

## ***Thoughts on the Christmas Plays by Michael Miller***

In autumn when the leaves on the trees change their color and begin falling, it is a signal that the year has reached its maturity and that a harvest is to be made. Each year, at the end of the season, the custom has been that the teachers of the Waldorf Schools around the world present their respective communities with a special gift. The teachers work together, combining their various talents and energies, to perform for their school community - for the students and their parents and friends - one or two of the three remarkable; medieval, mystery Christmas plays, commonly referred to as "The Christmas Plays."

As longtime Waldorf parent and as a spouse of a Waldorf faculty member, I have many times received this unique gift, and I now welcome this opportunity to express my gratitude. I will do so by sharing some thoughts about what this special gift has meant to me.

In those years when my wife took part in these productions, I was able to see close-up what a tremendous effort is called for on the part of each teacher and to appreciate the special mood of loving sacrifice involved in the annual giving of this gift.

Watching from the sidelines, I saw the teachers who not only choose to take on the demanding activities of memorizing lines and undergoing long rehearsals and living through the anxieties of the final performances, but who do so in such a spirit of *intensely joyful devotion*, that it is nothing short of inspiring.

This selfless and self-transcending behind-the-scenes activity expresses the spirit in which these gifts are given, but what I really want to talk about is what my experience of these gifts has been as one of the fortunate recipients. It may be that those involved in this activity of giving might now and again like to hear what their gift can mean for someone sitting in the audience.

*The Paradise Play* and *The Shepherds' Play* are different from most other medieval mystery plays. The first thing that struck me about them is that their self-mocking good humor toward sacred subjects indicated that they probably did not originate in church liturgy, than they were not the products of a staid and jealously defensive church hierarchy bent on keeping the faithful in line. I have since learned something about their history, and I have no doubt that they represent a genuine folk tradition undistorted by church politics. That Waldorf teachers involve themselves in preserving these rare and unique cultural and spiritual treasures by sharing them with us adds a dimension to the special nature of their gift. [...]

The opportunity to view the Christmas Plays —thanks to the Waldorf faculties around the world —is nothing less than a chance to be touched by a cultural event that is much more profound than the usual "flash-in-the-pan" products of changing fashion. But beyond all the things that make the performance of these plays, as gifts, special, there is the more, personally magical event that can happen for one who opens himself to the mystery these plays hold.

### **The Tree-Singer's Song**

I remember sitting in the darkened gym of the Denver Waldorf School one year, watching and listening to *The Paradise Play*. I remember that while the old familiar story of the play was unfolding, I was also experiencing at some deeper level of my consciousness a spontaneous stream of new thoughts and feelings. I could sense the presence of the children in the audience and feel their enchantment at this magical event. At the same time, I felt that the special charm of this play had the capacity to set the self-conscious adult free from such habitual attitudes as pretended piety and false humility.

I thought to myself, the purpose of this play is not to make converts, but to present a picture of the true mythic depths of man's common spirituality in familiar images, and, to do so in a way that leaves the individual psychologically free to respond out of his own inner nature. True, the imagery of *The Paradise Play* and that of *The Shepherds' Play* is more specifically Christian, but I could not help but feel that any Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim, sufficiently mature in his own spirituality, would nevertheless be able to appreciate the mythic dimension of this play without feeling any proselytizing pressure.

For instance, *The Paradise Play* begins with a procession of all the players walking and singing around the hall, in effect circling the audience. This is a gesture that says to the audience: What you are about to see and hear is about you, each and everyone of you, and all of you together. As the play continued, I became aware of an intimation that in some sense this parade of character, the Tree-Singer, the Angel Gabriel, God, Adam and Eve, and the Devil, all taken together, are a composite picture of one grand being, the spiritual being of Man himself, which is to say, myself in the complex and mysterious depth of my own mythic and spiritual being.

The Tree Singer became for me the "Ancient of Days" whose narration of events was itself outside of time and prior to the whole drama of the Fall of Man. The tree, of course, is a very ancient symbol for the growth of consciousness, which springs out of the earth and reaches up into the sky. It is usually pictured with a snake coiled around its trunk and with a bird poised upon its topmost branch.

At the level of consciousness, represented by the Tree-Singer where the growth of consciousness has reached its pinnacle of completeness, one may indeed be inwardly free enough to pull the Devil's tail in easy good humor. And the Tree-Singer does just that in the play.

However, while one is still caught up in the drama of the struggle for growing consciousness, one necessarily experiences that dynamic tension between God and the Devil. This binds the man to the woman and the woman to the man - as personifications of "will" and "imagination" - into a single but self-divided being. This being, whose destiny has been to succumb to temptation, is then expelled from the primordial unconscious unity of Paradise into the chaos of this world which is east of Eden. Here, overcoming the trials to be experienced upon the Tree of Good and Evil, it may rise, at last, to the heights of consciousness that are possible on the Tree of Life, and which are personified in the Tree Singer.

Such is the mythic depth of this play that, by experiencing one's own mythic being in this composite cast of characters, one can experience one's own being before the Fall and feel reassured that, from the very beginning, the possibility for rebirth and resurrection was given along with the Fall. *The Paradise Play* is the play of the Fall and points toward *The Shepherd's Play* its natural and inevitable sequel. In *The Shepherd's Play* we are definitely in the world. We are lowly and ignorant shepherds haphazardly caught up in the drama that is taking place high above our heads but that yet involves us intimately.

## **Twixt Ox and Ass**

Early in *The Shepherd's Play*, Mary asks Joseph a very important question:  
"Why is the world so faithless grown?"

This is a question that seems not so much concerned with asking, "Why has the world evolved toward, that pervasive lack of faith which is characteristic of our own day and age and which makes life so difficult?" but rather with asking, "Why is it the nature of the world per se that, once we are in it, we tend to lose our faith so quickly and easily?" This question is not a question about history. It is a question about the present moment, about our present conscious experience of being alive in the world, and it is therefore a timeless question, which could be rephrased: "Why is it the case that the world, by its very nature, seems to rob us of our faith?"

There is a mystery here, a mystery about what it means to be a human being alive on the earth between birth and death, alive in the world. In *The Shepherd's Play* - a medieval mystery play that has come down to us not as something preserved by ecclesiastical authority, but as a legacy of a pristine folk tradition - the mystery is rendered in images which tell -of the birth of Christ, that is, in images specific to the culture out of which that tradition arose. The mystery itself, however, is not specific to any culture or tradition: it is specific to Man, to mankind.

To approach this play with any kind of parochial attitude would be to miss the point - for both the Christian and the non-Christian alike. For the mystery is about, as the angel says, "that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee ..."

What Holy Thing is this? It is nothing other than that love which is able "to enter the hearts of all the earth." In other words, that love which can only enter the world via the human heart, and without which the world must needs remain "faithless grown."

If you are a Christian, you celebrate the birth of Christ, which is to say, you give this mystery a name and a place in a certain religious tradition. But that Holy Thing - if it is to be born at all- can be born "only of thee" - of you as a human being, be you Christian or not.

The play is called *The Shepherds' Play* for good reason. The play revolves around the shepherds coming together and each one asking in one way or another, in his turn, "What? Am I not first? I thought so to be." This is how it is with us human beings. To begin with, each thinks of himself first. This is our starting point with the mystery.

Like these shepherds, we human beings seem to awaken on a cold, dark night and are barely able to recall the messages. that some angel has given us in our dream. We stumble about and converse with one another, trying to piece together our similar but separate dreams. And, by the by, "leaving our flocks a field," we do eventually find our way "to the stable, the manger...", by following the brightest light in the sky. But in response to our knocking at the entrance, we hear this immediate answer:

*With searching look and eager mind,  
Say, friends, what seek you here to find?*

Indeed, what have we come here, to the earth, to find? What else, but that Holy Thing which can only "be born of thee," of you and me? But where shall we find it, and how? Under what conditions?

*No featherbed hast Thou this day.  
Thou must lie in rough straw and hay.  
Thou wast not born in summer's time,  
But in bitter winter's time.  
And for Thy lily and Thy rose  
Seest thou nought but frost and snow.*

Here, at just this point in the play, the anonymous author rightly brings in the message of King David, who was also a shepherd and who, as we are reminded, "Goliath, the dread giant, he did smite." The world, that is, that which exists without this Holy Thing that is born of thee, is this dread giant. And it is only this small wonderchild who can bring down this dread giant, who can overcome the world.

This is a priceless and delicate discovery that the shepherds have made, that twixt the ox and the ass, in a stable, in a manger where none could guess, *in the shabby human breast* that Holy Thing is born. But, who can believe such a thing?

*But when we to our fellow tell  
Of things that here to us befell;  
They'll not believe what we report,  
But will of us make mock and sport,  
In such strange fashion is this come about,  
The wisest head may thereon doubt.*

The mystery in *The Shepherds' Play*, a specifically human mystery, is a timeless story that can be told over and over again, in many ways. But the form it takes in this traditional play has its own special charm, one, which we can only hope, will not get lost as we rush around on the information superhighway. Its timeless quality speaks to the sense of wonder in every small child; the unspoiled character of its folk tradition speaks to the adolescent's deep longing for authority in a chaotic world and its mythic imagination speaks to the free adult spirit. To all ages, it speaks the same profound truth of the mystery of human existence. .

It is a mystery at once so delicate that we are ever in danger of losing it and yet so diamond-like that we could easily' crack our skulls on it. As we are told, even "The wisest head may thereon doubt."

And if, having heard our report, some friend should happen by and ask, "Is it far to go?" there is but one answer we could give: "Till thou comest there!"

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