

The Vintage Voice

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A Clear Memory

The Rev. Woody Bartlett

Lying in bed at night, I remember an exquisite moment that happened some years ago when I was a young priest. The moment exists at this time only in my memory but deserves to be remembered by a wider group than just myself. Or is my memory enough?

The occasion was a series of jazz masses that I produced in the 1960s while I was the Episcopal college chaplain at Georgia Tech with my base at All Saints' Church in Atlanta. The music director, Kathleen, and I teamed up to produce these services on Sunday nights, once a quarter, for five school quarters. Kathleen recruited a very talented friend, Mary Sue, who played the piano. Mary Sue brought her husband, Gene, to be the drummer. Gene also happened to be the chief percussionist for the Atlanta Symphony, so these people were no musical slouches. The trio was rounded out by Al, a base player — not the electric base so much in vogue in this day, but a real standup base fiddle that he thumped, thumped, thumped with calloused fingers.

We packed All Saints' on each of the five nights. At the services, we would sing standard hymns from the church hymnal, but to a jazz beat. You would be surprised how this simple idea reinvigorated some old hymns with a new spirit. The trio would play real jazz for a prelude and postlude, as well as during communion and at other intervals in the service. They would play classical and modern tunes, but always in the jazz idiom. One of the finest moments occurred during a prelude. As the congregation gathered, Mary Sue sat alone at the piano at the foot of the chancel and started playing a Bach fugue, just as Bach wrote it. After a few minutes, Gene entered from the side and slid in behind the drums. He started brushing the snare drum with a jazz rhythm. Then Al came out and started doing a jazz beat on the base. Finally, the trio blended into a jazz improvisation on the Bach fugue. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. It was so beautiful.

But the exquisite moment that came to me, lying in bed, was the time Mary Sue decided to write the service music for our services. Historically, that has been a Gloria, a Kyrie, the Sanctus, and a few other pieces. Most of what she wrote was pretty good, but the Sanctus was close to genius. It was easy to learn, so the congregation would get into it pretty deftly. We used it for several of the services. Toward the end of the series, we got a trumpet player to expand the trio

into a quartet. He played the Sanctus as a solo, then we sang it, and then he repeated the solo rendition. That is what is enshrined in my memory as the “exquisite moment.”

His tone was clear and sweet. The melody was in a jazz idiom with a subtle jazz beat and with modern intervals between the notes as the melody rose and fell. It was quiet and haunting and quite mystical. The melody dramatically followed the text with a musical emphasis on ‘full’ and ‘glory.’ The Amen at the end was a reprise of the opening notes. We sang, “Holy, holy, holy. Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of thy glory. Glory be to thee, O Lord, most high. Amen.” It was just beautiful.

We recorded the service on 8-track tape, but the tapes have not survived the many moves since those early days. Even if we had them, I understand that it would be difficult to transfer them to modern media.

The Episcopal Church has also revised its liturgy so that now the Sanctus has new words. So even if we could restore the music, it could not be used in a service. And I’ve lost touch with Mary Sue and Kathleen, so those avenues are gone, too.

All that remains is the memory. And my memory and voice are fading as I get older. I ask myself, “Is the memory of that Sanctus enough? Shouldn’t it be preserved somewhere?”

How many other fragments of wonderful culture and rich occasions are out there, fading into nothingness as generations succeed generations? Although still quite active and productive, I find that memories are taking up increasing amounts of space in my mind, as I lie in bed at night. It stirs a bit of melancholy to witness events being followed by memories, which are sure to be followed by the coming void.

Lately, however, a new understanding is emerging. Now I realize that the most important thing I am left with is a profound thanksgiving that I, and maybe some of the others gathered that night, had an experience of brushing up against the holiness of God as we sang the ‘Holy, holy, holy’ to that exquisite music. For that, memory is enough.



The Rev. Woody Bartlett lives in Clarkston, Georgia, just outside Atlanta, with his wife, Carol, a teacher and group facilitator. Although retired as a priest of the Diocese of Atlanta, he and Carol are quite active in caring for the creation, having started Georgia Interfaith Power & Light four years ago. The organization now has two full-time staff members and an energetic program of helping communities of faith live more faithfully through their conscientious use of energy. Woody and Carol also tend to eight grandchildren, travel, and keep two hives of bees.