

# Introduction

The secret to living a full and happy life lies in learning to sing new songs.

This book really began in songs sung thousands of years ago. But you will never really know that when you read it because its words are as clear about today as they are about all the yesterdays before us. They are, you see, the psalms which the Jewish-Christian world has been praying daily for centuries. And the reason for their relevancy is a clear one: The psalms are the story of the human soul—yours and mine—in progress.

This little book is a walk through psalms written by one people but prayed by many different peoples since. Because they are about life, about what it means to be human, what it is to struggle and laugh, to be confused and depressed, to grapple

with self-acceptance and strive for enlightenment, they are about all of us. Best of all, they are written in a universal language that never goes out of style, that is always fresh, always piercing. They are the languages of poetry and song.

There are two things in life that explain everything without explaining anything at all: One is music and the other is poetry. As Aaron Copland, the great American composer, put it, “The whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, ‘Is there a meaning to music?’ My answer would be, ‘Yes.’ And ‘Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?’ My answer to that would be, ‘No.’”

In “Yes and No,” in fact, lies the beauty of both. Both music and poetry tap into the unconscious and give it free rein. Both music and poetry bind generations and bridge cultures. Both music and poetry are about what it means to be human at the deepest part of our souls. Both music and poetry allow us to bring our own meaning to the work and so enlarge the meaning and the consciousness of others. Both music and poetry are eternally flexible: They harbor within them the meaning we give them at any point in time, as well as the meaning they speak to us in words forever.

The psalms in this book—all pieces of poetry and music—have meaning for us, too. If it is true that “the history of a people is found in its songs,” as George Jelinek says, then this spiritual history of the House of Israel is our history, as well. And, perhaps, the history of any living human being in search of the living God.

The 150 songs of praise in the Book of Psalms are a sweeping overview of the spiritual life that some say express virtually the full range of Israel’s religious faith. They are the universal story of the soul’s pilgrimage through life.

The psalmist sings to our hearts and our minds in language we understand. The psalms bring poetry to our ears that breaks open in us new particles of hope in the presence of the living God. Right here. Right now. And in particular to us.

The psalmist is poet and wisdom figure, balladeer and historian of the human struggle for God.

This little book sets out to bridge the two cultures, the two eras, the soul of the psalmist and our own.

The process is a simple one: It puts the words of the psalmist under the microscope of now in order to bring new insight and perspective to these times

and challenges. Then it is up to us to bring ourselves to the psalm, to bring our own lives to the microscope, to engage in the dialogue of the soul.

My recommendation is that each segment be dealt with slowly. It is important to participate in the conversation, to challenge the position of the psalmist with insights of our own, to memorize each versicle, perhaps, and so to immerse the vinegar of our lives in the honey of the sentences. Then, by allowing them to sift into our veins, we may begin a new song of praise for all the ages of our own lives in the heart of the world as well as in our own.

May this simple little book become an oasis in time for you, away from the stresses of a world that demands more attention than the human soul can bear. May you, too, learn from its poetry and its songs to find new meaning at the core of life. Most of all, may you make its songs your own.