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ENVS 410
Oral History

A Bridge Story

There are memories of place that have become so firmly entrenched within our minds that they emerge as our identity: the trees that we climbed and built forts in as children, that spot at the lake where our families meet in summer, or that rocky shoreline where we seek solace during times of loss. Some of these are shared memories that help shape and define a community, and many are deeply private, helping to create what is unique about an individual. Places that have helped define both individuals and communities are treasures that enrich our lives and nourish our connection to each other and to the earth. One such place within our community is the Greenway Bike-bridge over the Willamette River.

Construction of the Greenway Bike-bridge was completed in 1978 to connect existing bike paths on both sides of the river at Valley River Center and Maurie Jacobs Park. It was inaugurated with a formal ceremony, a “bicycle beauty contest,” and a warm welcome from Eugene’s growing base of bicycle enthusiasts (The Register Guard; 2/22/78). It was originally named The Willamette Bike Bridge; this name was selected from over 3000 entries in the “name the bridge” contest sponsored by the Eugene Bicycle Committee. The committee awarded the winner with a new 10-speed bicycle after passing up more colorful entries such as *No Gas Overpass*, *The Troll Bridge*, and *The Polk Spoke*. After further discussion with absent committee members the decision was made to rename it Greenway Bike-bridge (The Register Guard; 9/8/77).

Since its introduction to our community the bridge has become more than a simple landmark. It serves its basic function well; connecting the north and south banks of the Willamette for dozens of people each day, but to many it facilitates a host of internal connections as well as physical ones. Many of us have paused at the center of this bridge and felt the inexorable pull of the Willamette below as it meanders toward the Pacific. Water is essential to life and when we encounter large bodies of it in fluid motion we have tapped into collective memory and touched the core of what makes us human: the ability to reason and reflect upon where we came from. In these moments of deep reflection we are forging an internal landscape that connects us to the earth and to each other without the limitations of time and space. These are powerful moments that stay with us long after we have moved away from the physical space in which they occurred; we carry them with us in our daily lives and use them to center ourselves when our surroundings are less idyllic.

I recently met with a local musician, whom I'll call Mark, who feels drawn to this particular bridge for many reasons. He feels strongly that the moments shared here belong to all of us and that the story he tells me is about a larger connection wherein his ego gets put aside. It was a clear September afternoon and summer was giving way to the golden brilliance of autumn. Mark had just completed some work on his cello and was seeking an inspiring place to play along the banks of the Willamette River. He found what he was looking for at the Greenway Bike-bridge. He said "The good thing about this place is it's very beautiful, it's about 75 feet off the water (I'm guessing), and you've got the wind at your back and you're facing down the river as the water's kind of going away from you towards the sunset, and you just sit there". Strains of Bach's "Sarabande"

from Cello Suite #4 flowed from his cello and mingled with the sounds of the river.

When asked about why he chose to play Bach on this day, Mark said:

“ I play cello because I love cello. I’m not trying to feature myself as a performer, I really love the instrument... feel like it communicates something—it’s harder to communicate with other instruments the way you can with this one and that’s why I guess that I’ve been drawn to it. Every cellist ends up migrating towards the works of Bach because Bach was one of the first people to write solo repertoire for that instrument and kind of elevated the instrument. Every cellist has learned how to make their bread and butter playing Bach suites: Bach has helped out a lot of cellists through time.”

Bach wrote six suites for cello alone in 1720; though like the rest of his music, they were not popularized until the nineteenth century. The Baroque period (1600-1750) saw major musical contributions in widely varying styles by the Italians, French, English, and Germans. Chamber music was still the express privilege of the elite and concerts were rarely held for more than a handful of patrons at a time. “[Composers of this era]...accepted a set of conventions for organizing music and shared ideals of how it should sound. Most important, they believed that music’s principal goal was to move the affections”(Grout, Palisca 2001:252). The cello is an instrument well known for its ability to evoke emotions with its richly melodic strings and a resonating sound.

The “Sarabande” is a traditional dance sequence within Bach’s cello suites wherein he “created the illusion of a harmonic and contrapuntal texture. By requiring the player to stop several strings at once, he suggested an interplay of independent voices”(Grout, Palisca 2001:394). This dance, this interplay of independent voices mirrored the scene on the bridge as passersby were drawn to the music. Mark said, “By nature of the way it’s built it kind of limits the traffic, so when somebody walks by and you’re playing it’s kind of personal but it’s not intrusive. They can kinda just walk by and keep going, or they can walk by and stay if they want to...public but still intimate”. He told me of the

aging woman who pushed her frail mother in a wheelchair. They listened for a long time before informing him in their thick French accents that the music was quite beautiful, even though it was German. There was also the young punk who tossed a condom in his cello case for a tip; Mark smiled graciously as the young man informed him that it was all that he had. Some paused briefly then moved on, while others lingered in the light of a setting sun, letting the music stir memories and feelings that they had not expected to encounter on the bridge that day. Mark spoke of his encounters with these passing strangers almost reverentially, and how each time that he comes here to play he is able to create a memory that lingers in the minds of those people who paused to listen. He said, “I like the way that this space at the Greenway Bridge seems like just the right place to just share a little bit with a few passersby in kind of a quiet surrounding. It seems kind of chance, you’re walking across the bridge and there’s someone playing cello. I don’t think it’s very common but it’s definitely friendly to playing and being in the moment”.

Mark’s choice in music was particularly meaningful as the philosophical current behind the baroque era was a belief in music as a potent tool of communication “Baroque music comes from the Renaissance interest in ideas from ancient Greece and Rome. The Greeks and Romans believed that music was a powerful tool of communication and could arouse any emotion in its listeners...the spirit of the baroque – an unwavering belief in the power of music to touch people’s lives – changed music history forever”(baroque.org 2006). It was Mark’s intent to honor the spirit of the baroque with Bach’s music in a timeless setting: “What I’m trying to do is to merge the timelessness of those pieces and that instrument with the timelessness of that surrounding, and kind of merge the two aesthetics as best I can”. The sensation of successfully merging these elements within

himself has left him with an intimate connection to the Greenway Bridge. He appreciates the nature of this relationship and carries it with him always, using it to enhance his playing when his surroundings are less inspiring. He is able to feel this place even when the thick walls of a recording studio or the vast echo of a performance hall surround him. He said, “I remember that place now when I play that everywhere and it helps me kind of be in that moment...if you can feel what your supposed to be feeling it definitely has an impact on those pieces”.

The Greenway Bridge was special to me even before Mark shared his story, but he has added yet another layer of richness for which I am grateful. I will never again peer over the lookout at the center of this bridge without hearing the plaintive strings of the cello mingle with the cries of the birds and the running of the river; impossible to gaze at that sunset without thinking of Bach, and French women, and punk kids with empty pockets. This place has now become a part of my story, as well as Mark’s, and the passersby who have shared this moment. It is as indelible as the trees we climbed in childhood or the lake havens where family histories unfold, as enduring as the sunset, and as lovely as Bach’s “Sarabande”.

Bibliography

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