

A monogamous old bird who saw beauty in his mate

- **June 27th, 2010**
- (0) comments

Bill Hall



COMMENTARY

While strolling through a park last month in Missouri I was serenaded by a little bird high in a treetop. And when I saw the singer, I was struck once again by the unfairness of nature.

The bird had both a sweet song and good looks. That's just plain greedy.

I encountered the bird during a visit to the Harry Truman presidential library in Independence, Mo. Mind you, I don't know much about birds, except for the large ones that are delicious when simmered in garlic, rosemary and white wine. That kind of bird makes me want to sing,

But I'm not ordinarily much of a bird watcher - or a "birder," as they call themselves. I'm a worder not a birder.

Nonetheless, when I heard the birdsong above me, I scanned the tree to see who was performing that day. And there he was, dressed flamboyantly in bright red like a prince of the church, an appropriately named "cardinal," looking more like a bird from Rome than from Harry Truman's Missouri.

The cardinal is an unusually lavish bird that looks like it should have an Italian name, something like *Cardinale Cantante Uccello* (Cardinal Birdsinger).

As the little show-off performed in one of nature's most flashy costumes, I was struck by the injustice of a bird being made so handsome and being allowed at the same time to sing so much better than the rest of us. The same greedy excess is often apparent in the birth of a few lucky humans who are obviously the Creator's pets.

Consider, for instance, the great musical star Lena Horne who died the other day after a long, lovely life of singing like an angel and looking like one too. You would think when Providence hands out first-class human attributes that some attention would be paid to how scarce great beauty and great song are in the world.

Why do cardinals and stunning women like Lena Horne get double helpings of song and beauty when so many of the rest of us are left croaking to the music in our drab feathers?

If the powers that be are handing out elements of superiority by double handfuls, it stands to reason that others will be left with neither great looks nor with exceptional voices.

Nature was more prudent when designing the sparrow. I hear sparrows singing these summer morns, and if anything, their song is even more beautiful than that of the cardinal.

But let's face it: A sparrow is a drab little performer who looks like he forgot to put on his tux before appearing on stage.

It was in that context that I visited Harry Truman last month, or at least the life-size sculpture of the former president at the library that tells the story of his life in politics. As a young reporter, I interviewed him years ago. And the Truman Library sculpture has captured his personality. He was kind of a twitchy, smallish man, not unlike a little sparrow hopping about, looking quickly this way and that, frequently pecking on Republicans.

I never heard him sing, though he was musical, playing the piano. But he had a flat, nasal speaking voice, making me believe there was a reason we never heard him sing.

But like a cardinal, he was dapper. He was a former men's clothing store owner who dressed like someone who can afford the best suits because he gets his clothes wholesale. He looked sharp and he knew it, standing ramrod straight in double-breasted suits with perfect ties and shoes that shined like reflections of his amused and cocky smile.

He talked rapidly in the repetitive, staccato rhythms of a man who was completely sure of himself. His movements were bird-like but they were not so much like the cardinal or the sparrow as like a feisty little banty rooster.

But Harry was a monogamous old bird, a one-hen rooster all the way. And as for beauty, how true it is that such judgments are in the eye of the beholder. He lived in a time of Lena Horne, one of history's great beauties, but he only had eyes for Bess.

She was his childhood sweetheart, a woman who appeared a bit sparrowish to others. But until the day he died, Harry Truman looked at Bess and saw a woman so adorable that the birds in the trees envied the song in his heart.

Hall may be contacted at wilberth@cablone.net or at 1012 Prospect Ave., Lewiston, ID 83501.