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Paul Simon's *Memento Mori*: A Review Essay



by James C. Schaap

Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English at Dordt College and author of *Romey's Place*, *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*, *The Secrets of Barneveld Calvary*, and other works. Schaap has been honored by the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association for his fiction. He has also written plays, histories, and numerous articles on Faith and Writing. Among his other titles are *On the Trail of the Spirit*, sixteen stories of people affected by the ministry of the Back to God Hour; *Every Bit of Who I Am*, a devotional for teens; and *Paternity*, a collection of short fiction. His novel *Touches the Sky*, released four years ago, was given an Award of Merit by *Christianity Today* in their annual book awards. His most recent works are *Fifty-Five and Counting* and *Sioux County Folk*, released last fall by Dordt Press. He has been teaching literature and writing at Dordt College for thirty-three years.

And thou most kind and gentle Death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise Him! Alleluia!
Thou ledest home the child of God,
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.

I didn't really need to sing stanza six of "All Creatures of our God and King," a completely unfamiliar verse of an otherwise familiar hymn. It came after the sermon and just before the final blessing one May Sunday at the English Reformed Church of Amsterdam, where we worshipped—*we* being the 2011 Dordt College Alumni and Friends Netherlands Tour group. I didn't need to sing that peculiar stanza because the tour had already taken us places where the idea of *memento mori* (a Latin phrase suggesting "remember your mortality") was in stark evidence.

Besides, upon the podcast recommendation of a friend, I'd been reading Rob Moll's new book, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come*, to return to what once was a principled exercise Moll says is completely forgotten, in part, because today death is antiseptically cordoned off from day-to-day experience. Not so formerly, he argues.

Death could never be more frequent, given the rise in world populations; but it could be, and likely was, more familiar years ago, when people died younger, childbirth was vastly more dangerous, and—in many places—hospitals were few and far between, hospice-care unknown. Forty years ago already in her much-read study, *On Death and Dying*, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross maintained that, as a

culture, we'd distanced ourselves unhealthily from the experience of death.

Rob Moll's book restates what Kubler-Ross found in the late '60s: the distance we put between death and ourselves is soulfully detrimental. Moll is a believer—and his book is written primarily for Christians. Kubler-Ross was the child of Swiss Protestants, but by the end of her remarkable life she seemed, to some at least, to be more of a spiritualist than a believer in Jesus Christ.

What both clearly demonstrate, however, is the distance our medical competence has been able to engineer between ourselves and dying, a fact which any visit to one's European roots makes vividly clear. Once upon a time, death was immensely more familiar.

Wherever one goes in Holland, one sees ample evidences of the theme or idea of *memento mori*. Every old cathedral is festooned lavishly with skulls and crossbones. Centuries ago, a church's high-and-mighty were buried in the floor, beneath the aisles of spacious sanctuaries. No one going to worship could miss the memorials beneath their feet.



Even though “All Creatures of our God and King” was composed by St. Francis of Assisi already in the thirteenth century, and even though today it is very familiar, the famous hymn didn't find its way into the CRC's own *Psalter Hymnal* until the 1987 edition.

I'd never heard that verse before. It is yet another example of *memento mori*. To St. Francis, death is “kind and gentle.” For decades I've taught Emily

Dickinson's most famous poem, “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” as some kind of anomaly because Mr. Death, in that poem, is not some ghoulish monster but a kindly gentleman caller. Dickinson, I've told students, was an original. I may have to edit that assessment out of future lectures; Ms. Emily may simply have picked up the idea from New England hymnody.

Why the very famous hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King” didn't make it into the *Psalter Hymnal* until recently may be an easier question to answer than why the version we do sing does not include the verse that rang out a few weeks ago in Amsterdam's English church. Here are the lyrics again:

And thou most kind and gentle Death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise Him! Alleluia!
Thou leadest home the child of God,
And Christ our Lord the way hath trod.

Perhaps—just perhaps—one doesn't find that stanza even in the gray *Psalter Hymnal* because it was considered too morbid or mawkish for congregational singing.

Rob Moll quotes C. Ben Mitchell, a former professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and head of the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity, Union University: “You have to work hard to avoid discussions of dying in the church,” Mitchell says. “Yet that's exactly what we've done. We have avoided it with all of our might.”

Moll claims, ironically, that evangelical Christians are among the most dedicated to refusing to accept the reality or the moral power of death and dying: “Unfortunately, many Christians insist as a matter of faith and in order to be consistently pro-life that all deaths should come only after deploying an arsenal of medical treatment,” he writes. “To many believers, it seems paradoxical that one could at once be pro-life and embrace death as it approaches.”

But then, simply getting old makes denying death's reality difficult, if not impossible. In the last decade I've spent countless hours in the often silent hallways of places designed for “leisure living,” in homes for the aged, where I've watched parents tangle pathetically with malfunctioning

bodies. I've learned to turn up the volume in my speech and to don short sleeves when making even mid-January visits. I've learned what can and can't be said to my own parents, what will and will not get through. "Getting old isn't easy," my 92-year-old father-in-law has said to me frequently, and he should know—he and his baby brother are the only siblings, of ten, who haven't been victims of Alzheimer's.

That's why I say I didn't need an old hymn's strange stanza or cathedral icons to remind me of my mortality. I know it in my bones after mowing the lawn and staining the deck. I know it every time I climb the stairs or get out of a straight chair. At 63 years old, despite all the trips to the gym, I'm not getting any stronger.

The processes of aging may be why I was drawn to Paul Simon's new collection, *So Beautiful or So What*, when I read a review. Simon and his sidekick Art Garfunkel have been part of my life since I was a teenager. Once upon a time I had every last



album; I still have several. Even though my musical tastes have drifted elsewhere, Paul Simon's own eclectic folk rock is almost always beside me here in my study. It plays on our iPod sound system on some Saturday afternoons, and when I walk or bike and I need inspiration to get through the workout, I choose Paul Simon.

So Beautiful or So What, Simon claims, offers a skein of new songs meant to fit together thematically like *Winesburg, Ohio*, a collection of related short stories, or an old Beatles album—say, *Abbey Road* or *Sgt. Pepper*. He claims he wanted *So Beautiful or So What* to be itself a work of art. And it is—it's Paul Simon's very own *memento mori*. He is, after all, 70 years old, and it may be only natural that he is,

for the first time in his long musical career, thinking seriously about mortality, as he does in this album. Most of the work in this first new album of his in some time points clearly at immense, even cosmic, questions.

Simon has never been shy about grabbing musical ingredients from exotic sources. Some call him a creative genius; others accuse him of ice-cold carpet-bagging, traveling to South Africa to pick up new rhythms, then morphing those adopted native sounds—not to mention the natives themselves—into his compositions, as he did in both *Graceland* and *Rhythm of the Saints*. Here again, he uses all kinds of means to achieve what seems really verdant instrumentation.

The opening cut, "Getting Ready for Christmas Day," borrows snippets from a 1941 recorded sermon of Rev. J. M. Gates, in which the Reverend uses Christmas as a metaphor for his own, someday soon, meeting with Jesus. Although Paul Simon says he doesn't consider himself a religious man, one of this album's most obvious themes is religious; but then it's almost impossible not to consider religious ideas when thinking as seriously as he is here about death. References to Jesus Christ are not infrequent in *So Beautiful*, despite the fact that Simon, ethnically at least, is Jewish. But he's also playful, very playful, and will borrow ideas and images just as quickly as he borrows rhythms.

I'm not well enough acquainted with the folk rock scene today to make generalizations, but it seems to me that few singer/songwriters are capable of getting as much percussive playfulness from an acoustic guitar as Paul Simon. "Getting Ready for Christmas Day" rocks through some issues in today's world—money worries, war in the Middle East—and then, almost seamlessly, fuses the African-American sermon rhetoric of Rev. Gates's sermon: "Getting ready, ready for your prayers, 'I'm going to see my relatives in a distant land.' Getting ready, getting ready for Christmas Day," all of it rhythmically punctuated by amens and hallelujahs.

It's a marvelous single, seemingly disjointed yet skillfully unified by Simon's own late-in-life visions. A line like "If I could tell my Mom and Dad that the things we never had/Never mattered—we were always okay" has the definite feel of someone bring-

ing some healing to his or her own mysterious past.

He follows up with “The Afterlife,” a goofy bit of human imagining of life, post-mortem. Just like “Buddha and Moses and all the noses from narrow to flat,” there’s procedure after dying: “You got to fill out a form first/And then you wait in the line.” Sacrilegious?—well, sure. “To suffer and wait for the knowledge we seek/It’s all His design/No one cuts in the line/No one here likes a sneak”—Heaven as a medical clinic.

But when Simon’s persona finally gets his paperwork in, “The Lord God is near/Face-to-face in the vastness of space,” a place where “Your words disappear/And you feel like you’re swimming in an ocean of love.” What Paul Simon sees and sings is what troubadours have crooned since first stringing an instrument—what matters finally in this world is love, and love itself is as strong a theme as mortality in the *So Beautiful or So What*.

“Dazzling Blue” begins soberly, with the mystery of what is to come in the afterlife: “Truth or lie, the silence is revealing/An empty sky, a hidden mound of stone.” But technology has robbed us of at least some of the mystery: “But the CAT scan’s eye sees what the heart’s concealing/Now-a-days, when everything is known.” The music’s delightful syncopation, the almost magical percussion, simply will not allow moral seriousness. Besides, “Dazzling Blue” is unapologetic love song:

Dazzling blue, roses red, fine white linen
To make a marriage bed
And we’ll build a wall that nothing can break
through
And dream our dreams of dazzling blue.”

“Dazzling Blue,” the first of a few sweet love songs, is pure delight in sound and substance.

“Rewrite” is narrative, the story of an old man, a Vietnam vet perhaps, trying vainly to create art, a novel, a screenplay maybe, his own life perhaps, doing a rewrite while working in a car wash where both customers and co-workers seem to consider him a sad victim of his war experience. His petitions to God are only one moment of prayer in the album—there are more. But the summary I’ve just given makes the song sound more serious than it is. As someone on YouTube says, once again the imaginative beat reminds him of someone rhythmically

throwing a tennis ball up against a cement wall. Such darling rhythms and exotic audio effects won’t let you take the whole thing too seriously, even though the questions he asks are not trivial.

God Almighty returns in “Love and Hard Times,” a tune that begins with a patient piano intro and includes orchestral accompaniment in what seems all-that-is-right moments. It starts startlingly: “God and His only Son/Paid a courtesy call on Earth/One Sunday morning,” a beautiful morning. But the two of them leave rather quickly, more creation to manage, after they come to a sad conclusion—“these people are slobs here.” It’s more than a bit of a joke. Even though Paul Simon is decidedly serious in the album, he’ll never allow a listener to take him too seriously—he is, first of all, an artist, not a preacher. “God and His only Son” prepare to leave again, but then admit grudgingly that if they disappear, “it’s love and hard times.” Such is life, saith Paul Simon.

But the piece’s quirky theological intro—God and His son on an earthly stroll through what seems to them a despoiled garden—disappears for the remainder of what follows, as Simon creates yet another love song, perhaps the most ambitious of the album, with a line that concedes the difficulty of writing something fresh about love itself: “I loved her the first time I saw her/I know that’s an old songwriting cliché.” The story he tells, in images, is not without its heartaches—after all, it’s “love and hard times”; but the resolution comes soaring back with a mantra of blessed thanksgiving: “But then your hand takes mine/Thank God, I found you in time/Thank God I found you/Thank God, I found you.”

Something in “Love and Hard Times” sounds like “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” but it may just be me. Other hints and allusions to his most iconic songs are much harder to miss and add evocatively to the sense that this is, at times, his own retrospective.

“Love is Eternal Sacred Light” summons back both of the most important themes of the album—love and mortality—in a chorus of references and allusions to oddly aligned ideas, from anthropology to evolution, from Big Bang theory to talk radio (“politics is ugly”) and frightening Midwest blizzards, all of it communicated through a voice he employs occasionally in the album, the very voice

of his sense of God, in a blues-jam mix.

“Questions for the Angels” is just that—a list of unanswerables: “Who am I in this lonely world?” More allusions from old albums: “If an empty train in a railroad station/Calls you to its destination/Can you choose another track?” And then this: “If every human on the planet and all the buildings on it/Should disappear/Would a zebra grazing in the African savannah/ Care enough to shed one zebra tear?”

There is no reference to death and dying here, but the questions have this ultimate sense to them, questions that have puzzled human beings for centuries—questions for the angels, questions for the ages.

Most of the work in this first new album of his in some time points clearly at immense, even cosmic, questions.

The almost ragtime beat of “Love and Blessings” runs beneath what seems a pageant of images, some almost desperate, some sweet and fulfilling. But once again, in this cut, as elsewhere, Simon returns adoringly to the antidote for the blues, even as it pertains to death and dying. “In a word, or in an image/Something called me from my sleep/Love and blessings/Simple kindness/Ours to hold but not to keep.”

What’s here is an injunction to commit oneself and one’s life to love, even though human love, like everything else, is not forever—not in the sense of its being momentary or even transitory, however, but in the sense of simply not being eternal. Love is all we can ask for, all we can know of the eternal.

Paul Simon ends this short and tightly packed collection of new work with the title cut, a piece which gathers its almost hallucinatory strength from the simple fact that the entire piece, musically, is a relatively simple riff. In a way, “So Beautiful or So What” is a lament—not about love or the lack of it, but more importantly about how it is we all seem to discount life’s own richness, to look past its radi-

ance, to leave its bounty untouched:

Ain’t it strange the way we’re ignorant
How we seek out bad advice
How we jigger it and figure it
Mistaking value for the price
And play a game with time and love
Like a pair of rolling dice
So beautiful
So beautiful
So what

“So what”—the other side of “so beautiful” in the title—is, I think, deliberately ambiguous. Paul Simon isn’t simply discounting everything around him, finally playing the cynic, shrugging his shoulders and smirking and saying, “So what?” That phrase is not uttered simply in resignation. Read that way, the final line cuts against the grain of most of the album’s soulful optimism, its estimation of a “so beautiful” world. Read that way, “so what” undercuts everything else he’s suggested. Someone ultimately made the decision not to end the title with a question mark.

“So what?” I may be wrong, but I also hear Francis Schaeffer—so, given all of this, how are we going to live?” It’s the question he’s asking himself, and us, the question *not* for the angels but for the ages, a question that arises more frequently at the end of life, when there’s more to see and judge in the rearview mirror than out front and down the road.

So Beautiful or So What is, in a way, Paul Simon’s retrospective self-portrait, a meditation, a preemptive obit he’s created for himself, a collection that shows him at his creative best, turning out tunes and poems that challenge the listener with substantial questions people, like him, and me, ask when they come uncomfortably close to their allotted three-score and ten. As Elvis Costello says in the album’s liner notes, “I believe that this remarkable, thoughtful, often joyful record deserves to be recognized as among Paul Simon’s very finest achievements.”

And it’s fitting for me, too, this non-musician, to take another look at Paul Simon because I have a history with him, a history that includes a paper I wrote 43 years ago on the Dordt College campus to fulfill an assignment bestowed upon me by an

education prof who wasn't sure I could be properly recommended for teaching in a Christian school—after all, I listened to worldly music.

Back then, both of us were living through an era that has become its own brand, the late '60s, when an almost unbridgeable gap grew between flower children and the Ozzie and Harriet generation, parents shaped indelibly by the Great Depression and WWII. That old professor was concerned about secular music blaring from my dorm-room stereo by way of albums like *Sounds of Silence* (1965) and *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* (1966). Because of my musical preferences, he had questions about my heart and soul, questions for which he wanted answers before he and the department he ran would recommend me. "Okay," he said, at one of the weekly conferences I was required to attend in his office, "if that music you listen to is so relevant, so important, then show me."

So I tried. The paper I wrote for him—long gone I'm sure, as is he—is probably the one I remember most clearly from my final year, even though I wasn't enrolled in his class and my careful unpacking of Paul Simon's lyrics had nothing whatsoever to do with achieving a semester grade. He wondered, seriously, whether a Christian school should hire someone who listened so intently to the music I did, and I knew that a lament like "The Sound of Silence" somehow captured in its thoughtful questioning a vision much broader and relevant to my life than what I perceived as his stiffly shuttered piety.

In a way, he was doing what all of us have to do—weighing what we see and hear around us by values that are enduring. That I thought him silly didn't stop me from writing the very best paper I could. This was no classroom exercise, and I knew it; that opportunity was an opportunity, I thought, for the student to teach the professor. I was a kid. I liked that reversal.

Years later, at a reading somewhere far away, I saw him once again. He seemed to me to be in a kind of awe, shocked that I now taught at the college he once did and was even representing that college. And he was proud, I think, patronizingly so, confident he'd played a significant role in my spiritual maturation. After all, how could someone like me have ever succeeded had not someone like

him made me accountable?

Maybe he was. That too is a question for the ages.

That whole story is a parable, really. In Dordt language, it offers a narrative that illustrates the conflict between what we learn from the revelation of Holy Scripture and what we learn by way of that other "revelation"—the story told by creation itself, *by our world*. What is Godliness? What is righteousness? What is obedience?

It could well be that those questions were classroom theory until the conflict—between what that old professor thought of as saintliness, based on his view of Scripture, and what I did, based on the way Paul Simon clearly sang to my heart and soul—worked itself out in a extra-curricular assignment and proved to me that Simon and Garfunkel had (and still have) something to say.

So I did. Or tried.

Even though today it would be easy for me to judge that old professor as a Neanderthal, who is to say that what he forced me to do nearly a half-century ago didn't shape me powerfully, albeit in ways he may well not have intended. God's ways are not our own. Take it from someone in his last year of long career of teaching at Dordt College.

Paul Simon's *So Beautiful or So What* speaks to me now just as surely as *The Sounds of Silence* did to me forty-plus years ago. Today, Simon is almost 70. Back then, a Jewish singer/songwriter from Brooklyn, New York, somehow managed to ask the questions I was asking, a Dutch-American kid from a tiny little town in the rural Midwest, a kid who knew almost nothing about a Calvinist heritage I somehow carried unknowingly. It was the late '60s, and both the kid and the old man were "of" a generation.

How might my analyses have changed in those 40 years? Quite simple, really. Back then, I probably believed that Paul Simon's art deliberately made broad philosophical statements, created a "message" somehow discoverable by devoted analysis of "the perspective" that lay beneath each and every composition. I was as sure as the old professor that art was only slightly different from preaching, that both genres were given, finally, to the bold print of propositional truth.

No more. Today, not to see even a deeply philosophical work like *So Beautiful* as playful is to miss its

richness and its own blessing. Art plays thoughtfully with life and truth; writers and artists often dance and sing but only rarely preach. Twisting the lyrics of Simon's latest album into propositional truth misses the joy in this album of songs of mortality. Paul Simon is asking the big, tough questions, but he's also having great fun.

In a You Tube video about the album, Simon says that the very first sound on the very first track is nothing more than a steam engine in slow motion—a sound he simply found fascinating and threw into the mix, almost willy-nilly. That's *play*—and that play is at the core of what he's done with *So Beautiful*. To say that takes nothing away from the accomplishment, nor does it in any way downplay the significance of the questions he's asking. But he

is singing with a smile.

All of which puts me in mind of something Dordt's first president, Rev. B. J. Haan, once told me. If he could do it all over, relive his life from the time he became a pastor, he said, he'd change a great deal because he had learned, through the years, that the way to the heart was through a smile, through laughter, through joy. Anyone who knew him in his last decade understands that assessment.

So finally, after all these years and all those songs, what I'm saying, Mr. Education Professor, is that, once more, Paul Simon's *memento mori* in *So Beautiful or So What* speaks to me just as clearly as anything he ever wrote.

I hope you understand.