

Reflections by Music Director Thomas Stumpf

Theme: "Gratitude"

Sermon: "**Stirring Up the Dust**"

November 29, 2015

Introduction:

Three thesis statements:

I do not live easily or joyfully in a world that doesn't appear to be willing to differentiate between truth and fact.

I do not live easily or joyfully in a world that doesn't appear to be willing to differentiate between fun and joy.

The 19th century German-Jewish novelist Berthold Auerbach once wrote: "Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." He was a good and wise man, and no doubt he meant to say something good and wise about music, but I don't like the over-used quote. I think I prefer music that stirs up the dust.

Reflection 1:

Some time ago the Reverend Claire shared with us her Credo from this pulpit, and she shared it again last Sunday at Coming of Age. It includes the following words: "I do not believe that everything happens for a reason, I do not believe that there is a divine plan or destiny and we are all in lockstep with it, and I do not believe that suffering is meant to test or teach me, or anyone else. I do believe that human beings have the will and ability to make meaning out of any event, even the most terrible suffering, that this meaning-making is holy and powerful, and we can use that power to transform ourselves and our world."

I too believe intensely in the sacred and powerful capacity human beings have for meaning-making. I believe that the will and determination to engage this capacity is one of the great triumphs of the human spirit. And I believe that the act of meaning-making transforms us by helping us to experience and understand the human condition as something not only bearable but full of blessing and wonder.

There are many ways to create meaning out of life. They almost all involve giving it form. This is something the generally messy chaos of life doesn't naturally possess. And so we tell a story to a friend, and out of all the random and not-so-random events of our life we weave a tale that has a beginning and an ending, and in between there is a plot-line that suggests comprehensible cause and effect. Or we take scraps of cloth and we

stitch them into a delightful quilt that has a (usually geometric) comprehensible shape. We string together tones to form melodies and harmonies, we organize them into rhythmic patterns, and suddenly a piece of music emerges that has singable or listenable lines which we can comprehend. The form of art-works give comprehensible shape to life.

In addition to form, meaning-making often involves a kind of aesthetic pleasure that we call beauty. We try to choose the right words, the right colors, the right tones which balance symmetry and contrast, consonance and dissonance, joy and sorrow, darkness and light, blessing and terror, in ways that give us sensuous pleasure and by deepening the meaning also intensify our emotional pleasure. And the pleasure we take in the sheer beauty of art-works helps to make bearable that unforeseeable mixture of blessings and cruelties that constitutes life.

All this should make it clear that the holy task of meaning-making is not at all a way to make life easier, or to pretend that it's easy in the first place. The need for form arises from the randomness of life, from the fact that cause and effect are sometimes present and sometimes not, sometimes we understand why something happens and sometimes we don't. The need for beauty arises from the perplexing fickleness of nature, which we sometimes perceive as joyously glorious and sometimes as cruelly ugly.

Take Katrina. How the storm wrecked New Orleans is a classic example of the awe-inspiring power but also the ugly cruelty of the natural world. How the aftermath combined corruption and justice, greed and compassion, an apparent need to destroy further and a deep and wonderful urge to rebuild, is a classic example of the odd, incomprehensible mess we call human nature. But we managed to create meaning. Stories and photographs and films gave the events shape and form which helped make them comprehensible to us; in the novels and poems and music there was enough beauty - even if it was sometimes a dark and cruel beauty - to make it all just this side of bearable, perhaps to help us retain our sanity, and to rouse us to action.

I had my own private Katrina moment, if you like. As many of you know, when I was eighteen my brother Martin died. He was only four years older than I. It was cancer: one of nature's incomprehensible cruelties. Human nature didn't serve me terribly well either: my parents, no doubt suffering their own unspeakable grief, made their share of mistakes in relation to me and my only way of dealing was to suppress my grief. Without my consciously knowing it, I suspect now that music-making was one of the primary things that saved me. Unable to cry physically, I cried metaphorically at the piano. And of course I told the story of my brother's death over and over again, in various ways to different people, not always entirely honestly, not always fully, but I told it. And from very shortly after his death I always wanted to compose some kind of requiem, a musical tribute in memoriam, but was unable to do so. Until last year, when I finally wrote a piano piece entitled "The Spirit and the Dust" which fulfilled that long-held wish. I realize now that it is not really a tribute to Martin: it's about me, and what I went through. Whether it transcends my personal experience sufficiently to move other people and

enable them to identify with my emotions is a question that will decide whether it is of much use as an art-work. But for once in my life, I have to admit I don't care.

The arts aren't the only way human beings have of creating meaning out of life: but they are a crucially important way. In the words of the Australian art critic Robert Hughes, "The basic project of art is always to make the world whole and comprehensible, to restore it to us in all its glory and its occasional nastiness - not through argument but through feeling - and then to close the gap between you and everything that is not you, and in this way to pass from feeling to meaning."

And this leads me to what I understand as the crucial importance of the arts: truly great art-works allow each one of us to feel at one with all of humanity and all of nature; to feel that the human condition is both our individual condition and that of every other human being.

I am deeply grateful that making music - as a pianist, as a conductor, and as a composer - shows me the possibility of making meaning out of my life: that it helps make the world whole and comprehensible for me, that it restores the world to me in both its glory and in its nastiness by making me feel. And by closing the gap between me and everything and everyone else - in other words by reminding me that I am at one with all of humanity and all of nature - art allows my feelings to become my meanings.

Reflection 2:

Obviously I take meaning-making very seriously. Please don't misunderstand me. This doesn't mean that all art has to be serious in some deadly earnest kind of way. Great comedy can be every bit as revealing as great tragedy. In fact sometimes it is the deepest way to uncover the oddities of human existence and the foibles of human beings. Our reaction in the form of a deep genuine laughter is a wonderfully healing as we understand and identify with clowns and clownish actions.

What I won't accept is shallowness, superficiality. Again, don't misunderstand me. The superficial - what we call "fluff" has its place. That "place" is when we are sick of trying to make sense out of life, want to turn off our mind's quest, want to believe for a little while that life really is simple and pleasant. Many evenings I sit down to watch a British murder mystery - "Midsomer Murders" and "Poirot" are present favorites. Both shows have charming theme music, when it comes on as background to the credit titles I am transported to an easier world where morality is straightforward, murder is essentially a plot device, and the villains are eventually unmasked and arrested, but only after their motives have been made clear.

This is what I call having fun. I do not live easily or joyfully in a world that doesn't appear to be willing to differentiate between fun and joy. I am deeply distrustful of our society's insistence upon "having fun." "If it's not fun why do it?" I would like to change that to: "If it doesn't bring you the deep joy of living, why do it?" Wow, doesn't that

sound terribly pompous. But if we don't recognize and acknowledge the difference between fun and the deep joy of living, we impoverish not only our vocabulary but our souls.

When music, for instance, is simply "fun," then it's entertainment. But seeking to be entertained and making meaning out of life are two different things, and it's surely important for us not to confuse them. The great Jewish-German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt once wrote: "There are many great authors of the past who have survived centuries of oblivion and neglect, but it is still an open question whether they will be able to survive an entertaining version of what they have to say." What does this mean? It means that if what the greatest books - "Pride and Prejudice," say, or "Madame Bovary" or "Anna Karenina" - have to say about the nature of love is replaced by romantic comedies; if what the greatest plays of Ibsen or Chekhov or Eugene O'Neill have to say about the nature of families is replaced by sitcoms; if Shakespeare's explorations of murder occasioned by ambition or revenge or jealousy are replaced by cop shows - then entertainment triumphs over enchantment, fun wins out over deeply joyous understanding. And we lose.

Now I could tell you that to find fun entertainment musically you should go to a rock concert. And I could tell you that to find meaningful enchantment you need only go to a symphony concert. How I wish it were that simple. But I know it's not. It all depends on who is making the music, and whose music is being made. Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" is well-crafted charming entertainment - his opera "Così fan tutte" is an exquisite and moving lesson in love and life. The Beatles' "I saw her standing there" is well-crafted charming entertainment - "Eleanor Rigby" is a short but richly beautiful and sad life-lesson. In one performance Beethoven's 7th symphony might radiate a slick surface beauty; in another it might be a life-changing experience. And the willingness of the listener to have their life changed is always a part of the equation.

The American critic Neil Postman has his own views on the fun/joy dichotomy. In his 1985 book "Amusing Ourselves to Death," he rails against the trivialization of religion through "entertaining" television broadcasts. He writes: "The spectacle we find in true religions has as its purpose enchantment, not entertainment. The distinction is critical. By endowing things with magic, enchantment is the means through which we may gain access to sacredness. Entertainment is the means through which we distance ourselves from it."

Entertainment is the means by which we distance ourselves from the sacred; enchantment is how we gain access to it. As I understand it, the "sacred" here does not mean only what is conventionally termed religious. The sacred is everything in which we have faith.

And so finally the word faith makes its appearance. Not the easiest word, especially for Unitarian Universalists. Faith involves first of all a clear distinction between truth and fact. I do not live easily or joyfully in a world that doesn't appear to be willing to differentiate between truth and fact. Facts can be very comforting, but they are surprisingly slippery and changeable, and the best of them are just a way of seeing the

world that we can all agree upon. We'd like to see science as a kind of religion of facts. But, as Adam Gopnik wrote in the latest edition of *The New Yorker* (so much "the latest" that the date on its cover is tomorrow), "Science isn't a slot machine, where you drop in facts and get out truths. But it is a special kind of social activity, one where lots of different human traits - obstinacy, curiosity, resentment of authority, sheer cussedness, and a grudging readiness to submit pet notions to popular scrutiny - end by producing reliable knowledge." Now there's a human definition of science! I could argue with the word "reliable," but at least he ends with "knowledge" rather than truth. Truth is - in my vocabulary - a different thing altogether.

By definition, faith isn't based on facts. This leads some to the conclusion that it is a folly based on lies or illusions. But genuine faith - not the kind that justifies itself by making literal everything that was meant metaphorically - genuine faith is based on truths. It is, as the Lebanese-American poet and mystic Kahlil Gibran once wrote, "a knowledge within the heart, beyond the reach of proof." To me "a knowledge within the heart" is not just a pretty damn good definition of the notoriously-difficult-to-define concept "faith" - it can also function as a definition of "truth."

But truth, everyone yells at me, doesn't exist of course. I raise my eyebrows, and they say: well, all right, objective truth doesn't exist. Well, whoever claimed that the truth was - or should be - objective? Is it any the less real and vitally important for not being objective, whatever that word means? I would be inclined to say: truth exists, objectivity doesn't.

My own particular faith is largely centered on the human spirit. I love the human spirit, I love its capacity for strength in the form of love and compassion and courage in the face of the most terrible suffering, and I love its capacity for the holy and powerful task of making meaning out of the best and worst that life has to offer. My faith understands also that the human spirit is sometimes corroded by fear and anger, which give rise to acts of cowardice and hate and what we subsume under the term "evil." My faith includes the hope that love and compassion and courage will win out more often than not: and I see that victory often enough, most especially on the smaller stage of individual behavior, so that I don't have to think my hope is vain.

I know that some people share my faith in these truths, but that doesn't make them facts or prove them true. I know that some people do not share my faith, but that doesn't turn my truths into lies or delusions. My deepest knowledge is what my heart knows, and that knowledge is unassailable. Scientific facts about what foods are or are not good for us seem to change every month nowadays: but my love for Holly and for my daughters - which I know as very specific and miraculous manifestations of my love for all things human - that love doesn't change because it's a truth that is known to my heart. Teach me everything factual that doctors know about cancer - but it won't teach me how to deal with the truth of what my brother's death means to me. Only my knowing heart can do that and it's been working hard for forty years because it's a horribly difficult truth that no facts can deal with.

I am lucky enough to have great music as a guide along my path. Music is a lot like faith in some ways. There are facts about music, but like many mathematical facts they are just a vocabulary to help quantify what is already there. And these facts explain nothing that is truly important. Like faith, great music is a knowing of the heart; it knows that the truth is multi-layered (what Holly calls "one-thought songs" are never great music); it acknowledges the power of meaning-making, it acknowledges that meaning is not meant to be objective, because it uses no objects, no words to make its meanings concrete; it acknowledges that perception is intensely personal; and at the same time it believes in the universality of the human spirit, because otherwise how could it ever seek to communicate meaning to so many different human beings?

I am deeply grateful that making music - as a pianist, as a conductor, and as a composer - shows me the possibility of making meaning out of my life. I am grateful that the music of great composers allows me to discover (in the words of the great Charles Ives) "the inner, invisible activity of truth" - of personal and private truths that I need to know. Faith is a knowing of the heart, and I am grateful that music underscores my faith because it allows my heart to know - if only through a glass darkly.

I am also deeply grateful to Follen Church for having given me the opportunity to explore both my music-making and my faith-making for over twenty years. Perhaps you have understood that these reflections have been a way of letting you know how and why I have done my work here in the way I have; perhaps you have also understood from these reflections why it is time for me to move on. I'd like to end with some lines from Stanley Kunitz's remarkable poem entitled "The Layers":

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

May you never be done with your changes. May you carve out meanings from your experiences and your artworks all the days of your lives.

So may it be.
Amen.