

Heaven came to the dump

by Ed Landry

But thanks be to God, who made us his captives and leads us along in Christ's triumphal procession. Now wherever we go he uses us to tell others about the Lord and to spread the Good News like a sweet perfume. II Corinthians 2:14

Prison life can drain the hope out of a man. I have been involved in several prison ministries in the past, and it always felt good when I left and heard the sound of the doors shutting behind me. For me those doors sounded like freedom, but for those inside the doors heard a hopeless shudder when they crashed shut. The film *Shawshank Redemption* tells the story of an innocent man, Andy Dufresne, who finds himself in such a hopeless condition. Andy earns the trust of the guards and the warden and becomes a trustee. In one scene in the movie a long requested donation of literature and music arrives. As Andy sorts through the treasure he finds a recording of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. He breaks into the guard's office and plays a hauntingly beautiful aria over the prisons PA system. For a moment the dingy walls and dreary existence vanishes. The entire prison comes to a halt. No one moves. They are transported for a brief moment to a place of peace and beauty.

Andy's best friend, Red sums up what everyone is thinking, "They were singing about something so beautiful that it can't be expressed in words...and makes your heart ache because of it." They were touched by something they didn't understand. Prison walls had been breached by beauty. It was an extraordinary moment.

I first met Bert and Muriel at a church conference. They did the special music and it was just that, special. They were different from other singers and performers I had seen and heard. They had a contagious joy. I was drawn to them immediately. The first night we visited them at their home Bert and I stayed up until three in the morning talking about the things of God. We were bonded for life.

Bert was the director of a mission agency that partnered with national church planters in many countries. I later became the Philippines field supervisor of that agency. Several hundred churches were started in the years I had the privilege of working with the White Fields mission. Years later we decided to hold a grand reunion, and it was that event that brought Bert and Muriel to the Philippines for their one and only trip to the “Pearl of the Orient.” It was a glorious week but my favorite experience was a totally unplanned “Shawshank moment.”

One day we took our friends to the poorest section of Manila called Tondo. Tondo was the home of the world famous “Smoky Mountain,” a seven story, 150-acre dump site which was home to 20,000 squatters living on what had to be the worst real estate on the planet. A pig growing project of another Christian agency was stopped there because the pigs died from the smell.

We met several White Fields pastors who were ministering in absolute squalor and saw their churches and met the congregations. We visited one squatter area that was a jumble of high rise cardboard shacks built over open sewers with dead cats floating in them. We visited a church there. God is at work even in the most horrid of human conditions. His love is the only brightness in these places and can be seen reflected in the poor who know him as savior.

For lunch we had planned to get them out of the filth and we took them to an old railway station that had been converted to a fairly upscale mall right in the heart of the some of the densest and poorest population on the planet. When I first saw the mall, I thought it would never fly there, but the large Chinese population nearby has been a source of steady customers. The poor don't go there. They can't afford it. So we took Bert and Muriel there to get them out of the repressive tropical heat, debilitating pollution, and crowded markets. It was a break in an air-conditioned oasis.

We ate lunch at a large food court on the top floor. Every kind of Asian cuisine is displayed in dozens of food stalls. It is a fun and exiting place to eat. In the center of the food court there was a lone grand piano sitting all by itself, quiet and beckoning. Bert and Muriel could not get their eyes off it. They asked why it was there. I had no idea except that maybe on special occasions they had someone in to serenade the customers. After lunch our musical friends sauntered over to the new Yamaha grand and sat down at the keyboard. With a twinkle in their eyes they launched into a rousing piano duet of Disney's “It's a small world.” The entire food court filled with people stopped their conversations, and all eyes turned to center stage. Following a rousing

ovation when they finished, Bert and Muriel decided that this was going to become an impromptu concert. I just watched and enjoyed the event as the crowds gathered around these musicians par excellence. The lonely piano had resurrected. Music filled the room and all the halls leading down the mall. People came from all over. When they shifted from fun secular music to the great hymns of the Faith, some of the crowd joined in singing, "There is power, power, wonder working power in the precious blood of the Lamb." Requests started to come from the crowd, and no one was disappointed with the style of the artists they were listening to. Bert and Muriel have this amazing feel at the keyboard, can add a lot more notes than were originally written, and put a bounce in the music so that you even tap your toes to the *Old Rugged Cross*. As for me, I can't even play a radio, so with my lack of music skills I could only watch the event and rejoice. It was an unplanned happening. Most of the crowd stayed for the 45-minute interactive concert. At one point a young man who said he had some basic piano abilities sat down. With the three on one bench, the young man did his piece. Bert and Muriel picked up on it and made a symphony out of it. Six hands on one keyboard had a joyous time complementing one another in music.

And then it was over. The applause died down and we milled around talking to folks and telling them what we do. We had just seen a 45-minute worship service in the Tutuban train station mall. Heaven had come to the dump. Amen.

Philip Yancey wrote a book called *Rumors of Another World*. He gives numerous evidences from our broken world that there is something outside of what we see. We at times come into contact with people, experiences and events that direct our attention to something supernatural. He calls them "rumors of another world". They are extraordinary moments that ignite our imagination and hope. Jesus did that. He would meet men and women caught up in the mundane and routine, and like a mountain burning in the dark night, he would catch their attention and make them wonder. He didn't just walk down the street and say "Hi, how are you doing? He rubbed mud in a blind man's eye and light flooded in. He shouted at the wind, and it sat down. He wrote a condemnation in the sand with such penetrating clarity that everyone left the courtyard in shame. He called a man's name, and he who was dead for four days walked out of his tomb. With a single command he freed a man bound with a thousand demons and caused a herd of pigs to drown themselves in the lake. Every teaching, every act, every touch was a rumor of the other world. When Jesus came, Heaven came to this dump of a world.

Let's be honest with ourselves. Are we living lives that are extraordinary or are we just walking down the street saying, "Hi, how are you doing?"

I still remember Lausanne II in Manila when 4,000 evangelical leaders gathered to synchronize their world mission's watches and work cooperatively in reaching the lost. One night was particularly meaningful. It was the night the persecuted church was emphasized. A pastor from China shared his story. He was arrested and put in a dismal jail. For eleven years he experienced every kind of abuse at the hands of his God-hating captors. He was given the lowest task in the camp, to clean the human cesspools by going down into the open trenches and walking in neck deep human sewerage for six hours a day while scraping the bottom with a shovel. He told us he actually considered it a privilege to be alone with God, and then he sang a song acapella that he used to sing each day in that indescribable pit. "I walk through the garden alone, where the dew is still on the roses . . . And the voice I hear as I tarry there, none other has ever known." We could barely breathe as he sang in his delicate, injured but tender voice. He was singing to God and God was listening. The sounds of the sobs of 4,000 people could be heard throughout the auditorium. In a brief, surprising moment that humble man had taken us from a dingy hopeless prison to a place that, well, let's just say I felt like Red in *Shawshank Redemption*, "He was singing about something so beautiful that it can't be expressed in words...and makes your heart ache because of it."

These are extraordinary moments, a song breaking out in the dump, glimpses of eternity, and rumors of another world. I can't help but think our lives were meant to have more of them. So, "Hi, how are you doing?"