

SOMETHING WE CAN TRUST

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Some years ago, shortly before gay marriage was legalized, my wife Holly Atkinson and I attended a fundraiser in the Hudson River Valley hosted by friends of ours to support the legalization efforts. They also invited us and several dozen other attendees to an after-event dinner on the veranda of a nearby hotel. Most of the attendees at both events were gay couples.

As Holly and I approached the maître d' at the hotel, he sized us up, then directed us to a table on the periphery of the veranda where another older heterosexual couple was already seated. We hadn't met them before, and after introductions — Helen and Bryce were their names — we engaged in the usual chit-chat about the event, which had been hugely successful, and the weather, which was lovely.

The conversation eventually wandered from weather to work. Upon learning that the couple were both artists, Holly asked, “What medium do you work in?”

“Paint,” Bryce replied curtly.

“What kind of paint?”

Another very curt reply: “Oils.”

Upon this response, Holly and I figured out that we were sitting across from a couple who almost never found themselves in a situation where someone didn't know who they were — especially given Bryce's trademark outfit, regardless of the time of year, of black jeans, black turtleneck, and a black knit cap.

To make a long and awkward story short, after a surreptitious snoop at Google under the table, I discovered that we were sitting across the table from Bryce and Helen Marden. By the late 20th century and into the early 21st century, Bryce Marden was probably the best known and best-selling contemporary artist on the planet.

We hadn't a clue. It wasn't quite like sitting down to dinner with Taylor Swift and not knowing who she is, but almost. We were quite thoroughly mortified by our cultural and artistic ignorance.

Happily for us, Bryce and Helen apparently found the situation charming. We saw them from time to time after that event, and they joined us for dinner to celebrate Holly's 60th birthday.

I also had a memorable conversation with Bryce one day in his studio. He talked about the challenges of being a revolutionary artist in his youth but in his later years being seen as part of the old guard. I've always seen myself as pushing art forward in a new direction, he said. But the young artists of today view me as a traditionalist. It's hard for me to know where I belong or how to respond. So, I just keep painting.

In various ways, many people today share Bryce's sense of being disoriented — maybe not artistically, but perhaps culturally and certainly politically. Many of us feel uncertain about where we belong or how to respond. The old paradigms no longer seem relevant.

For example, what used to be the left wing of the political left now seems to be either the right wing of the left or maybe even the left wing of the right. What used to be the right wing of the political right now seems to be the left wing of the right or maybe even the right wing of the left. The current left wing of the left and the current right wing of the right seem diametrically opposed to each other on all points except their shared intolerance of anyone who disagrees with them — especially people who would otherwise be political allies.

For his part, Bryce Marden came onto the art scene at a time when minimalism had become narrow and confining, and Bryce insisted on expanding it — making art big again, both physically and emotionally. As William Grimes put it in his New York Times obituary of Bryce, who died a year ago, “In the mid-1960s, when conceptual art, Pop Art and minimalist sculpture were in the ascendancy and painting was declared dead by many critics and artists, Mr. Marden issued a powerful counterstatement.”

His counterstatement was revolutionary in two respects. On the one hand, Bryce remained steadfastly true to tradition. He made art using oils on canvas — paintings that were designed to be put on stretchers and hung on walls. On the other hand, Bryce rebelled against what we might call the existential agnosticism of art in the mid-1960s — art that purposely rebuffed any effort to find meaning in the work, much less elicit any emotional response or feeling.

Not that the meaning of any of Bryce's paintings is obvious. It's not. As Bryce himself once put it, “People look at a painting and say, I don't understand. Of course you don't understand. It's complicated.”

For him, the complexity of his paintings came not from the lack of feeling and emotion in them, but the opposite — a complexity of feelings. He once told an interviewer, “It seems as though, because [my] early paintings were just one color, one could say one color [meant there were] no feelings. But instead of no feelings, they were all this feeling. Each layer was a color, was a feeling, a feeling that related to the feeling, the color, the layer beneath it. A concentration of feelings in layers.”

Like Bryce Marden, Leonard Bernstein also found himself at odds with the trends of his day. John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis and others were writing music that was intentionally the antithesis of the music Bernstein and his audiences loved best. Some of their so-called avant-garde works were twelve-tone and many were non-tonal. These developments led Bernstein, in his Norton Lectures on the Future of Music at Harvard in 1976, to address the Unanswered Question posed by Charles Ives in the first decade of the twentieth century: whither music? Where is music going? Isn't non-tonal music an oxymoron, Bernstein wondered? What are modern composers thinking?

Bernstein put it this way in the preface to his book *The Infinite Variety of Music*:

I am a fanatic music lover. I can't live one day without hearing music, playing it, studying it, or thinking about it. And all this is quite apart from my professional role as musician; I am a fan, a committed member of the musical public. And in this role of simple music lover, I confess, freely though unhappily, that at this moment, God forgive me, I have far more pleasure in following the musical adventures of Simon and Garfunkel or of The Association singing "Along Comes Mary" than I have in most of what is being written now by the whole community of avant-garde composers. Pop music seems to be the only area where there is to be found unabashed vitality, the fun of invention, the feeling of fresh air.

Bernstein himself composed a number of avant-garde works during a sabbatical year from conducting the Philharmonic. He had already achieved significant success as a conductor and as a Broadway composer. But he also wanted to be taken seriously as a classical composer, hence the avant-garde works. No sooner were they finished, however, than Bernstein threw them away. All that remains from that year's work are the Chichester Psalms, beautifully performed for us this morning by Alejandro, Trent, and the All Souls choir—tuneful, melodious, and emotionally satisfying.

For his part, Bernstein considered Beethoven the greatest composer who ever lived. Beethoven mastered the formal structures of the classical tradition that preceded him, but he enlivened the rigid structures of that tradition with a new openness and vitality. His book *The Joy of Music*, Bernstein writes: "Beethoven broke all the rules, and turned out pieces of breath-taking rightness. Rightness – that's the word! When you get the feeling that whatever note succeeds the last is the only possible note that can rightly happen at that instant, in that context, then chances are you're listening to Beethoven."

In a recent episode of the classical music podcast Sticky Notes, conductor Joshua Weilerstein discusses Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, which begins with the most famous eight notes in not only Western music, but probably in all of music. It's a four-note motive repeated twice, and it becomes a throughline in the symphony that follows. For Beethoven himself, the motive appears to have provided a steady solace in a complex and changing world.

When Beethoven composed his Fifth Symphony, he was living and working in culturally conservative and politically oppressive Vienna at a time when the French Revolution was championing liberty, equality, and fraternity. Musically, Beethoven – especially his Third Symphony – provides a hinge between the formality of the classical tradition that preceded him and the expressiveness of the romantic tradition that followed. "Sometimes in his formal structures," Weilerstein points out, "he is a pure classicist. But in his emotional intensity, he is surely a romantic."

The key element in Symphony No. 5 is that four-note motive, which previous composers would have introduced in the first movement and then left behind in

subsequent movements. Beethoven uses the motive as the heartbeat throughout the symphony. It is there in passages that elicit a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity, even conflict, and it's also there in passages that feel like victory.

As Bernstein put it, Beethoven “has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.”

There is something we can trust — because it resonates with what we know to be true about the world and because it resonates with our own experience.

Bryce Marden felt the same way about art. For him, the experience of looking at a painting provided a touchstone in an ever-changing world. He once said, “Remember that an artist’s life is an intense search for truth.” For him, that search led him to return again and again to paintings that challenged him, intrigued him, even provoked him. He said, “One of the things about a painting is that it stays that way. You can go back to it, and every time you go back to it, you’re different, but it’s the same... It’s a stable thing, a reference.”

In a world that has become increasingly complicated and disorienting, we all need something we can trust, that will never let us down — a stable thing, a point of reference. That’s one reason we gather as a community each week and, among other things, repeat a few brief words that provide us with that point of reference — words we can trust.

For us, it’s six-word motive — one that has been the heartbeat of this congregation for more than two centuries. As with Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5, the heartbeat comes first — the first six words we say together each week: “in the freedom of the truth.” No matter how complicated the world, no matter how disorienting our experience, no matter how conflicted the paradigms of meaning, this is something we can trust — the freedom of the truth.

The phrase derives from a promise Jesus of Nazareth made to his disciples in the Christian New Testament gospel according to St. John. If you follow me, Jesus said, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Whatever Jesus may have had in mind when he was talking about the truth, he got the principle right. Knowing what’s true about yourself and knowing what’s true about the world will set you free — free from willful ignorance, free from collective delusion, free from manipulation by others.

Make no mistake: there is such a thing as truth in the world — actual facts that are independent of anyone’s opinion or coercion. No one gets to have their own set of facts. There is no such thing as “my truth.”

By the same token, each of us has our own experience of the world, based on how the facts of existence affect our individual lives. No one can gainsay anyone else’s experience.

This is the conundrum of life in the modern world — arbitrating the relationship between the notes on a page and the feelings they elicit, or between the material elements of the painting and the feelings they prompt, or between the facts that are true and the impact of those facts on our experience.

The truth alone isn't sufficient to develop a life of meaning and purpose, but it's a necessary beginning. Some of the things we believe about ourselves may not be true. Some of the things we believe about other people may also not be true.

Once we know the truth about ourselves and the world around us, then we are free — free to see beyond what is present to all that is actually possible. Freedom is the goal — the freedom to engage our own lives authentically and the people around us with genuine compassion. The freedom of the truth: it's the kind of freedom we can trust.