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Let the Magpies Sing



I sensed that something terrible was going to happen. Not an accident or a death, but something was wrong with the mood of the Earth. The winds which are fairly predictable in our part of South Gippsland were not blowing in their usual direction. The clouds were not forming in their expected shapes and the birds were restless, with some species, uncommon to our region, flying past in large expanding webs across the sky.

I am a small capillary in the body of this creature called “Earth”. When my Earth is ailing, I also suffer. When some part of the Earth has disease it spreads and slowly affects the whole. I could feel this sickness of an Earth that was tired of being exploited and consumed by humanity, the way uncontrolled



parasites can destroy the very host upon which they rely for survival. Darfur, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Israel, and so many other ulcers of upheaval and death have overflowed their sepsis into the veins of this poor Earth, and we are all contaminated.

The Earth seemed sick of us and I could no longer pray. I had surrendered to the drought of peace, the drought of tolerance, the drought of hope.



Each day I read in the newspaper, or heard on radio broadcasts, about more disasters, more floods, famines, suicide bombings, school massacres, road deaths, hopeless starvation, torture and hatred. I felt that life was out of control and menacing. I searched for some point of hope but I felt that my faith had also succumbed to drought and, unlike the birds flying above me to escape the bushfires and relentless drought, I was trapped in a cell of despair and could only watch the parade of victims, knowing that my turn to join the procession was inescapable.



Jan worried constantly about the lack of rain. The local churches held community meetings to offer support to distressed families, and to pray for rain. School children were encouraged to write letters to God asking for the drought to end and save their farms, but no rain fell . . . “All in his good time,” Jan said while scanning our shrivelled pasture and receding dam. “At least I have my veterinary work to



hold us up for now. I'm thankful to the Lord for my off-farm work. Not everyone is as fortunate as us." Even Jan's words which were intended to encourage me had a hollow echo.

I prayed for rain, not just for us but for those farmers whose income relied solely on the productivity of their land. The faces of lost hope appeared on television each night. "She'll be right. It'll come soon, mate, no worries," said the worn-out bloke on the land who was being interviewed for the news report. The listless cattle and the withered crop in the background of the broadcast told the real story, even if the farmer pretended to retain hope.



I took to wandering in my dying garden-park. I didn't care that a few plants weren't going to make it. There was just so far that I could carry buckets of water in our three-acre garden – besides, a flourishing garden raised suspicion of water-wasting in an area where a green patch in a field meant a leaking pipe, and that was unforgivable when neighbouring farms were running out of water.



Each day I walked outside and sniffed the air for the smoke of bushfires, and worried how I would manage to rescue my five dogs without Jan's help if he was at work and fire swept over the hills to our farm. Would I stay? Would I fight the fire or just leave and not look back? I couldn't face the prospect of choosing among my animals as to which ones



I would take and which ones I would leave to the panic and fury of the flames. I wanted to give up. I couldn't even offer any words of hope when Jan also evidenced his feelings of abandonment by God.

One hot afternoon I sat in my park with a small Bible in my hands and flicked it open at various pages, hoping to read some passage which would help me to hear God's voice again. It always seemed to work for people in movies, but for me, nothing. God had gone. The feeling that he was sick of us and covered his ears to our pleading had dissipated into an even more sinister feeling. "Are you there, God? Is life as futile as I think it is? Are you sick of all our hatred and destruction towards each other?"



My self-pity turned to anger. "If you think that man is destructive, you are far worse. Does it make you feel big and mighty to see our suffering, however small it is in comparison to others who suffer because of our actions? Go ahead, don't listen, don't care, don't exist."



I tossed the Bible off my knee, covered my face with my hands and rocked myself as I wept, overwhelmed by a feeling of abandonment and despair. Somewhere near me I heard magpies chortling. I used to take comfort in their song when I was a child. It always meant that rain was coming, but this day I considered it to be callous mockery.

"Shut up, you stupid birds. It's not going to rain."

Look at the sky. No clouds, no rain, no God, you idiots.”

I heard Debbie, the young lady who rents a cottage on our farm, hurry to her car and drive away. I didn't even care whether she had heard my loud exhortation. I didn't care about anything any more. The only clouds forming were those of my depression.

I looked at the ground beneath me; the large gaping fissures in the soil appeared like parched mouths, open and pleading for a drop of merciful rain. The magpies sang again. “Shut up, you stinking magpies.” A small breeze dried the tears on my cheeks. “If God isn't there, why do you bother to sing for rain? No one's listening to us. We can only rely on nature now. We are alone, I tell you. There is no rain.” I hated God, I hated magpies, I hated life.

As I sat, my soul shrivelling like the garden around me, I recalled how in the early days of our marriage I had instructed Jan to dip his fingers into the holy water font at the entrance door of a Catholic church we were attending. “It is a symbol of cleansing and blessing to dip your fingers into the holy water and trace the sign of the cross on yourself, Jan, when entering or exiting a church.” I was a little shocked at his blunt refusal to conform to the custom, but what he saw as a mindless ritual was soon explained to me

in what I have long since expected from his gentle and wise Middle Eastern culture.

“What water isn’t holy, my love? It isn’t some mumbled incantation by man which sanctifies water, nor is man cleansed by sprinkling it on himself. Every single rain drop is holy, and man’s sanctity comes from within his heart, not from the outward display of ritual. Man’s sorrow for wrongdoing flows out of him as tears, and these too are holy. Both stem from our need for God’s mercy.”

The faint smile which my reminiscences produced quickly faded and I returned to the bitterness of my former gloom. “Where is your mercy? Where are you now, God?” I left the garden to the magpies whose raucous anthem pounded the emptiness of my soul.

Several hours passed. I had sulked long enough. “God, are you there? Sorry for the insults. You know when it’s best to send rain. Maybe now isn’t the best time for us, but I ask you to send it to those who need it even more desperately than we do. And God, the dam of my faith is a little empty at the moment. Could you add a few drops in there as well when you’re ready?”

I fell asleep as a child does after crying. Not a peaceful contented sleep but one induced by exhaustion, petulance and disappointment.

Yes, it rained. Not that day or even the next, but it rained in many parts of drought-affected Australia.



Our dam was certainly filled, bit by bit. The grass turned dark green again and grew a little before the winter's chill stunted its growth until the warmth of the following spring. My faith returned, though that also was stunted for a while. We all know how it feels after a big argument and cessation of friendship. When you patch up the differences something still hurts for a time. Some faint note of discord is all but obliterated in the great tuneful harmony of life, but the melody goes on and you can either concentrate on the discord or allow yourself to be swept away again by the magnificence of the theme.

