

CHRISTMAS IN MY HEART.®

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JOE L. WHEELER

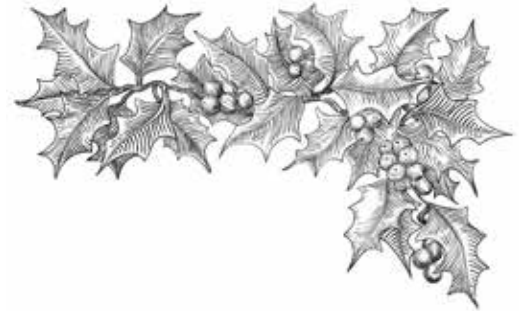


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My Christmas Swan Song

Joseph Leininger Wheeler

As I look back over the last thirty plus years, the first word that surfaces (in terms of my role) is *unworthy*. Why me, Lord? I like C. S. Lewis's likening God's perception of all His billions of sons and daughters down through the ages as each being limbs or branches of a vast tree, all interconnected. I can thus conceptualize myself as metaphorically standing on the shoulders of my story-loving elocutionist mother, Barbara Leininger Wheeler, who memorized thousands of pages of inspirational short stories, poetry, and readings that I, my brother, Romayne, and my sister, Marjorie, grew up listening to her reciting. In one of my books, *Tears of Joy for Mothers*, (W. Publishing/Thomas Nelson) I pay tribute to her in my introduction, "My Mother's Scrapbooks." I conclude it with my mother's signature poem, "A Song of Life." She was just fourteen when she won a high school elocution contest with it; and later, my father fell in love with her when she was reciting it in a college assembly program. In her later years, it would generally be included in her public performances. Here is how I concluded this chapter:

Finally, I have finished rummaging through

Mother's scrapbooks. It strikes me that in her poetry is a wondrous philosophy of life of what it means to be a mother—not just to her biological children, but to the thousands of children of the spirit who called her "Mother." I am humbled by her drive, by her determination that her children would soar after leaving her nest. And they have: one is a composer, poet, and concert pianist; one is an artist with a brush; and the third is a writer.

All her life, Mother prepared us for her passing. In the "Cradle to the Grave" programs, she and my father gave late in life, she would close with the poem that summed up her passion for life: Amelia Burr's "A Song of Living."

How these stories came to be

Thirty-two years ago, I wrote a Christmas story of my own. No good reason for it. Only in retrospect do I realize God was already sneakily setting me up for my part of what is today being called "the longest-running Christmas story series in America." The odd thing about these Christmas stories that bear my name is that I didn't write them. God did. It was a bit humiliating to discover that the stories I dreamed up on my own were close to worthless. Undeserving of inclusion in the series. Rather than filled with vibrant red blood, my characters were so moribund they might as well have been stuffed with sawdust. This epiphany took a mighty long time to penetrate my thick head: *Joe Wheeler, alone, was incapable of writing stories that would stand the test of time.* Time after time, I'd bullheadedly play around with plots that went nowhere. Months would

go by and the book deadline would loom closer and closer—and still no story! Finally, I’d be forced into falling on my knees with the only prayer that had ever worked:

Dear Lord,

It’s me again: Your sinful child. . . . Please forgive. I fail so often, yet each time, unworthy as I am, You forgive, stoop down, and raise me up once again. As you know, I’m nearing my deadline and nothing I’ve written so far is much good. Nothing sings. My wisdom wells are shallow and the water is brackish. Only Your divine wisdom wells are deep and contain vibrant, living water. And so I humbly ask—if it be Your will—that You will grant me just for today access to Your deep wisdom wells so that the story will long endure and bless each person who reads or hears it.

And God *always* responds. Sometimes delays, making me sweat, stretch. Each day, I pray a variation of this prayer. There is no guarantee that He will bless all that I write.

One of the serendipities of writing stories has to do with which characters turn out to be such scene-stealers that they end up running away with a given story. Usually, it cannot be planned or predicted; it just “happens.” And the two most important parts of a story or a novel are the opening and closing lines. I guess, in a way, I must be unconsciously partial to little girls. For instance, little

Beth runs away with “Evensong.” However, in “Pandora’s Books,” a cat steals the story. And in “Christmas After the Dark Time,” Charity and Mother Mary run away with the story.

I have often observed God’s unconditional love during my lifetime, and I try to weave some aspect of His love into my stories. In “Journey” and “Two Bouquets for Christmas,” the timeless message of love shines through.

It’s an incredible feeling: to realize that the great God of us all will stoop so low to be a writing partner with the unworthiest of His children! And had it not been for these stories, I’d never have learned about such divine condescension, humility, and empathy.

* * * * *

As I look back over the thirty-year lifespan of *Christmas in My Heart*, I can’t help but think back to the very beginning of the series, when Greg Johnson flew out to Annapolis, Maryland, and agreed to represent our future Christmas books. Little did we dream, back then, that three decades later, the series would still be alive! Our agent has faithfully guided the series every step of the way. So a heartfelt thank you to

GREG JOHNSON
President, WordServe Literary Group