

**Bill Stevens**

**Spirituality and Faith**



Disclaimer: The following are my thoughts and feelings as I prepared for this project over the last eight years that includes my research, the compositions, the preparing of the electronic horn effects, the improvisations, the audio and video recordings all of which finally came together throughout 2018 and 2019. It is deeply personal and may offend some readers; however I believe that it is essential to have a clear understanding of my process toward the music in this, my most current project, Spirituality and Faith.

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I was brought up in a traditional Roman Catholic home. My earliest memories are attending the weekly mass in Latin at St. Margaret's Parish in Syracuse, NY with my mother. Later, when my mom wasn't able to attend mass due to her health, her wish was that I would continue to be a part of the church, so my father began to take me each Sunday. My father followed the Protestant faith; however later in his life he converted to Catholicism. I never really discussed his reason to convert; however I have a feeling that it was more on the urging of my mother. Throughout my adolescence I attended mass each week; however when I left for college in 1974 to present day, I have been in and out of the church. Currently I can be described as a non-practicing Catholic.

Whenever I visited my parents in Syracuse or in Scranton, PA were they moved later in their lives, I attended mass with my mom when she could go, but I very seldom continued this practice when away from home. Then while in Seattle, I taught music at a private Catholic school, St. Edward's for four years, were I gradually found myself re-connected with my faith and when I moved to New York City in 1990, I attended mass at St. Joseph's in Greenwich Village and later at the Church of St. Francis Xavier where I became a member of the parish for a short time.

I have always been drawn to and have had a belief in the spiritual nature of things. The arts, to me, are a spiritual enterprise. The process of creation and the out of body experience that I often feel when hearing music, seeing fine art, dance or drama or reading a great book. This became even more vivid to me in the 1980's as I witnessed first hand the beauty of the planet in the mountains of the Rockies, Cascades and Teton ranges, the amazing natural wonders of Yellowstone, Yosemite and Mt. Rainier, seeing the Pacific ocean for the first time, as well as the magnificent parks in Utah - Arches, Canyonlands and Zion and more recently in my trips to Norway, Denmark and Iceland. Is spirituality a manifestation of God's grace?

On the other hand, it is the concept of faith that I have had difficulty in understanding and in making it a part of my life. My faith has been tested as I try to grasp the concept of "organized religion". Throughout history, how much bloodshed has there been in the name of organized

religion? Within my lifetime, just examine the violence among the three major religions of Islam, Catholicism and Judaism in the Middle East who all feel that they have a right to the land as described in the Quran or bible. Who is to say which is more correct than the other?

As I examine my own faith within the Catholic church, I have difficulty in understanding priests who abuse children and the church leaders who have covered up the truth. The way that women are viewed in the church hierarchy does not seem in line to how Jesus spoke about the place for women within his teachings. And then there are my secular beliefs which are often not in line with the Catholic church, such as the battle over a women's right to choose. I see the church's position not as a right to life, but more as a right to birth as once a child is born, services for the child and mother are literally non-existent whether from the church itself or in the form of local, state or federal government assistance. That there are those who see the killing of doctor's and nurses as a means of speaking for the church is incomprehensible to me.

In our current political climate, religion seems to be taking on the form of "secular" faith. By this I mean that on Sunday, we can listen to the sermons on following God's word or the teachings of Jesus and yet when we leave the sanctuary of the church we find it acceptable to cast a negative light on migrants, gays and lesbians. We justify the casting of votes for accused pedophiles or leaders who commit crimes or adultery or blindly lie because they will deliver on a "political agenda". Is this political agenda now more important than the moral agenda?

I cannot help but think, why would an all powerful God allow people to be connected to so much violence toward one another? Why would God allow children to starve in Yemen or Syria or to be pulled from their mothers arms in a separation policy to "secure a border"? Why do we look at a caravan made up of mothers and children seeking asylum as such a threat that we must deploy the military against them? Why would we destroy our own planet whether through the conspiracy theories against the scientific proof of global warming or through the continued escalation of nuclear weapons? And yet, what do we hear at the end of speeches from politicians, that we do it in the name of God as we beseech God to bless our country.

This is a deeply personal topic to me with more questions than answers. So much so that it has been difficult for me to follow my mothers wishes to continue following the faith that she so strongly believed in and that my father swore he would follow as part of his conversion to Catholicism. I also understand that it may be difficult for people to read this and not feel a need to reach out to me in one form or another and I am OK with that. I am hopeful that people will not simply reject what I have written without making the attempt to read further and to listen to the music for this project. These are some of the reasons that I have turned my thoughts on Spirituality and Faith into musical statements. I am hopeful that upon reading this and hearing the music you might have a better understanding of my difficulties within my faith and yet know that I feel as strongly as I ever have that spirituality is truly expressed through the arts, in the beauty of our planet and in those we love.

In order to gain a more comprehensive knowledge to attempt to understand the meaning of faith I have been involved in research dating back to 2012 to my album "Iema sabachthani" based on the series of paintings by the abstract expressionist Barnett Newman on the Stations of the Cross, as well as a sampling of books I have read below:

Elaine Pagels - The Gnostic Gospels, Beyond Belief and Revelations  
Timothy Morton - Realist Magic  
Deepak Chopra - How to Know God  
Neil Donald Walsh - Conversations with God  
David Lynch & Maharishi Mahesh Yogi - Transcendental Meditation  
Steve Hagen - Buddhism, Plain and Simple  
Thich Nhat Hanh - Living Buddha, Living Christ

And then it all seemed to come together in 2017 where I attended the Lincoln Center White Light Festival whose focus that year was on faith - faith of artists through the ages and faith in humanity to inspire a better future. I saw performances of Monteverdi and Meredith Monk, Messiaen and Arvo Part, Beethoven's Missa Solemnis all of which occurred over a ten day period of time. This "saturation" of music and dance inspired me to re-examine my own belief systems. Specifically a presentation at the festival called the Psalms Experience which was the complete 150 Psalms in a retrospective throughout history by 150 composers over twelve concerts. The White Light Festival also presented a website with all 150 Psalms in writing with photography from the New York Times that highlighted each Psalm's central message that I read, one day at a time each morning for the next 150 days. It was at this point that I began through meditation and the use of affirmations to compose the four movement suite, Spirituality and Faith.

I used the central themes as presented by the White Light Festival for each composition as follows (movement titles are mine and not those of the White Light Festival):

Faith - state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.  
Drifting to (a)void

Faith through - a variety of beliefs moving toward sophistication.  
The Already and the Not Yet

Faith - Coexistence of sameness and other. Recognizing and accepting the other. Other is self.  
Other and self are identical.  
Instead of Eloquent Words

State of Faith is inherently uncomfortable.  
Far Away is Close at Hand in Images of Elsewhere

I have continued to explore further the same compositional frameworks as found in my most recent works (The Seasons & Fragile Beauty) for this suite. There is, what I have referred to recently as, a setting for improvisation, a foundation, in an electronic, ambient mode created with GarageBand. The difference in this suite is that my solo horn is not used as an organic voice, but is now electrified as well using pedals to distort my sound (Vox Wah Pedal, Flashback2 Delay, Pitchfork Harmonizer). What I have attempted to do with this work is show the dichotomy of the beauty and warmth of what spirituality and of faith can be, while at the same time exposing the tension that is inherent in my own belief systems involving my own spirituality and faith. My playing on each setting for this suite is totally improvised in the moment guided by the setting and the sound of the pedal. My only guide are the time markings indicating my entrances and exits from the music.

Throughout 2020, I will be releasing the four movements of the suite Spirituality and Faith, through a video on all of my social media platforms, one movement at a time in April, June, August and October with a complete audio playlist on Spotify in November 2020. This topic is certainly, and encouraged to be, open for discussion, so please share any thoughts you may have as to my writings, music and/or your own belief systems on these topics. I look forward to hearing from you as I continue to address my beliefs on Spirituality and Faith most likely for the remainder of my life.

Thank you for taking the journey with me.

Bill

**Artwork by Laura Salzberg**  
**Undiscovered Emotions**  
**Mixed media on paper**  
**14" x 11"**



Bill Stevens plays the trumpet and flugelhorn, is a composer and arranger and performs in New York City with many of his own ensembles. He has been a guest speaker at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, Norway and the Australasian Jazz & Improvised Research Network in Melbourne, Australia. He has most recently served as the Assistant Principal - Administration, Supervisor of Arts Disciplines & Director of Jazz Studies at the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts.

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**Contact Bill:**