

JOHN
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STORIES

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PUBLICATIONS

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Introduction



There is no neat way to classify these stories. Some came from my own experiences. But more often than not, when I told them, I disguised them in one way or another.

Some began as one-line observations that jumped out at me from random conversations or stunned me as I turned the pages of a book or article. For reasons I do not know, my imagination fancied the words and spun them into characters, dialogues and plots.

Some are riffs on well-known Biblical narratives, mainly Gospel stories. I had meditated on them for so long, I could not resist adding to their music. Before I knew it, the story had gone well beyond its sacred precincts.

Some were situations people innocently told me about, commenting that I might be able to use them in a talk or homily. They knew the appetite of public speakers for material. Their sketchy situations became story seeds and, through conscious and unconscious nurture, gradually grew into trees—and I hoped at least some of

the birds of the air might find a home in their branches.

But, as varied as these stories are in origin and inspiration, they share some common features.

They all have been told, either in whole or in part, before they were written down. They were not written and then read, a standard way for stories to be received by listeners. They had an oral origin that was gradually refined and finally stabilized in a written form. The written form is the same story as the spoken form, but it is not simply a matter of typing on a page what my voice said. As they took written form, there were subtle changes in phrasing and sometimes significant developments. In written form they found their way into books of stories and reflections like *The Legend of the Bells* and *Elijah at the Wedding Feast* and into books of theology and spirituality like *An Experience of Spirit*, *The Spirit Master*, and *Starlight*. In this book they are gathered together in one place and the dedication page reflects this spoken-written history: To Those Who Have Listened and To Those Who Will Read. The recipients of the stories, either as listeners or readers or both, are the ultimate unifiers of the collection.

Therefore, it is natural that when I see these stories in

print, I think of the times I told them. When I am telling a story, I can feel the flow between myself and the listeners. We both are attentive and invested in what is unfolding. The story becomes a commonly shared world. What happens to the characters in the story is important, and, to some extent, what is happening to them is also happening to us. Even wilder, things are happening to us that we cannot imagine. The story is creating outcomes we cannot predict or control. I believe it was F. Scott Fitzgerald who said, "Pull your chair up to the precipice and I will tell you a story." In telling and listening to stories there is that dual quality of alertness and peril. It is quite a kick.

They also share in common a spiritual ambition. Despite the secular cast of my mind that comes unsolicited as a gift of American culture, I have never been able to shake the intuition that a spiritual dimension permeates who we are and what we do. However, it is not easily available to conventional consciousness. As Lao Tzu suggested, it lingers like gossamer, barely hinting at existence. But, on occasion, it manifests itself in our physical and social life. It lifts up our tired bodies and suffuses our routine with adventure. If we are alert to this shin-

ing of the Spirit through the flesh, we can be illumined, comforted and challenged in ways we never suspected. The stories seek to express and communicate this type of manifestation.

The spiritual intent of the stories is evoked by the Gospel quotations that serve as a headline. Many novels, short stories, and poetry collections begin with quotations. I always take them as hints to the ultimate meaning of what follows. No matter what the readers may take from what they are reading, the author has provided a thread through the labyrinth. The quotation is not meant as a constraint but as a guide. When I reached for guides, I dipped into the Gospels. It is the well I always drink from.

Therefore, these stories are humble servants (as is their author), waiting upon Spirit and remembering the paraphrased words in one of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, "When the sun strikes the trees a certain way, even the meanest of them sparkle."

