

In life, in death, in life beyond death

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

April 19, 2012

It's [the second movement](#) of Leonard Bernstein's choral work, [Chichester Psalms](#). A boy soprano (or a countertenor), in the "role" of the shepherd boy, David, sings in Hebrew the opening verses of Psalm 23. He is accompanied-sparingly, fittingly-by the harp. The first several measures are tender but not tentative; filled with sentiment, but without sentimentality (this per Bernstein's instructions). When the women's voices take over the text at תִּמְלֵצ אֵיגֶבַּךְ לַאֲיִכַּי פֶּגַּם . . . (*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . .*) there's an ethereal echo-canon effect. This part of the movement, when executed well, is something sublime.

The tranquil beauty is then violently interrupted by the tenors and basses intoning the first four verses of Psalm 2: קִיר־יוֹגֵהִי מִיִּמְאָלוֹ; מִיּוֹגַ וּשְׁגָר, הֶמָּל . . . (*Why do the nations rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?*). It's a manic few measures (*allegro feroce*)-abrupt, angular, agitated-with frenzied orchestral accompaniment.

But gradually, unobtrusively, and, according to the vocal score, "blissfully unaware of threat," the women return to Psalm 23: יִרְצֵ דָגְוֶהָלְשִׁי וַיִּפְּלֵךְ לִפְנֵי . . . (*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies . . .*). Underneath them, though, in the men's percussive whispers, the turmoil continues. Even when the solo voice completes the last phrase of the 23rd Psalm and the women repeat its opening line, the final few measures of the movement belong to the instruments who, *misterioso*, recall the disturbing interruption of Psalm 2. The movement ends, as Bernstein himself once said, "in unresolved fashion, with both elements, faith and fear, interlocked."

I sang the *Chichester Psalms* this past Sunday as part of a [reunion concert](#) at the college where I teach (and from which I graduated many years ago). The event honored Dr. Larry Parsons, the school's long-time choral director and professor of music who is retiring this year. The Bernstein piece is a favorite of his and it was both musically satisfying and emotionally bittersweet to sing it one last time under his direction.

But I also sang the work with other thoughts in mind. On Friday I learned of the death of a dear friend, a woman of such light and loveliness that, in the years I have known her, she seemed to exude a kind of palpable joy at the sheer giftedness of being alive. She was playful and kind, compassionate and magnanimous—always sensitive to the needs and struggles of others. She was a person of deep faith, possessed of a fierce integrity and with little patience for apathy, idleness, or easy answers. In all my knowing of her she was a seeker of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

But in recent months my friend faced serious struggles of her own. Old demons returned. Important relationships were lost. And despite having given so much encouragement to others through the years, she could not receive the needed strength and support from those who loved her and who reached out to her. She was broken and in despair. She felt alone. I know that, till the end, she sought to hold onto belief, but in her death, "in unresolved fashion, both elements, faith and fear, interlocked."

And yet unresolved tension is not the end of things.

The coda of the third and final movement of the Bernstein is the first verse of Psalm 133:

בּוֹטֵחַ מַה טוֹב,	Hineh mah tov, Umah	<i>Behold how good, and how</i>
תָּבֵשׁ - מִשְׁעֵנֵי הַמּוֹ	na'im, Shevet aḥim	<i>pleasant it is, for brethren to</i>
יָדֻחִים יַחְדָּם.	Gam yaḥad	<i>dwelt together in unity.</i>

By including it, Bernstein intended it, he said, as "a prayer for peace." But it is a prayer born of pain and struggle. Bernstein conveys this musically in the opening of the third movement with its tonal chords, dissonant semitones, and minor 9th chords. Conflict and irresolution abound. After this menacing dissonance and before the final coda, [Psalm 131](#) is sung in its entirety. The musical tension is relieved and this gentle chorale, sung in rare 10/4 time, prefigures the final prayer that all might "dwell together in unity."

In broader terms, the entire work might be said to represent the bringing together of the seemingly irreconcilable: everything from minor seconds and major sevenths to Bernstein's own eclectic musical styles to guttural Hebrew texts set for an English

cathedral choir. That Bernstein wrote the *Chichester Psalms* in the mid 1960s with that era's cultural upheaval and racial tension only makes the prayer for peace more poignant.

But on Sunday—a day that resonates with resurrection hope and with the promise of rest and renewal for all of creation—I sang it for my friend. I offered a prayer for her peace, that she might now dwell in unity, the tension of faith and fear finally resolved in her weary, restless spirit. I pray that she now rests eternally in God, that light perpetual shines on her, and that she knows as never before that in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

Originally posted at [Intersections](#)