

**Art and spirituality: A Personal Vision.**

Sermon in Three Parts by the Reverend Lone Jensen

Long before I became a minister I used to go on pilgrimages to sacred places, places where I could as Emerson wrote “find beauty as God’s handwriting”, only back then I would not have used the word God but I might have said Goddess. I invite you this morning to join me on a personal journey, a pilgrimage to places that became for me doorways to the sacred. Take what you can use from these paths of transformation, be it into healing and peace or into a creative turmoil and unrest. Your individual spiritual paths will be different than mine but my hope is that you will allow my journey and these artists to awaken the spirit within you or at least think about what it is that your deepest self responds to. Maybe it is words you crave, or music, or movement. Or maybe you crave silence, going inward or the mind’s acrobatics of logic and philosophy. Put your logic aside for just a little while and open your eyes, and though the conditions are not perfect, enjoy the images projected on our wall. Let us honor all our senses.

If you were to think of the most unlikely place for a pilgrimage it might well be the city of Houston, an overgrown sprawling city surrounded by Texas size industry on steroids and huge oil fields. Yet I would travel half a day or more from Baton Rouge Louisiana through a

Dante's inferno of industrial ugliness, chemical pollution mixed with wet hot gulf air, all that can go wrong when we let the quest for more money override everything else, a near perfect example of why we have global warming. But they had good art there and my soul craved art. In what was then a quiet tree lined neighborhood I found the Rothko Chapel. The building is small, windowless and unassuming, a decidedly geometric, postmodern structure. Outside is a reflecting pool with a broken obelisk dedicated to the Reverend Martin Luther King. Barnett Newman, the artist wrote: "The Obelisk is concerned with life and I hope that I have transformed its tragic content into a glimpse of the sublime."

It is a chapel dedicated to all faiths and in the foyer you find scriptures from all the major religions. You enter from the bright sun outside into a place of twilight. The glare of the Texas sun is filtered and tamed through one single opening in the center of the roof. It is a stark place with stone floors and simple wooden benches with a few scattered black meditation pillows around. On the surrounding walls hang 14 large paintings by Mark Rothko. He was, I knew from my studies, a tortured soul and yet, his colors sing. He wrestled beauty from his pain. Call it a triumph of the human spirit. I liked Rothko. But these canvasses seemed at first to be entirely black and devoid of meaning. Still I had come a long way so I sat quietly and let my eyes adjust. Colors appeared

slowly, browns and purples and reds, subtle shapes and shadows. I sat quietly. I looked at the center of the floor where a single pillow had been left. And deep from within my soul an ancient grief arose. I began to cry and could not stop even as curious visitors passed by. It seemed as if the light was a living presence, an embrace that held me softly as I cried. This place of peace, dedicated to interfaith harmony, is so simple and stark that it utterly throws you into yourself. For some visitors that is very true. Others walk in, look around and shake their head in disbelief. Neither is right or wrong. There is no God with a face in Rothko's art. But the experience of beauty so intense it makes you cry is a form of grace. And it's also terrifying because you might be transformed and changed forever. Tears are, it seems, a common thing there, people enter and unexpectedly start to cry. There's something about that place it that brings that out in people...it's like a door. The soul is stripped of everything but the essentials...You realize how much of an illusion the arrogant idea of being in control really is. Mark Rothko was not a Buddhist and yet his art is Zen like. It was shortly after that afternoon in the shelter of the Chapel that I decided to become a UU minister. It was as if I had finally been set free and given permission.

Musical interlude with projected art works.

Giotto di Bondone:

This might be more like what you think of as religious art. We recognize the images and we know the stories. Giotto di Bondone is recognized as the first genius of art in the Italian Renaissance. His Capella dell' Arena was commissioned by Enrico Scrovegni to atone for his father's crimes as a heartless money lender, the equivalent of today's "Pay Day Loans". A chapel paid for by greed and guilt is transformed by this artist into playful beauty and joyful grace. I tell you that if I ever meet an angel I want her, or him, to look just like Giotto's flying spirits, lovely and rounded, a kind human face with a pair of wings. Florentine painter and architect Giotto lived at the cusp of another era much like ours, a time of great change and transition. Medieval rigidity was giving way to a new humanism, new heresies and new ideas. How do you paint infinity? You paint the ceiling bright cobalt blue with twist of ultramarine and scatter bright golden stars all over it. Oh, he stuck with the usual topics, faith and the Gospel stories, as we find them in so many other churches of the time. But the world he painted, in which these saints moved, was real and what he saw and portrayed were living and breathing human beings, not one dimensional golden icons. Mary, Jesus and the disciples are earthy, full blooded and filled with life. Yet all this abundance is kept within boundaries, safely done, creating a restful place where one might contemplate infinity, under control and at a

distance. Giotto was greatly influenced by St Francis and what comes across to me is an irrepressible joy in life and a sense of the sacred as found in the natural world.

This chapel is a lovely place of spirit and poetry, filled with symbols and fancy. Giotto has a graceful yet powerful way about him. The people in his paintings are growing into their humanity. In a single gesture all is expressed and we need no words. Looking at his art is like doing a familiar and sacred ritual. Every Sunday we light our blue stained glass chalice. We can see what it is, we know what it means and we can add new words and poetry to the symbol. We have seen it done before and there is comfort in that very familiarity. It is like a classical piece of music where everything is measured and has a definite framework and structure. But within that safety the spirit can soar.

Musical Interlude with projected art works.

Marc Chagall:

How many of you remember the pictures on the wall of your nursery? Or your first encounter with art or with paint? Before you cared about what it would end up looking like or whether you had to color in between the lines? Have you ever felt as if the closest you could come to being God-like was that blank piece of patient paper waiting for the world to be created? If Rothko's spirituality is everything stripped

down to a Zen like essence and Giotto follows St Francis then Marc Chagall is an artist without spiritual boundaries, wild, child-like, joyous and tragic at once, painting a lost world and his memories.

Over my bed, when I was young, hung one of Chagall's prints, not an original of course, one of his circus paintings with a woman in yellow sequins on a red and purple horse, with many flourishes and flowers. Every evening before I went to sleep and first thing in the morning the purple horse galloped across my imagination. No wonder purple is my favorite color. That and blue, deep twilight blue as in Chagall's stained glass window in the Chicago Art Institute, where skyscrapers and the statue of liberty float along with menorahs, birds and women, all held in an eternal twilight. I could sit in front of this window for hours resting in the blue dream like world, thinking about what freedom really means and rejoicing that Chagall escaped the holocaust to give us such a gift of beauty.

He painted from memory of a world long gone, his childhood Russian village, him and first wife and greatest love Bella floating as a wedding couple into a flowery night and he told the tales of the prophets on canvasses burning with colors. His art is a kind of divine madness, a prophetic spirit without any bounds, a life force unleashed.

If you saw only his circus paintings or flowery women you might think he had an easy life. Not true. He went to study in St Petersburg but was jailed for not having obtained a permission to live there, which he needed since he was Jewish. He supported the Russian Revolution only to have the Communist Regime turn against him. He escaped to Paris but World War II brought the Nazi occupation of France, the deportation of Jews and the Holocaust. His paintings from that era are dark and filled with suffering. The Jewish crucifixion is one of those. Chagall hid at Villa Air-Bel in Marseille and the American journalist Varian Fry assisted his escape from France through Spain and Portugal. In this Varian Fry was helped by our Unitarian Service Committee who gave him a cover story. In 1941, the Chagalls settled in the United States of America. He later returned to France but paid tribute to what America used to stand for: freedom and sanctuary for the oppressed.

It is a mystery what makes one person want to create beauty and another want to destroy. The ancient forces the Hindus spoke of, the dance of Shiva the creator and Shiva the destroyer are always manifest in our lives. The choice is ours. Art can be a doorway to the sacred, a way back to our soul and to our senses. Dare to step over the threshold.

