

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL

We need tread only lightly upon the sorrows of this world,

for there is a joy beyond ourselves,

a joy beyond our circumstances,

a joy beyond every encumbrance.

the

Joy!

*When morning gilds the skies,
My heart awaking cries:
May Jesus Christ be praised;
Alike at work or prayer
To Jesus I repair:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*Does sadness fill my mind,
A solace here I find:
May Jesus Christ be praised;
Or fades my earthly bliss,
My comfort still is this:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*In heaven's eternal bliss
The loveliest strain is this,
May Jesus Christ be praised;
The powers of darkness fear,
When this sweet chant they hear:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*Sing, suns and stars of space,
Sing, ye that see His face,
May Jesus Christ be praised;
God's whole creation o'er,
For aye and evermore
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

*Be this, while life is mine,
My canticle divine,
May Jesus Christ be praised;
Be this th' eternal song,
Through all the ages long:
May Jesus Christ be praised.*

Katholisches Gesangbuch, Würzburg

Man—that is, all of mankind—has blessed itself with a counterfeit emotion it calls “joy.”

The joy man has created, however, is often riddled with sarcasm, cynicism, revenge, arrogance or, at best, silliness.

As he so often does, man has settled for an inferior product; in his ignorance, he has taken his own low humor as the supreme example of ultimate joy. Thinking only he knows best, he has decided that small experiences such as laughter, feeling good, happiness, and pleasure are synonymous with real joy.

But there is only one authentic joy, and it is God-created. It is an experience of His devising, and every related man-created experience or emotion pales in comparison.

The believer’s joy is a sometimes powerfully quiet, sometimes riotously ecstatic exultation based on the presence of God in a life. That presence is called the Holy Spirit, that blessed companion who is the engine of our joy. God’s joy come down, translated by the Spirit, transcends any earthly pretender as it weaves itself through every temporal experience, every moment, every part of a life.

God’s joy is not just present, but active in our sorrows; it is the force that holds our bearing in the storms and earthquakes that challenge our relationship with Him.

You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 1:6

His joy surrounds and upholds, lifting our fears above the fray, our expectations beyond ourselves.

You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.

Lord my God, I will praise you forever.

Psalms 30:11-12

The casual believer can readily understand the value of God’s joy in a life when trying times hit; no sane person can be against having an es-

cape from trials. But the same casual believer may not so easily understand that in God’s economy, trials are meant to actually *produce* the joy.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

James 1:2-4

God’s joy, like His trials, is a deep and powerful thing—bearing nothing but confusion for the worldly man and mystery for the casual believer, but incalculable peace to the one who dares to plumb the depths of His riches.

Happiness may bring momentary pleasure, but true joy always points to God.

I could have stayed in bed, but then I would have missed the opportunity to say "good morning" to God through the voice of a cardinal.

The early morning air is clean and crisp. The summer sun shoots golden rays through the trees from its low angle, spotlighting every detail around me. The green carpet of grass, so dark and thick from the generous spring rains, wears its morning shawl of sparkling dew like a rainbow of diamonds. The green leaves of the trees move softly back and forth in the gentle stillness, outlined by the sunlight against the dark blue of the clear dawn sky.

An irritated doe, insulted by my breach of protocol, snorts at me from the pond and trots off into the safety of nearby brush. But the birds in joyous chorus sing their greeting from the overhead branches. A brown thrasher limbers his chords, running through his lyrical repertoire, filling the cool morn-

ing air with strains that Mozart would have copied down. The wrens add their rhythmic counterpoint, bouncing notes up and down the scale like cool water splashing over small pebbles.

I could have stayed in bed. The night had been pleasantly cool, and I was comfortably ensconced beneath several layers. No one would have faulted me a few more minutes of blissful slumber before beginning the day's work. But from two floors down I can hear the distant clattering of a mouse trying to free himself from one of the traps I had set in the canning room on the first floor. I rise from my warm bed and descend to inspect the traps. A solitary captive glares back at me through the clear plastic flap that is the only barrier between his imprisonment and freedom. His wide black eyes speak volumes of his annoyance over being so rudely inconvenienced, and his small round ears

twitch nervously, sending me a semaphore message, "Get me out of here this instant!"

I cross the soft rise that takes me from the back of the house to the old west burn pile—now overgrown with weeds and reducing down into mulch, now only a home to birds and mice, and anything else needing shelter.

From the old burn pile I look down into the valley just beginning to catch the light of the sun rising behind me. The hillsides toward the west are bisected—the top rows of trees painted gold by the sun, while those further down still rest in the shaded gloom of pre-dawn light. Deeper still, down in the hollows where cattle munch their breakfast and farmers begin their daily toil, pockets of fog drape the valley in a mystical, Brigadoon cloak, blanketing the curving rows of corn and soybeans.

A Morning

Life bursts at the seams in this wet year. Every living thing—trees, grass, flowers and vegetables, cows and sheep, moths, cockroaches, June bugs, possums and snakes—everything this year is extravagant in its vitality. Healthy green is the predominate color of the foliage, everything bursting with the juices of life.

Even mice. The anxious one in my hand vibrates his fear combined with anger, reminding me that he considers himself in an unpleasant situation and still waits to be released. I pass the hole where once stood the old cherry tree, toppled last year by its aged rot. I pass by the trellis buried beneath the huge mound of wisteria; erected to support the flowering vine, the vine is now the only thing holding up the fragile trellis.

My mudders glisten from the wet grass as I cross up the rise that will take me to the new burn pile on the edge of the north field. The large circular clearing, its soil blackened and gray with ash, is all that is left of the towering accumulation of last year's and this spring's work clearing branches and brush. With the old burned away, the pile will now begin again, as we set to the never-ending task of maintaining the property.

I pause to look out over the rolling, sloping terrain of the small valley over which our land rests. I inhale the clean, bright air. It is the beginning of a new day—a day never experienced before. What lies ahead? What new discoveries will brighten the way? What wonderful things will be woven through this day's hours?

In my hand, the mouse vibrates his displeasure, so I move beyond the burned clearing, over the mowed grass to the taller grass of the open field that slopes down toward the gravel road. I rotate the plastic trap so that the flap that has been covering the opening swings down. In a flash the mouse is free, shooting from the trap like a bullet, flying through the air to land in the tall, wet grass.

And then he is gone.

There is a daily rhythm to the songs

of birds. Just before dawn they begin their chorus, rising in number and volume with the rising of the sun until, in a moment like this, the morning quiet is overwhelmed by the antiphonal choir perched in the branches of the trees. Then, as the day warms, and the sun rises higher toward its zenith, the chorus decrescendos,

punctuated only by the occasional burst of song or squawking rebuke.

For now the chorus is still in full voice. As I turn back toward the house, I pause beneath the row of poplars that divides the front lawn from the north field. I lift my gaze up the trunk of the dying tree that I

will soon be cutting down for kindling, and there in its white, skeletal branches sits a male cardinal, gloriously crimson against the green of the leaves and the deep blue of the morning sky. He hops about in the high branches, and just when I expect it, he lifts his head and sings.

It is good to give thanks to the Lord
And to sing praises to Your name,
O Most High;
To declare Your lovingkindness in the
morning
And Your faithfulness by night,
With the ten-stringed lute and with the harp,
With resounding music upon the lyre.
For You, O Lord, have made me glad by
what You have done,
I will sing for joy at the works of Your hands.
How great are Your works, O Lord!
Your thoughts are very deep.

Psalms 92:1-5

And in that moment—that bright, crystalline moment—I am with God. There is no orderly, systematic logic to explain my thoughts; if handed a pen, I could not write them down. But there in the crisp morning chill, with dawn spreading its light across the wakening land and a solitary, winged worshiper lifting his praise, I, too, am lifted into His presence.

It is a groaning, un-worded joy that overtakes my being. It is a tiny sampling of the unbounded joy I will one day experience in the Father's actual presence, as I join the chorus of all the redeemed around the throne. It is a small piece of that same joy encased in the crown I someday will be given—a crown containing a joy I cannot wear, but must cast back at His feet. For the joy is not mine to keep, but only to share for a moment with all of His creation.

...the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, To receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, And by Your will they exist and were created."

Revelation 4:10-11 NKJV

There is a joy that the Spirit of God forces upon us, even in the midst of our labors.

Afternoon

The day warms quickly, the humidity rising with the temperature, adding phantom degrees that can make a simple walk to the mailbox uncomfortable—and real work a miserable enterprise. The lush foliage created by the bountiful spring rains adds fuel to the waves of humidity that push up from the Gulf of Mexico. My work clothes feel clammy against the skin, like a claustrophobic fur coat.

The barn is hot, the air close and stifling as I gather my tools. I look for the joy, but it is elusive. Where is the joy in sweating under a hot sun? Even the few birds who are still singing sound weary and morose. There is no breeze; nothing stirs but the laborer going about his rounds.

Linda needs the lower garden tilled, so I back out the machine, top off its gas and oil. With one pull it starts; I shift into Foreword and aim it toward the rectangular plot.

All the advertisements for garden

tillers show a well-dressed young woman, perfectly coiffed with not a drop of perspiration dampening her brow, with no more than a few fingers of one hand effortlessly guiding her shiny clean tiller through the soil of a perfectly level garden. But in the real world I must wrestle the beast uphill, sweat pouring down into my eyes, using all the fingers and hands of both arms. I must lean into the effort, pushing and straining as the rotating tines fight against the winter-compacted soil. The machine belches gasoline fumes back into my face as a gust of hot wind blows by. I pause, gasping for breath in the thick, humid air.

And there at my feet lies the joy. I bend down and sift my hand through the freshly tilled soil: fine, ready to receive the seeds. Here is the joy. Long ago the Lord entrusted this land to us. He didn't give it to us, in the sense that the world understands that word. But the Lord brought us to it

in answer to our prayers, saying, "Here is where I want you to live. I place this land—this home—into your hands to take care of for Me. Nurture it, as it nurtures you; be good stewards of the land, make it grow and prosper, and I will cause you to prosper in return."

So we work the land, and the joy springs forth—not from the produce, necessarily, but from the doing. The joy is not so much in the harvest, but in the sowing. The joy is not so much in the fine soil that passes through my fingers, but in the knowledge that it is being tilled for the Lord. He is the landlord. He is the one for whom the labor is wrought, and the joy is found in the simple act of laboring and sweating to bring glory to His name.

I suppose it is a "guy thing": We both work the land, but I run the heavy machinery. Linda will drive the old tractor to haul brush and weeds to the burn

pile, or to haul compost from the woods to her gardens, but I am the one who spends the hours mowing the several acres of lawn. If the job requires a smelly two-cycle engine spewing fumes, or a working knowledge of a hulking brute to wrestle around the property, I'm elected.

So after cleaning its blades, I put away the tiller and gas up the tractor for mowing. Now, I don't wish to complain, but when we got our new tractor, it came with an instructional videotape showing all the hows and wherefores of the machine. And, of course, in the video the shiny new tractor was being used by a gorgeous hunk on a postage stamp-sized lawn outside your typical suburban dwelling. All very Leave-it-to-Beaver. The lawn was beautifully smooth, with few obstacles to mow around. No rocks, no dandelions, no fresh gopher mounds, no gravel for the blades to inhale and carve away at their sharp edges. And naturally, he obeyed the rules by wearing goggles the whole time. He never sweat, and he never got dirty.

In the real world I must jockey around countless trees and bushes—most of which lash out at me, lacerating my bare arms with their lower branches. I must repeatedly mow over bald spots

that, when dry, blow billows of dust, and maneuver around tree roots, rocks, and planters. And there is not one square foot in our three-plus acres of lawn that could remotely be termed "flat."

The sun bears down on me, and the only breeze is the one created by my movement through the still air. Black gnats pester my ears. And again I wonder, Where is the joy?

The first section I mow is the teardrop-shaped island of grass inside the driveway loop. The old apple tree is still holding up, its branches bearing fruit this year. The next section is the largest: spread across the front of the house, wrapping east, up around the flower garden, around the wedge of large conifers, down along the drive, all the way to the gravel road. Out in the open, the sun is intense, irritating, but the blue sky is dappled with pretty cotton-puff clouds, and under my broad-brimmed hat I grin.

There is the first joy.

I fight the monotony of the long passes that take me from the west fence, straight east, around the curve of the drive north to the road. I want to use the time profitably—think time, planning time—but the heavy, steady drone of the engine makes organized

thought a chore. I wonder if I'll be able to finish the mowing today—or will those clouds collect up into thunderheads and rain me out this afternoon? What a shame that would be.

The spring and early summer rains have made more work: the grass is growing thick and fast. But with the rains come berries. Both wild and cultivated raspberries, and the wild elderberries that grow in the ditches along the roads, appreciate in wet seasons. As I pass along the fence line, the new berries are just beginning to color. Soon the thorn-armored stalks will be covered with black and red berries, and this year there will be plenty for jelly.

And there is the joy again.

As I move into the orchard to cut the scruffier grass around the young fruit trees, the purple martins swoop and swirl around me, as if wartime dive bombers strafing my position. But I am not their target. They are dive bombing mosquitoes. And I wonder why God created mosquitoes. But then the thought betrays my egocentric view of the natural world, of which man is only a part. If nothing else, mosquitoes are food for many birds, bats—and purple martins.

The orchard is an obstacle course. With all the small trees and bushes the

tractor steering gets a real work out—as do my arms, and I work up more sweat. But then I notice that the small apple trees are loaded this year. There will not only be much applesauce made this year, but with all the different varieties blended together, it will be especially good.

And there is more joy.

I pass the woodpile, near the last section, and see the flash of a chipmunk zipping from his home amid the logs to the armored safety of the rain spout. On one of the Lord's better days He created chipmunks, those tiny clowns that dart here and there, their cheeks bulging with nuts and seed, crouched atop the split wood piercing the stillness with their sharp, amplified chirp. They are small, wonderful joys.

The job done, I steer the tractor back to the barn, dusty, sweaty, my posterior both aching and numb from four hours riding the vibrating metal beast. I disembark bowlegged, stepping stiffly, wishing only to get out of my dirty clothes and into the shower. As I lower the barn door and head back to the house, I realize I have just spent a hot, dusty, weary afternoon—filling myself with joy.

The victim who was about to be sacrificed is called in the Chaldean Language, Isaac; but if this name be translated into the Grecian language, it signifies, 'laughter'; and this laughter is not understood to be that laughter of the body which is frequent in child sport, but is the result of settled happiness and rejoicing of the mind. This kind of laughter the wise man is appropriately said to offer as a sacrifice to God; showing thus, by a figure, that to rejoice does properly belong to God alone. For the human race is subject to sorrow and to exceeding fear, from evils which are either present or expected, so that men are either grieved at unexpected evils actually pressing upon them, or are kept in suspense, and disquietude, and fear with respect to those which are impending. But the nature of God is free from grief, and exempt from fear, and enjoys the immunity from every kind of suffering, and is the only nature which possesses complete happiness and blessedness. Now to the disposition which makes this confession in sincerity, God is merciful, and compassionate, and kind, driving envy to a distance from him; and to it he gives a gift in return, to the full extent of the power of the person benefited to receive it, and he all but gives such a person this oracular warning, saying, "I well know that the whole species of joy and rejoicing is the possession of no other being but me, who am the Father of the universe; nevertheless, though it belong to me, I have no objection to those who deserve it enjoying a share of it." For the Father has not permitted the race of mankind to be wholly devoured by griefs, and sorrows, and incurable anguish, but has mingled in their existence something of a better nature, thinking it fitting that the soul should sometimes enjoy rest and tranquility; and he has also designed that the souls of wise men should be pleased and delighted for the greater portion of their existence with the contemplation of the soul.

Philo (c.20 BC—c.AD 50), *On Abraham*, translated by C.D. Yonge

The west porch is a welcome sanctuary at the end of a hard day: a room of windows, most of which face the valley and hills to the west, a rocking chair, and the gentle duet of crickets and song birds finishing their day.

Days die slowly in the summer; there is still an afternoon's worth of hours beyond what would be the hour of sunset in the winter. So we work longer, push longer, and by the end of it the shower is a baptism containing about as much grace as simple water can hold.

The residue from a day's worth of sweat and grime sent swirling down the drain, I lean back into the old wooden rocker, embracing the sweet ache of soft muscles stretched beyond their capacity. My eyes feel gritty from the dust and sun, my stiff back no longer fits the contours of the chair, and my hands are sore from long hours spent gripping the handles of vibrating tools.

Our west porch is reserved seating for God's magnificent sound and light show. Decades past, Linda and I had sat in other old wooden chairs to witness the Sound and Light Show of the Giza

plateau—the dramatic splash of colored lights and recorded music and narration that tell the story of the pyramids built for the three ancient Egyptian kings. But that extravaganza was little more than flashlight and finger shadows compared to the brilliant performance played out each evening across the western sky.

Awaiting the performance, I listen to the overture.

Just as they were earlier this morning, the birds are in full chorus. The wrens, between scolding our outdoor cat for getting too close to their nest, lift their full-throated melody skyward; the cardinals chirp and warble; and across the road, in the next field, a meadowlark adds its cheerful, yet slightly melancholy song. And the brown thrasher is trying his best to imitate every other bird. Together it is a multifaceted symphony in celebration of the dying day. It is their final cho-

rus before each turn away, silently, removing to their nesting places scattered about the property, to rest before it all begins again on the morrow.

And I wonder—Why am I so cheered by the sounds of the birds? Perhaps it is because they seem to embody the full expression of my joy. There may indeed be boring biological rationale behind their songs, but to the naked eye they seem to be diminutive beings that find it hard to contain their joy. Perhaps it is because they seem to be unshackled by the same weights of convention, tradition, propriety and manners that so encumber us. To the inhibited human they seem to say, "Oh, just let it out!"

As the orange ball slowly descends into the hills, the curtain rises on tonight's performance. Stray messengers, precursors of glory, glide past, wispy exhalations of vapor back lit by the star. They tease with faint shadows

Evening

of what is to come.

Outside my window, just a few feet away, a mother turtle backs into the shallow hole she has just dug and begins depositing her eggs. She leverages her position with her back feet, shifting side to side to distribute the eggs evenly in the hole. Without a sound she places her hope in the soil of our front flowerbed.

Expectant hope. As we stir the dying embers of one day, it is to place our hope in the new day that will rise from its ashes. It is another chance, another opportunity to embrace God's grace in the light of a new tomorrow. The turtle buries her eggs in warm soil, the bird warms hers in a nest of twigs and daub, and the human gazes upon the fading light of a hard won day. All exercises in hope—hope in the future. But while the winged beast may more freely exult in God's gift of life, it is the human who has been made in His image. His Spirit courses through our veins, and if we fail to give voice to our joy as extravagantly as we might, there remains only the deep, vibrating groan of our ancestry.

At the end of a day, when the world is being painted the rich umber of fading sunlight, there is a primal hum that moves across the land, drawing us in,

drawing us upward, drawing us toward the throne.

The shadows are returning to the hollows, deepening into dusk even as the final sharp rays of the sun pierce through the treetops. Evening haze moves into the valley below, and the distant lowing of cattle announces their longing.

Mottled ranks of clouds gather and arrange themselves in a symphonic spread between porch and descending globe. Higher still, arrow-like streaks are painted east to west, west to east, by passing jetliners. Congregations of busy travelers will be missing the show tonight, but their vaporous trails will become a part of the performance.

For a moment the sun is directly behind the clouds, outlining their shapes in brilliant silver and gold, transforming, for a fleeting moment, water vapor into priceless currency. But then it sinks lower, and the clouds lose their value.

Now the curtains part, and the show begins. As the sun descends below the clouds, it paints each rank in rich pinks and purples, until all are bathed in its glorious light. And suddenly the sky is afire with a symphonic conflagration, the colors of day-end roof the land in

thunderous applause. One cannot add to the praise being uttered by creation; one can only stand in speechless awe at the work of His hand.

And there is the joy. At this moment words are meaningless chaff as my spirit soars skyward to ascend the brilliant causeway lit by God's light. There is His hand—it is painted across the sky! He has shown Himself, graciously inserted His presence into the fading embers of my weary day.

There is the joy!—the unspeakable joy that He is present, that He is near. As I ascend, He comes down to meet with me, and our spirits unite midway, lost somewhere amid the glorious hem of His robe that drapes across the sky.

And I stand humbled before Him: My God, how wonderful You are!

God alone has pure joy; it is other-worldly, but comes to man in mystic union with Him.

Beyreuther, Finkenrath