

“ A Spiritual License Plate: Three Key Words”
Roy Ogren (1/21/18 service)

When Laura invited me to participate in a service about three words for a spiritual license plate, I hesitated for two reasons. First of all, I learned long ago not to commit to a service before knowing what I was going to say, and secondly, there’s a nebulousness to the word *spirituality* that always makes me a bit uneasy, especially since most of my potentially spiritual experiences may better qualify as sensuous in the strict dictionary meaning: of, derived from, appealing to, based on, affecting or perceived by the senses; readily susceptible through the senses; enjoying the pleasures of sensation. Nonetheless, I thought I’d give the topic a shot.

One of the most vivid experiences I’ve ever had that might qualify as spiritual – or sensuous -- occurred about 45 years ago on Skye Island in the Hebrides off the coast of Scotland. There was – and hopefully still is -- a primal quality to the landscape of jagged rock outcroppings, cliffs cascading into the turbulence of the North Sea, shafts of dazzling light piercing the sky as in a Renaissance depiction of The Annunciation, piles of peat stacked neatly beside rustic cottages, unshorn sheep grazing in fields strewn with rocks no doubt deposited by the last ice age – it all felt so pure, so elemental that it awakened in me something deep and essential which I don’t think I’d ever felt before, a state of hyper-receptivity and, for lack of a better word, “aliveness,” a concept I encountered recently in an op-ed by a philosophy professor at Harvard. This was a landscape brimming with energy and power with the promise of creation, an image of sublime beauty that has lingered in my mind for decades, much, I believe, like Wordsworth’s impressions of “Tintern Abbey,” which you may recall from your senior high school English class. Wordsworth

is overawed by images of “an aspect more sublime” which lightens “the heavy and weary weight of all this unintelligible world” until we feel “almost suspended ... and become a living soul.”

Which is exactly how I sometimes feel in a concert hall, almost noncorporeal, “suspended” like a “living soul.” I’ll bet many of you know exactly what I’m talking about. I am as entranced today by Schubert’s Impromptu #2 in A-flat as I was when I first heard it 30 years at the Kennedy Center. The formal dignity of the opening measures never fails to create in me an absolute stillness, a clarity of mind in which I feel “suspended” in sound. In fact, if it could be arranged, I’d like to be enfolded in their majesty as I drift out of this life. Can’t you picture it? Maria at my bedside, CD player in hand, a finger hovering over play while I say, “now,” “no, wait,” “yeah, that’s it,” “whoa,” “one more minute.” An inspired performance transports me from the mundane plane of existence to an inner universe of exquisite sweetness and light. In the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay “On Hearing a Symphony by Beethoven,” “this moment is the best the world can give.”

So where does leave me with my license plate? Skye Island, Schubert, the sublime, stillness, aliveness? At the risk of having Laura revoke my license for invalid plates, I must settle on just one word: Beauty, for it is through beauty in all of its manifestations – in the arts, in nature, in tender human interactions – it is through beauty that I experience a feeling of transcendence, not a transcendence that sweeps me up to a supernatural realm, but rather a transcendence borne of air and water and sound and light, an expansion of consciousness without LSD, an immersion in the sublime dimensions of the physical universe and human experience. Is that spiritual? Sensuous? Does the terminology matter?

In "The Rose upon the Rood of Time," the Irish poet William Butler Yeats expresses his infinite love of Ireland and his sadness over the civil strife that has torn it asunder, a sadness so profound that even the stars that have silently borne witness for decades "have grown old in dancing silver sandaled on the sea."

I'd love to have you close your eyes and visualize that image for a moment -- stars "grown old in dancing silver sandaled on the sea."

But all is not lost to sadness. In fact Yeats offers one quiet, yet irrepressible source of hope in the closing lines of the first stanza when he invokes the soul of Ireland, shrouded in druidic mists, to "come near," to inspire and uplift him:

Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,
I find under the boughs of love and hate
In all poor foolish things that live a day,
Eternal beauty wandering on her way.