

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 25 – Manoj Kesavan – Making Things Happen

The Most Silent Hour of the Night

And now a personal word,

Manoj Kesavan poses the question: what must I do? For him the answer is he must make things happen. He must bring people together in an open and inclusive way to showcase art that is grassroots, organic, experimental and courageous. He must respond artistically to what is needed in the moment. This moment needs the building of trust, the broadening and crossing of boundaries, the expression of what is true and beautiful and just. In doing what he must, as Manoj noted, he is following the advice of the great German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke.

Rilke was widely recognized as an intensely mystical and lyrical poet who spoke of love and existence.

Between 1903 and 1908, Rilke exchanged letters with a young would-be poet. After Rilke's death in 1926, the letters were published. What did Rilke say? Here is an edited version of the first letter Rilke famously wrote:

Paris February 17, 1903

Dear Sir:

Your letter arrived just a few days ago. I want to thank you for the great confidence you have placed in me. I cannot discuss your verses: for any attempt at criticism would be foreign to me. Nothing touches a work of art so little as words of criticism.

You ask whether your verses are any good. You are looking outside yourself, and that is what you should most avoid right now...There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write...confess to yourself whether you would die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? And if the answer rings out yes, if you meet this solemn question with a strong, simple 'I must,' then build your life in accordance with this necessity; your whole life, even into its humblest hour, must become a sign and witness to this answer.

If an artist's life seems poor, then the artist has no one to blame but himself. The artist must look within. Only artists who are unable to call forth the riches of their art are poor, because for the creator there is no poverty, and no poor, indifferent place.

So dear Sir, I can't give you any advice but this: to go into yourself and see how deep the place from which your life flows: at its source you will find the answer to the question of whether you must create.

Perhaps you will discover that you are called to be an artist. Then take that destiny upon yourself, and bear it, its burden and its greatness, without ever asking what reward might come from outside. For the creator must be a world for himself and must find everything in himself to whom his whole life must be devoted.

Yours very truly,

Rainer Maria Rilke

Manoj Kesavan knows that he must create. He has gone deep within himself to the place from which his life flows. He has committed his life to initiatives that spur art and innovation in ways that address the deep social and cultural issues of his city.

Over the years, our work has intersected. I gave a presentation on the mythic qualities of cities at Point 8, the forum Manoj founded. That year Manoj wrote an opinion column on architecture for Charlotte Viewpoint, the cultural magazine I founded. I presented on my summer watching Turner Classic Movies for PechaKucha, the presentation series Manoj founded. I have attended BOOM Charlotte, the fringe festival that Manoj has organized and leads, and Manoj is now a guest on this podcast. In between, we have attended hundreds of the same events in the city, have had discussions over coffee, and we have agreed and disagreed, as people with points of view about art and creativity do.

As Manoj so eloquently noted, to be an artist is a conscious decision, a mode of existence, a stance in the world. It is the artist's burden to create the world in which they want to live, to bring forth truth and beauty and justice. The bargain is this: the artist bears the weight of creation and in exchange creates what they must.

It is a hard life. A difficult one. It is a life in which feelings and emotions overwhelm, where melancholy and anxiety and depression are common. There are many moments of doubt and solitude. But it is from that wellspring that our true and beautiful and just selves emerge.

It is from the most silent hour of the night that an entire city can be transformed.

Mark Peres © 2017