

Daily Meditation 11-18-24

Donald Reeves, Friend, Spiritual/Religious Pioneer and Prophet

Good morning.

It is my privilege in today's meditation and in tomorrow's, to share with you some anecdotes and some teachings, some of the story of my friend Donald Reeves, who was an Anglican priest in London, and who was awakened by attending the Urban Institute in Chicago in 1968, to the issues of social justice, especially in that kind of ministry and caring. And how, after many years as a priest in two different churches in London, he stepped away from that, and he started his own nonprofit, called Soul of Europe, to deal with the devastation of the Bosnian war that had been occurring in the late 90s. He started this organization in 2000. And he died on Halloween this year, a few weeks ago, at the age of 90.

And in Tuesday's meditation especially, I will be focusing on the role of music in his spirituality, which, as he said, sustained him so much for the very difficult and trying work of peacemaking between the acting parties in the Bosnian war, including the Orthodox Christians, the Muslims, and the Roman Catholic Christians in Serbia.

He says his Soul of Europe project was meant to be a sign of Muslim-Christian collaboration. And they did get some things done, including, in Kosovo, working with Orthodox Serbs in the monasteries. Because a number of monasteries during the war were destroyed, standing isolated in a country that was once part of Serbia.

"These religious communities feel threatened, and monks and nuns travel with armed escorts. It is, of course, unacceptable," he says, "that religious communities should live like this." So that was a third project, in addition to the other two that I mention in my essays.

"While involved in these tricky endeavors, I persisted with Bach. Playing his music changes the way in which I see the world. Redress as a balance from a less bleak view of human affairs, to a more sane and hopeful perspective." And that theme of Hope keeps returning in his description of what Bach does for him. You who are familiar with my work know that I often talk about Art As Meditation being the way of the prophets.

Donald was nothing if not a prophet to religion, and a prophet within religion, and a prophet in the political sphere as well, interfering with the damaged souls of communities. Serb, Bosnian, Muslim, Christian in Bosnia. He says,

Peace building demands a long process of dismantling the victim mentality shared by both those who suffered and those who inflicted pain, helping those caught up in the traumas of conflict still being waged years after the war ended, and addressing the ignorance and cynicism of international bureaucrats.

So I found so much of his life, and of his ideology behind his life and his work, is applicable to us today, where there is such a lack of hope, so much cynicism and ignorance in our politics.

Bach's organ music is as measurably life enhancing, saturated with intimations of hope, he declares. He says, As you get into his work, more doors open up, each one reaching deeper into the heart of the music, tracking a stream of Bach's extraordinary genius to its very source. The source of creativity, is an undiscovered country.

And he quotes Virginia Woolf: "We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. But," says Donald, "it is possible to get close."

And he quotes from Albert Schweitzer, who, of course, was also a great organist and lover of Bach. In fact, he published a book about Bach in 1911. And of course Schweitzer, as you recall, left the comforts of Switzerland and the middle-class society as a doctor, to devote himself to the poor in Africa, because he was a doctor, and they needed doctors. But he also kept playing the organ. Music was very important to him, sustaining his prophetic vocation as well. And Schweitzer said about Bach, "Only he who sinks himself in the emotional world of Bach, who lives and thinks with him, who is simple and modest as he is, is in a position to perform him properly."

And Donald Reeves talks about immersing himself in the great 18 choral preludes of Bach, completed in Leipzig toward the end of his life. He says,

Each of these pieces is five minutes, but they only seem to be miniature. With astonishing condensed complexity, yet emotional directness, Bach illustrates the words of Lutheran hymns. But, Donald insists, you don't have to be Lutheran. The music transcends Lutheranism." He says that it's not necessary to be a believer to appreciate the music. However, as a performer, it helps to share this aspect of Bach's faith, to be able to express the sheer intensity of the choral preludes, that make him so compelling. Bach's life, he reminds us, was punctuated by the devastation of death. He was orphaned at the age of 10, and one member after another of his close family died around him from then on. Much of his music results in longing for death, as if death were a way of escaping his grief and being reunited with those he loved. There is a longing in the preludes for peace, for union with God. Some of them express grief, and others express longing.

All this getting in touch with our deep feelings, as we've been talking about with what Einstein says about intuition being the bedrock of values. All this is what Donald returns to, when he is doing his prophetic work on the one hand for peace, and then drinking from the well of Bach's spirituality. He cites Robert Schumann, who told his friend Mendelssohn, that "to play the music from Bach called Deck My Soul With Gladness, this is what happens. If life were to deprive me of hope and faith, this single chorale would replenish me with life."

So the return to Bach for these people, is the return to love of life, to Biophilia in the midst of the necrophilia, for example, of the Bosnian war. Or might we say, for our most recent election.

Bach's music, says Reeves, is a testament to the gift of hope for the human spirit. There is a quality of anticipation unfolding as the music moves forward to resolution. There is a longing for the coming of Christ, that leads the listener into the mystery of the incarnation.

Peace Building is not glamorous work, he writes. Peace building demands boundless patience and persistence. Setbacks are frequent. This is true of any peacemaking, of any effort at justice making, because there is no peace without justice. The fundamental inspiration for peace building is found among those who take the risk of sitting together with their enemies and, of course, working together. The word community, communio, means to work with. And so building, rebuilding community, is about people of different persuasions and experiences, getting together to work together side by side.

And Donald says, "Bach's music weaves its way to a logical, simple and graceful conclusion. That is why I enjoy learning, playing, and performing his music, while working for peace."

May peacemaking and justice-making, and the return of joy and of hope, be all of ours at this difficult time.

Thank you. We'll see you in a week.