

The arts and faith

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!
I will praise the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long. –Psalm 146:1-2

The Psalms are the Bible's hymnbook. Faith's songbook. Some of the Psalms, including the beloved 23rd, are attributed to David, the shepherd boy-harp player who became Israel's greatest king, but most were written over many years. The Psalms were used in a variety of settings, and many were written for a particular context. For most of the church's life, the Psalms, "the Psalter", was the ONLY song book for public worship.

Like all music, the Psalms express the deepest human emotions and feelings. The tone of the Psalms ranges from anguish and despair to ecstatic joy, from anger towards God to deep love for God. The Psalms express our doubts and fears, as well as our hopes and dreams and deepest faith. The Psalms express our feelings about God, our feelings about each other, our feelings deep within our souls.

So we find in Psalm 130, set to music by Martin Luther and J. S. Bach, expressions of human anguish: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications." And words of quiet confidence: "With the Lord there is steadfast love."

Or in Psalm 98, we hear a song in joyful praise of the God who is gracious with his people. A song extolling the goodness and greatness of God: "O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things...Let the sea roar and all that fills it...let the floods clap their hands."

We find in the Psalms comfort for us in our distress, the light of hope to guide us in the darkness of our grief, and a promise that God will ever be with us: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you, God, are with me."

And we find in the Psalms a confession of faith, such as we find in Psalm 146: "I will sing praises to God my whole life." Singing – and I would say singing is a metaphor for all of the arts – is how we express our faith. Through the arts we are inspired and comforted, challenged and encouraged. The arts and the worship of God are inseparable. Through the arts, we live out what we believe.

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The theologian Augustine said, “The one who sings, prays twice.” Through music we express our doubts and fears and emotions. For music and the other arts transcend the weaknesses of our human words and even human capacities.

I find it interesting that a person who stutters, does not stutter when he sings – it is as if he is free to finally and fully express himself. And often times, when persons suffer cognitive impairment, or the onset of a disease like Alzheimer’s, music continues to feed a person and soothe a person as nothing else can. In the Bible, remember how the boy David could soothe the troubled spirit of King Saul – simply by playing his harp?

As Augustine said, “The one who sings prays twice.” To which I would add, “And the one who *makes it possible for others* to sing and play and paint and sculpt and write and act – that person prays *thrice*.” We can’t all sing or paint or act or write. But as the Bible says, we all CAN “make a joyful noise” in praise of God. Sometimes that joyful noise we make is our encouragement of the development of the arts in gifted individuals. And sometimes the joyful noise we make is our financial investment in the arts for our community and in our world.

I never talked to George Richards about any of this. But we all know that is the way HE lived. He found joy and fulfillment in the arts. And he expressed his faith in God and his appreciation for the human spirit, by supporting the arts.

And music and all of the arts will carry us through our grief, for the arts carry God’s word to us.

The Psalmist wrote, “I will sing praises to my God all my life long.” Or, in the words of the nineteenth century hymn based on that Psalm:

*My life flows on in endless song; Above earth’s lamentation
I hear the sweet though far off hymn That hails a new creation:
Through all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—How can I keep from singing?*

Now may the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. AMEN.

R. Charles Grant
Service for George Richards
February 11, 2010

Psalm 98

- ¹ O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.
- ² The LORD has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
- ³ He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.
- ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
- ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
- ⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.
- ⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
- ⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy⁹ at the presence of the LORD,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.