

Radix

McGill's multi-faith newsletter

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Perspectives on Art and Music

Dance, Music, Bhangra

Bhangra is a folk dance that has its roots in the region of Punjab in northwest India and Pakistan. Unlike other folk dances which usually fail to catch the interest of the masses outside of their particular community or geographical region, *bhangra* has managed to transcend its label as being merely a folk dance to be performed by Punjabi sons of the soil.

Bhangra began as a dance to celebrate the harvest and was usually performed at the time of *Baisakhi* (the harvest festival). It was traditionally the domain of males, though today it is open to dancers of both sexes. The dancers' costumes comprised colourful lungis, waistcoats and turbans. The dance movements were supposed to depict the cycle of plowing, sowing and reaping. It is an energetic dance involving vigorous movements of the shoulder and hips. The beat is heavy and hypnotic. The accompaniment is in the form of singing, clapping and the beat of the drum. The main instrument is called the *dhol*, a large barrel-shaped drum that provides the rhythm and the beat. A drum roll often marks the end of each line of the song and the last line is repeated by the dancers like a chorus. Dancers often

form a circle with pairs of dancers periodically taking centre stage to give solo performances that showcase their prowess, virility and acrobatic ability. Getting into the festive mood, dancers often punctuate each beat with an exuberant shout and may even be moved to recite witty couplets.

Today *bhangra* is not just a dance form, but a term that embraces a new form of music. Initially it was a dance performed to celebrate a good harvest. Soon it was not just confined to the harvest time but found its place at wed-

dings and almost all other celebratory occasions. Performers like Daler Mehndi, Bhatti and Jassi B have taken it to the top of India's pop charts. Finally, it crossed the seas to become the most 'happening' thing on the Asian club scene in London. Modern disc jockeys found that the foot-tapping rhythms of *bhangra* were almost begging to be remixed. Today, you can't escape it. It's on television; you hear it in homes and television alike. It has crossed all boundaries of religion, caste, community and country. *Bhangra* has gone international and it is just starting to get good.

—Neil Deep Singh Shah
U2 Political Science



—Hien Le



Inside:

Travel to distant places,
feel the beat of dance
and music, share glimpses
of the smells, sights,
tastes, feelings and
sounds of what makes us
truly

Islamic Architecture

Last year a friend of mine went on a trip to Spain, organized by an Islamic tourism group. At first I was surprised that they had chosen the south of Spain rather than Muslim countries that were known for the *Masjids* (Mosques) and palaces that are architectural wonders of the Islamic world. I had once heard that the Islamic Empire had extended into Spain in the ninth century CE and had retained some areas until 1492, but I had not yet heard about the rich heritage that survived in the form of the Alhambra palace of Granada and the Great *Mezquita* (Mosque) at Cordoba.

Throughout the Islamic world, the *Masjids* have always been more than a place of worship. These buildings also serve as townhalls, schools and hostels, among other things. Because of the importance of the *Masjid* in Muslim societies, the best architects and artists of their times were gathered to create these works of art. As for the palaces of the Muslim world, though they were the residences of rulers, they were also gathering places for those who played a role in the administration of these states, and were therefore also public spaces. In both the open areas of the palaces and the private areas reserved for the rulers

and their families, we can see the influence of Islamic beliefs and practices in the layouts and ornaments of these buildings.

Islam is believed to be a complete way of life, and therefore the integration of disciplines such as science, art, politics and religion was natural and logical. The *Masjids* and the palaces demonstrate how Muslim artists and architects were strongly inspired by Islam, and the Alhambra and great *Mezquita* in Spain are only two of the many examples that illustrate this...

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Editorial Notes

Life is a dance. We live as we create. I used to think of art as a non-essential aspect of life—an indulgence, certainly not necessary for life. And then I moved to the city, a place detached from all the art and music I had lived my life in the company of, growing up in small towns with forests, blackberry bushes and ravines as my backyard playgrounds. Removed from the natural symphonies of rivers and grasshoppers and wind through trees, canvasses of starry night skies and ocean shores at dawn, I found myself seeking human expressions of this beauty I had taken for granted. In this present world that tends in many ways towards ever-increasing uniformity in nature and culture, art, in its many forms, is a vital lifeline to discovering and rediscovering humanity and divinity in all their simplicity and complexity. This double issue of the Radix is a small contribution to that quest, and perhaps it will even encourage you in yours.

Namaste,

Erica Crawford, editor

U2, Environment and Development



Thank you to all of our contributors over the year.

Below is a collection of symbols representing the various spiritual traditions that have been found in the pages of the Radix throughout this year. We welcome submissions from people of all faiths and beliefs—if you don't see your symbol below, be sure to submit something next year so that we can change that!



BAHA'I



MUSLIM



BUDDHIST



SIKH



CHRISTIAN



YOGI



JEWISH



Religion and artistic creativity are complimentary forms of spiritual enrichment. They both serve a similar purpose, which is to attach the self to G_d as manifested in human experience. Creation is a manifestation of G_dliness. "In the beginning G_d created" (Genesis 1:1.) When human beings create we experience awe and shame. We are in awe of G_d when we realize the amount of thought and energy it takes to create something from something. Imagine creating something from nothing—it's beyond human comprehension. Only G_d creates from nothing because G_d is everything, the ultimate Creator. In this way, an artist is humbled and ashamed at his puny accomplishments. Yet he is also thankful that G_d gave him the capacity to glimpse the Divine experience.

The act of painting or drawing combines the spiritual with the physical. When a painter squeezes paint out of the tube he exerts physical effort. When he dips his brush in the appropriate colours and applies it to the surface he is fusing thought and action. In this moment of fusion, the soul is awakened. It is taught in *Chassidus* that a person's thoughts influence his actions. If a painter's thoughts are connected with the Divine will, G_dliness will be manifested in the work of art. But if a painter's mind is in the gutter, his work will express it. This is why it is important for an artist to dissolve his ego before he begins to paint. The character of an artist is reflected in his work. If the artist is in a good spiritual state, the work will bring light into the world.

The fusion of the spiritual into the art object has great potential in communicating Divinity. The subject of a painting can be religious or arbitrary and the form can be figurative or abstract. For example, a painting of light and colours that awaken a feeling of goodness might represent an abstract spiritual feeling or Moses receiving the 10 commandments. There are many ways for the painter to express spirituality, but ultimately his own spiritual state is manifested even in figurative work. That is why a painter needs to have knowledge of G_d and be in a healthy spiritual state. Religious observance that celebrates life through creativity brings light into the world. In this way creative artists can help make the world a dwelling place for G_d. Another activity that helps us connect

with G_d is music. For example, when the Jews left Egypt, Moses' sister Miriam played a tambourine. In fact, most prayers in the book of psalms were musical compositions. Music arouses the heart, the sense organ of the soul. Any healthy culture incorporates music into spiritual life.

Singing is one of the most unifying human activities. It is a *Chassidic* teaching that G_d "blew" into Adam, the first man. When we breathe it is our life source, a miracle. But to sing—such a wonder to carry a tune, to blow our souls into the world, to sway the souls of others!

Singing a happy tune is also a powerful medicine against spiritual malaise, and a great way of dealing with anger, as it releases tension. *Chassidus* teaches us to transform the "animal soul" to do the will of our Maker. Singing can uplift anger, transforming wrath into joy. In this way music can serve the highest purpose, changing darkness into light. When a religious community sings to G_d, their bond and commitment in doing G_d's work is strengthened. This is why prayers were written as psalms. Reaching out to G_d through song brings us closer together, which is what G_d wants. When we sing together, in diversity we are united. Each unique voice can sing the same tune, uniting us all in one voice. Imagine the whole world singing the same song at the same time—what a miracle!

In architecture we can see how three-dimensional space interacts to create a spiritual reaction. The idea of using art to teach spiritual concepts is a fundamental way of keeping those concepts in practice. However, the danger inherent in manifesting the spiritual in the physical is that the object threatens to replace G_dliness. The danger of placing too much emphasis on the form is that it can become more important than the content, which can lead to idolatry. Therefore, it is important to remember that art and music are *manifestations* of G_dliness. The *essence* of G_d on the other hand, can only be found in acts of kindness (*mitzvahs*.) This is why, in Judaism, we need the Torah, first and foremost.

—Ariella



Beit HaMikdash

The Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem is a central and visible place where the interface between God and humanity takes place. The service therein is paradigmatic of all service of God, and is the macrocosmic fleshing out of what goes on within the individual human microcosm.

Like Einstein's theory of relativity where time and space actually affect each other, in Judaism time, place and soul are understood to be inextricably linked; therefore, anything done anywhere by anybody affects the world on all three of these planes. The Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem is a place of heightened spatial sensitivity, and so things that happen there affect the world in a heightened way, again on all three planes.

The service in the Beit HaMikdash, involving sacrifices and incense, was performed by *Cohanim*, the Jewish priestly family. The sacrifices performed each had tremendous spiritual and psychological import. Judaism understands that psychology embraces not only the realm of the abstract idea, but also connects to the natural world itself. According to Judaism, there are certain fixings that require a certain kind of dying. The animals are not being used as scapegoats; rather, the person who brings them is supposed to identify with the animals. These inner psychological processes require very deeply a tangible manifestation—the natural world around us is not merely an incidental garden for us to watch. According to Judaism, it is a vibrant spiritual whole that is in the process of growth with us as humans.

But even the greatest spiritual/psychological strivings can have the pitfall of "getting off on to your own trip, even if that trip is itself all about not being on a trip." This is where music comes in. Music plays a central role in the Beit HaMikdash service. There was a great choir there, not to mention a fantastic groove-machine band that belted out a Divine Jam. Music, in its purest sense, when played by real lovers of God, is understood by Judaism to have a kind of a backwards pull or tide to it, drawing the listener back to their source in God—a reminder to the listener to be real and simple and Godly.

—Daniel Leibish Hundert,
History student



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Exegesis

This book is steeped in blood
And bound by human flesh;
You quote it nonchalantly
And answer it tit for tat.
You stretch the flesh to fit
And tear the meaning out,
Over its corners, wearing it thin.
And book-binding you forget
The arena, the pyre, the Soviet regime
(More blood than courses through your debates):
As you argue hermeneutics,
The Word walks away.

—Erin Russell
Graduating, Honours English Literature



—Shireef Darwish

Peace

clean, glistening silver cross, against the crisp,
ironed, blanched chemise, resting always
on the prayerful bosom of the faithful nun.

safe I feel
long to be
in your quiet world
alone in the cloister, where even stones are full of mystery;
and green grass grows,
surrounded by other women
of faith.

—Sara Cornett
U2 English, Cultural Studies



Performance Art

The performing arts have a legitimate place in public religious ceremonies. In fact, a religious ceremony is in itself performance art of the highest order. The preparation and presentation of a piece of music is an intensely spiritual exercise. I refer to spirituality not as something other-worldly, but rather as the very human effort to be compassionately present to the people, events, and tasks that I encounter every day. As an organist, harpsichordist and choral director I must be very awake, attentive and present to each moment in order to learn, teach and perform the music in a convincing way. As well, and in order to maintain that presence, I must, in a certain sense, forget what came just before so that my attention is fully focused on the details of the present moment. This presence and wakefulness is something worth striving for in general, and musical practice is a good way to learn the mental, physical and spiritual skills involved.

In many people's eyes, "performance" in a church setting equals showing off or self-glorification—putting oneself where God belongs—and I have heard it argued that to focus attention on the music is to practice idolatry. A custodian's careful and focused work of keeping the church clean is not seen as idolatry, and yet, from a certain perspective, the whole scene of churches with their buildings, music, and programmes is idolatrous to the core. As someone who knows intimately what is involved in preparing and delivering, as well as receiving and appreciating a good performance, I am well aware of the pitfalls of the musician's ego. The point I wish to make though, is that the very acts of thorough preparation, rehearsal, and performance can in and of themselves be acts of worship, and invitations to worship. If I am prepared for, and present to, the tasks of practicing and performing, I can offer my best efforts, in the words of J. S. Bach, "for the glory of God and the recreation of the mind." In any truly good musical performance, it will be abundantly clear that the performer is spending his or her efforts to draw our attention primarily to the music itself, and not so much to his or her own skill and artistry.

Church services are performance art at its best. We are putting on a show and God is the audience. We dramatize the body of Christ (the anointed body) so that we become the body of Christ. In Anglican churches, among others, where we have consistent and (hopefully) conscious use of the same order and prayers from week to week, the element of performance is heightened and intensified. Every time I say certain recurring prayers, sing or play certain songs, or perform certain actions, it means something new and different. This is one of the main reasons I became an Anglican to begin with—I love the collective dramatization of the story that we all share which culminates in the communion meal.

I am now a full-time music student here at McGill, getting ready to go into the Master's programme in performance. I also have been employed for the first time in my life as Director of Music of a small but lively and active Anglican church in St-Lambert. This group of people loves music. However, there is some discomfort with the perception that the choir and I are sometimes putting on a show, a discomfort that I myself have felt in the past. There is a feeling sometimes that if the whole congregation is not singing along with everything, then the worship experience is incomplete. I

wholeheartedly respect and share the desire and need for people to feel as though they are participating. That very participation is itself a performance. But the point begs to be made that listening is also a way of participating.

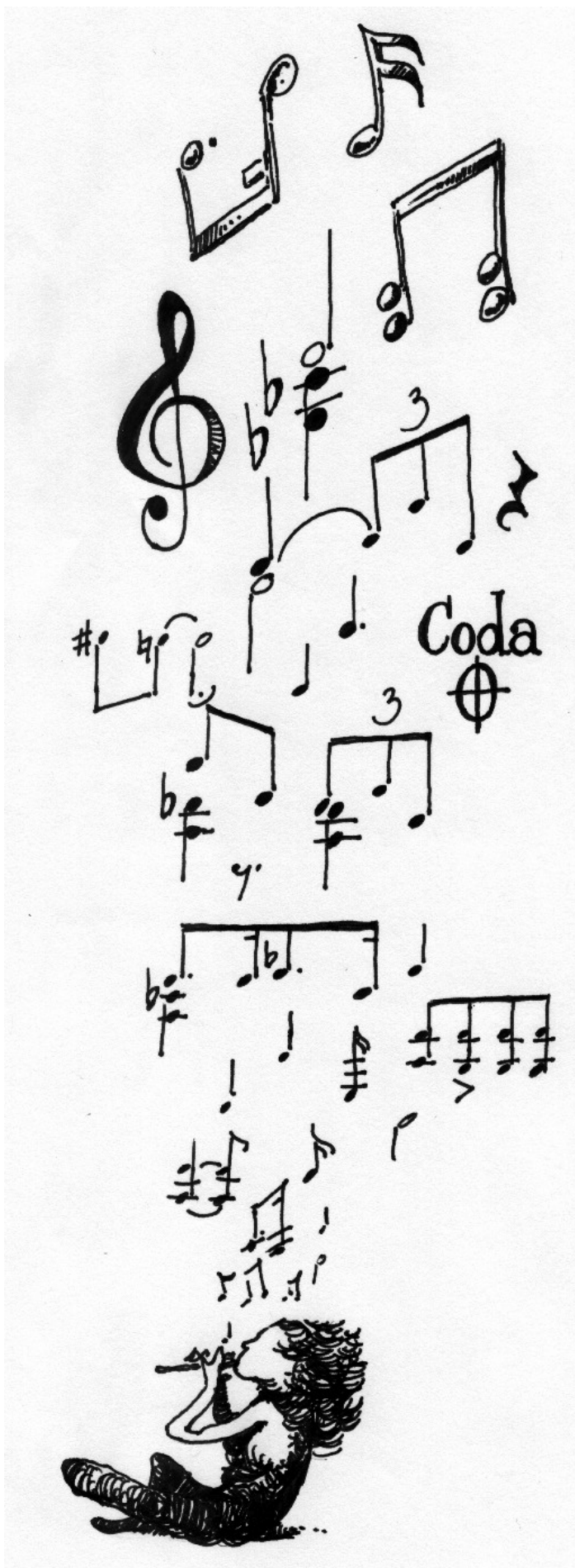
When I work with my church choir, I make every effort to cultivate an atmosphere of respect and love. Since the choir's role is to provide physical, visual and aural leadership in worship, it needs to do its work in the same spirit of invitation and dedication that is needed in all human interaction. The choir is in this sense a microcosm of the whole community. Likewise, I must do my work of choosing music and preparing myself to teach it in the same spirit. If I neglect to spend the focused time and energy necessary for a good performance, the whole of the worship experience is degraded. As well, if I'm pondering all the various meanings of the words to a hymn that I'm accompanying at the organ, as opposed to concentrating on getting the notes right, shaping the phrases elegantly to fit the rhythm of the words, then I lose my place, and no one can participate anymore.

Some therapists use role-playing in order to allow their patients to realize and articulate their realities and problems. When I go to church, I agree to enter into a role-playing relationship with everyone else there, and read the script that is given to me (with a critical and interpretive eye), which is to say that having a script is often very helpful. This dramatization, and more-or-less abstraction, can point to something

*Spirituality is the very human effort
to be compassionately present
to the people, events, and tasks that
I encounter every day*

very real and in need of recognition in my unrehearsed and concrete everyday life. But just because I'm playing a role absolutely does not mean that I'm somehow being phony. I speak here simultaneously of pure musical activity and of religious ceremony. I have seen many "spontaneous" acts of worship that were thoroughly and embarrassingly phony. This is not to suggest that spontaneity is out of place in church, far from it; it is the spontaneous which brings the rehearsed and memorized to life. Likewise, rehearsal and memorization allow more space, dignity, and vocabulary for spontaneity, since they provide greater confidence in performance. I would not be offended at all if, in an Anglican service with all of its pomp and ceremony, smells and bells, someone was so moved that they needed to jump up and shout "Halleluia!" at a particularly poignant moment. All of these forms of expression say the same thing—that we have realized that we are children of God and loved, and it makes us happy.

The use of artifice by no means renders its purpose artificial.



As well, just because something is part of an old tradition does not mean that it is irrelevant in the here and now. In fact, it is Anglicanism's connectedness with the ancient Christian liturgical customs and traditions that I find so inspiring and empowering. It's always possible to understand and perform traditional expressions in perpetually new ways. It's also possible, and of vital importance, to be aware of the failings of our cultures and traditions, and to redeem them through that very same process of renewed and changed understanding and performance.

As Robertson Davies once said, the problem with elitism is that we don't have enough of it. If everyone pursued the quality and skill that they really wanted, and helped others to do the same, I think the world might be a much happier, safer and more interesting place. Human creativity is worth the time, effort and resources that are required to bring it to real flowering. The human tendency to organize sounds and other sensual events and objects in a creative way is one of those inexplicable natural gifts and, as with anything, the use of our gifts to care for the people and planet around us are the real objective. Our human creativity is one of the best gifts we can offer back to our Creator, to the world, and to ourselves. To enable that offering is one of the main goals of religion.

—Loren R. Carle
Masters in Performance



Art is not a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement; art is great matter. Art is an organ of human life, transmitting man's reasonable perception into feeling. In our age the common religious perception of men is the consciousness of the brotherhood of man—we know that the well-being of man lies in the union with his fellow men. True science should indicate the various methods of applying this consciousness to life. Art should transform this perception into feeling.

The task of art is enormous. Through the influence of real art, aided by science, guided by religion, that peaceful co-operation of man that is now obtained by external means—by law courts, police, charitable institutions, factory inspection, etc.—should be obtained by man's free and joyous activity. Art should cause violence to be set aside. And it is only art that can accomplish this.

—Leo N. Tolstoy

architecture, cont'd from pg 1

As we looked through many pictures my friend took on her trip, she tried to convey to me the beauty of the intricate carvings on the columns and ceilings of the interior of Alhambra. Geometry and balance are key to these complicated repetitive patterns that are characteristic of Islamic art, and as Muslim mathematicians preserved and expanded on the works of the Greeks, the application of geometry to art must have become even more prevalent in what is often called the Arabesque style.

Geometry was also key to creating the networks of columns often used in Islamic architecture. A striking example is that of the two-storeys of columns and arches, placed one on top of the other in the *Mezquita* in order to reach the proper height for the roof.

My friend's pictures also showed that verses from the Qur'an were often used to decorate the walls of the Alhambra and the *Mezquita*. Calligraphy is another widely practised form of Islamic art, and there exist many styles of Arabic calligraphy.

Though my friend said that she found beauty in so many of the things she had seen, one thing stood out above the rest in her memory. Near the Alhambra is the private summer palace of the Muslim rulers of Spain called the *Generalife*. This name is actually the anglicized version of its original Arabic name, *Jannat-al-'Arif* (*Jannat* is the Arabic word for Paradise). The courtyards of these palaces are private spaces filled with gardens and fountains and fruits, reminiscent of the beautiful pictures in the many verses of the Qur'an which describe Paradise as lush green gardens full of abundant fruits and flowers, with flowing rivers and fountains.

As we sipped our tea and my friend continued to tell me about the beautiful things she had seen in Spain, I realized that I could only get a true impression of these places by actually going to visit them. I truly hope to be able to make this trip one day, God willing. Still, as I listened to her and looked at the pictures, it was almost as if I could hear the water splashing from the fountains, touch the intricate carvings of calligraphy and geometric patterns and smell the sweetness of fragrant flowers and fruits while sitting in one of these palace courtyards.

—Amina Mohammed, U3 Education



Reading an icon

Right now you are likely not looking at these words for the sole purpose of admiring this nice black print on this brown paper. Rather, you are likely seeking the deeper meaning that these bunch of letters are trying to portray. The icon is thought of in the same way. The icon is a Christian Byzantine art form that legend dates back to the evangelist and gospel writer Luke as the first iconographer, but others would say it likely began to flourish around the 7th century.

Like looking at this mix of letters before you now, we would miss the true meaning of an icon if we only observed its aesthetic appeal. Some would even go so far as to say that if a person is only captured by the aesthetic beauty of an icon and not brought into the deeper meaning, then it is not a true icon but simply a nice painting.

Icons do not try to evoke emotion. In fact, they avoid showing emotion, instead focusing on virtues of purity, patience in suffering, forgiveness, compassion and love. Realistic bodily features are replaced with symbolic, heavenly features such as high foreheads to symbolize divine wisdom, and small lips to avoid sensuality.

Everything within the icon is symbolic; therefore, the icon is *read*. Icons are *written* in prayer and it is into this prayer that the icon fulfills its purpose of leading its observers into this shared worship.

—Jessica Walters-Regnier, U1 Education stu-



oh does a fool delight within paradox

oh does a fool Delight

within paradox

and needn't we all be fools at some point

in time lest laughter gets the better of us in catching us by surprise

and we fall

confused and dismantled.

and indeed G-d is laughing at the universe

whose existence

displays nothing short of

a brutal and abrupt slap

in the face of Logic

and her handmaidens.

because although indeed beauty appears

from within the spaces

between the lines

on the page

of a work of art,

'tis not the spaces themselves

which give birth to the "form",

nor is it the "form" which gives birth to the spaces

but rather something Higher.

As the void too is nothing other than a creation

A manifestation

Of the Divine.

to contemplate

how darkness gives way to light

and revelation to concealment

and how this makes no sense

but still the world really and truly DOES exist

although this is not logically possible

and how G-d laughs

at us

and yet insists

that we persist

in order that the reality

of

what is revealed

within the concealed

of the concealed

of the revealed

is breathed within the consciousness and articulated in the actions

of all who inhabit our planet

And beyond

—Sarede Switzer, U2 Psychology



Source: www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/icons/clip/reign.gif

Omniscient art

Slowly, the heavy wooden door opened, just wide enough to let the child step into the cathedral. The smell of incense, the crucifix, the flames of the candles...

She stops, awestruck, admiring the construction. All thoughts from the exterior vanish into a feeling of solemnity, as her mind and body adopt a slow pace of vigilance. Songs of prayer echo and resonate within and around her, bouncing off the meticulous architecture.

Is that the sound of angels ? Is it the sound of God ? Is God in this smell, in this light, in this feeling?

From the plane she can see the Golden Gate Bridge. She's been to San Francisco before, but she cannot remember. Now that she is a teenager she will live the experience differently.

Streets are filled with life and color, music and poetry are singing to the beat of altered consciousness. It is all new and wonderful. Her heart and soul are expanding in all directions, looking for meaning and love. Magic, spirits, shamans floating in a torrent of emotions. She feels lost but it feels so true.

Now it is time for her to tear all remaining roots from the ground, time to grow up. The turmoil must be calmed. She steps into the temple. The chanting of Buddhists, the burning of incense and the flames of candles.

She seeks refuge.

She stops, awestruck, and adopts a slower pace as a feeling of solemnity slowly fills her heart and soul.

What resonates within? Is it God? I want to clear my mind and make it pure and true. I want to be a child again and rip out old habits.

Sitting in meditation she tries to put a stop to everything, to reach silence, to reach blankness, to reach essence, calm and peace. But the more she tries, the more her mind becomes useless, and everything loses meaning.

Why have I turned away from the world? What am I looking for inside of me? How will I find it if I cannot appreciate what is outside? How will I appreciate what is outside if I do not know what is inside? Why am I searching for a result, when what really matters is the process?



Hear the music of silence, hear the music of prayers. One could not be without the other.

Cross-legged, close your eyes and watch your mind. Watch the cathedral, watch the Buddha statues, watch the art.

Can you see that perfection only exists in your mind? No perfect circle in this world.

Minds created by nature, inspired by nature, recreating the meaning of nature through imperfect geometry, inspiring other minds to understand nature.

Symbols of harmony created from harmonious visions, wishing to be transformed into harmonious societies.

Walking in the garden she picks up a flower. Five petals, one heart, imperfect creation, perfect moment.

Music, smells, sensations, beauty. Cause or result.

The nature of art is nature itself.

—Marie Eclache

U3 Psychology



Religion

It looks at me

It hears me

It feels me

It judges me

It helps me

It enlightens me

It traps me

It bothers me

It soothes me

It produces for me

It nurtures me

It reasons for me

It kills me

It talks for me

It wrecks me

It develops me

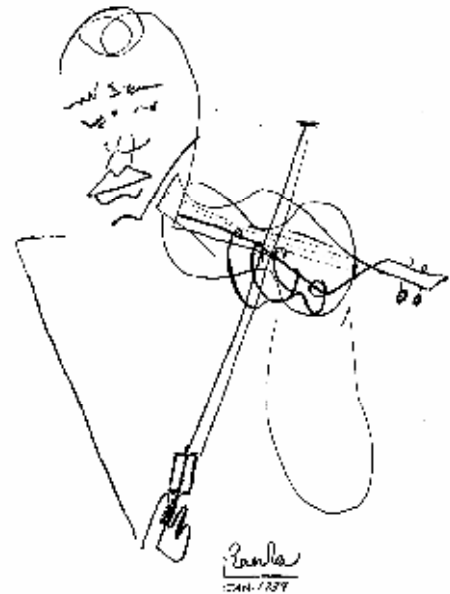
It wounds me

It loves me

It _____ me

It kills me

It is me...



—Rania Becket

—Hardip Singh Manku
Masters student, Psychology



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