

Memory or Communion Eternal?

Last month one of my closest friends for over 40 years entered life eternal. John was only a few months younger than me and was diagnosed with early onset dementia 5 years ago. I was having weekly “facetime” calls with him and sadly watched him fade away during that time. Calls for the last few months were only possible with his wife as a go between. His slide from home to hospice came on rather suddenly and unexpectedly. Also unexpected is that I feel closer to him now that he’s passed on than I have in probably the last 10 years. I’m saying ten years because that’s when I think I started noticing him becoming more irritable, dissatisfied and possibly even a little disenchanted. Things like that don’t end a connection like ours but they do add an element of concern and desire to get to the root of whatever was bugging him and fix it. To remove the discord from the harmony we used to share.

I spent the last year putting together a book likening the Body of Christ to a perichoresis of *perfectible* harmony. Life on earth began as nearly indistinct bacteria that didn’t just ‘somehow’ conglomerate into highly complex individual cells that further evolved into bodily form. They evolved in harmony with one another, while transfiguring the planet’s gaseous cloud and dusty surface into an interdependent atmosphere and biosphere in the process. From there, it’s not a far stretch to imagine oneself as nothing more than an individual cell which ... *if* it’s striving to be perfect, as the heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5:48) ... is the tiniest participant in a process transfiguring mere biological existence into the compassionate and sagacious mediating Body of Christ; a living and essential ingredient in a perichoresis of perfectible harmony.

I like the idea of each of us being “cells of a living body” better than “stones of a temple”. Either analogy works but since we pray for God to remove our hearts of stone and give us a heart of flesh, I think we need the change in perspective from stone to cell. Plus, while the mortar of the law holds stones together, the commandment to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and you neighbor[ing cells] as yourself is what binds the cells of Christ’s Body.

From that perspective, now that John has entered life eternal, he’s no more ‘a static John’ of a certain age and demeanor now than he was a static entity at the 5,10 or anywhere else within the 40+ years that I’ve known him. What he is, is the ‘dynamic and still living John’ who is as much my neighbor in the eternal Body of Christ now as he ever was. That makes me wonder though what constitutes ‘dynamic and still living’? Sitting on a cloud paying a harp? Something of Dante’s imaginings? I get the feeling it’s neither. To start with, if there is a God then John would be playing a vintage Les Paul, not a harp. I’m not entirely joking when I say that. I’d expect nothing less than an upgrade in the instrument ... y’know being heaven and all ... if we are to continue on an arc of perfectibility. The instrument I have in mind though is our physical body which acts as an interface between our inner sensibilities and our outer expressions. Considering that our physical bodies are left behind when we enter eternal life, I’m inclined to believe that the upgrade will be for our inner sensibilities to directly interact with others without any of the perceptual distortions and temporal lags inherent in operating the instrument of our physical bodies.

Music is what drew me and John together. He wanted to do something other than classical music for a performance class he was in. He wanted to put together a jazz octet. At the time, the college didn’t have a jazz program, so he recruited people outside the music

department, including me on keyboards. Other problems were he could only find 5 people for the octet and none of us knew how to play jazz. This was the first time John pushed me to go beyond myself to find solutions. I solved the people problem by naming it the “5/8ths Jazz Octet”. The problem of what to actually play fell into place when something I was noodling around with on the piano caught his ear and he asked me to work it into a tune. Jazz/rock fusion wasn’t an interest of mine at the time but it did end up being a lot of fun ... for us. The department, on the other hand, disapproved, and that should have been the end of our collaborations at Hofstra.

Two years later however, John needed to perform three classical pieces in an end of year recital for his scholarship. He had selected two pieces and just couldn’t think of a third. As luck would have it, the Guggenheim was having a ‘works in progress’ lecture/demonstration with Pat Metheny and Steve Reich - at that time, John’s favorite guitarist and my favorite composer respectively. They were working on a piece for 8 prerecorded guitar tracks and live performer. As we were headed home, I said I was disappointed and thought I could do better. John replied: if you write something ... I’ll play it at the recital. And so, I wrote my first piece of classical music. Well ... late 20th century classical music which gives a lot of leeway. I don’t think I did any better than Steve but considering I didn’t really know what I was doing and had to go with my gut rather than my head it came out pretty good. John, too, was basically unfamiliar with what I threw at him. He knew sheet music and chords and charts, whereas from me he got a lot of squiggles, verbal descriptions and melodic fragments to be assembled on tape and then figure out how to count out the live part.

We both had to dig deep to put this thing together. I needed to think how to put what I was hearing inside my head on paper so he could create an external representation. He, at the other end of things, had to feel what he saw and read without thinking about techniques and known patterns, since he was very much out of his element. But if there’s a point here, it’s not in the piece of music per se. Stripping the waves of sound away, what you find is nothing but spirit and faith. As a composer, the best I can do is jot down notes that best convey the spirit of what I’m hearing. When I revisit a piece of music years later and feel it needs revisions what is that other than getting closer to the spirit of the music by revising the law of its notation? And there’s also faith in the performer to bring out the spirit embedded in the law. Practice and rehearsals are little more than meditations on the law in order to immerse oneself in the spirit.

I don’t remember anything about the performance of this piece; who I went with, where I sat, what the reaction was, but I vividly remember the hours we spent in the studio putting the tracks together and trying to get to the heart of the music. I had absolute faith in John to find and bring out depths of the music that I was unaware of. And he must’ve had at least some faith that the notation I presented him with was worth his time (and reputation and grade). What we were both after, however, was the spirit of the music and the only way we could get to that was by aligning our inner sensibilities. Words, gestures and analogies weren’t enough to get the job done. There was something happening at a level of intuition that anyone who’s ever played in a band or sung in small choir knows all too well ... a communion of spirit. (fortunately the school made a video of [Phase Extensions](#).)

Until now, I thought spiritual communion what was missing in our weekly facetime calls. I knew his spirit was still in there somewhere, but never felt any connection. But maybe that’s because I was trying to connect through our established patterns and remembrances. That was the John I remembered, knew how to relate to, and who knew me so well that word and gesture could take on broader and deeper meaning based on shared experience.

Of course, as his memory and attention span deteriorated all of that vanished, yet I could tell he was still in there somewhere. And as frustrating as it must have been for him to try to relate and express himself, in retrospect I wonder if part of that frustration (in the later stages) was in having to relate in a manner suited to us non-demential folk.

I'm speaking strictly from the perspective of a person calling once a week at a set time so as to establish a routine. Obviously those who saw him in person and especially who were with him on an extended basis will have different feelings and might completely disagree with what I'm about to say. But as a contemplative musician more concerned with eternity than temporality I can't help but feel that as John's mind was being forced to let go its temporal connections, he needed to reorient himself to something 'other'. I can easily imagine an internal battle between clinging to the life he knew and venturing toward an 'other' and I found myself utterly incapable of suggesting, let alone fostering, an orientation to life eternal: remnants of the same helplessness I felt when I was a daily visitor to my father in a nursing home after he suffered a stroke.

So now we need to go back to my thoughts on eternal life being a deeper immersion in the perichoresis of perfectible harmony; otherwise known as the mystical Body of Christ. It's only one's spiritual nature that enters the mystical body, yet one's spirit must be somehow bounded if we are to remain our individual selves. And here's another reason I prefer the analogy of cells in a body to stones in a building: cells contain a nucleus and organelles within the bounds of a permeable membrane. When we pass to eternity, is our soul with its organelles of rationality, heart, eye, and ear encompassed by a mystical membrane so that it may adhere to and interact with the other cells in Christ's body? And what other than love could be the force of adhesion? Not just any love, but the threefold love of self, God and neighbor. When I was with my father at the nursing home, we didn't talk much but we certainly shared a heartfelt silent love; especially when we could sit in the outdoor garden. No doubt John's wife and children fostered that same sense of love for him (and each other) but what I want to focus on is love of self and love of God. I think what brings us the greatest sense of love of self is when what we think and what we feel are in complete concord *because* that inner concord is in harmony with our sense of God. Ideally that's already in concord with others as well, but if not, then either others need to come into concord with our self, or the other way around; or probably a little of both.

For John and my father in their late stages, you couldn't reach them through the intellect ... which, not to sound demeaning, is the same with infants. Infants know nothing about the semantics of language yet easily grasps the music of language. They begin to vocalize by producing vowel sounds either individually or in melodic phrases. Parents get excited when the child attaches consonants to vowels and begins forming words. That's when they begin to "teach" the child words, phrases and sentences by providing clear examples for them to mimic and expressing their delight when the kid gets it right. Probably fair to call that the beginnings of the intellect.

What interests me more though, is who taught the infant to make vowel sounds and sing recognizable intervals of melody in the first place? It's a simple fact of nature that timbres whose overtones cling most closely to the order to harmonic sound are perceived as the most pure and beautiful. And that certain intervals found within the order of harmonic sound are perceived as perfect and pure. The largest intervals are deemed perfect and the next smallest pure. This solely human capacity is both innate and universal. St Augustine wrote that the 'teacher within' ... the one teacher, the Christ ... prompts us to know 'what in heaven is' by bringing out innate knowledge. If it's fair to say that truth, beauty and love

are 'what in heaven is', then it's also fair to say that the infant is engaged with the "teacher within" as it learns to form harmonic sounds suspended in time and express them melodically in real time. To all appearances it is increasing love ... as the infant draws nearer to the highest state of beauty ... that sustains their interest and draws out the realization of purity and perfection. At a non-intellectual stage this is all intuitive, but since producing harmonic sound and melodic intervals is a bodily activity of nerves and muscles we can also surmise an accumulation of bodily knowledge which a developing intellect would later be able to analyze and make sense of. Humans were making flutes with tone holes very near to perfect fifths and pure thirds for many thousands of years before Pythagoras was able to mathematically define what they were. Eventually, we could articulate the absolute truth (mathematical measure) of the highest state of beauty, but that only really mattered to people designing instruments and philosophers trying to demonstrate a connection between what they thought to be a model of perfect harmony in the heavens (astronomical objects) and an earthly system of harmony (musical notes). For the rest of us simple folk, the intuited truth that 'the teacher within' drew out of us through love of and desire for beauty was enough.

Now ... let me try to bring this all home. The one teacher, the Christ isn't looking to put a band together. Music is just a means to "faith and spirit". We need to have faith in our inner sensibilities and trust in the spirit of love in order to know 'what in heaven is': the beauty of the Father, the truth of the Son and the love of the Holy Spirit. Any individual piece of music or phrase of melody is entirely subjective, but the atoms of music - the proportional measures of the intervals - are entirely objective. An octave is 2:1, fifth 3:2, third 5:4. Almost nobody cares about or is even aware of the numbers anymore from an intellectual perspective, but we still recognize and feel them and perfect and pure. What's more, the same proportionality corresponding to beauty in music is foundational of beauty in dance and the visual arts. In general, love for beauty orients us to the heavens. But when approached through the truth of the heartfelt purity and perfection, we find ourselves drawn to the Father (beauty), through the Son (truth) in the love of the Holy Spirit. We never actually get to the Father though. We're always approaching through the Son by being members of the Body of Christ. At best, we'll be seated at the right hand of the Father at the end of times, as one within the Body of Christ.

The 'end of times' is too unreal to think about. The end of an individual lifespan, on the other hand, is too real *not* to think about. Life begins in simplicity where the one teacher, the Christ engages the newborn's innate love for beauty in a manner that draws forth a mind appreciative of and longing for truth while fostering faith in the spirit. From there life gets more complex. We reach a peak of physical and mental strength and then as the body winds down, we find ourselves returning to an elevated type of simplicity ideally marked by wisdom and warmth of heart. To me, the characteristics of wisdom and warmth come from looking at subtler and broader truths intertwined with an opaque beauty that often requires a generous proportion of forgiveness. They also arise from within rather than as something acquired from a book or a seminar or podcast. At the same time however, wisdom and warmth of heart don't come about in isolation. They come from being in communion with others. Not even an isolated contemplative can come to wisdom or warmth of heart outside of communion with 'the Eternal' and extending the scope of meditations to others; be they people, animals, celestial spheres or even a simple blade of grass. That's all part of being one in the Body of Christ. Now this is the tricky part: if 'the one teacher, the Christ'... is within each of us simultaneously, then, while we may be students within ourselves, we're also teacher to others at the same time.

John didn't teach me to write classical music, but through his faith and spirit, he got me to look inside myself and listen to the teacher within. When my father had his stroke, it was out of love for his spirit that the teacher within me stimulated an interest in music and movement therapy. Not in how they're currently approached, but in a manner by which the teacher within each patient can reorient them to know and embrace "what in heaven is" - a return to something more basic and primal. Something closer in approach to what the one teacher, the Christ used to teach my infant Dad that led to his acquisition of linguistic abilities and rational thought. This led to extensive reading on neuroscience, autism and childhood development. I hadn't considered Alzheimer's or dementia until John's diagnosis but found that the question was the same: how to reach persons on a primal level whose intellect has deviated from what is considered the norm. Not to try to remake them in 'our image' but to come to their fullness within the Body of Christ as both student and teacher.

Neither John nor my Dad were able to learn anything from me once their afflictions had taken hold. I can only hope that my love reached them in some manner that their teacher within could use in some mysterious way. But the both of them were teachers by drawing out of me faith in the need for therapies to reach beyond physical results and for pastoral care to reach beyond what mere words can convey. And as long as I hold them in memory, trying to understand them and persist in a will to reach others in similar plights, they are still teaching me - in communion - as living members of the Body of Christ; and maybe ... just maybe ... the intensification of my drive somehow teaches them something in the afterlife that benefits them, us and those to come in our never-ending perichoresis of perfectible harmony.