



Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

Succumbing to Life

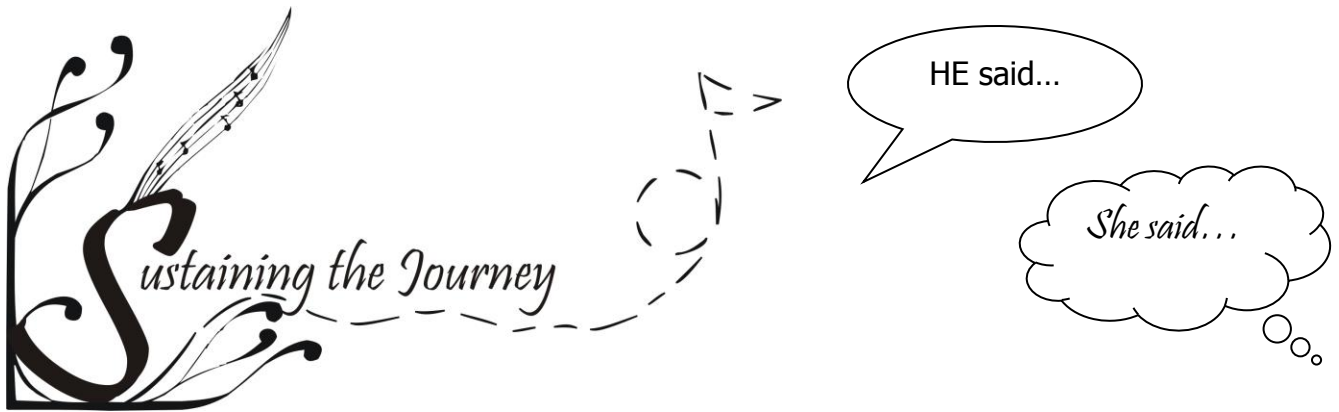
Bob's Perspective:

2021 is not much different (so far) than the “Year of the Mask (2020),” or so it would seem. We’re still social distancing, we’re still wearing masks, we’re still quarantining. The number of those contracting Covid-19 is still high and the number of those expiring from the virus is still growing. A vaccine is on its way (or here in some cases), and although many have received it, there are many more who have not. Our social-political scene is a mess (or not – depending on one’s point of view). It would seem that we are slowly succumbing to the inevitable. But while all of these things are true, I would suggest that rather than succumbing to death, we also have the opportunity instead to succumb to life.

I realize that by definition, the word “succumb” carries a negative connotation. We might think of succumbing as submitting or surrendering – like giving in or succumbing to temptation. The origin of the word actually come from Latin *succumbere*, which means “to fall down.” So what could possibly be the positive aspect of succumbing to life?

Once upon a time there was a prince who wore about his neck a valuable amulet containing a precious gem. One day, he and his entourage approached a small brook which they needed to cross. They did so for the most part without much difficulty. However, just before the prince reached the opposite shore, the chain around his neck broke and the amulet containing the gem fell into the water. The prince sent his servants into the water to find his treasured possession. They splashed around and searched frantically, but to no avail. Growing more panicked and impatient, the prince himself entered the water, splashing and searching, but he also came up empty. Meanwhile, sitting on the shore and watching the whole thing was a monk, who was also travelling with him. “Good friar,” the prince yelled out, “help us find my amulet – it contains a most precious gem.” The monk responded, “I am helping you!” and continued to sit quietly and watch. The prince, now infuriated by his response, traped out of the water, sat down on the shore and began to cry in despair. After a time, the monk slowly stood up and calmly walked a short way into the brook and stooped over. Reaching under the water, he picked up the amulet. Then, still as calm as could be, he made his way over to the prince and handed him the amulet. The prince was astonished. He asked, “How did you know exactly where to find the amulet? It was if you could actually see it!” “I did actually see it,” replied the monk, “you and your men stirred up so much sediment while haplessly splashing about, that you disguised the location of your amulet. I simply waited until it all calmed down, and in the crystal clarity of the water, I saw your treasure and retrieved it.”

The prince succumbed to panic and despair. The monk succumbed to life. The water and the sediment didn’t go away, but they calmed down. He let all of the turmoil around him go by the wayside. All of that was out of his control. Instead, he focused on calm and clarity – and with that he attained his goal.



Moral of the story: rather than being upset about all of the Covid-19 restrictions and regulations, the social-political scene and so on (they're not going to go away, but they will calm down), maybe it would behoove us to take some time to just quietly sit on the shore, wait for things to settle, let our vision become focused, and then calmly proceed with the things in our life that we can control and nurture. Succumb to life.

Mary's Perspective:

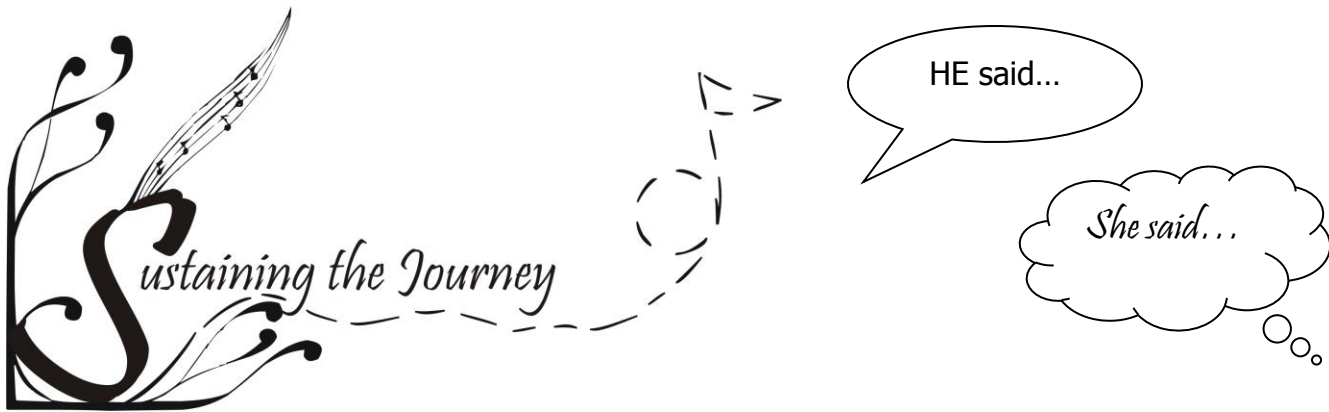
When we first talked about this blog, I was in the midst of literally a barrage of funerals. After a relatively quiet last quarter of 2020 and holiday season, I played 15 funerals in the first few weeks of January. To be clear, for the most part, this was simply a natural part of life. The vast majority of those funerals were for folks well into their 90's . That's not to minimize the grief and sadness, but there is also comfort in celebrating a long life well lived. With one exception, Covid-19 was not involved in any of their stories. Most of the families with which I met expressed joy and gratitude that they had celebrated one last Christmas with their loved one, or that they were able to be there at the time of their loved one's passing, or that their loved one was ready to go home to God.

However, between the funerals and the ongoing pandemic, what was present to us at that time was a pervading feeling of despair. Among our colleagues in liturgical music, there is a sense of restlessness – like we're holding our breaths, waiting for the next step. Perhaps that next step will be a lifting of restrictions, a rebuilding of choirs, and a return to our comfort zones. Or perhaps communal singing is still a long way off. As Bob said, it would seem that not much is different so far this year.

Reading Bob's parable made me think back to an exercise we used to employ regularly when we would present workshops or when we would prepare school children for attending Mass. We've written about it before – emptying the cup. Basically, one is challenged to imagine a cup that is full to the brim. Using all the senses, consider the look, color, texture, size, and temperature of the cup. Identify with great detail in your mind's eye if it is smooth, cold, metal or glass, etc. Consider the contents. When I would do this with the school students, I would ask if the cup is filled with water, or syrup, or prune juice, or murky green grassy liquid that spews out when one mows the lawn while it still is covered in fresh dew. Stretch the imagination and truly visualize this full cup. Then empty it. Completely dump it out so that not even a drop is left in it.

The purpose of the exercise was to help us recognize that we typically approach life with preconceived notions and expectations. Whether it is attending Mass or a work meeting, if we come with our cup full, there's not much room to be filled with new, fresh ideas – nor room for the Spirit. By clearing away the noisy baggage, we open ourselves to truly be inspired. If we come to ministry frustrated because of all we *can't* do, there's less room in our mind's eye to be inspired by what we *can* do.

A friend once described the role of a music minister as this: we are not teachers of a subject; we are facilitators of an encounter. Consider that for a moment: facilitating an encounter. If we truly embrace that role, it's a little easier to turn from the frustration of masks and no communal singing, and to focus on how we can best facilitate an encounter with



the Almighty. Perhaps part of that means helping others empty their cup. Perhaps it means mindfully emptying our own. And maybe – just maybe – the encounter we are facilitating is not only for our assembly.

It would be easy to drift into despair right now. It's chilly out, and even though the days are getting longer, it would seem that everything outside is tinged gray. Loss and illness and funerals and political turmoil abound. There is plenty of noise filling our heads. It is precisely at this time, when the sediment and murkiness and negativity are stirred up, that we most benefit from seeking the calm. If we take the time to empty our own cup, we can be open to considering how best to facilitate the encounter.

Just one other thought... obviously I write this from the perspective of my job. However, I do really believe the concept is applicable in a much broader perspective. Whether the noise comes from a staff meeting, or obnoxious clients, or needy patients, or grumpy classmates, none of us is immune to our cup overflowing. When we take the time to quiet our mind and help spread that calm, we open ourselves up to the possibilities. When we let go of the hope of returning to "how things always were," when we acknowledge *and release* the despair, when we stop feeling sorry for ourselves because life has changed, when we mindfully empty the cup and watch the sediment settle... only then will new life begin to flourish. We will be inspired. We will facilitate the encounter.

We will succumb to life.