel. Man cannot make a buck that will grow

and shed its antlers, and keep a harem for the propagation of the species. Man can cultivate, but cannot create grass, and bushes, and trees. Only God can. Man can excavate, carve, even pulverize granite, but he cannot make it. Only God can.

What man *can* create (and does so rather well) is noise, and it is his noise that typically masks the gentle sound of creation's yearning and praise for God. Man's creations, while useful and necessary, tend more often to insulate us from God than draw us to Him. The useful, even laudable sounds generated by the factory,

the mill, the print shop, the marketplace do not carry the voice of God, but of the earth. Of flesh.

Unlike man, the trees have not fallen into sin. They have no soul, thus no prospect for eternal life, but neither do they transgress against their Maker. What voice they have is untainted, pure, and reserved for the object of their praise.

Then the trees of the forest will
sing for joy before the Lord;
For He is coming to judge the
earth.

(1 Chronicles 16:33)

Words for Him Alone

I stand in the silence of a late-winter wood and, once the clamor of my own self interest has subsided, in the stillness my spirit begins to hear the murmuring of creation's praise of God. There is nothing animistic about what I sense—God does not, as some believe, literally dwell in the components of nature. Neither do the things of nature have literal voices. But what I begin to feel around me as I quiet my own spirit is in a sense the very *vibration* of creation, that lingering echo of the moment God set, quite literally, His own fingerprints upon this earth.

Only God can hear the voices of the trees, for their words are only for Him. We of flesh may hear them groan and squeak; we may hear them rattle and crack their branches in the frigid north wind; we may hear the gentle swish of their summer leaves, and their scratching descent in the autumn. But these are sounds for earth-dwellers. Only God can hear their words of praise.

For us to be privy to this exchange, we must first come away from the noise of our own kind. The humming communion between Creator and creation can only be heard in those places free of man's discord. But, of course, our purpose is not to eavesdrop on the trees, or their cousins the bushes and grass, but to use the quiet of their dwelling for our own communion with the Lord.

“For you will go out with joy
And be led forth with peace;
The mountains and the hills
will break forth into shouts
of joy before you,
And all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.”

(Isaiah 55:12)

The trees express their praise; we must express our own.

The Longing

When a believer is reborn into the family of God, he or she is given a longing—a sometimes painful, unrequited longing to experience the things of one's new place of birth. Though we have never seen it, have no memories of it, have been told little about it, we still have a visceral longing for it. We have never spoken, in person, with God, but we long to hear His voice. We have never seen the Spirit, but we long to feel Him on a deeper, more profound,

more life-changing level. We have never touched the person of Christ, but there is in us a longing to be held in His arms.

I stand in the silence of a late-winter wood and listen. I listen for everything the world does not want me to hear. I listen for the voice of my sovereign God.



In speaking of this desire for our own far-off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence... Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. Wordsworth's expedient was to identify it with certain moments in his own past. But all this is a cheat. If Wordsworth had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it; what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not *in* them, it only came *through* them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the things itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited... The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret...Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation.

(Lewis)