Sinatra in the bell tower: God's ear is attuned to the stark syntax of human need

by Kathleen Norris
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One morning, as I stood on the hill west of town admiring the morning sky just after dawn, the tune on the carillon at the Catholic church caught my attention. I thought that the song was from the Broadway musical Brigadoon, but its title eluded me. Finally I realized that the new priest was calling the faithful to 7 a.m. mass with “Till There Was You.” Jesus wept over his own city, but I wondered if he might laugh over a town such as this.

Over the next few weeks, listening to local gossip, I became aware that the “updating” of the carillon was one of many changes that the young priest was making at the church. Most people seemed to welcome the songs and the priest as a breath of fresh air. And it seemed as if every time I ran an errand to Main Street, my ears took notice of something new: a Beatles medley, more Broadway, a bit of Gershwin.

One day I heard “My Way” wafting down from the ethereal heights of the church’s bell tower, and I knew that I had the makings of a poem. This is how many of my poems begin, with a simple juxtaposition that seems too juicy to pass up. The entire heritage of the Holy Roman Church—theological, literary, musical—had just come up against Old Blue Eyes doing it his way. And Jesus laughed. And wept.

I had no idea what form the poem would take, but weeks later, as I stood at a funeral parlor in Manhattan watching an undertaker arrange pink netting in the coffin of a dear friend and mentor, I found the next piece of the puzzle. My friend’s husband had asked me to pin a favorite piece of jewelry, a brooch, onto her jacket, and as I did so I gently removed the netting from around her face. Her husband’s sentimental gesture she would have tolerated, but she would have detested all that

frothy pink stuff. I recalled something that she had muttered to me many years before, protesting what she dismissively termed “the ignominy of the living.” Pink netting in a coffin. Pop tunes in the campanile.

The poem that finally came, titled “The Ignominy of the Living,” begins with the story of the netting and ends with the bells. Hearing the angelus ring at noon, I thought of how my friend might enjoy the thought of the ancient tradition continuing in a little prairie town: “Then,” I wrote, “a recording of ‘My Way’ came scratching out / on the electronic carillon. / ‘Oh, hell,’ I said, / and prayed for Frank Sinatra, too.”

I find myself saying, “Oh, hell” a lot these days in the church. I fully appreciate, as one of the more delicious ironies of the Christian tradition, that the religion has kept itself alive, has in fact remained traditional by appropriating and transforming material from the popular culture. But I often wonder why so many intelligent and well-educated Christians seem to be unable to discern what in our culture might hold possibilities for such scandalous transformation and what is simply trendy, far too flimsy too stand the weight of time. The problem seems very deep to me, and far-reaching; I suspect that it originates in the difficulty most of us have in telling good art from bad.

I attended Bennington College, which since Martha Graham’s tenure in the 1930s has been a mainstay of modern dance. Several women in my graduating class—Liz Lerman, Wendy Perron—founded dance companies that have won international renown. Other classmates have had careers in dance. All of this to say that I got an education in modern dance and know bad dance when I see it. When I witness liturgical dancers using the body in the most hackneyed ways (hands clutched on the head, abdomen contracted and knees bent to express grief, and for joy, much energetic thumping about the sanctuary, arms waving around a face that is curiously frozen in a broad, self-conscious grin) I groan. When I asked a friend, a Christian gentleman who makes his living as a dance critic, if he had ever seen good liturgical dance, he sighed deeply and said, “It’s difficult, isn’t it.” After a pause, he said, “Maybe once or twice in the last 20 years. Most of it is Baptist hula.”

I have nothing against liturgical dance per se, and am aware that it has a long and honorable history within Christian tradition. I don’t even mind giving graduate students a chance to set the books aside and get some aerobic exercise while wearing cute diaphanous trappings. But bad art tells lies, which is one of the many reasons that, as Oscar Wilde once put it, it is a great deal worse than no art at all.

And I go to church to get away from the lies that our culture gives us, the lies that bad art feeds on: that sincerity matters more than discipline, and sentiment more than emotion, that the desire to “express oneself” is sufficient as an artistic expression communicating something important to others.

Frederick Buechner annoyed many people at the 1997 Presbyterian General Assembly by saying that he finds it difficult to go to church at all because the language is so often uninspiring. I was glad to hear him tell the simple truth: that the emperor has no clothes, and the therapeutic, super-relevant and hyperinclusive jargon we’ve been creating for the church over the last 30 years has yet to find its soul.

I am also deeply aware of my need to set my internal editor aside when I go to church and to realize that I am there for reasons that transcend language altogether. To take the hand of a friend, and let my own hand be taken. To lift our voices in prayer and song (even our feeble, out-of-tune voices, even a song with lyrics that are laughably bad) so that we might worship God together. If God hears us at all, it is despite our inadequate language, our artistic pretensions and our best intentions. Fortunately for all of us, God’s ear is attuned to the silent language of the heart, the stark syntax of human need.