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November 9, 2020 -

As told to Mark "Frosty" McNeill, 3103 words.

Tags: Music, Performance, Inspiration, Process, Collaboration, Mentorship, Mental health.

On connecting to the joy and love of doing

Composer and performer Meredith Monk on staying balanced in order to create work that amplifies humanity.

Have you always been at peace with the in-between states?

I feel like I've always made my discoveries in the in between and I've always talked about my work as being in between the cracks of art forms. What I find there is usually a new form. I love to also work with my voice in what I would call in between emotions—it's the feelings that we don't have words for, that we haven't delineated into a label. That's a very creative part of life, for me, in between the cracks of everything. We've always lived in the unknown. It's just that it hasn't been front and center the way that it is now. Now we're more aware of that. So in a sense, it's a time that we can really grow and learn from, because that's the way it's always been and always will be.

Do you make space for joy and happiness alongside grief and pain within the bubble of the space that you're physically or emotionally in? Can you, as an artist, build on these coexisting emotions to energetically move forward?

I've always believed that the palette of emotion can be within one piece. Certainly the way pleasure and pain come and go is part of life. That's part of our destiny as human beings. We usually grasp pleasure and push away pain, but that actually makes for suffering. I've always been incredibly grateful for the life I've been given, but somehow in this challenging world, I'm feeling my creativity blossoming. It feels like it's right there—the river of creativity, because it comes out of love. That has been getting me from one day to the next. And it's very joyous. I was talking to one of my colleagues and she said, "I feel guilty that we're having such a wonderful time making music." And I said, "No. Even within grief is joy."

What we're all trying for is to get to a raw-heartedness, which is that all of your defenses melt away. And that comes down to a certain kind of existential sorrow. And so for me, instead of thinking that that's something I don't want to feel, when I feel that, I'm connected. Joy also comes from that because ultimately, it's a sense of compassion and a very deep acknowledgement of sorrow. Another thing I've learned over the years is resilience. I just take it step by step and find creative solutions to limitations.

If you're doing something that you love, and it can be any kind of creativity—being an artist, a composer, making a wonderful meal, learning a language—giving something to someone else is so pleasurable. That is what we need to really embody and connect to. The joy and the love of doing. I think that helps so much.

Are there things that guide you forward when the picture becomes murky?

The Buddhist teachings that I've been engaged with for so many years—Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Pema Chödrön's teachings, have really gotten me through. Every time I go back to those, it's as if I'm reading them for the first time. They seem to apply. We've been training for death, and we've been training for disaster, and we've been training for things not going our way, for years. So yes, it's still hard, and it really hurts but I think that there's a kind of perspective you get when it's not so surprising. There can be a very dark period... It's like in a forest, when the leaves fall and decay. Out of that decay the new life comes.

The multiplication of adversity can lead to an amplification of change. We're honing our skill sets and learning to operate in new ways based on new constraints. Is there a benefit to working in modular forms, where each piece can be its own world that builds into a greater whole?

With some of my early site-specific work I was definitely thinking in terms of modular forms. What I would do is create these modules of material, and adapt them to different performing spaces. We're talking about the late '60s, early '70s. I was thinking in terms of units, and those units would be reconfigured, depending on the performing architecture or where we were going.

So now, I've been working on a piece for about the last 10 years, called Indra's Net and it has to do with principles of interdependence. Indra's Net is an ancient Hindu/Buddhist legend and teaching story. There was an enlightened king, Indra, who created a net that covered the universe and at each intersection of the net was an infinitely-faceted jewel that reflected the infinite facets of all the other jewels of the universe. And each jewel was slightly different. One example of this idea, in musical form is a racket—a fully interdependent form. If one person falls down, then both people fall. And I've always had that principle in my music, the passing of something, or the leaning of something on another something, makes for a third something.

I remember before this pandemic, talking to one of the people in my ensemble, Ellen Fisher, and I said, "You know, Indra's net is a very inspiring concept because it means that everything that each of us does influences everything else in the universe. And so, be aware of our actions, they have resonance. But wouldn't it be interesting to also have a very dark section of the piece, as in a disease? A disease also is interdependent—how it passes, how it spreads. The same way that our actions do. Wow! One morning I woke up and thought, hats off to this virus. I mean, one brilliant organism. It's adaptable, it moves quickly. The virus is a manifestation of the power of nature and from my viewpoint, it's essential to be respectful of all life forms. Here is this tiny organism that's wreaking destruction and havoc on our world but when we acknowledge its complexity and potency, we are in dialog with it, and can ask for its mercy. That's what art was about in ancient times, and that's one aspect of what art is about in many indigenous cultures.

I would say Indra's Net is probably the most spatially dependent piece that I've ever made. I see how the sound in space works. Everything is related to space. It will be a performance and an installation where the audience could walk through and listen very closely but they would hear the whole thing at the same time. You know, this idea of tactility and then different distances. I believe in the magic of the piece, and the beautiful group of singers that I have, they are just remarkable. So my goal has been to keep this process going somehow.

You've collaborated with so many people over the years in such a connective, human way. What do you look for in collaborators and how do you bring out the best within them?

Recently I read an interview by a composer whom I love and he was talking about the way he works, that he writes down his compositions, and it doesn't actually matter who performs them except that they have to be really good musicians, to do what he wants, which is what he has on the page. It doesn't matter who the people are. And I was thinking, wow, I work very differently. I mostly make my pieces thinking of particular people and voices. Even in very challenging situations, like an orchestra or a big chorus where I don't know everybody, I go and work with them and then I might adapt my material to who they are. There's always the give-and-take between the music as a fluid and responsive form, to the humans—because it's not paint, it's humans. I certainly respect the other way, but I was almost laughing, because I was thinking, "I work exactly in the opposite way." You know, I'm always thinking about who will perform it. And it makes a big difference for me.

The music composition is really precise. I work for years before I even go into rehearsal. And there is a right and a wrong in relation to the form but within it, there are places to play, particularly for people that have been working with me for a while and know the parameters. It's got that kind of fluidity but at the same time a very meticulous and precise form, because I love structure. I feel like an architect, I love to make my building. And yet at the same time, I like to have softness in it too, like if you think of a Frank Gehry building. His buildings breathe and are so beautiful. I always see them next to some of the other buildings in New York. They're always organic. So that's the way that I think of it. I don't really like to make improvisational forms, particularly. I really like to make a form.

To make a beautiful organic form takes architecture and engineering.

Exactly. With the ensemble and the performers, I feel like what I try to do is really see them and bring out who they are. You know, I always say that there is only one of us in the universe. And our job is to discover what that is and what makes what we have to offer different from anyone else. So what is it that we have to give in this lifetime? That's our path.

And so, with each of these performers, I try to bring out that light that I see in them, so that each of them shine, and there's no mistaking that that person is that person and the other person is the other person. We each are a unique jewel with all kinds of radiance that will affect ourselves and other people. We are part of this net that's bigger than any of us and that's another level of comfort—sensing that we're part of a bigger whole. And what do we particularly have that we can give to that whole? Sometimes, I wish I were a nurse or I was out marching. I feel, is music enough? But that's what I have to give. That's the way that I can express my love.

Music is this ephemeral yet powerful form. A light that's reflected by a million jewels, a trillion-zillion. It hits people on such an internal level, but the internal can become external and change the world, which is amazing.

That was always, for me, the poignancy. I do this live performance and then it disappears. But that's the beauty of it. It comes and goes and it's alive. Another aspect that I've enjoyed over the years is that we've toured to more than 50 countries and because the music doesn't include a lot of text, it seems to reach people in a visceral way. You know, there is nothing wrong with text, I love the way people put words and music together, but I think that sometimes words can become a filter system to direct experience. When you take the words away, there's a kind of universality of communication. The voice and music become the language. And so we've been able to go all over the place—the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia—and somehow communicate with other human beings.

I'm curious about your Buddhist practice and performance. The balance of being in the moment and on the edge while performing a hocket for instance, does your dharma practice build into the coexistence of being comfortable but also feeling the electric shock of the moment?

One of the most beautiful things about a live performance is the vulnerability. What is wonderful is that we're all in the same place at the same time. The audience is with us, giving us energy. Then it's a kind of an infinity sign—we're sending that energy out, they're sending the energy back. And we could fall off the tightrope at any time. The sense that an audience has of that risk is something that's very moving. A performance is a template of the possibility of human behavior. I believe in that really strongly. That the vulnerability, the generosity, the sensitivity, the presence, the immediacy, all those qualities are part of performing. And that would also be part of dharma. You know, the more I go on in life, the less I see them as separate. Because I think that the idea of dharma is just the now—being aware in the moment. And I think that performing is as close as you can get to the meditation process. The most wonderful performances are that you are one with your material. No part of your mind is there, except for your material. There's no subject-object relationship. It's one. And that's what dharma talks about all the time, is non-dualistic existence.

As an artist whose works can be epic in scale with lots of moving parts there must be a trick of time—trying to project towards a vision of the future. How do you view the large projects that you want to accomplish, and feel at peace with the pace?

I'm contending with that right now, to be totally honest. Because I guess for all of us this time has stretched out so much longer than we thought it would. Alan Pierson from Alarm Will Sound, a great new music group, is asking different composers to make works for this situation. We talked and I said to him, "I don't have the energy and time right now to work on a new work but I'm working on Indra's Net, and maybe there's a section of it that would be appropriate." And so I had a section that was called Anthem, which I consider a kind of prayer anthem for a world without boundaries or borders, where we could sing our commonalities of being citizens of this beautiful planet. That's what we need to concentrate on, not our differences.

So I built Anthem, which I consider one of the connective tissue pieces—the net of Indra's Net, and I've made these intricate, little jewel pieces that are mostly instrumental. But I don't think that I would be satisfied with taking it section by section, and then having this whole score that I can hand to my ensemble when we can get together. That would be very sad for me. So we're trying to figure out ways we can start rehearsing and working on some of the vocal parts. I want to sculpt it in rehearsal. I don't want to sculpt it on paper.

I've been contending with feeling bereft and then at the same time, thinking how amazing that Anthem is done. Rotation, the next thing that we're working on, is going to be a video installation of another section of Indra's Net. It's kind of a step by step approach and somehow, I need to learn to tolerate that. So many of the teachings that I've been blessed to receive, emphasize tolerating discomfort and pain. Pain is different from suffering. Pain is a natural part of life; suffering comes from calcifying it.

Right now, I'm in the process of just trying to keep my spirit up and being grateful that my creative mind is flowing, that I will be able to find some kind of solution for whatever comes up. Sometimes when I'm stuck when I'm working on a piece, I just say to myself, "Shtep by shtep, Meredith." So that's kind of what I'm saying to myself right now.

Is there a direct channel to joy for you, that you access to enhance everything else?

Well, I'm in the country now, three-and-a-half hours outside of New York City and what brings me instant joy is to just walk outside and breathe the air. And to see the leaves turning now. It's just magnificent. So for me, having glimpses of nature and her processes is what gives me instant joy. And then as a little

adjunct to that, more awareness of how much we have to fight to keep our beautiful work going. Protect that.

I remember being in my loft in Lower Manhattan during lockdown and New York City is really noisy. The noise bombardment is relentless. But it was very quiet and I could hear birds singing. And I realized I've never been in New York when it's quiet enough that I could actually hear birds singing. One day, I finally decided to take a walk, you know, risk it. And I walked to the river. I found a little tree, and up in the tree was a mockingbird that was doing a whole repertoire of 50 different tunes. And I just stood there for maybe an hour. Nature is so precious. That bird meant so much to me. There's so much out there that we're missing because we're so caught up in our own minds. And I think that's a lesson for us all, that we can appreciate the smallest thing, and just know that we're so blessed. Even if you were in dire straits, I believe that if you were able to take a breath, pause, or have that moment of noticing something again... I'm kind of getting teary about this, but I think that maybe even that, in the worst circumstances, could be of benefit.

Meredith Monk Recommends:

1. My book recommendations are "When Things Falls Apart" and "Welcoming the Unwelcome" by Pema Chödrön. Both are perfect for this time.
2. Cooking a soup using any vegetable that you have available. I love cooking a soup because you never know exactly how it will come out. I use chicken or veggie broth, vegetables such as zucchini, parsnips, beets, carrots, kale, and sometimes Jerusalem artichokes, plus add tumeric, basil, fresh ginger, tamari and maybe some thyme. Soup is very comforting, there are no rules and each one is its own creation.
3. Go outside and be open to whatever you see and hear.
4. Put on some music and dance. Whatever gets you moving. "Happy" by Pharrell is one of my favorites.
5. Light some incense and listen to music that opens up space like Federico Mompou's early piano music. One of my favorites is "Impresiones íntimas."
6. Enjoy a good cup of extra dark French Roast Coffee in the morning to get moving.

Name

Meredith Monk


Vocation

Composer, performer, director, interdisciplinary artist


Fact

Bonnie Marranta

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