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“Stray Pieces: Where All Things Lost Are Made Good Again”

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart,
 and try to love the questions themselves,
 like locked rooms and like books
 that are now written in a very foreign tongue.

-Rainer Maria Rilke

There’s a tradition of artistic expression found in literature, music, and the visual arts that’s always seemed essentially theological to me. Sometimes called collage art, or assemblage, or junk art, or just the art of found objects, it consists of arranging pre-existing elements that have been found or scavenged into a meaningful new constellation, one that forms an entirely different meaning because of the way each element relates to the others.

I’ve brought a few examples with me. The first is an object I was given in Haiti, during a visit to the Crosby Center. It’s a butterfly, meant to hang in a child’s room, or maybe as an ornament on a Christmas tree. But if you look at the butterfly’s wings carefully, you’ll notice that they’re made from discarded x-ray film. The creator of these objects scavenged the remains of that film from the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Deschappelles, and converted them from trash to something that, to my eye, is kind of delightful. One of the reasons I like it so much is that it exemplifies the genius of Haitian art and religion. Haitians have managed to fashion the leftover remains of not only objects, but of culture, of ideas, of rituals, into works of astonishing beauty and power. Haitian vodou was born from a similar impulse as this little butterfly: arranging ritual elements that others had discarded into a mosaic of stunning spiritual vitality.

Here’s another way that creative impulse has been used. I have here one of my favorite books of all time, Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. Benjamin was a Jewish philosopher and literary critic who died as he was trying to flee the Nazis in occupied France. He was trying to smuggle a suitcase out with him, which it turns out, contained this book, “the theater,” Benjamin wrote, “of all my struggles and all my ideas.” The book wasn’t published in English until 1999, and it’s an attempt to understand what precisely had happened to Europe in the 20th century. The book is a thousand pages, but it is composed entirely of fragmentary quotes from other sources, all of them arranged into discreet themes – fashion, boredom, collecting, gambling, urban planning, social movements – that are mysteriously interwoven. The South African novelist J.M. Coetzee wrote that the book “suggests a new way of writing about a civilization, using its rubbish as materials rather than its artworks.” It is a beautiful, mesmerizing, and overwhelming book that I will never cease reading, one that I never expect to get to the bottom of.

Yet another vision of assemblage can be found here: this is a copy of *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, Bob Dylan’s most recent album. He speaks to his own creative process in the opening song of

the album, when he sings, “I go right to the edge, I go right to the end, I go right to where all things lost are made good again.” Those words effectively sum up Dylan’s method as an artist throughout his career, but especially since 1997, when each album became a collage of quotations culled from the blues and folk traditions, and just about anything else the man listened to or read – Homer and Virgil, the Bible and Shakespeare, Mark Twain, William Faulkner, even a Japanese pulp novel he was reading. It all gets rearranged and blended into works that are mysterious, allusive, and playful. Dylan’s art does precisely what he says it does: taking all the lost and discarded fragments of a culture, and then with a master’s touch, making them good again. It’s the old dream of alchemy formally realized: rust transformed into gleaming gold by the artist at work.

We could list other examples. You could look to Susan Sontag’s notion of camp, for example, or to Howard Finster’s sculptural visions in rural Georgia. But for our purposes today, it’s not the creative method of those in Haiti, or fascist Europe, or an American songwriter that most concerns me. At risk of sounding grandiose, it’s God that I’m interested in, and the raw material of your life and mine that’s at stake in what I wish to share today. You see, assemblage, or junk art, or collage or montage are all beautiful ways of understanding the creative process that God undertakes in the book of Genesis. Those forms of creativity exemplify the ways God works in each of our lives, where all things lost, all things discarded, all things forgotten and fragmentary, are somehow made good again. That’s a theological principle as old as the creation story, one as deep as the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans, and as relevant for all of us coming out of a pandemic year as anything I can imagine.

Before we get there, however, I want us to spend a little time in Genesis, where we’re given a glimpse of God’s creativity at work. One of the most intriguing aspects of the first creation story in Genesis is that it contradicts what later theologians tried to insist must be true of God: that God created out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*, since according to a certain logic, there can be nothing that preexists God. If there were, the ancient writers thought, there would be something prior to God, and thus God wouldn’t be God at all, but just one more thing, one more thing, that somehow came into existence. You can tie your mind in knots thinking in that sort of way, and the old theologians did precisely that. But they rarely acknowledged a stubborn truth of the Genesis text. That stubborn truth is that when God fashions the world into existence, the materials are already laid out. When we encounter the story, we’re not in a world of nothingness at all, but in a place in which a creative Spirit, a wind, hovers above what is called in Hebrew the *tohu-wa-bohu*, or formless matter, undifferentiated, unsorted, unarranged. I didn’t have us read the entire chapter, but the work of creation that follows is the work of arranging, fashioning, and bringing into relation elements that had previously been free-floating – which is to say, formless, without cohesion or quality. Creation, according to the opening pages of the Bible, is a story remarkably akin to assemblage, junk art, and collage. It seems to be a declaration, right from the start, that this is how God works – taking the fragmentary, formless stuff that already exists and fashioning it into something life-giving, meaningful, and inhabitable.

That insight allowed modern theologians to begin bending that creation story away from literalist understandings about the formation of the cosmos – that’s a quest, and a set of questions, best left to the sciences – and more toward the ways in which God is at work making the disparate parts of the world, and of our own existence, cohere into something meaningful and whole, even

if the world is composed of fragments in search of cohesion. Might it be that the creation story isn't finally about how the universe came into being, but about how its various parts were differentiated and arranged into something like a habitable world, a home, a place worthy of being called good? That seems to be the deeper meaning of the first creation story: God fashions what is already biologically present into something more than mere matter, where cycles and rhythms and names make for a coherent and hospitable world in which to dwell. It's a process that's mirrored every time a child acquires language, every time a shelter becomes a home, every time a community comes into existence and marks its life with a kind of ritual calendar, the way we do in church. And it mirrors what happens when artists in Haiti, or writers, or singers, build objects of beauty out of discarded waste: the formless void is given substance.

But it turns out that we ourselves are also fragments in search of coherence and meaning. To engage our humanity is to be caught up in the act of creation itself, in which the stray and disparate moments of our lives are somehow arranged into something that is no longer a formless void, undifferentiated matter, but rather a life bearing the imprint of the divine goodness. We do it for ourselves all the time. Consider the miracle that goes on in your brain in every single instant, where perception – smell, taste, feel, sound, sight – is organized into something resembling an ordered experience of the world. The basic fact that your mind can form a coherent sequence of timed events, where one thing follows another and then another, is a marvel of being alive. It might be otherwise. Your world might simply be a jumble of unrelated events and sensations, but there is a creative something within each of us that not only processes and organizes those sensations into something coherent, but that does so in a way shared by others as well. Am I making sense? There's something within each one of us that's already working in a way akin to the artists scavenging the trash in Haiti, or the stray literary fragments of a crumbling civilization. Something within us is arranging the disparate elements of our lives into something resembling experience.

Still, sometimes the meaning eludes us. Each of us has undergone events that we can't integrate or understand into our existence. An accident or an illness leaves us shaken. A death leaves us shattered. A retirement leaves us to contemplate all that we have accomplished, or failed to accomplish, and to wonder if it adds up to anything much. The children or grandchildren go off to college, leaving us to think about all those stray moments we've had with our kids, and what they finally meant. We move, or we change schools. We gain or lose friends, and we wonder how or if that previous piece of our lives fits with the current piece. We get divorced, or remarried, and we're left to ponder how an earlier self pertains to a later self. Or we just grow, mature, or move on from who we once were. Can the people we are now recognize the people we once were, twenty, thirty, sixty, seventy years ago? Does it all fit together? Can it? Sometimes our own lives come to resemble the heaps of discarded remains, all of it in search of a creative coherence.

One of the goals of a mature faith is to trust that, though we ourselves may sometimes feel like a heap of discarded fragments, God is somehow holding our lives together, lending us coherence even if we cannot feel it. That's the meaning of the Apostle Paul's affirmation in the book of Romans that all things work together for good for those who love God. What that passage does not mean is that God makes everything happen, good or bad, terrible or tragic, in order to bring some greater good out of it. That would make of God a moral monster, and it would make us

human specimens. Instead, I think it means that in faith, we trust that even through the darkest or most incoherent moments of our lives, a force greater than us is binding us, stabilizing us – praying within us with sighs too deep for words - helping to keep us from coming apart. I think it means that in faith, we trust that somehow God is holding all the stray pieces of our lives together, binding them into a work of alluring mystery. More than that, it is an affirmation that in faith, God has the capacity to work a strange beauty out of the discarded fragments of our lives, maybe not unlike the artists in Haiti, or Benjamin with his literary quotes, only now it is God who somehow performs the task with us. That must be something of what it means when Paul says that the Spirit is praying within us with sighs too deep for words. That too is a part of God's creative power – to shape the formless void within each of our lives into something that issues a strange kind of beauty. A beauty where all things lost are made good again.

One of the reasons it feels important to speak about creation in this way, drawing upon notions of assemblage, has to do with what we've all passed through this previous year. It's left us all with a lot of fragmentary threads that are dangling in our lives, things we haven't fully processed or accounted for just yet. I was conscious two weeks ago when we gathered in this space for the first time in over fifteen months of just how much had occurred for so many of you during that time. In particular, I was conscious of who was no longer with us, of those who had been claimed by age, or illness. But I was aware of other things as well. Externally, many of us did just fine throughout the pandemic, but what of the fear of those early months, when we all imagined losing those we loved most? Is that experience not a stray fragment, drifting uneasily somewhere in our psyche? What of the 600,000 we've lost domestically, and so many more internationally? Is that overwhelming fact not a stray thread that's haunting us all somewhere in our being? And what of the loneliness that beset so many among us? But then also what of the very real gratitude that we've felt, the very real help that we've received from so many sources, the very real courage we've witnessed and sometimes discovered within ourselves, the very real kindness and competence and generosity that have gotten us through? There's so very much to sort through, to sift through, and it will take a good deal of time before we understand just what this experience has done to us, for good and for ill. One of the gifts of faith, however, is the assurance that God held us as we went through those events, but also the assurance that God is helping to make all those stray moments that we don't fully know what to do with into a difficult coherence.

Or maybe it's something like this. This past winter my wife Rachael shared a story that she encountered and subsequently taught in her own classes. It's concerns something called the Recycled Orchestra of Paraguay, as recounted in a children's book called *Ada's Violin*. Cateura is a town of 20,000 residents, though to call it a town is an exaggeration. It is, really, a slum set against an enormous garbage dump, where the waste from Asuncion, Paraguay's capital city, is sent. The sole source of income for most of the people in Cateura is sifting through the dump for goods they can recycle and sell. In 2006 an environmental engineer named Favio Chavez arrived in town to teach safety practices to the residents. He was a musician as well, and he began offering music lessons on the side to keep kids out of trouble. The problem, however, was that he didn't have enough instruments for all the kids who wanted to learn how to play. And so he and the kids scavenged the dump, and they learned how to make violins and guitars, flutes and saxophones and drums from trash that they found. A violin could be made out of a paint can and an aluminum baking tray, a fork and pieces of a wooden crate. Cellos could be made from oil

drums, cooking utensils, and the heels of women's shoes. Saxophones could be fashioned out of drainpipes, coins, spoons, and bottle caps. The wonder of it all is that it worked. And not only that: the kids actually got good on their instruments, so good that they were invited to tour the world. They played with Stevie Wonder. They opened for Metallica on a South American tour. They played for Pope Francis. It is assemblage art, junk art, of the highest order.

Perhaps that's what God is doing with each of us. Not that we're junk, or composed of junk – far from it. But maybe what's going on at a level we can't always discern is that God is helping each of us to assemble the stray, fragmented pieces of our lives into a work that achieves a strange and discordant beauty. It's a piece from here, a leftover part from there, and it doesn't always look pretty. Few of us get to be a Stradivarius. But faith is to trust that somehow, God is at work producing a captivating music from the raw assemblage that is each of our lives. The song is different in each of our cases – some are mournful and some are off-kilter, some are percussive and others are soothing – but it is a captivating song that emerges all the same.

I return to Rilke. Be patient with all that is unsolved in your heart. Be patient with the process. Be patient with the song of your life. And trust that God, who began a good work within each of you, will bring it to completion, in God's own good time.