

Gretchen E. Weis

A Reflection on Transcendence

Gunther Shuller raised his baton and the first six chords exploded to the sounds of the kettledrums. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony had begun.

I was a college freshman singing in the choir along with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. I remember Maestro Shuller rehearsing the chorus over and over again, first with a broomstick in hand, beating the floor to drum the German cadence into our brains before we ever sang a note: *Freude schoene Gotterfunken, tochter aus Elyssium*.

Note followed note, leading to the renowned fourth movement -- the first time a chorus had ever been incorporated into a symphony, singing Friederich Schiller's poem, "Ode to Joy," wrapped in a melody that has become one of the most beloved and familiar pieces of music throughout the Western world, if not the entire globe. The fact that this symphony was composed and conducted by someone who was totally deaf by this point in his life -- who had to be turned around to face the audience at its premiere in 1824 to see the standing, cheering crowd -- made each note a more precious miracle to perform nearly 150 years later.

As our voices soared with violins and clarinets, something magical happened that night and everyone involved knew it. The music becomes as close to perfection as it is possible for humans to achieve. Tears ran down the faces of singers and veteran symphony performers alike, as the sound we created became a prayer. We were "in the zone." We were totally engaged. We lost ourselves in the music, left our individual egos behind -- had transcended to another level of living, and it was a truly holy place.

Have you ever been so fully engaged in something that you lost yourself completely? Where life took you to a different place or different sense of yourself? Maybe you got lost in a book, or a poem, or the exploration of a new idea. It might have been music, dance, and writing, a painting. Perhaps physical movement led you to a zone, the rhythms of exercise, such as running, or the rhythms of daily tasks -- cooking a special meal for loved ones, folding the laundry. Or maybe you got lost in a good story well told, on the stage or the screen. Perhaps you connected to the wonder of a small, new, velvety-skinned life in your lap, or to the sparkle behind another's eyes? Whether through the act of creation or of appreciation, we each can find special moments, moments of total engagement with what speaks to our hearts, and has the power to take us outside ourselves. Where we experience transcendence -- to a connection to something greater than our every day world, beyond the shape and timber of our individual lives. Our engagement leads us to experience being one with a larger world, and we know, as these moments happen, that we will never be the same again, for the gifts they bring our hearts.

May each of you discover what Joseph Campbell calls "your bliss." May you seek out those people, places and events that fully engage you on multiple levels -- that speak to your heart -- and may you experience sacred connectedness to what you name and claim to be holy. Amen. May it be so.