



Last week, I had occasion to sing with my choir at the funeral of a long-time member of our church. This happens from time to time. I'm a little odd – and possibly creepy – in that I kind of enjoy these final rites of passage that many attend out of duty, love and respect... but basically dread. Maybe “enjoy” isn't the right word, exactly. But I always feel privileged to be among those who are mourning the loss of someone dear, privileged to help ease their pain through music, and maybe – in some small way – just through my presence.

First Presbyterian isn't a large church, and it was filled to capacity that afternoon. Lots of our members were there, and lots of other folks, too – plenty I recognized and plenty I didn't. At some point during the scripture readings, our minister turned to the 23rd Psalm and invited us to join him in reciting it.

Uh

oh

I thought

. Do I remember the words?

And what about all those people out there in the congregation? Some of them aren't

churchgoers. Way to put them on the spot!

I needn't have worried. The minister began to speak, and the congregation joined in – even me! – and it was like some mighty Collective Unconscious rose up from God-only-knows-where, and we intoned that ancient poem (the King James version, with all its makeths and leadeths and restoreths) as one voice, in perfect unison. I'm still not sure what happened or where those words came from. Looking back, I can't even recall memorizing the 23rd Psalm – Was it at home? At school? At Sunday school? – though I certainly remember knowing it. But who knew I

still knew it? Who knew all these people – from preteens to senior citizens – knew it? And who knew saying it together would be such a magnificently comforting experience?

Don't worry. This is not a column about religion. (If you read my last piece, you know I've learned my lesson.) This is a column about poetry. And song. And how important they are. They've always *been* important, of course, but I wonder if they're not more crucial than ever today?

It seems a great irony that as our world grows ever more connected by technology, the human community feels more and more fragmented. As people settle into their comfy corners of the web, swear allegiance to this cable news channel or that one, and grow more cavalier each day about blocking and un-friending on Facebook – virtually erasing those who aren't "like us" – we've grown adept at custom-tailoring our information communities to a degree that makes me deeply uncomfortable.

So, being the ornery cuss I am... I rebel. I make a constant, steadfast effort *not* to settle into a corner... *not*
to swear allegiance to a channel,
never
to block or de-friend a soul. I'm a free agent in the Information Age... a web wanderer... a cyberspace cowboy...

The result? My head is spinning.

I find it harder and harder to focus. I'm constantly checking my sources. I'll start reading an article about a particular issue, and I can't even finish before I'm off searching for a "second opinion"... wondering what the "other side" has to say. I see opinions on Facebook that are so wildly at odds with other opinions – and so out of touch with what I perceive to be reality – I'm amazed that the posters are living on the same planet, much less in the same country. I think about popping in with my own comment, to puncture this hyperbolic statement or clarify that half-truth... but it seems more and more pointless. The Hatfields didn't *want* to understand the McCoys – and they sure didn't want to see them as neighbors – and the feeling was entirely mutual.

I fear things have only gone downhill since then.

Y'all know I have this weird, inexplicable need to make everybody put aside their differences,

join hands and sing a Carpenters song, right? I've written about it too many times to count. Well, sometimes, this compulsion drives me very near to despair. I can't get no satisfaction! (And yes, I know that's not a Carpenters song.) But I keep trying. And always, always, my head keeps spinning. Too much information... too much of it conflicting... too much of it maddeningly distorted. Too many people screaming on TV, screaming on the radio, screaming online. (IN ALL CAPS!)

Which brings me back to poetry and song. April is National Poetry Month, so people have been posting poems on Facebook. And when I come upon one, it's like a mental palate cleanser ... an oasis of truth in the desert of spin. I'm sure there are places in cyberspace where people argue mightily over poetry, but on Facebook, it's a uniter, not a divider. Doesn't seem to matter who the poet is or what the topic, people inevitably chime in with their 'likes' and their 'thank you!'s and their 'this made my day!'s. And what's so great is that, for a moment, I can actually concentrate again. I can read the whole thing, from start to finish, and not just because most poems are short, either. It's because a good poem has a certain... moral authority. It just sits there quietly, politely, and *demands* my full attention and respect. After all, the poet has given me his.

If the poem's set to music, even better. When Levon Helm of The Band died last week, I wasn't surprised by all the YouTube videos people posted – that's normal, today, when a music legend dies – but what did surprise me was how often the song of choice was "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." FB friends from all over the country (and all over the political map) displayed a unanimous adoration – a reverence, even – for the sad, haunted tale of Confederate soldier Virgil Caine. Story songs like this one touch a deep, universal nerve, I think, reminding us of our common humanity in a way not much else can, anymore. This one has all the makings of a juicy socio-political argument... and yet, nobody was arguing. Instead, we were all just listening with our hearts, speaking gently to each other, and – in my case, anyway – singing along. Almost as if we were gathered together – with Virgil, under the Tennessee pines – gazing into a campfire instead of the artificial glow of our separate computer screens.

On Easter morning, my choir sang the Hallelujah Chorus as a benediction. We do it every year, and every year, it's such a joy. The congregation stands through the entirety of our musical marathon, and there are these huge smiles on their faces, and they always clap when we're finished. (For Presbyterians, clapping in church is a rare moment of emotional abandon. Smiling in church, too, for that matter.) There's this wonderful feeling in the room, this feeling of "we're all in this together, and this is our song!"

I felt a similar sensation – though more poignant – last week, when the BHS Voices performed

their Spring Concert. They did an intricate rendition of the classic Scottish folk song, "Loch Lomond," with harmonies as sweet and stirring as the old familiar lyrics. *"For me and my true love will never meet again... on the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond."*

Who can hear those words without feeling it in the gut... that bittersweet pang of solidarity with an entire species made for love and loss? We really are in this together, but how often we forget. Poems and songs – especially the old ones that are practically in our DNA by now – remind us.

"Life is hard and then you die," the saying goes. And some days, it seems like that's the final word – especially those days when all our fancy new networks leave us feeling more estranged from each other than ever. But, there's another saying, and this one's from a song. It may not be very old, but like all the best songs, it reminds us of who we are. *"We're one, but we're not the same," Bono tells us. "We get to carry each other... carry each other."*

Hallelujah.

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