

AN AUTUMN STORY

By John R. Hall

The other day I was sitting on the steps leading to my kitchen. From out of nowhere, a small whirlwind appeared. It remained stationary as it began to lift up the dry maple leaves in my side yard. Round and round, higher and higher the leaves would rise at least ten feet in the air. Then the whirlwind disappeared and the autumn leaves fell slowly to the ground.

Sometimes, the inspiration for a story eludes me. It was obvious to me that I was in a hiatus and unable to write a new story. Then a reason comes my way. Nearly every time I had an appointment to see my primary care physician, Dr. Daniel Butler in Murray, I would bring him a story or two. For many years, he has been our family physician. For almost 40 years, Dr. Butler has practiced medicine. He told me that he enjoys reading my stories and looking at the pictures. One thing that I admire about Dr. Butler is the fact that he does not hide or shy away from being a Christian doctor. He is honest in his opinions of the moral decay that our society is experiencing when they took prayer out of the classroom. I thanked Dr. Butler for keeping me alive. He would reply that God keeps me alive, he just does some tinkering.

We talked about the drug crisis that is sweeping our land. The opioid problem is more serious than I realized. News media shines a light on the issue of Fentanyl abuse. Dr. Butler said that Cartentanil is 200 times more powerful than Fentanyl. This drug is so powerful that a 20- micro gram dose-about the size of a grain of salt-can be fatal. The drug is used to tranquilize elephants and other large animals. I gave Dr. Butler two of my old stories that contained some modifications. "I have to return next week and I plan to have this story put in his in-box at the clinic.

Several maple trees stand majestically in my front and back yard. Each autumn they produce thousands of brilliantly colored leaves. While looking at one of these tall trees, an old memory came to mind. As an Army Reserve training officer, I was on orders to review foreign military films and make VHS tapes for a training scenario under development in my unit. I completed the assignment and I had a one day lay over before my flight back to Louisville, Kentucky. I was in Virginia and decided to drive over to Washington D.C. I happened to be walking by the National Gallery of Art. It was rather hot that sunny day. To get out of the hot sun, I went inside the Gallery.

There was a security guard standing at the entrance to a very large room. I went inside the room and to my amazement, there were four very large pictures hanging on two walls. When I say large, I mean 53 feet by 77 feet not counting the picture frames. I learned that Thomas Cole began to paint the first picture in 1839. He believed that landscaped painting could impart moral and religious values. One could say that his mission was to convey the word of God through sublime landscapes. He wanted his canvases to speak a language eloquent of God and man and human life.

Thomas Cole focused his story by painting the unfolding life of one man, as opposed to the complicated rise and fall of a nation. His pictures are voyages of life of a pilgrim's journey along the "River of Life." In his first picture called "Childhood," a golden boat



emerges from a dark cave— a mysterious earthly source— from which a joyous infant reaches out to the world with wonder and naivete. Rose light bathes the scene of fertile beauty as an Angelic figure guides the boat forward. I remember looking at this huge painting. The hourglass on the front of the boat caught my immediate attention. This painter was telling his story without saying a word.

I moved on to Cole's second painting called "Youth." The young pilgrim confidently assumes control at the helm of the boat. He is oblivious to the increasing turbulence and unexpected twists of the stream. The pilgrim boldly strives to reach an aerial castle,



emblematic of adolescent ambition for fame and glory. This artist was starting to get to me. I had been at the helm of a much larger boat in the China sea when I was still a youthful teenager.

In deafening silence, I slowly made my way across the room to Thomas Cole's third painting. I call this the scary painting because the pilgrim is about to go over the water fall to meet his doom. Nature's fury, evil demons and self doubt threaten the pilgrim in this picture. The helm of the boat is gone. The pilgrim has lost control of his life. The Angel looks down from the clouds as the pilgrim is whirled towards violent rapids and bars, and fractured rocks. Only divine intervention, Cole suggests, can save the pilgrim from a tragic fate. Time and time again, I felt that divine intervention saved me from tragic fates. Like the pilgrim in the boat, I would pray and hope that Christ would help me.



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I walked over to Cole's fourth painting called "Old Age." In this painting, the stream of life has reached the ocean of eternity where the pilgrim floats aboard his broken, weathered vessel. All signs of nature and "corporeal existence" are cast aside. I noticed that the hourglass on the front of the boat is gone. The Guardian Angel that we see for the

first time, directs the pilgrim's gaze towards a beckoning soft light emerging from the parting clouds-the vision of eternal life.



There I stood, an Army Captain, in the National Gallery of Art, amazed at Cole's masterpieces. From the innocence of childhood, to the flush of youthful confidence, through the trials of middle age and finally, to divine salvation. Cole's voyages of life evokes the Christian doctrine of death and resurrection. This is a small part of our Christian faith and our belief in eternity with Christ. John 3-16. To enhance this story, I

sent off for prints of Thomas Cole's four works of art. I was told to give credit to the National Gallery of Art and to Thomas Cole to use a copy of the prints in my story.

The once brilliant red and yellow maple leaves have lost their splendor. Like sprinkles on a cake, the green, brown, yellow and red leaves litter my yard and beg to be raked and discarded. We all witness the end of the autumn leaves. We watch from our windows as the days get shorter, the nights get longer and the weather gets colder. I wake up in the morning and drive my grandson, John-John to school. The drive allows me to see the leaves on the trees as they change colors. John-John is too busy texting his teenage friends to notice the autumn leaves falling from the trees. I try to give Christ honor and glory in my stories. Autumn reminds us to focus on the impermanence of life and to embrace the present. God created autumn for us because He loves us.

John F. Hall

*Read more stories written by John F. Hall at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>