

**FINDING COSMOS IN THE CHAOS: THE WAY OF ARTIST AND BELIEVER**  
**2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-6:10**  
**MARCH 5, 2003 – ASH WEDNESDAY**  
**THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

A few years ago I received a call at my hotel room in downtown Montreal. It was from a divinity school classmate. She was calling to tell me that a dear friend and fellow classmate of ours had died of AIDS.

I was anticipating Ken's death. He had been fighting AIDS for some time – even before his move to San Diego. He was immensely talented. Published playwright. Pastor to the arts community from St. Peter's Lutheran Church – located under the tower at Citicorp Plaza at 55<sup>th</sup> and Lexington. Ken was the congregation's representative to the Duke Ellington Foundation – Ellington's widow was a member of the church. He made possible the commissioning and acquisition by the church of a major work by William De Kooning – the abstract expressionist painter. In his spare time he picked up a law degree at Columbia and became the marketing agent for Sir John Templeton's Prize for the Advancement of Religion – the largest cash award given anywhere for humanitarianism.

But Ken lived in the fast lane. That night when our friend called to say that he had died I was on my way, with some Canadian Presbyterian pastors, to see Nicholas Cage in *Leaving Las Vegas*. If you saw the movie it was depressing. But as it turned out it was a fitting story to see on the day of Ken's death. When I saw Cage driving his BMW at warp speed through the Nevada desert to Las Vegas where he would single-mindedly drink himself to death, I thought that's how Ken lived his life. Fast. Reckless. On the edge. Some people are just driven. Self-destructive. All the while being, like Nicholas Cage in that movie, totally endearing. Displaying both blemish and blessing is the human condition. Ken wasn't perfect. None of us is.

I want to talk about "Finding Cosmos in the Chaos" this Lent. A phrase I borrowed from Madeleine L'Engle who borrowed it from Leonard Bernstein.<sup>i</sup> Bernstein said that's what the arts, music in particular, does for him. Enabled him to find meaning, purpose, healing in the course of everyday occurrences, even catastrophic events. Cosmos in chaos.

I refer to *Leaving Las Vegas* on the night of my friend's death because despite the dire news it was a moment of finding cosmos in the chaos for me. It didn't take away my pangs of sorrow at Ken's death but it did help me to find some meaning out of an otherwise senseless, tragic loss. Cosmos out of chaos.

Here is the fascinating, profound connection between the arts and faith. A partnership that has existed for centuries certainly but in recent times has taken on a new dimension. Robert Wuthnow from the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University says artists are the theologians of our time.<sup>ii</sup> More than academic theologians, painters, poets, musicians, dancers, film-makers, photographers are exploring the meaning of life and the mystery of creature and Creator.

More people than ever before are consumers and practitioners of the arts. Yet, the contemporary church has allowed this historic relationship to the arts to wither and die.

My goal this lent is to stir our interest in this vital, life-giving partnership. Westminster is well-positioned to be a leader in the religious community and wider community as friend, sponsor, and practitioner of the arts. Not only is our commitment to the arts visible in the very material and design of this building but it is also displayed in many of our programs as well as our individual lives and activities. Yet, we have barely scratched the surface.

In a world increasingly driven by cynical, mercenary-like commercial transactions not to mention our nation's present soul-searching to be a force or not for humanitarianism and peace in our world, the arts can be a source for finding sanity, justice, and joy in every day. Cosmos in chaos. Over the Wednesdays and Sundays ahead we will consider different facets of the relationship of the arts to our faith and we will hear artists speak about what this connection means and how it works for them.

When St. Paul says in today's scripture reading "be reconciled to God...for your sake we have suffered every hardship, difficulty, and obstacle, that you may know the power and peace of God in your life" when St. Paul says this he sums up the artist's mission.

What is it that drives the artist despite suffering and hardship to create? Is it anything other than truth? Is it anything other than the desire to convey to fellow human beings something of the grandeur and gift of life? Is it anything different than the courage to face darkness and death and proclaim this is not all? But life!

The artistic process is one that requires sensitivity to human suffering, commitment to truth, and is surely based on an evangelical and prophetic spirit to tell the world what it knows.

Let's probe more deeply. Saul Bellow has one of his characters in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* who escaped the Nazi death camps say in prayer to God about his dead nephew. "He was aware that he must meet, and he did meet – through all the confusion and degrading clowning of this life through which we are speeding – he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in our inmost heart, each of us knows."<sup>iii</sup>

Bellow, a Jew, says there is a contract, what Presbyterians call "covenant" between God and us. A covenant or contract we ignore at our own risk; but if discerned can give what Paul means when he talks to the Corinthians about reconciliation to God, neighbor, and self.

Most of us get either so wrapped up with the grind of life or seduced by the beauty of life and our hungry egos that we do end up ignoring the contract between us and God. The contract to honor and respect the gift of life. Art and artists can help snap us out of it. Emily Dickinson who was pierced by what lies between God and humans – literally what lies between us: the great abyss, the great unknown to which she devoted her intellect and life work. Or Abraham Lincoln, another lonely 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker like Dickinson, who in his second inaugural address near the end of the Civil War offered his reflections on the justice and mercy of God in regard to slavery as intricate and far-reaching as Dickinson's poems.<sup>iv</sup>

The covenant with God to seek wholeness. I love what the Irish poet Seamus Heaney said in his 1995 Nobel Lecture that art, poetry, keeps us alert to the “murderous and the marvelous” and “persuades the vulnerable part of ourselves of its rightness.”<sup>v</sup>

We grow so accustomed to approaching life with our defenses up, shielding what is vulnerable and tender, even questioning and doubting what is vulnerable and tender in us in our hard-knock world that we run the risk of dying inside. Dying to the place where we are moved and inspired and emboldened to risk. The place of self-discovery. The place where we recognize what is right and true about ourselves and our relationships.

As Heaney says in his 1995 lecture the way of life was made opener because of the artists and poets who inspired and lead and shaped him. Herman Melville said the same thing when he referred to his mentor and colleague Nathaniel Hawthorne as “one of God’s spies.”

So here we are at the start of Lent. In the fine tradition of the church Lent has always been a time of soul-searching. A time seeking transformation and truth.

I suggest such a journey is best conducted when we are attuned and open to the darkness and silence and emptiness of life. By wearing ashes, not armor.

That too is what lent is and has always been about. Converts to the faith redeeming sinful lives and hearts for Easter baptism. Unless we let the darkness and silence and emptiness of our lives speak to us how can we fully embrace the light and word and presence of God?

Here too the arts come to our aid. The yellow, early spring light on the brow and arms of Thomas Eakins’ rower on the Schuykil River. Not hot, bright August light, but end of winter, spring luminescence promising greater warmth and renewal.

Or, as Rudolph Otto says of the credo in Bach’s B-minor Mass where the listener sinks into the stillness. No mere momentary pause, but an absolute cessation of sound long enough for us to hear the silence itself...a juncture in the work when the biblical admonition that every living thing keep silence before the Lord is fulfilled. An expression of the holy by way of intimation rather than forthright utterance.<sup>vi</sup>

Or the solemnity created in the framing of space by Chinese architects and Japanese painters. The interesting part of those works is not the substance but the absence. The void, the emptiness.<sup>vii</sup> The strongest impression is made with the fewest strokes. It is the void of those buildings and paintings that grabs you and conveys something more solemn and sublime that we are used to seeing in the swirl of our days.

My hunch is that because each and every one of us can be moved by a song or painting or poem that each of us is or wants to be, if we could admit to it, a spy for God. A witness to the places where truth and healing and justice are present or needed in our world.

And as witness to truth then called to proclaim to all who would hear it God’s invitation this day and each day to choose life.

Finding cosmos in chaos. I cannot think of a better time for us to do so in the life of our church and city and nation. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, Walking On Water: Reflections on Faith and Art (New York: North Point Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 17.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Wuthnow, Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 5.

<sup>iii</sup> Alfred Kazin, God and the American Writer (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) 23.

<sup>iv</sup> Kazin, 15.

<sup>v</sup> Seamus Heaney, The Spirit Level (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996).

<sup>vi</sup> Rudolf Otto, The Idea of the Holy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923) 70ff.

<sup>vii</sup> Otto, 71.