

SINGAPORE MEMORIES: THE SOUND OF MUSIC

*“And it came to pass, when the **evil** spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.”*

1 Samuel 16:23

There is something special about the soothing balm of music.

I love listening to classic rock and roll songs, and many of them can transport me—as if on a magic carpet—to special memories from the past: I again become a part of the place and life circumstances where I heard the song for the first time.

As I mentioned in another recent missive, we now are sorting, pitching and otherwise decluttering our accumulated “stuff” of several decades as we prepare to sell our house. It has been a difficult process: especially when it comes to parting with things that retain some sort of emotional pull over your life.

On the other hand, I have stumbled across some real gems.

One of these appeared in the form of a hard copy of a missive that I had thought was long lost. The piece describes a specific experience from my years in Singapore (I was a First Secretary in the Embassy from 2007-2009), but I have thought about the incident repeatedly ever since. It is among my most treasured memories from that chapter in my life. I hope you enjoy:

“SAXOPHONES OF GRACE

Revelatory insights of God’s grace arrive unexpectedly and in the strangest places

On the first Saturday of 2009, I grabbed my favorite art pad and pencil and started out on the ten-minute walk down Holland Road from my apartment complex to Singapore’s beautiful Botanical Gardens. My wife and youngest daughter only recently returned to the States [they had come out for several days during their Christmas break from school]. We enjoyed a delightful holiday together. [I remember feeling a bit down-and-out after their departure]. During their visit, we visited the Botanical Gardens on a handful of occasions. Imogene particularly loved sitting on a lakeside bench, across from the pavilion, where we would enjoy dusk by soaking in nature’s sights of ducks, turtles and birds frolicking amid a small clump of red-stemmed palms and reeds. As darkness hovered closer, we enjoyed a veritable symphony of quacks, clucks, songs and splashes.

On that Saturday morning, Singapore's equatorial sun chased me from the bench after a few minutes of sketching. I retreated from the growing heat and began my trek back toward my air-conditioned apartment on top of the hill. I chose the side road that borders the garden grounds. The route dumped back into Holland Road after a short distance. Lush, emerald-green tropical vegetation encroached the edges of the road. On one side was marked off a series of parking slots for local cars of garden visitors. As I approached the narrow road—using one of the garden's many sidewalks—I thought I heard the sounds of a saxophone.

I quickly dismissed the thought because it was so out of place and illogical.

As I left the jungle foliage and entered the road, I noticed a solitary car parked on the roadway's edge. An Asian man stood beside the car and reached inside. He fumbled for something in the front seat.

He was dressed casually—like most Singaporeans on a weekend—sporting a non-descript tee shirt, flowered swimming trunks and flip-flops. He wore a Bluetooth earpiece and so I guessed he was, as most Singaporeans, technologically savvy. As I walked closer, I observed him climb into the car where he grabbed a silver saxophone out of its case (my sister, an avid saxophonist in her own right, told me later it was probably an alto sax). He ignored me as I walked past the car.

When I passed the end of the car and the trunk, I noticed a beautiful gold saxophone perched atop its own stand. Nearby was a simple metal music stand on top of which was spread out handwritten notes of a musical score.

The saxophone and the music stand were situated so they directly faced the jungle foliage along the edge of the road.

Perhaps this is a good time to note that God recently has been dealing with me on the matter of grace. [He still is!] By grace I mean the notion that we as believers enjoy the unmerited favor and blessing of Father God as a result of the perfect, one-time sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross.¹ The result has been an amazing time of spiritual insight for me. In the process, I have learned to pay particular attention to unusual events that cross my path, as God will often use these types of circumstances to convey a spiritual truth.

Back to the Singaporean with the saxophone. I had not walked more than twenty paces down the road from the car when I heard the most beautiful, lilting

¹ [I have told this story many times to my friends over the years. When I first arrived in Singapore for this assignment, I promised my mother I would attend the service of a Singapore preacher she had watched on television. To honor her—the very first sleepy Sunday morning in the city-state—I took a taxi to the mall location where the services were held. I barely got a seat in the fourth overflow location, a theater holding at least 2,000 people. Throughout my time in Singapore, I attended Joseph Prince's *New Covenant Church* almost every Sunday. To get a seat in the primary service location, the "Rock," you had to show up hours before the service, which entitled you to a ticket to stand in a group that rushed, into into the auditorium, Oklahoma land rush style. The church held four packed services every Sunday. Most times, I was one of only a handful of Caucasians in attendance. I often wondered during those years, how many people in the United States were hungry enough to hear God's word that they would show up an hour early on Sunday morning to get a ticket to stand in line to attend a church service.]

and melodious saxophone notes. The music was so powerful that it was obvious to me that the man I had just passed was a professional. I stopped, turned around and stood frozen on the road, looking on and listening with a sense of awe at the scene unfolding before my eyes and ears. Outside of the tropical vegetation, I was an audience of one. The music [so incredibly beautiful that I still remember it] cast a captivating spell but it was (apparently) arranged for my ears alone. What an unexpected and soul-healing blessing. The incongruity of the setting further enhanced the specialness of the melody. I didn't recognize the song—it was truly beautiful—and I haven't ruled out the thought that the musician composed the musical score himself.

I stood there spellbound, absolutely motionless as I listened to the jungle concert for several minutes. I didn't want that special moment to end. If the saxophone player was aware of my presence, he didn't acknowledge it.

Standing there in that window of time, I realized that God's Holy Spirit had orchestrated the entire event—unlikely as it was—on an otherwise ordinary Saturday morning in Singapore.

You see my blessed friends, God the master composer has created each of us to be a special workmanship, with our lives uniquely scripted and purposed—original musical scores if you like—where notes of grace form our life's songs. All within the larger beautiful harmony of God's infinite mercy and favor.

The end purpose of our respective life's song (indeed the sole purpose for all the music in the created universe) is to glorify and honor Jesus Christ. God will get glory even if the trees—or lush tropical plants and vines—have to clap their hands.

I am seeing more clearly than ever that unless our life's musical score is focused on Christ, the music will become lost in a random assortment of notes: noise without melody. Likewise, in some inexplicable way, for those following Christ the agency of the Holy Spirit softly and graciously intervenes to facilitate the nexus between our conscious thinking processes and the talent of the master musician to make our life's song a sweet savor and savor to the very throne of God, as well as pleasant sounds to listening ears around us.

However, the sweetest musical refrains are useless unless appreciated by a listener. I am so thankful that God hears each of our life's songs. This reciprocal dynamic generates purposeful existence—abundant life—in the spiritual realm. My friends, please make grateful, receiving ears available to hear God's unique musical chords in your life and in those of others around you during this year of 2009 [and 2021]. Just as that Saturday morning encounter with the saxophonist in Singapore, God the Father wants to saturate us by pouring His unique composition of grace into our lives that we may bless others.”