

BEAUTY

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An old man (and I use that expression more circumspectly than I used to) eased himself down on the other end of the park bench. I had been there a while, looking at nothing in particular, just enjoying the warm late summer afternoon watching squirrels and birds chase and flit about. A moment passed, then two before he spoke. “Come here often?”

“Not often enough,” I answered. “I really like the expanse of grass and the flowers ... and the clouds seem to hover above in odd formations. Good place to let the mind wander and see where it chooses to go.”

He smiled perfunctorily. “I had no idea I would come here this morning,” he said. “I just needed to get out of the house and walk a bit. I saw you sitting here and thought maybe you were another person who needed to get out and about. I just lost my wife a few weeks back,” he continued, “and the joy seems to have gone out of the days and nights. Nothing is as it was. Foods have lost their interest, colors appear duller somehow.”

I let his words rest on the bench between us for a few moments before responding. “Tell me,” I said, “how would you describe beauty?” It seemed like a question out of the blue and so sudden that it kind of took him aback ... rattled him a bit.

“What’s beauty got to do with loss and sadness?” he asked.

“Fairly much everything,” I answered, “because when you begin to see beauty in color or taste or sound, in nature or in writings or in artwork or in people or in acts of kindness, you’ll begin to find joy in life again.”

“And ... I ... suppose you have an idea of the beautiful?” He paused as he said it not so much as a challenge, but more as an invitation to continue the conversation. So I recited a sermon I once gave about my earliest appreciation of something beautiful.

“What is beautiful,” I began, “is a matter of personality or preference. Eye of the beholder sort of thing, you know. For some it is a seascape – cresting waves breaking on craggy rocks. Others find beauty in a mountain storm, or in a challenge met, in a child’s face, in a noble thought, in an adoring pet, or in a tender touch. For me, all of that is beautiful, and fills me with joy, but when I think of poignant beauty, believe it or not, my first thought is of an old tree we used to have in our front yard.

I was about five-and-a half when I first became aware of it. That was the summer I learned to climb, and day after day I’d go sit on the old oak’s limbs, dreaming a young boy’s dreams on a young boy’s days of summer. I started school that year, as I recall. September – and the days chilled off early that fall. I remember one day coming home from school only to be amazed at the sudden change my tree had undergone. Sturdy, unflinching oak with leaves of forest green had

turned so suddenly yellow, orange, and crimson hued ... well, the colors simply took my breath away. I sat in her branches all that afternoon touching this leaf and that, much as one might sit by the side of an ailing friend holding a hand. I was awed by the colors and enchanted by the perfume of nature in transition.

I could hardly wait to get home from school each day to see my tree ... turning. Her deep hued leaves now more and more graced the lawn as branches bared their limbs to the greying skies.

That tree, going through its preparations for winter, treated me to a display of beauty that to this day still pleases me – still remains significantly etched in memory. And each September at the first hint of fall, that tree, in reverie, comes back to me and I, in turn, to it. The truth be told, there was always a hint of sadness in thoughts about that oak – losing her leaves like that. I often wondered; what does she get in return that would make the transition worthwhile?

And then, I came across an article in a nature magazine. ‘We are liable to think,’ it said, ‘that cold weather kills a tree's leaves and that it takes a winter of rest in order to recover from this weakening shock. But no, to the contrary. What happens is this. Upon the approach of cold weather, all the nutrients in the leaves rush to the trunk of the tree to be stored there. This protoplasm evacuates leaf cell after leaf cell and when its last drop has left, the leaf, now but the empty shell of nutrients past, can ride the next breeze to the ground. Winter then, is when the healthy tree stores up its juices, recounts its strengths, and prepares for the promise of springtime.’”

I turned then to my bench neighbor and said: “We could learn much from the oak - you and I. Nature parades her lessons before us and begs us take notice. We are each like the oak, and bereavement is our winter chill. Our loved ones drop from our outstretched embrace no longer a part of us, no longer physically attached, no longer sharing the seasons of our trials, the seasons of our joys. There are those who envisage the loss of a loved one as an emptying process. They view themselves as suddenly, emotionally denuded, and left unprotected from the elements. They see themselves as raw wood, soft and hollow, ready, almost expecting, often wanting, to fall apart, to disintegrate.

Be like the oak, nature teaches. She loses her leaves, but takes their essence inward. Their life is her nutrient, their history becomes her strength her armor against tomorrow's caprice.

A picture of poignant beauty? I see it in my mind's eye. Yes, the tree garbed in green. Relationships in full bloom. Yes, the oak mantled in reds and ambers. Love one falling away from our reach. Yes, the stately terebinth, branches bare, puffs of snow clinging to her trunk; and she ... serene, assured, stands through it all.

A picture of poignant beauty? I'll draw it for you. One who lost a lover, a child, a dear one, a friend ... whose years of relationship, be they few or be they many, were savored as an elixir warming the soul.

When the cruel winds of sorrow and the bitter chill of separation howl round the heart as lo they will - indeed they will, then remember the oak that stands in sublime majesty, resolute,

determined, resolved to endure the furies of winter and to blossom forth again to springtime and to life – replenished and renewed by that which was left to it ... not emptied by loss, but nourished by and strengthened by the memories of moments shared, and so made whole again by cherishing the beauty of what once was.

The oak grows stronger in loss and we by remembering our dear ones in the days of their most vital greenery can find strength not only to endure, but indeed to anticipate renewal in the coming seasons of our lifetime.”

“To find strength in loss and beauty in memory. Ah-ha,” my new found congregant intoned. “Can we meet again sometime?” he asked. Tomorrow perhaps?”

“Sure, why not?” I smiled. “Same time, same bench ... different sermon?”

May the memories of our dear ones become as the nutrients that buoy us in our downward moments, and then enable us to find emotional and spiritual strength to flourish anew season after season not only in peace but also in the joy and beauty of life.

Amen