

Tick, Tick, Boom: Jonathan Larson – An Urgent Calling, Writing Music & Finding Community

Proverbs 4:25, Colossians 3:14-16

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Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you.

Proverbs 4:25 NRSV

Keep your eyes straight ahead; ignore all sideshow distractions.

Proverbs 4:25 The Message

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

Colossians 3:14-16 NRSV

At the beginning of *Tick, Tick, Boom*, we meet Jon, a young theater composer who is waiting tables at a New York City diner in 1990 while writing what he hopes will be the next great American musical. Days before he's due to showcase his work in a make-or-break performance, Jon is feeling the pressure from everywhere: from his girlfriend Susan, who dreams of an artistic life beyond New York City; from his friend Michael, who has moved on from his dream of being an actor to a life of financial security; from an artistic community being ravaged by the AIDS epidemic. With the clock ticking, Jon is at a crossroads and faces the question everyone must reckon with: What are we meant to do with the time we have?

This is a musical about making a musical based on an autobiographical one-man show by Jonathan Larson. He was the astonishingly talented writer/composer of the ground breaking musical "Rent," who died just before the show's opening night.

It is also a tribute, and an expression of gratitude, for the support from those who Larson describes as a vanishing species, the creators of musical theater. This film version is explicitly theatrical, going back and forth between Larson's story and his one-man show telling the story. The musical and the movie version reflect the passion, struggle, urgency, and brightness of an artist committed to an art form that requires a lot of money and a lot of other people to be brought to life.

These are some of themes that struck me as I watched *Tick Tick Boom*. I think the story and music offer an invitation to us as we reflect on deeper questions of our spiritual lives, life and death, connections and community.

1) Stay focused on your calling

In the story Jonathan has been working on a rock musical for 8 years. He feels called, driven, inspired by this. And yet he struggles with doubt and anxiety. There are many points in the show when he is not sure he can or should stick with it.

Each of us may feel called at different times in our lives. It may be related to our profession. Or in a relationship as a mother, father, grandparent, aunt, uncle, friend. It may be a passion – painting, singing, gardening, repairing broken items, wood working. It may be related to an issue that we feel needs to be addressed.

The line in Proverbs is good wisdom – “Keep your eyes straight ahead; ignore all sideshow distractions.” How might we pray for focus? For perseverance? For new practices that keep us open to the Spirit? And there may come a time to let something go.

Jonathan leans on his friends to help him keep going. As his 30th birthday approaches, he thinks maybe he should give up on this dream and goal of having a rock musical go to Broadway. And yet there is a scene when his friend Michael says, “No. Don’t give up. There is only one Jonathan Larson. The world needs you.”

2) Community is needed

This calling to write an innovative and different kind of show takes all of his musical and storytelling skills and gifts. And yet, it is not done in isolation. He has a circle of friends who encourage him. He throws a party at his tiny apartment so he can have time with his friends. They are laughing and singing. And he has a community at the diner where he works. It is exhausting work, but it pays the rent. And there is a great scene where he is suddenly imagining the final song of a big Broadway production and he is conducting. He is part of the diner community and he can imagine how he is and can be part of the Broadway community of artists – famous ones come to the diner for Sunday brunch – Bernadette Peters, Joel Gray and others. Community and connection are sources of Divine love and hope

This is fundamental to our experience in the church. We come together for worship – in this space, on the patio, in the chapel, on line – to strengthen on bonds of friendship and connection. We sing together, are in silence together, pray together. The Holy One is in us and among us.

Because Jonathan is so focused on this task of getting his play funded and moving forward, he tends to ignore some of the people around him – friends, his girlfriend Susan and others. But he is reminded he needs them. He is committed to an art form that requires a lot of money and a lot of other people to be brought to life. It is collaborative. They are authentic together in community.

The letter or epistle was written to Colossians, early followers of Jesus, a group of people, a community. The writer, probably not Paul, uses the metaphor of music and actual music to remind them to live and serve God together. The words are written as plural imperatives – you all do this! That is what Jonathan Larson knew and lived.

3) The urgency of time – Chronos and Kairos

One theme that is woven through throughout the show is time. There is this sense in the music of a drumbeat, or ticking of a clock or even something about to explode. In the musical Jonathan in his actions and words shows he thinks he is running out of time – out of time to get his musical produced, out of time to keep going in this vocation, out of time to help his friends who were dying of AIDS. And sadly the reality is that he died suddenly, unexpectedly when he was 35 of an aortic aneurysm the night before Rent was opening. Life is precious.

Let's look at the trailer for Tick Tick Boom, the movie based on the musical. What do notice about how time is highlighted as a theme?

Video Clip https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJserno8tyU&ab_channel=Netflix

What are different ways we experience time? Does time seem to be speeding up or slowing down in your current season of life? We may be facing some health challenges. We may be waiting for test results. How does that affect our sense of time? We may be in a season of grief because some we love died. The time without them may some days seem short and others days it seems so long since we heard their voice.

We live at a time in history when we may feel an urgency to do something to make our democracy more stable or to do what we can in light of climate change. We want our lives to matter and do something that reflects our deeper sense of God's presence and following the ways of Jesus.

The question Mary Oliver asks in one of her poems reflect themes in today's musical "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

In Greek, there are two different words and types of time. Chronos time is what we live in. It's regular time, it's one minute at a time, it's staring down the clock. Chronos is passing time, measurable time.

Then there's Kairos time. Kairos is God's time. It's time outside of time. It's metaphysical time. Kairos is those sacred moments in which time stands still. It is the opportune time. We have those moments of beauty, of gratitude, of hope, of connection, of love, of participating in the reality that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

I am grateful for those moments when I am experiencing live theater or a live concert. It is a gift of Kairos time for me.

In gratitude to people like Rogers and Hammerstein, Andrew Lloyd Weber, Steven Schwartz, Jonathan Larson, Lin-Manuel Miranda and so many others who brought stories about human condition to the stage, in gratitude for those who are called to create art and beauty through music and other arts, may we take time to experience these gifts or make our own and be open to the Spirit so that our words of compassion, connection and hope are reflected in our actions. Amen.

Resources – websites with more info about Tick, Tick... Boom

<https://www.pcs.org/features/tick-tick-boom-plot-summary#:~:text=It%20is%201990%2C%20and%20with,outside%20of%20New%20York%20City.>

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/tick-tick-boom-movie-review-2021>

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8721424/?ref=fn_al_tt_1