

THE COMPOSITION OF FAITH

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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In my sermon last Sunday, titled “Promises to Keep,” I spoke about experiences that matter and our efforts to make them durable. I described how this Sanctuary was constructed during the Great Depression and explained why its architecture creates a sense of profound serenity and steady purpose. I also mentioned the importance of the magnificent music we enjoy here. It grounds our deepest sorrows and gives wings to our highest aspirations.

Walter Klauss has been our maestro of Music at All Souls for 32 years. Like the architecture of the Sanctuary, Wally and the choir play a leading role in creating the experience of worship that defines our community of faith. Superb musicianship has always been a hallmark of Wally’s choirs, but so has the extensive range of their repertoire. Today’s music—a foretaste of tonight’s concert—is a good example: a spiritual set to a Shaker melody, a Broadway show tune by Sondheim, a setting of a Hebrew psalm by the American composer Charles Ives, and an extravagant organ toccata by the French composer Henri Mulet. I am deeply grateful to Wally and the choir for their ineffable gift of music. Thank you, Maestro.

Wally’s decision to explore what he terms the American tradition in music led me to think about the American tradition in religion—and whether the two might be related. In 1925, the noted American poet and essayist Hart Crane wrote, “I am concerned with the future of America ... because I feel persuaded that here are destined to be discovered certain as yet undefined spiritual qualities, perhaps a new hierarchy of faith not to be developed so completely elsewhere. And in this process, I like to feel myself as a potential factor; certainly I must speak in its terms and what discoveries I may make are situated in its experience.”

What exactly does Crane mean when he speaks of a new hierarchy of faith developing in America, a new architecture of religious experience? What, if anything, does music have to do with it? And how might you and I also be potential factors in the process of developing this new approach?

Some time ago, Holly and I attended a concert at Carnegie Hall performed by the pianist Maurizio Pollini and the Julliard String Quartet. The main attraction for us was the performance by Pollini of Chopin’s *Twenty-Four Preludes*. Predictably, the Chopin appeared as the second half of the evening’s program. But first, there were dues to pay.

If the names Alban Berg and Anton Webern do not strike terror into your musical heart, it’s probably because you’ve not listened to their music, which filled the first half of the program. The fact that it featured ample dissonance and unpredictable rhythms was only the beginning. Some of the sounds emanating from the instruments were otherworldly, even surreal. I spent most of my time trying to figure out what I was supposed to be hearing.

That was precisely the point, as it turned out. I realized midway through the Chopin that Pollini knew exactly what he was doing when he set the evening’s program. Because we had spent an hour listening to Berg and Webern, our ears were no longer

attuned to the usual tonal conventions and rhythmic expectations. We could hear the intricate rhythms and subtle harmonic textures of Chopin more clearly. After an hour of not knowing what was coming, we had actually started to pay attention to the music.

The American composer Charles Ives wanted to accomplish precisely the same goal. He wanted people to listen to music in a different way. Since most audiences were accustomed to listening to music in concert halls, Ives tried to teach them to listen for music as they sat in their homes and walked along the streets. Since most people thought real music came from European composers, Ives' compositions quoted the music of America.

Ives' Fourth Symphony, for example, considered by many to be his best, picks up tunes from quintessentially American songs like *The Red, White, and Blue; In the Sweet By and By; Columbia, The Gem of the Ocean; Long, Long Ago; Turkey in the Straw;* and *From Greenland's Icy Mountains;* among others. If music is to resonate with your life, Ives suggests, then music must resonate with *your* life. Ives' music captures the political dissonance of a fledgling nation, the emotional hubbub of hearth and home, the rhythms of Main Street and the tunes of the village square. For Ives, music was one of the experiences in life that mattered most. As his biographer says, "Ives *believed*. He believed in love, he believed in wisdom, he believed in spiritual and moral progress, he believed in God...and he believed in *music*."

To encourage people to listen to music in a new way, Ives first had to break some of the old musical rules. And he did, experimenting with dissonance and rhythm long before Schoenberg and Stravinsky ever put pencil to paper. But Ives' musical genius, like the political genius of this new nation, was to rearrange the traditional hierarchy in order to place the individual at the top. The focus of Ives' music is the life experience of the listener, rather than the imagination of the composer or the skill of the performer. This focus on the individual was a perspective Ives gained principally from the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the leading lights in the Transcendentalist movement.

The Transcendentalists emphasized three main ideas: the divinity of nature, the worth of the individual, and the capacity of each person to know the truth directly. By directly, the Transcendentalists meant without the intermediary of scripture, doctrine, or church. Emerson asked: "Why should not we [as individuals] also enjoy an *original relation to the universe*.... Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past?" His doctrines of self-sufficiency and self-reliance assert that we as individuals can trust our intuition and live according to universal moral laws which we intuitively perceive. He declared: "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds."

In 1838, Emerson gave an address to the seniors graduating from the Divinity School at Harvard, his alma mater. In the speech, Emerson sought to identify the cause of what he called "a decaying church and a wasting unbelief." The problem, he said, was that true worship had departed from church; thus the benefits of worship had been lost altogether.

What could be done? Emerson responded, "The remedy is already declared in the ground of our complaint of the Church. We have contrasted the Church with the soul. In the soul, then, let the redemption be sought." By rejecting the church out of hand, Emerson sought a direct and immediate experience of God; he wanted his own revelation.

Emerson believed the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world and contains what the world contains. He put it this way: “Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.”

I applaud Emerson’s inversion of the hierarchy: his insistence that truth comes to us as individuals, if it comes at all. He goes wrong, in my view, when he summarily throws out the church. This is where a musical metaphor becomes helpful. Faith begins with a hint of melody: the awareness of a larger presence or intuition of a larger purpose. But if our faith is to endure, it must become something we build upon and develop into a composition, like a show tune or a symphony.

In the old hierarchy, faith is the willingness to believe that sacred scripture—the Bible or the Koran—is a supernatural revelation from God. This kind of faith is thought to be necessary in order to understanding the natural world and human history. As the fourth-century church father St. Augustine famously put it, “I believe, therefore I understand.” In the new hierarchy, you and I move in the opposite direction: not from belief to understanding, but from understanding to belief. We take everything we know into account as we decide what to believe. Enlightened faith never asks us to set aside what we know.

Enlightened faith is a leap of the moral imagination that connects the world as it is to the world as it might become. Faith looks at what is and imagines what might be. It is a leap of the moral imagination.

But without something to sustain it, our faith will eventually falter. It needs support: stories to restore our courage, symbols to remind us of commitments we have made, and daily rituals to renew our resolve. We need a place to go when we are feeling discouraged and songs to sing when we are full of spirit. We need companions to help bear the load. These not only help sustain our faith, but they also help recreate it at other times and places, and for other people. The theological term for supports that sustain and renew our faith is religion. It is the collection of forms we use to carry our faith along from day to day and generation to generation.

In order for our faith to remain vital and relevant, the religious elements that support and sustain our faith will need to change from time to time. When Ives realized that the music of Europe did not fully engage the experience of America, he didn’t summarily toss out everything: the Western chromatic scale, the conventions of musical notation, the idea of rhythm and harmony, the use of voices and instruments. He didn’t throw out his scores and his theory books. He didn’t ceremonially burn his piano.

Instead, Ives began to compose with a new goal in mind: to express the longings and aspirations of individual Americans. We approach the composition of faith with a similar goal in mind: to support and sustain the faith we treasure as individuals. Like Ives, we use many traditional forms, but we arrange these forms differently and give them new content. The composition of faith is as much an art as it is a science, because it works the boundary between things we know for certain and things we can never fully comprehend.

“I feel persuaded,” Hart Crane wrote, “that here are destined to be discovered certain as yet undefined spiritual qualities... and in this process I like to feel myself as a potential factor.” I feel the same. I believe we are destined to discover something vital here at All Souls. We are composing faith—an American tradition of faith.

The melody of our faith rises from the knowledge in our minds and the intuition of our hearts. The seasons and cycles of the natural world add rhythm and tempo, and the wisdom of the ages adds needed counterpoint. The beauty we experience adds harmony and resonance, and the injustice we confront adds dissonance. We are composing faith.

Our role is no longer passively to receive scripture or doctrine from on high. We are each a vital factor in the process. Which notes of inspiration will we use? What rhythm of awe? What tempo of obligation? With what will we harmonize and to what will we remain dissonant? We are all composers now.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.