

Introduction

The secret to living a full and happy life lies in learning to sing new songs.

This book really began in songs sung thousands of years ago. But you will never really know that when you read it because its words are as clear about today as they are about all the yesterdays before us. They are, you see, the psalms which the Jewish-Christian world has been praying daily for centuries. And the reason for their relevancy is a clear one: The psalms are the story of the human soul—yours and mine—in progress.

This little book is a walk through psalms written by one people but prayed by many different peoples since. Because they are about life, about what it means to be human, what it is to struggle and laugh, to be confused and depressed, to grapple

with self-acceptance and strive for enlightenment, they are about all of us. Best of all, they are written in a universal language that never goes out of style, that is always fresh, always piercing. They are the languages of poetry and song.

There are two things in life that explain everything without explaining anything at all: One is music and the other is poetry. As Aaron Copland, the great American composer, put it, “The whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, ‘Is there a meaning to music?’ My answer would be, ‘Yes.’ And ‘Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?’ My answer to that would be, ‘No.’”

In “Yes and No,” in fact, lies the beauty of both. Both music and poetry tap into the unconscious and give it free rein. Both music and poetry bind generations and bridge cultures. Both music and poetry are about what it means to be human at the deepest part of our souls. Both music and poetry allow us to bring our own meaning to the work and so enlarge the meaning and the consciousness of others. Both music and poetry are eternally flexible: They harbor within them the meaning we give them at any point in time, as well as the meaning they speak to us in words forever.

The psalms in this book—all pieces of poetry and music—have meaning for us, too. If it is true that “the history of a people is found in its songs,” as George Jelinek says, then this spiritual history of the House of Israel is our history, as well. And, perhaps, the history of any living human being in search of the living God.

The 150 songs of praise in the Book of Psalms are a sweeping overview of the spiritual life that some say express virtually the full range of Israel’s religious faith. They are the universal story of the soul’s pilgrimage through life.

The psalmist sings to our hearts and our minds in language we understand. The psalms bring poetry to our ears that breaks open in us new particles of hope in the presence of the living God. Right here. Right now. And in particular to us.

The psalmist is poet and wisdom figure, balladeer and historian of the human struggle for God.

This little book sets out to bridge the two cultures, the two eras, the soul of the psalmist and our own.

The process is a simple one: It puts the words of the psalmist under the microscope of now in order to bring new insight and perspective to these times

and challenges. Then it is up to us to bring ourselves to the psalm, to bring our own lives to the microscope, to engage in the dialogue of the soul.

My recommendation is that each segment be dealt with slowly. It is important to participate in the conversation, to challenge the position of the psalmist with insights of our own, to memorize each versicle, perhaps, and so to immerse the vinegar of our lives in the honey of the sentences. Then, by allowing them to sift into our veins, we may begin a new song of praise for all the ages of our own lives in the heart of the world as well as in our own.

May this simple little book become an oasis in time for you, away from the stresses of a world that demands more attention than the human soul can bear. May you, too, learn from its poetry and its songs to find new meaning at the core of life. Most of all, may you make its songs your own.

Path of Life

*You will show me the path of life,
the fullness of joy in your presence.*

PSALM 16

The path of life is a sinuous system. We want it to be straight and clear. It very seldom is. It is something that unfolds a little at a time while we're living it. We talk about "planning it" and "finding it" but life is much more often discovered in hindsight than it is in vision. More often than not, we do not find life, it finds us. The only question is whether

or not we recognize it and accept it when it comes, whether or not we bring meaning to it and take meaning from it as it is.

Psychologists talk a great deal these days about “alienation,” that feeling of being out of touch with the self, of not knowing exactly what we’re about in life or how we feel about it or what things mean to us as we race always from one place to the next looking for what we want but cannot identify. Social analysts say that alienation began to mark us as a people when the assembly line began to take the place of craft. People bolted steel frames or sorted peaches or cut pants pockets all their lives but never felt the exhilarating sense of creativity that comes with “building a car,” or “growing an orchard,” or “designing a suit of clothes.”

Clearly, it all comes down to finding “the fullness of joy in God’s presence.” Maybe alienation is


*When people
are serving,
life is no longer
meaningless.*


JOHN GARDNER




the sign that we are not a secular culture after all. Maybe, in fact, we are a very spiritual one suffering from the fact that we have been cast adrift of all the props and left to find for ourselves the things that really count in life.

Soul Points...

 Meaning does not come from what we do. It comes from what we are. If we are lovers of beauty, then beauty will fill us all our days. If we are committed to justice, then justice will drive us past all fatigue or failure. If we are devoted to building human community, then we will find meaning in the people whose lives we touch. It's when we are driven by nothing other than our daily schedules that life becomes gray, listless and dour.

 Life happens quickly but the meaning of it comes into focus only slowly, slowly, slowly. The challenge is to keep on asking ourselves what it is.

 Achievement is what we do for ourselves. Meaning comes out of what we do for others.

A wisdom story from oral tradition...

Two disciples, who had become dependent on their teacher, were concerned about what they would do as he grew older and one day died.

The elder, sensing this, drew the disciples near and told them this story:

Once there was a student who was with a teacher for many years. When the teacher felt he was going to die, he wanted to make even his death a lesson.

That night, the teacher took a torch, called his student, and set off with him through the forest. Soon they reached the middle of the woods where the teacher extinguished the torch without an explanation.

“What is the matter?” asked the student.

“The torch has gone out,” the teacher answered and walked on.

“But,” shouted the fearful student, “will you leave me here in the dark?”

“No, I will not leave you in the dark,” returned his teacher’s voice from the sur-

rounding blackness. “I will leave you searching for the light.”

Psalm 16 activity...

Do one creative thing this week—bake a cake, paint a picture, cut a bouquet of flowers—that brings you “fullness of joy.”

Leadership

*Happy are those who love God...
they are a light in the darkness
for the upright, they are generous,
merciful and just.... People such as
this will be honored.*

PSALM 112

In a century that has spawned Adolph Hitler, Ferdinand Marcos, Nicolae Ceausescu, The Terminator and teenage gangs, on one side,

and Martin Luther King, Jr., Dan Berrigan, and Mahatma Gandhi on the other, we find ourselves confronted by what seem to be conflicting notions of leadership. Is it force or is it example that defines it? As a result, we have developed some very strange conceptions of what it means to be strong, effective and publicly meaningful. Leadership has become an enigma. Are we to be faithful followers or independent individuals? Are leaders those who are trusted or feared?

The questions are cultural ones. In highly communitarian societies, it is extremely important to foster individualism so that people do not get swallowed up in the name of national development. In these situations leaders become martinets who use people for the sake of personal or social ideals that may or may not benefit the individuals whose lives are ground up in the project. The pharaohs built mighty pyramids but at

*Question
authority,
but raise your
hand first.*

AUTHOR
UNKNOWN





the price of a million lives. The kings of Spain created a national treasury of American gold but at the price of entire Native American populations.


In highly individualistic societies, like our own, it is just as important to foster a sense of group responsibility so that private interests do not usurp the common good. Corporate executives who take million-dollar salaries for themselves while their laid-off middle-class workers lose their homes to failed mortgages do not benefit society, though they affect it. Street gangs who terrorize neighborhoods to exert a power that is not theirs to use, do not influence a society, they bully it. Family members who manipulate the environment for their own emotional needs, whatever the cost to those around them, control but they do not lead.

Leadership is the ability to pursue the greater good whether anyone else is going in that direction or not. It is, as the psalmist says, the ability to be a light in the darkness for the upright. And it is often a lonely, lonely role.

Soul Points...

 Leadership is not an interchangeable part that can be rotated at will. We do not “rotate” organists, computer programmers and accountants. Leadership is a skill, a gift, a charism. Groups that want to succeed, to survive, need leadership. Groups that kill their leaders, kill themselves.

 Real leaders don't set out to organize a crowd. They simply set their faces in the right direction, regardless of how lonely the road, and one day discover that there is a crowd behind them.

 It is not necessary to be in an official position in order to be a leader. It is only necessary to be brave, to be honest and to be clear about where you are going and why. Thomas Merton was a spiritual leader who never left the monastery and never gave a retreat. The Beatles led a change in music styles, not by teaching music, but simply by doing something different with it themselves. Rosa Parks had gone to the back of the bus one too many times. The question is a simple one: What is it you believe in that you have failed to do anything about yet? Until you answer that question there is no proof if you are really a leader or not.

A wisdom story from oral tradition...

A young rabbi said to the master, “You know, when I study and when I join others in great feasts, I feel a great sense of light and life. But the minute it’s over it’s all gone; everything dies in me.”

The old rabbi replied: “It is just this feeling that happens when a person walks through the woods at night, when the breeze is cool and the scent in the air is delicious. If another joins the traveler with a lantern, they can walk safely and joyfully together. But if they come to a crossroads and the one with the lantern departs, then the first must grope her way alone unless she carries her light within her.”

Tales of the Hasidim

Psalm 112 activity...

Take one action on behalf of justice, peace, or compassion. Become “a light in the darkness for the upright.”