

In The Third Act, Everyone Either Dies or Goes Away

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We had just returned from one of our summer trips when I received a call from Ken Hopper. He was calling to ask if he might drop by the house later in the afternoon for just a few moments. I told him that he was welcome anytime. As I hung up the phone, I felt a moment of foreboding. It was unlike Ken to make an appointment. If he had something on his mind, it was his style to state it immediately. When I mentioned to Beverly that Ken had called to say he wanted to stop by for a moment, she put my foreboding into words. "He's going to resign, isn't he," she said. "I think that is likely," I replied.

I spent the next while trying to think of alternative reasons Ken might be coming by. As the afternoon progressed I fantasized half a dozen scenarios, none of which seemed reasonable. And then the doorbell rang, and it was Ken. He scratched the dog behind the ears, seated himself on the edge of the couch and got immediately to the point. He explained the offer he had received to become the Executive Director of the Des Moines Symphony, what a great opportunity it represented--an opportunity he could not afford to pass up. I remember saying, "It sounds like a hell of a commute to be here on Sunday mornings!" And Ken commented that leaving the church, after eleven years as organist and music director, had been one of the hardest parts of his decision, but it was an opportunity he simply had to accept.

I told Ken that I agreed with him. Sad as it made me, it seemed clear that he had made the right choice. After he had left, Beverly and I sat and looked at each other. We both agreed that no one would ever replace him. I found myself feeling a deep sense of loss, for I have never felt as close to a music director as I have to Ken. He is the first church musician I have known who seems to have a vision of the larger mission of the church and seeks to make his music serve that vision. Ken has always taken his music seriously, but he has insisted upon not taking himself too seriously. This has made him a colleague and a mentor and a valued friend in a way that no other church musician in my experience has been.

As I sat there, that sunny summer afternoon, watching the strong sunlight play among the leaves of the rhododendron growing outside the window, seeing the occasional sparrow settle briefly in the shade offered by the tall plant, listening as the traffic moved by on Mountain Avenue, as I sat there feeling sorry for myself and my congregation, I found myself remembering the many moments over the past years when Ken's music had touched my life. I thought back to the afternoon music concert which presented Gian Carlo Menotti's *THE TELEPHONE*; I remembered the concert by the New Jersey

Percussion Ensemble when the church resounded with music made by striking hub-caps and wheel rims and a host of similar instruments. I remembered the Sunday morning when the music for the service was a suite by Claude Bolling for Jazz piano, flute, drums and bass. I remembered the magnificent vocalists who have graced our services. I remembered Ken and Harriet Johnson's four-hand piano. I heard the Flentrop organ, responding to Ken's touch, springing to life, filling this sacred place with breathtaking, heart-stopping music. And then, in my mind's eye, I saw Carol Hopper, up in the balcony, standing by the organ, pulling the stops at just the right moment. I remembered her skill and patience and enthusiasm in planning for guest speakers over the years and the way she generously opened their home for choir parties and early morning staff meetings and other church functions. I heard her voice reading from the balcony for the Christmas Eve service. And I found myself thinking, "It will never been the same again. Why are things always changing? When something is good, why can't it stay the same?"

As I was feeling sorry for myself, I found my mind drifting to another occasion. It was an evening last May. Beverly and I had gone to Moravian College in Bethlehem, for a concert of the Pennsylvania Youth Symphony--the last concert of the season. The concert hall was small and intimate, but with amazing acoustics. While we observed most of the rituals of formal concerts--applauding the conductor when he came on stage, before he had a chance to do anything, and so forth--there was still an air of pleasant informality about the proceedings. Perhaps it emanated from the young musicians, who made up in enthusiasm whatever they may have lacked in experience.

As the program proceeded, I was deeply moved by the quality of the musicians and their obvious pleasure in the music they were presenting. In that hall there were times when I could actually feel the music on my skin as well as hear it. At various points in the proceedings, the conductor stopped to explain the music, what it was, where it came from, how it reflected its own time and setting. At one point he was introducing a selection from Tristan Und Isolde. Having sketched the story in order to provide the setting of the music, he commented that "in the third act, everyone either dies or goes away." There was an expected burst of laughter from the audience, and then the conductor turned, raised his baton, and Wagner's music poured forth.

All through the music, the conductor's words stayed with me: "In the third act, everyone either dies, or goes away." And I found myself thinking that not only is that true of Wagner's opera, it is also true of life. And those are the words that came back to me, that sunny afternoon in July, sitting in my living room, contemplating the prospect of a new church year without Ken Hopper, and feeling sorry for myself. "In the third act, everyone either dies, or goes away."

What a depressing thought, I found myself saying to no one in particular. And then I heard whispers of my own voice, speaking from a half-dozen pulpits over the decades, declaiming the central gospel of my ministry: "Change is the essence of life. The one unchanging reality in this universe is change itself. If there be anything in this universe which deserves the title God, it is the process of eternal change which brings us into being, sustains us in being and takes us out of being." To rail against change is to commit

what the preachers in my youth used to call "the sin against the Holy Spirit," the unpardonable sin.

Sitting in my living room, that summer afternoon, watching the interplay of light and shadow, of plant and bird, of sun and cloud this range of emotion flooded over me--regret that no matter how beautiful, how right, and good, how enriching life may be at any given moment, no one can hold on to it; a sense of joy that life had brought a rich new opportunity to our friends, Ken and Carol Hopper; a sense of deep uncertainty about what shape the future would take now that the old, familiar, enriching patterns had been disrupted; and a personal sadness at the departure of good friends. And then, as I sat a bit longer, all these emotions seemed to coalesce into a new feeling, a sense of deep gratitude for the gift I had been given, the gift the congregation and this community had been given by the presence of these kind, gifted, committed people among us.

I heard the words of the conductor again: "In the third act, everyone either dies or goes away." But I found myself saying, that may be the way the opera ends, in life that is not the end of it. In truth, from the moment of our births until the day we die, people are always coming into our lives, touching us, changing us, challenging us, enriching us, calling us to be what we were born to be. Most of those people pass through our lives and move on; they die or they go away. But what they have meant to us does not die or go away. That remains with us, shaping our vision, our understanding of ourselves, our world, our possibilities, our limitations. "In the third act, everyone dies or goes away," but what they have meant to us remains to form the challenges and the vision for the next act of life.

I am who I am because of all the people who have passed through my life, and because of how I responded to the gifts and the challenges they brought. Some of those people played only minor roles and I don't even remember their names. For example in the fourth grade, there was a class bully who, without my knowledge, organized a successful campaign to have me elected class president because he liked to hear me speak. I don't remember his name; I have no idea what became of him; he passed quickly through my life and went away. But, given my subsequent career, it seems obvious that he left a permanent mark on my life.

I remember the man who hired me to clerk in his grocery store when I was in High School. I was so painfully shy, it took every ounce of courage I could muster just to speak to a customer. But the owner of the store was convinced that I needed the job--not only for the money it paid, but for the challenge it presented me to encounter the world. Slowly, he taught me how to be in a world filled with strangers. And in time, I went away. But I took with me the memory of his patience, and something more--the example of the integrity with which he conducted his business and his life. I doubt he ever realized how great was his impact on my life, but though years and miles separate us, something of him remains with me to this day.

In college, there was a professor who recognized in the lonely youngster in his freshman English class unrealized possibilities and untapped potential--a man who befriended me,

and counseled me and offered guidance, who helped me shape my dreams and give substance to my ambitions. And there was an older woman who ran a grocery store near the campus, who took it upon herself to enrich the lives of two college students. She took Beverly and me to the opera when it toured in near-by cities; she gave us recordings of fine music; she opened a window on a larger world. In time the professor went away, the grocery owner died but both of them remain a vital part of my life, continuing to shape my self understanding though years and miles and death itself separate us. "In the third act, everyone either dies or goes away," but the impact of their lives lingers to shape the world and how we live in it.

My guess is that if you think about it, each of you will discover, women and men who have passed briefly through your lives and left their mark upon you. And for everyone you remember, undoubtedly there are others you do not remember who shaped you though the touch be too light and too subtle to be remembered. What is often more difficult is to remember that though we seldom realize it, we play the same role, have the same kind of impact upon all those we encounter. Always, as we live, there are people watching, people touched by what we do or leave undone, people shaped by our actions or our inaction. I am constantly astounded by people who remember something I have said or done that made a difference in their lives--often things I have no recollection of having said or done. And that is true of your impact on people as well.

In our cultural fascination with individualism, in our desire to see ourselves as self-reliant and self-made, we often fail to understand the deep and profound way we interact with and act upon other people, shaping common visions and common values and common dreams. We are who we are as a consequence of a complex web of interaction between the people who have passed through our lives, and how we have responded to each other.

But more than this, for so long as we live, the interaction continues. To be human is to be born a neonate--unfinished, incomplete, dependent from the moment of our birth upon the care of others for our very survival. To be human is to spend all our lives building the person we are to be. To be human is never to be complete, never to be finished so long as we live. And this means that people are always coming into our lives, touching us, changing us, and moving on, having revealed to us some new vision, some new insight into who we are and what we might become. And this means that we are always entering other people's lives, touching them, changing them, and then moving on, leaving behind consequences we never intended and never dreamed of. And this is how the human individual is created and this is how the human community is built and this is how the human venture evolves.

And that, in turn means that the moving on, the leaving behind of the known and familiar and embracing the possibility which beckons is also central to being human. No matter how rich and fulfilling and rewarding our present situation, it will change. Nothing we can do will avail to freeze a moment in time. Our existence is dynamic and evolutionary and is always in process of transformation from what is to what will be. To try to keep things as they are is to risk making a curse out of what had begun as a blessing.

I am reminded of the words of Robert Terry Weston, who wrote:

I picked up a handful of sand,
And it trickled through my fingers,
And I could not pick it up again.

I plucked a flower, and the petals fell;
Lo! where they had been already there took shape a tiny seed.
But it was no more permanent than the petals.
I sought to hold it, and it shriveled up and ceased to be.
I planted a ripe seed,
And it split and where it had been a green sprout appeared;
But the seed decayed.
The green sprout grew;
A thing of beauty;
Sent down roots, sent out leaves,
Budded, flowered, bore fruit, decayed,
And was itself a withered thing.
I could not even keep the ripe seed.
Yet each in its time had had its own peculiar beauty.
All things change; nothing remains the same.
Spring comes, fills the heart with song and is gone;
Summer with its invitation to leisure is upon us,
And hardly have we taken hold of it
But the ripe fruit of autumn is in our hands.
Either we enjoy it or it too decays,
And the sharp breath of winter and snow crystals
Are flying past us before the last persimmon is gone.

Lo, each in its time, each life in its every moment,
The baby, the child, the youth, the lover, the parent, the aged,
Is at its ultimate state in every moment, and passes on.
Pluck this moment as you would a precious flower.
Share it as if it were love, and let it go.
Beauty and wonder lie all about you even now;
They too, even as you, are never final
But always in process of both being and becoming. Take then each moment as the
perfect gift of life,
Knowing you shall no more be able to hold it as it is
Than what is already past.
Even as you let go,
Another and yet different moment comes...
To be enjoyed or lost.

"In the third act," said the conductor, "everyone either dies or goes away." Sitting in my living room, that summer afternoon, I found myself responding, "And that is the way it

ought to be." In our coming and going, in our living and dying we touch each other and the world, we change each other and the world forever and forever and forever. This morning we say farewell to Ken and Carol Hopper. Let our farewell be a rejoicing for the gift they have given us, for the manner in which they have touched and changed our lives, for the new possibilities they have opened before us and for the new possibilities which now stretch before them. "In the third act, everyone either dies or goes away," and that is as it should be, for that is the process of growth and renewal and life itself.