

“We’re More Like Music than Billiard Balls”

Psalm 150 (The Psalmist praises God with many musical instruments.)

John 17:20-26 (Jesus prays fervently for his disciples, saying that God, he himself, and his disciples are all “in” each other.)

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By Carolyn Bohler

Redlands First United Methodist Church

You might tell me that you “bumped into” someone from our congregation at the Redlands Bowl; perhaps you did. Perhaps the two of you collided with one another. More likely, you simply “met” “saw” or “talked with” your friend. We humans say we “bump into” each other, but really, that phrase is more apt as it applies to billiard balls.

To refresh our minds about how billiard balls relate to each other, I’ve asked a few of our dancers to demonstrate. What I want you to do is to *notice how one ball relates to another*. **[Dancers pantomime being billiard balls.]** Whew, do I feel lucky to have such talented billiard balls who willingly offer a demonstration. Thank you.

How did the balls relate to each other? They *bounced off* each other! It may seem obvious, but notice that they *touch* each other on the *outside*. They are “externally” related.

Now, Bill, I’d like for you to play some music. Everyone else: Your responsibility is to notice *how* the music relates to you. **[Bill plays on the piano & sings “I’ve got you under my skin.”]** Thank you Bill —We’re very fortunate.

Everyone: Did the music *bump* into you? Did it go by you? Hit you? Go through you? How did you relate to the music? The music somehow went *into* us, didn’t it? It affected us on what seems like our inside, “under our skin.” If you really liked the music, it just may stay inside you for a long time, as you hum along, singing it to yourself. If you didn’t like the music, well it could still linger in you, whether you want it to or not! Music relates to us internally. We might say that Bills’ music “moved” us. But it didn’t move us like one billiard ball moves another. It moves us emotionally. Quite frankly, Bills’ music often moves us!

How do we as humans relate to each other? Are we more like billiard balls, bumping into each other and affecting each other from the outside? Maybe football players bump into each other, but more rational humans do not, in our ordinary encounters. Generally we humans are much much more like music in the way we relate. We are “*internally*” related.

Why on earth would I be asking you to consider such an odd thing as whether we are more like billiard balls or music, whether we are more externally or internally related? We are people—neither billiard balls nor music.

There are actually many interesting and some crucial consequences of this comparison. How we think about our relating as human beings helps us to consider how we *live with* each other on a daily basis, and it also helps us to consider on this Memorial day week-end, how we *continue* to relate to others after they have died.

You might have heard me mention this idea before, this idea of our memory of people being similar to our memory of music, for I have occasionally alluded to it when I have spoken at a memorial service around here. Because it is Memorial Day Week-end, I

decided to focus on this idea in a larger way, to explain the real beauty of this phenomenon.

I was about to fly from Ohio to California twenty-two years ago, to be with my father when he was near death. Our son, who was four years old then, consoled me by telling me that whenever I needed to think of Grandpa, I could look at Grandpa's photo. I was touched by my young son's attempt to comfort me.

Since Stephen himself died almost eight years ago, I have spent a good deal of time looking at *his* photos, and I have some comfort thinking of him. But he does not bump into me in our kitchen.

From study of theology and philosophy,<sup>1</sup> I had been introduced to the idea of humans being internally related, and that made sense—clearly we are. But at some point in my grieving the *significance* of being internally related grasped me. That naming of reality gave me a kind of assurance of *yet another way a loved one lives on*—that is, literally in us. Though our loved ones do not bump into us physically now, they affect us internally; their “music” sings in us today and will forever. Our loved ones sang songs of sports, art, fathering, mothering, or soldiering. Just as *music* lives in us, so too do all those remembered this Memorial Day continue to live in us, under our skin.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes people read passages from the *Gospel of John* and find them rather “mystical,” which is another word for “strange.” Listen again to these words of Jesus: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they (The “they” are Jesus' followers.) also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you . . . have loved them even as you have loved me.”

There's a lot of insideness here, in Jesus' prayers. Jesus is aware that he's soon to “die.” But he knows, too, that he had not related to his disciples as billiard balls relate to each other. He had related to his beloved humans internally, lovingly, and that this “under the skin” relating would never ever end.

Listen to this passage's assumptions:

- God is “in” Jesus *and* Jesus is “in” God.
- All humans are “in” Jesus and “in” God.
- There's a radical indwelling of God and Jesus in believers.

Jesus' prayer is that all humans, with Jesus in them and God in Jesus, would be one with each other. This community of oneness—that's us Christians-- are to serve as a witness to the whole world about how all can be one.

That's a lot of internal relating!<sup>3</sup> God, Jesus, and humans are all “in” each other. I'm not sure how that would pass in a course on logic. But, it actually makes genuine sense—if you think about how we relate mutually “in” each other. The dancers' pantomime is within Bill now and Bills' music is within the dancers. They are mutually “in” each other. All of us are. But especially since God and Jesus *want* to affect us, and we *want* to be affected, it's all the more clear how they can be “in” us.<sup>4</sup>

Once we're in another, we, like music, are sort of “in” forever. It's hard to get “out.”

It is so important to let people from all walks of life *into* our lives, because that gives us a more complex symphony within.<sup>5</sup> And then what we give *to* the world is a rich symphony. When we travel, read widely, and participate in congregations like this one where we can learn so much from each other, the people who “get under our skin” are

varied—so our interior life is complex and rich. All of this internal relating, this being “music” in each other’s lives affects us while we are living.

Years ago Allen Boone wrote *Kinship with All Life*<sup>6</sup>, a precious book that helps us to relate to animals with a greater sense of being “at one” with them. He cites people from Job to Jesus to Native Americans who all point out in one way or another that riding a horse at-one-with-the-horse is very different than bumping up and down on the saddle.

There are many Madonna and child images that depict the love between parent and child, one of the most revered being Michelangelo’s. We call those images “pieta.” “Pieta” came to mean, in 1500, “...a profound love that neither life nor death can destroy.”<sup>7</sup> *Isn’t parent-child love potentially so strong because they let each other affect them?*

What if? What if we lived with each other—all others—*sincerely wanting* all others to affect us, to get “under our skin”? What if we could be radically honest with our spiritual struggles as we talk with Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and atheists? What if we could actually hear, unfiltered, the spiritual struggles of other Christians? If, just if, a human riding a horse can be “at one” with the horse instead of bumping up and down on the saddle—consider how humans might be able to “become completely one” with each other instead of banging into each other. This was Jesus’ fervent prayer in the Gospel of John.<sup>8</sup>

Psalm 150 is the last Psalm in the Psalter—it’s a rousing and uninterrupted invitation to praise! Praise the Lord! Praise God with trumpet sound, with lute and harp, with tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe; praise God with clanging cymbals...That’s praise from every section of the orchestra!

This music of praise found in Psalm 150 affects us a couple thousand years after it was created. Why? Because as music it stays inside us, singing away in our souls, reverberating in our minds, rumbling in our emotions. This psalm is as “alive” now as it was when it was created over time, orally, by faithful people.

When we encounter a friend at the Redlands’ Bowl, on State Street, or at church. . . . When we encounter people through news reports from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya, Saudia Arabia, Guatemala, Mexico, or Tim-buck-too. . . . When we consider the joy of Dodgers, Angels, or Padres fans nearby. . . . or the Miami Heat and Dallas Mavericks fan this coming week. . . . When we encounter an estranged family member or friend or co-worker . . . or a *beloved* family member or co-worker. . . . May we tilt our ears ever-so-slightly to hear their music, to let them get under our skin, to let *their* song enrich *our* lives . . . and to seek ourselves to enrich their lives.

It’s helpful *to intend* to be influenced by the lives of others. On Memorial Day we as a country intend to be influenced by soldiers... so that we gives thanks for their courage, ask in a sense for forgiveness for the occasions that shortened their lives, and also to deepen our intent and resolve to provide peace for future generations. Amen.

This potential enriching for each other never ends! And, the potential for the lives of those who have passed through life on earth to enrich our lives now, never ends. Billiard balls are fun. But Alleluia... it’s such a blessing that we humans are way much more like music that gets under our skins in the way we relate, forever, to each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Especially that of Alfred North Whitehead and others who came to be called “Process Theologians.”

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<sup>2</sup> Whitehead called our receptive experiencing of another “feeling conformally with another” (188) and spoke of “the individualizing phase of conformal feeling.” (136) “This word ‘feeling’ is a mere technical term; but it has been chosen to suggest that functioning through which the concrescent actuality appropriates the datum so as to make it its own. There are three successive phases of feelings, namely, a phase of conformal feelings, one of ‘conceptual’ feelings, and one of ‘comparative’ feelings, including ‘propositional’ feelings in this last species. In the conformal feelings the *how* of feeling reproduces what is felt.” (190) Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. New York, NY: The Free Press First Paperback Edition, 1969. I suggest that we could say that we experience our loved one who has died with conformal feelings, with what was, but then we almost always introduce “what ifs?” and imagine their projected lives, which would move to conceptual and propositional feelings.

<sup>3</sup> Whitehead’s famous list of antitheses are beautifully expressed here!

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent.

It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many.

It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently.

It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.

It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God.

It is as true to say that God creates the World, as the World creates God.

Whitehead, *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>4</sup> “Superject—To be something for oneself necessarily entails being something for others. “Superject” refers to the sense in which an occasion has an effect beyond itself. This is not optional; it is simply a matter of fact. Whitehead underscores this frequently by calling an actual entity a “subject/superject.”

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1984, 226-7.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Loomer writes, “By *size* I mean the stature of a person’s soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions. I mean the magnanimity of concern to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.” Loomer, Bernard M., “S-I-Z-E Is the Measure,” in Hary James Cargas and Bernard Lee, *Religious Experience and Process Theology: The pastoral implications of a major modern movement*. New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1976, 70. I like to think of people who let many “in” as “Fat souls.”

<sup>6</sup> J. Allen Boone, *Kinship with All Life*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1954.

<sup>7</sup> Kloos, Marguerite, “Synergistic Aspects of Native Pietas.”

<sup>8</sup> We cannot actually keep any single human from getting “inside” us a little bit—any more than we can tell music, “Don’t enter me” as the sound approaches us. But, we can enjoy music, appreciate it, and let it enhance our lives—we can let its beauty in. Likewise, we can let all other humans in, enjoy them, and appreciate them.