Love and Grief: An Evening of Jazz Improvisation

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Love and Grief: An Evening of Jazz Improvisation
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May 10, 2024
Keywords: Love, grief, jazz improvisation
“If we do not grieve what we miss, we are not praising what we love. We are not praising the life we have been given in order to love. If we do not praise whom we miss, we are ourselves in some way dead. So grief and praise make us alive.” (Prechtel, 2015).

For my final project I intend to offer a jazz musical performance that explores songs of love and grief. I have had a tragedy in my life and have written about it for other classes. I considered exploring the experience more deeply, especially in relation to grief, but after thought and consultation I decided to channel these feelings into a creative project. My ultimate goal here is to overcome the feeling of relentless regret, a term that I have made up to depict the kind of rumination that I get caught in. The regret is over the inability to have a family and the loss of my marriage. I think that practicing for this performance is a healing treatment on several levels that I will explore. And I believe it is useful for my future ministry as a hospital chaplain.

Why jazz improvisation?

Jazz improvisers are committed to playing new musical material. surprising themselves and others with spontaneous, unrehearsed ideas. Jazz differs from classical music in that there is no clear prescription of what is to be played. From the Latin "impostus", meaning "not seen ahead of time", improvisation is "playing extemporaneously ... composing on the spur of the moment" (Schuller, 1989, p. 378). Given the highly exploratory and tentative nature of improvisation, the potential for failure and incoherence always lurks just around the corner. Saxophonist Paul Desmond said that the improviser must "crawl out on a limb, set one line against another and try to match them, bring them closer together" (quoted in Gioia, 1988, p. 92). Jazz saxophonist Steve Lacy discusses the excitement and danger inherent in improvisation likens it to existing on the edge of the unknown.

I'm attracted to improvisation because of something I value. That is a freshness, a certain quality, which can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get from writing. It is something to do with the 'edge'. Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go out there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown. (Quoted in Bailey, 1992, p. 57)

The metaphors of leaping into the unknown, hanging out on a limb, suggest the exhilarating and perilous nature of engaging in an activity in which the future is largely unknown, yet one in which one is expected to create something novel and coherent, often in the presence of an audience. Improvisation involves exploring, continual experimenting, tinkering with possibilities without knowing where one's queries will lead or how action will unfold. Improvisation is like walking backward into the future.
From the moment a performance begins, the improviser enters an ongoing stream of musical activity that is constantly changing and evolving: drum accents, harmonic alterations, segmented bass lines, fragmentary melodies intermingling through temporal structure of the song. Players enter this undulating flow, constantly interpreting the musical material before them, merging their own ideas with others’, attempting to create a coherent statement. They are constantly anticipating one another’s intentions, making guesses and predictions. Players are committed to stay engaged with one another, to listen to emerging ideas, and to pay attention to cues that can point to an unexpected trajectory.

Jazz improvisation is often likened to a conversation between players: like a good dialogical exchange participants strive for attunement by listening, anticipating, responding. They are engaged with continual streams of activity: interpreting others’ playing, anticipating based on harmonic patterns and rhythmic conventions, while simultaneously attempting to shape their own creations and relate them to what they have heard. In some sense, attunement is built into jazz performance by the practice of turn taking. Through iterative patterns of exchange, each person takes a turn developing a musical idea. While one person is developing an idea, others take on a support role by accompanying, or ‘comping’. The task of those ‘comping’ is to focus on helping the other develop her emerging idea, to empathize with the soloist, anticipate the direction of her phrases so as to blend, encourage, and augment.

But improvisation is not only about being spontaneous. In order to improvise one must be steeped in a tradition so deeply that you learn to take the right notes for granted. Musicians train in a tradition, learn to anticipate and trust one another. Having said that, rehearsal and practice are extremely important. One must learn the vocabulary, the chord changes, the song forms, the melodic possibilities that are appropriate for each chord. Musicians have to prepare to be spontaneous. We study the jazz giants, dissect their solos, analyze their chord changes, emulate their rhythms. This is a form of lose study not unlike lectio divina. This points to one of the core paradoxes of improvisation. One learns licks, phrases, routines, habits, but in the moment these can become too reliable and detract from present moment. So one of the skills needed seems counter-intuitive: mastering the art of unlearning. The temptation to play what is comfortable is something that must be overcome, so musicians must in a sense “unlearn” the routines they have mastered so the they are fully present enough to surprise themselves and their bandmates with fresh responses.

But perhaps the most important lesson here is that jazz prepares you to respond with grace. There is so much that is outside of your control and outside of your capacity to predict. Players have to actively listen and respond to one another, attuned to the unfolding material that they are simultaneously creating and discovering. The best thing you can do is to prepare yourself to respond to several equivocal situations, not only the unexpected, but also the unwanted. Practicing jazz is practicing attention, actually practicing one’s orientation in the moment. We make mistakes all the time of course, but it’s essential not to problem solve (since the moment is gone and you can’t any way. And it’s essential to not be haunted when you make a mistake. Improvisation depends on an appreciative way of knowing, an aesthetic that values surrender and wonderment over certainty, listening and attunement over self-preoccupation.
Practicing for a jazz performance is very complicated. It’s not like practicing for a classical performance. In classical music the notes are written out, the plan is in place and your job is to realize the composer’s intent, to actualize the music very precisely. It’s not that way with jazz. Musicians work within a minimal structure that allows maximal flexibility and autonomy. So, one of the frustrations is that you can practice for a long time and not necessarily see that it is bearing fruit. Certainly, you can learn new songs and accompanying chord changes, but the only way you know if you are expanding your skills is to see how you perform in the moment. In a sense when you practice, you’re trying to create fruitful habits that will eventually pay off in a way that you can’t predict. You must be prepared to do things you’ve never done before. That’s why it’s hard to practice for several hours. I have on several occasions practiced for an extended period of time and wondered whether it had any payoff. The advantage of practice is that you hope you are building your vocabulary and that when unfamiliar things happen you won’t be paralyzed by anxiety. It’s not for the faint of heart.

There are some ways in which practicing and playing jazz improvisation is like learning virtue. Playing jazz is not just about being spontaneous. You must be embedded in a tradition that allows you to take some things for granted and then be willing to abandon routines in the moment. That’s why jazz musicians can trust each other to do the right thing.

For this performance I have chosen songs that deal with love and grief. At the moment here are the tunes I’m considering and a small sample of the lyrics to give a sense of the song’s meaning:

My Shining Hour:

“This moment, this minute / and each second in it/ will leave a glow upon the sky / and as time goes by, it will never die. This will be my shining hour/ calm and happy and bright. Like the lights of home before me / or an angel watching o’er me/ this will be my shining hour until I’m with you again. “

Our Love is Here to Stay

“It’s very clear / Our love is here to stay / not for a year / but ever and a day / The radio and the telephone/ and the movies that we know / may just be passing fancies / and in time may go. But oh my dear / our love is here to stay / together we’re going a long, long way In time the Rockies may crumble; Gibraltar may tumble / they’re only made of clay / But our love is here to stay.”

My Secret Love

Once I had a secret love / that lived within the heart of me / All too soon my secret love / became impatient to be free. So I told a friendly star / the way that dreamers often do / just how wonderful you are / and why I’m so in love with you. Now I shout it from the highest hills . . my secret love’s no secret anymore.
But Not for Me

They’re writing songs of love, but not for me / A lucky star’s above, but not for me. With love
to lead the way / I’ve round more clouds of gray / than any Russian play could guarantee. . . .
Although I can’t dismiss the memory of her kiss / I guess she’s not for me.

Make You Feel My Love

When the rain is blowing in your face / and the whole world is on your case/ I could offer you a
warm embrace / to make you feel my love. When the evening shadows and the stars appear / and there is no one there to dry your tears / I could hold you for a million years / To make you feel my love.

For All We Know

“For all we know / we may never meet again/ before you go / Make this moment sweet again.
We won’t say goodnight / until the last minute / Ill hold out my hand / and my heart will be in
it. . . . so love me, love me tonight / tomorrow was made for some / tomorrow may never come
/ for all we know.”

An Affair to Remember

“Our love affair is a wondrous thing /That we’ll rejoice in remembering.”

Hard Times

“My mother told me ‘fore she passed away / Said son, when I’m gone, don’t forget to pray /
cause there’ll be hard times, hard time times / Who knows better than I?”

There are a few other songs I’m considering. I will have a trio playing with me. We will
not have rehearsed and most likely will not have met until the performance. That’s the nature
of jazz. There’s a tacit, almost impersonal trust that allows strangers to play together. I’m also
considering asking a few of my classmates to sing a few of the songs.

All of this raises the question of how this relates to my ministry. For starter this is about
love and grief. And if know anything about grief it is that there are no scripts for grief, no right
way, no clean way, no comfortable or predictable way to deal with the loss of love. So in a
sense grief is improvised and jazz embodies the practices that grieving demands. But more
than that, from my experience as a hospital chaplain I learned very quickly that I needed to be
prepared for the unexpected, emergencies, severe injuries, families dealing with pending
deaths, patients physically suffering, suicide – all of which I experienced during my chaplaincy.
And further I learned that what works in one case won’t work in another, that I need to slow
down and pay loving attention to the moment, and perhaps most importantly to not
communicate anxiety. These are all skills that jazz musicians need to nurture.
How is jazz a good metaphor for ministry? For starters, jazz cultivates loving attention. Since there is no pre-ordained script that orients musicians, they must pay close attention to others’ experiences. They must also pay close attention to their own interiority. But to be open and responsive, one must be willing to abandon comfortable routines and habits and risk taking action with no guarantee that these will be fruitful or impactful. Chaplains must be radically present and alert to the mood of the room, whether it is grieving families or joyous newlyweds. Jazz demands attentiveness to the moment, it cultivates an appreciative way of knowing, an aesthetic that fosters surrender and wonderment over certainty, affirmation over problem solving, attunement over isolation. Chaplains and ministers, like improvisers, are living in the moment, discovering the future that their enactments create as it unfolds.

There is also the danger of too much self-consciousness. It is dangerous to become obsessed with saying the right thing and the temptation to avoid making mistakes. When one is concerned about avoiding errors, one’s attention is not free enough to take in emotional cues. If one becomes concerned about “saying the right thing,” one is in a sense, leaving the room. In comedy improvisation one of the rules is to avoid trying to be clever but instead learning to say the first thing that comes to mind. Ministry means actively and generously listening and responding, attuned to the unfolding world as one is simultaneously creating and discovering. Jazz bands take turns soloing and supporting; while one player is developing an idea, others take on a supportive role by accompanying or “comping.” The comping player is helping the soloist think out loud, helping the other to develop an emerging idea, empathizing and anticipating so as to blend, encourage, and augment. In this sense, jazz prepares one to respond with grace.

It’s enlightening to consider how a jazz musician practices. One must prepare to be spontaneous. This means one must steep oneself in a tradition so that you learn to take the right things for granted – practicing chord changes, scales, and phrases so that they become automatic repertoire that one might draw upon extemporaneously. In this sense, practicing for jazz is a form of virtue ethics, cultivating habits that make it more likely that one will respond with wisdom – in the right way, at the right time. Similarly, a minister or chaplain must steep herself in a tradition – studying scripture, learning about stages of grief, reading literature on trauma, understanding family dynamics within different ethnic communities. These become a background repertoire that a minister can draw upon when needed. Jazz musicians create conditions so that people can do things they’ve never done before. They support one another, they don’t freeze or stop if someone makes a mistake, they orient to a minimal structure. They have to accept and adapt to the circumstance while constantly seeking to make room for the other. Chaplains can do something like this as well. They can practice centering and removing mental clutter, nurturing an inner serenity through contemplation and meditation.

In ministry it is essential to accept the risk of attempting something new. It’s not unusual for example that you will be in the company of a grieving family you have never seen before. It’s important to navigate with grace in the presence of strangers who themselves are likely in a liminal state. Often patients and families are talking their way through sorrow. The
chaplain’s job is to “comp,” to set the right tone, to be a holding environment that allows others to find their way through new terrain.

There is a pressure in such public roles to look competent and effective. But if musicians and chaplains must avoid habitual responses and risk taking action with no guarantee that will be the right thing, then mistakes are inevitable in jazz and in ministry. Miles Davis once famously said, “If you’re not making a mistake, it’s a mistake.” Both jazz and ministry call for an aesthetic of forgiveness. If one becomes paralyzed by anxiety or embarrassment over an awkward gesture or comment, present awareness is obfuscated. In both jazz and chaplaincy, errors are a source of learning. Certainly, in chaplaincy one can be invited to notice, usually in retrospect, what didn’t land with the patient or family, what missed the mark. It might be helpful to consider how God can take failures and make something beautiful out of them. Perhaps this is why it's important to be working with a spiritual director or a support group of other chaplains / ministers in which one can safely disclose vulnerabilities. It’s important to remember that whatever mistake one has made, it is not worse than the suffering of a grieving family.

Iris Murdoch is an ethical philosopher who claims that rather than emphasizing choosing the right thing to do, there is a prior condition – cultivating right and just attention. Attending is the most vital task. Perception itself she claims is a mode of evaluation. She accents its moral significance when she claims that “the selfish self-interestedly casual or callous man sees a different world from that which the careful scrupulous benevolent just man sees insistent clamoring of the “fat relentless ego.” (Mudoch, 1999, p. 342).

Improvising well in jazz and ministry means surrendering to the situation. Iris Murdoch called for “negative effort,” that is a willful, loving attention to what is “other” that renders one vulnerable and open to transformation. Murdoch calls this transformation “unselfing,” a process of becoming increasingly open to the light of the Good. She offers a vignette:

I am looking outside my window in an anxious and resentful frame of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but the kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important (Murdoch, 1999, p. 369).

Being attuned to the fullness of the kestrel disrupts egoistic absorption, transforms the unselfed observer to become open to the inbreaking of the other and changes the observer’s entire comportment. It breaks through everyday feelings of fear, resentment, envy; it “breaks the spell of this ego-driven oblivion” (Murdoch, 1999, p. 369). The kind of attentive awareness that both jazz and ministry demand is tantamount to love as Murdoch describes it:

Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that
we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good. It is a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun (Murdoch, 1999, p.384).

When love is present, the object of attention is transformed. Playing jazz and chaplaincy are acts of love. They are spiritual exercises in the art of overcoming the “fat, relentless ego” and creating a holding environment in such a way that the other is transformed.

Reflection following the performance:

Looking back on my senior project I feel an immense sense of gratitude. I had several “first time experiences.” This is the first time I practiced piano diligently for several months. The pressure and expectation of playing in a piano trio for the first time motivated me to keep returning to the practice room. I observed the way my feelings would ebb and flows, sometimes seeing progress but more often feeling frustration. It’s very hard to practice improvisation. How do you practice for the unknown? The only think one can do is memorize chord changes, practices licks and phrases, work on rhythmic variation. Most of the time it was a slog, and I was tempted to give up. I’m so glad I didn’t. Having gone through the performance and listening to myself playing, I can hear that I had a certain fluidity that I might not have noticed before.

I decided not to prepare remarks and to simply speak from my heart about whatever came up. I decided to tell the story of the personal tragedy that led to the grief that was one of the core themes of the evening. I learned that it impacted the audience. There was a gasp when they heard the story. And I think people listened to the music differently and more deeply because they could see that I was working through gut level sadness. I chose songs that reflected the arc of my marriage to Madelene, from joy to sadness and tragedy and I interspersed more details about my marriage throughout the evening. Later when I asked people about the evening, every single person mentioned that the stories and explanations were helpful, and they were able to appreciate the music with my story as background.

I was surprised by the evening. I was surprised that so many people were so moved. The audience response was enthusiastic. When I listen to other music, such as Keith Jarrett, I can feel my mood change, I know that the music works over me and impacts me. I have never considered that my music could impact others this way. This is perhaps my major learning.

A few people have asked me if playing the concert relieved my grief and if I’m feeling less sad as I work through it. My answer then and now is “no.” I will grieve the loss of a family my whole life. It will never go away. There will be a core sadness accompanying me until my last breath. Sometimes it will be figural, particularly during holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I will need to either find ways to avoid the holidays or make my way through them until that season passes. But playing this jazz concert was important. If grief won’t go away, there still is a way to live with it. And the best way is to be as completely present as possible, to celebrate the world that I am in here and now. I mentioned during the
performance that jazz is a form of praise. It is praise for the present moment and what is emerging. It demands attention to one’s inner urgings and the enactments of other players.

I have to say also that I was so moved by the many expressions of love in the room. There were more than 45 people present and they erupted with joyful appreciation after the concert. I had friends who flew from Florida, two friends who drove from Annapolis, one friend who flew from Oakland California, several friends drove from Gloucester. And of course several people from HDS came and for several days they stop me to tell me how moving the evening was. I felt for that one hour we were a close community, and it was music that helped us to connect. It’s an experience I will never forget. (There is a recording of the concert that I can make available to anyone interested).

Appreciation / acknowledgement

I owe the deepest gratitude to Matt Potts. He encouraged me to write about the tragedy for his grief class. I was hesitant. I took an incomplete in the course and spent several weeks in the summer writing the paper. I’m so glad I did as I was able to put a name to the suffering I had experienced. But I’m even more appreciative of Matt for encouraging me to play the jazz concert. I came to him with three options, two of which were papers. I’ve been writing journal articles, book chapters, and books for 30 years. It’s not hard for me to write a paper for the senior requirement. He said that all three of the options were viable candidates and I should just decide. Then he asked this question: “What is the thing you would not do if you weren’t here?” It was obvious what the answer was – to put myself at risk in public, paying attention in the moment to whatever emerges between musicians I had never met, throwing myself in over my head such that loving attention is the best option. What could possibly go wrong?

The night before the performance I wrote an email to Matt: “What the hell was I thinking?” I am so grateful that Matt Potts encouraged me to do this. Matt is thoughtful and careful to a fault and not one who feels comfortable being directive. He was subtly suggestive with me about both projects – the paper and the concert. But he had an intuition for sure. Thank you, Matt. I don’t know if there would be any better way for me to learn that playing jazz is a powerful spiritual experience and an affirmative praise to the present moment in which miracles are always available if we choose to notice.

Bibliography


An Evening of Jazz Improvisation: Songs of Love and Grief

Frank J. Barrett, MDiv ’24 on piano

With special guests:

Nicole Newell, MDiv ’24
Sam Bailey, MDiv ’23
Teddy Hickman-Maynard, Associate Dean for Ministry Studies

refreshments to follow

April 23
6–7:30pm
Williams Chapel