

Stephen Sondheim's expressions of yearning

My spirituality was shaped by this secular artist's powerful spiritual questions.

by [Martin B. Copenhagen](#) in the [December 29, 2021](#) issue



Composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim, who reshaped the American musical theater in the second half of the 20th century, died at age 91 at his Connecticut home on November 26. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa, File)

I remember my first encounter with the work of Stephen Sondheim, who died last month, with the vividness reserved for singular life events, like a first kiss—not only the where and the when but also precious details and, most of all, how it made me feel. On that night in 1979, when I left the theater after seeing Angela Lansbury and Len Cariou in *Sweeney Todd*, I was giddy with exhilaration. I was a student of the theater but, with rare exceptions, I didn't much care for musicals. This was something different, however. It had the complexity and nuance of a great play in verse, but the story took flight on soaring music that immediately took up residence in my heart.

Without delay or hesitation, I shared my enthusiasm for the show with family and friends—or, at least, I attempted to. It was like trying to describe a religious experience. My descriptions were earnest but largely inarticulate. After all, it is difficult to convey how one could enjoy a musical about a vengeful barber who slits the throats of his customers and about his lover, Mrs. Lovett, who then bakes them into meat pies. It was also difficult to describe how levitated I was by the experience.

I then immersed myself in all of Sondheim's earlier work. I was familiar with *West Side Story*, for which Sondheim wrote the lyrics at age 27, but I did not know any of the musicals for which he wrote both music and lyrics. I also made a point of seeing every new show—preferably before it officially opened, so I would be sure to see it before it closed. (One of his shows, *Anyone Can Whistle*, closed after nine performances.) Over the years, Sondheim's music has accompanied me so continuously that it has become something like the soundtrack of my adult life.

It is not easy to explain the effect it has had on me. Not only do I appreciate Sondheim as an artist, I also have come to believe that his work has had an impact on my spiritual life.

This is odd, because Sondheim displayed no interest in religion. He was a thoroughly secular Jew. When asked about his Jewish identity, he replied, "It's very deep. It's the fact that so many of the people I admire in the arts are Jewish. And art is as close to a religion as I have."

Sondheim's disinterest in religion is reflected in his work. The only character who displays any religious sensibilities—not counting the priest who was baked into one of Mrs. Lovett's pies—is Henrik Egerman, the repressed and tortured seminarian in *A Little Night Music*.

The only explicit reference to God in Sondheim's entire oeuvre is in *Merrily We Roll Along*, in which one embittered character sings: "It's called flowers wilt, / It's called apples rot, / It's called thieves get rich and saints get shot. / It's called God don't answer prayers a lot. / Okay, now you know." This verse, like countless others, demonstrates how far Sondheim departed from the kind of lyrics his mentor Oscar Hammerstein wrote a generation earlier, lyrics that could be "as corny as Kansas in August," as Nellie sings in *South Pacific*. In contrast, Sondheim's lyrics have a rueful bite to them, which essayist Adam Gopnik described as "consistently bittersweet, like the best, and darkest, dark chocolate."

So how can a secular artist with no apparent interest in religious themes inform and nourish my faith?

At the most basic level, any thing of beauty can give glory to the Creator who is the source of all things bright and beautiful. If the heavens can “declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1), so can Michelangelo’s depiction of the heavens in the Sistine Chapel.

This is even true of art that does not intend to reflect anything of God. As the heavens give witness to the glory of God without intending to, so can a work of art. The beauty itself is the witness, even if that witness is ambiguous. In this way, art can be a form of general revelation.

Sondheim’s music can be so exquisite that it actually seems like a revelation. His lyrics, too. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, painter Georges Seurat describes what it is like to get lost in the creative process: “Mapping out a sky, / What you feel like, planning a sky, / What you feel when voices come through the window, / Go / Until they distance and die, / Until there’s nothing but sky.” Here a creator, describing the act of creation, unintentionally reflects something of the glory of the Creator.

Just as surely, anything that illumines the human condition can serve the life of faith. Sondheim’s work traverses a wide range of what it means to be human: marriage and human connection (*Company*), parenthood and loss (*Into the Woods*), pathology (*Assassins*), love and obsession (*Passion*), the clash of cultures (*Pacific Overtures*). I could go on. In the theater, few have reflected on such a wide range of human experiences. (“I got to be in the room with Shakespeare,” said actor Mandy Patinkin after Sondheim’s death. “Who gets that?”)

Sondheim had a deep and nuanced understanding of the human condition, particularly the darker sides of life—and it was hard-won. When he was in his 40s, the night before his mother was to have heart surgery she wrote a letter to her son and had it hand delivered. It read, in part, “The only regret I have in life is giving you birth.” (Eugene O’Neill’s mother told him the same thing. Great art can be born from great pain.)

One aspect of Sondheim's work that has had a particular impact on my spiritual life is his inescapable, poignant expressions of yearning, a theme that permeates much of his work. Sometimes this yearning takes the form of nostalgia, a longing focused on the past. The entire show *Follies* is a reflection on nostalgia, as is the second act of *Sunday in the Park with George*.

More often, however, the yearning Sondheim evinces is for something that is not yet—for justice, love, and human connection that are elusive. The first and last words in *Into the Woods* are "I wish," and the phrase becomes a kind of leitmotif for the entire show. What each character wishes for is held just out of reach. The song that declares a happy ending, in which all of their wishes are granted, comes at the end of the first act. By the end of the play itself, discord and death have again asserted themselves, leaving the characters with their yearning.

This theme in Sondheim's work is evident from the beginning. He sought to distance himself from a lot of the lyrics he wrote for *West Side Story*, claiming that he was urged toward more trite expressions by composer Leonard Bernstein, as when Maria sings, "I feel pretty, / Oh, so pretty, / I feel pretty and witty and bright."

Sondheim was proud to claim the lyrics of one song in that show, however—Tony's exuberant "Something's Coming." The entire song is an expression of yearning for that which is, as yet, out of reach and out of view: "Could be, / Who knows? / There's something due any day. / I will know right away, / Soon as it shows."

To me, Sondheim's expressions of yearning offer echoes of Augustine's famous prayer: "Our heart is restless until it rests in you." Our hearts are traced with yearning—for love, for connection, for the fragmented pieces of our lives to be gathered up into something whole. And often we do not know the object of our yearning. Our longings are indistinct. We can examine our lives much like the way we sometimes stare into the refrigerator, having no idea what we are hungry for but aching with hunger nonetheless.

If Pascal is right that there is a God-shaped void at the heart of each of us, we often try to fill it with anything but God—but no one and nothing else can entirely fill it. And so, at the heart of us, there is yearning.

My spiritual life has been enhanced by having been immersed in this extraordinary artist's expressions of yearning. "God is the answer to the question implied in being," said Paul Tillich. I am grateful for Sondheim, who was able to articulate the

question so powerfully.

Cornel West once said in an interview, "I couldn't live without the genius of Stephen Sondheim." We now need to figure out how to do just that. Then again, as the Baker affirms in *Into the Woods*: "We die, but we don't." For Sondheim, through his work, that is undeniably true.

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