

## **Meditation: Autumn's Legacy by Phil Duran**

### **Autumnal Equinox Celebration**

Sunday, September 26, 2010

Fall has a way of focusing our attention back onto the trees that have been shading us for these past several months. By the end of the summer, we may find ourselves having fallen into a practice of taking their green fullness for granted, willfully setting aside our years of experience to believe that somehow, this summer will simply go on and on. Fall puts a quick stop to that.

While Fall is represented by many different types of images, from pumpkins and apples to cold snaps and back to school sales, there is probably no more central symbol of Fall than the changing colors in the trees, and the trees' eventual shedding of their leaves with the approach of Winter. Driving along the expressway, those endless, undifferentiated banks of green trees up and down the side of the road suddenly seem to compete to outdo one another to capture our attention. A green hillside becomes a many-hued mosaic of individual trees putting on their finest seemingly to give thanks for another successful season of growth.

Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that trees have over the years become evocative symbols in the hands of poets and musicians, representing numerous concepts, definitely including spiritual ideas. Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, for example, in his moving poem "My Cathedral," wrote, in part:

Like two cathedral towers these stately pines  
Uplift their fretted summits tipped with cones;  
The arch beneath them is not built with stones,  
Not Art but Nature traced these lovely lines,  
... Listen! The choir is singing; all the birds,  
In leafy galleries beneath the leaves,  
Are singing! listen, ere the sound be fled,  
And learn there may be worship with out words.

It is said that the act of planting a new tree is the act of an optimist: it is based on the faith that this sapling will grow tall and strong and provide shade or fruit or simple beauty to people eventually, far in the future, perhaps long after we are gone. It is a way of sending a message to the future; the legacy of this simple act is one others will enjoy even if we ourselves cannot. It is a concrete manifestation of what Reinhold Niebuhr meant when he wrote, "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime ... we are saved by hope."

Writers have also sought in trees symbols for our own lives and life-cycles.

Maybe because we so often see ourselves at the top of the heap when it comes to the animal kingdom, it is natural to want to compare ourselves to what seems to us to be the crowning achievement of the plant world. Sure, we enjoy our flowers, our shrubs and our ivies, but none really matches the physical grandeur of a towering old oak or pine.

Perhaps predictably, these writers have often invoked trees in many different ways in an attempt to capture some essence of our human experience. In our hymnal you will find a reading by Wendell Berry in which he exhorts us to "have the wisdom to survive, to stand like slow-growing trees on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it." In a similar vein, poet Effie Waller Smith wrote in the poem "Autumn Winds," "Oh, like the trees, I too would cast aside the fading leaves of pleasure and of pride, and stand forth free to struggle and endure!" For Berry and Smith, the comparison is between our lives and the trees themselves; Smith, in particular, dismisses the leaves as artifice to be shed.

It may come as a surprise to you that, tucked away in the original novel "Bambi" by Felix Salten, is a poignant dialog between two leaves themselves, about the meaning of life and about their own fate. Part of that dialog goes like this:

"Can it be true," said the first leaf, "can it really be true, that others come to take our places when we're gone and after them still others, and more and more?"

"It is really true," whispered the second leaf. "We can't even begin to imagine it, it's beyond our powers."

"It makes me very sad," added the first leaf.

They were silent a while. Then the first leaf said quietly to herself, "Why must we fall?"

The second leaf asked, "What happens to us when we've fallen?"

"We sink down ... "

"What is under us?"

The first leaf answered, "I don't know, some say one thing, some another, but nobody knows."

The second leaf asked, "Do we feel anything, do we know anything about ourselves when we're down there?"

The first leaf answered, "Who knows? Not one of all those down there has ever come back to tell us about it."

Does this sound familiar? Of course it does; Salten has used the same leaves that Smith looks forward to casting off to embody our own uncertainties about the mysteries we all face. For Salten, we are those leaves, not the tree.

The leaves in "Bambi" wonder what happens to them once they fall, and have very limited information with which to answer. We, of course, know: this fall's leaves will pile up on the ground, be buried and compressed by snow, and dissolved by the spring's rains to become the mulch that will nourish the trees that remain. Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal on October 24, 1837, about finding his connection not with the trees, or with the leaves, but with this mulch or, as he wrote, this "mould":

"Every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is the making room for another. The oak dies down to the ground, leaving within its rind a rich, virgin mould, which will impart a vigorous life to an infant forest. The pine leaves a sandy and sterile soil, the harder woods as strong and fruitful mold. So this constant abrasion and decay makes the soil of our future growth. As I live now so shall I reap. If I grow pines and birches, my virgin mould will not

sustain the oak; but pines and birches, or perchance, weeds and brambles, will constitute my second growth." In identifying with the mulch, Thoreau understood that his "second growth" - his legacy - would depend on what he produced during his lifetime.

So are we the trees, or the leaves, or the mulch? Maybe I am influenced by human hubris, but I feel drawn to identifying with the trees. Like Longfellow's and Smith's trees, we can aspire to be strong and spiritual and inspirational. During our lifetimes, if we are lucky and willing to work and persevere, we produce achievements and successes which, like leaves, come to characterize us and prove beneficial to others. In time, these accomplishments fall away to form a foundation, which, like mulch, gives rise to a legacy expressed in future growth.

Still ... those who would find connection with leaves or mulch make compelling cases. So are we the trees, or the leaves, or the mulch? I have a friend who would aggravate me by answering this question with the word, "yes." In the end, I suspect he may be on to something. We are all of these things, because just as they cannot be easily and meaningfully separated from one another, neither can we be easily or meaningfully separated from them, or from nature and its cycles and seasons. The fall equinox is the perfect time to reflect on the joy of following nature's example by living well, and colorfully, and leaving something behind as a legacy for the future.