



ARTISTS *who* INSPIRE

JONATHAN LARSON

Sunday, July 27th, 2024
preached by Rev. Beth Dana

"How do you document real life when real life is getting more like fiction each day?" Jonathan Larson wrote in the song Rent. "How do you write a song when the chords sound wrong, though they once sounded right and rare? When the notes are sour, where is the power you once had to ignite the air? How do you start a fire when there's nothing to burn and it feels like something's stuck in your flu? How do you leave the past behind when it keeps finding ways to get to your heart? It reaches way down deep and tears you inside out till you're torn apart," Rent. How can you connect in an age where strangers, landlords, lovers, your own blood cells, betray what binds the fabric together? When the raging shifting winds of change, keep ripping away. Draw a line in the sand and then make a stand.

One of the gifts of Jonathan Larson was his ability to make something out of nothing, to make a fire when there's nothing to burn, to take life that is rent, that is torn apart, shredded, and make something inspiring and hopeful of it. This is why we need art, to be an authentic reflection of life, to tell the truth, to make something of real life in all of its grunge and glory. Larson lived and created in the East Village of New York City in the 1980s and '90s. His home was a tiny rundown apartment with no heat, and as was referenced in the reading, a bathtub in the kitchen. Every year, at Christmastime, he hosted a peasant's feast, inviting friends who couldn't go home for the holidays to his tiny apartment for a huge potluck meal. Lin-Manuel Miranda, one of Larson's spiritual successors in the world of musicals, said, "He made the most boring things into a thing, a show. We're not having dinner, we're having a peasant's feast."

Once for Christmas, Larson distributed a list of what everyone had accomplished that year. He didn't have the money to throw these parties, but he found other ways to make people feel loved and valued. While studying theater at Adelphi University, Larson was introduced to the Greek idea of Kefi. His

professor, Jacques Burdick, wrote, "It has no true equivalent in our culture, but it means a quality of existence, a kind of generous grace that, if present, the simplest food becomes a feast, a hole in the wall becomes The Ritz." Larson kept a note with the word kefi tacked to a board by his desk. He was the definition of kefi. Jonathan Larson was a creative child. He wrote his first play as a third-grader. He was also the piano man, that guy who would sit down at the piano during parties and just play. He could listen to something and play it by ear with great passion, but not necessarily always with accuracy. But this passion sustained him in his career, because the life of many artists is not easy.

During his early years, Larson began corresponding with the esteemed Broadway composer, Stephen Sondheim. Sondheim became a mentor and a friend, and it was he who encouraged Larson to be a composer instead of an actor, because, as he said, "There are a lot more starving actors out there than there are starving composers."

In 1982, at age 22, Larson wrote his first full-length musical, an adaptation of George Orwell's book 1984. His goal was to get it produced by the year 1984 itself. But despite years of trying, he was never able to obtain the rights to the property from Orwell's estate, and it was never performed publicly in his lifetime. The final song in the musical was called S.O.S. It's been running through my head these past few weeks. A part of it goes,

"S.O.S, oh savior.
S.O.S, oh hero.
S.O.S Messiah.
Yes, oh yes, oh.
S.O.S, oh Jesus.
S.O.S, oh Buddha.
S.O.S, Immanuel.
Yes, oh yes, oh.
This may be my final hour.
This may be my dying day.
And though they never taught me why in school,
I think I'm learning how to pray."

He turned his attention to writing his own futuristic dystopian musical, which became Superbia, a satire set on a poisoned planet earth, a world where human emotion has been outlawed, and people sit staring at their screens all day, watching the elite who film their own fabulous lives like TV shows. It was an elaborate musical that was ultimately too weird and too complex to be staged. Much to his disappointment, his agent told him to move on and write what he knows something about.

Those of you who have been in your 20s, some of you aren't there yet, do you remember what it felt like? For so many of us, there's this feeling of time ticking away, conveyed so perfectly in that opening monologue that was our second reading. Time is running out. I need to move ahead in a career. I need to find my person. I need to figure out who I am and what I'm doing with this one, wild, and precious

life. There's a sense of urgency, a fierce urgency of the present. As the actor Andrew Garfield, who played Larson in the film adaptation of *Tick, Tick... Boom!* said, "The urgency, it's bursting out of his every cell."

I first saw *Rent* on Broadway when I was 20 years old and living in New York City. Then I saw it again when I was 23 years old, the year it closed its Broadway run. I remember feeling exhilarated. As I delved deeply into Larson's life and work in recent weeks and months leading up to today, I could feel the angst and the urgency in a new way. I turned 41 this week, and I laughed listening again to some of his lyrics. "Years are getting shorter. Lines on your face are getting longer. Feel like you're treading water, but the riptide's getting stronger. Don't panic. Don't jump ship. Can't fight it like taxes. At least it only happens once in your life. Friends are getting fatter. Hairs on your head are getting thinner. Feel like a clean-up batter on a team that ain't a winner. Don't freak out. Don't strike out. Can't fight it like City Hall. At least you're not alone. Your friends are there too."

He reminds us in that final line that whatever you are feeling about your place in life, you are not alone. The urgency that Larson felt on the eve of turning 30 was made all the more profound by his frustration that, quote, "My friends are coughing and screaming from viruses that rage like runaway wildfires. Yet the men in power send them nothing but autographed copies of their eight by tens." Many of his friends were contracting HIV, and most of them died. He was confronted over and over again with the impermanence of his life.

"There's only us, there's only this.
Forget regret, or life is yours to miss.
No other path, no other way.
No day but today."

Larson channeled this feeling of urgency, this fear about where his life and America and theater and his whole generation were headed into his next musical, first called *30/90*. He turned 30 years old in the year 1990. Then it became *Boho Days* before finally settling on its third and final title, *Tick, Tick... Boom!* It's about the choice between cages or wings, fear or love, compromising or persevering, selling out or being true to your soul, everything that Jordan and Scott and Jen and I sing about so powerfully. This musical was the closest thing to his life that he ever wrote, real life with some artistic license taken, but not much. It's about John, a struggling musical theater composer who works at a diner to make ends meet so he can persevere in following his passion. He's feeling the pressure of turning 30 and trying to choose between a life in theater or a traditional family life with financial stability. Should he try to get a job at the market research firm where his friend works? Should he marry his girlfriend and start a family? Is he wasting all his time trying to write a successful musical? Is it worth all that he's sacrificing?

Through this musical, Larson was grappling with a decision I think we have all made at some point. When your dream doesn't happen or doesn't happen how you imagined it would, do you start over and keep pursuing it, or do you move on? Larson kept pursuing what he loved, but with a deep fear

under the surface. Outwardly, however, he had an infectious passion and a generous spirit. Lauren Marcus, who performed some of Larson's work more recently, said, "The first day of rehearsal, we talked about the audacity of his earnestness in his writing. There is no room to pretend that you are above it or cooler than it. His heart was on his sleeve, and I think that there's no way that won't connect to someone who's listening. He could also write, for lack of a better word, a banger of a melody"

When working with actors who were performing his work, Larson was all about encouraging and building them up, trying to make it the best it could be. Actors and friends described him as energetic, driven, funny, brave, confident, generous, always willing to go over something one more time, and believing in others before they believed in themselves. He also believed in himself, not in a self-important kind of way, but in a way that one producer described as childlike. He had this almost innocent belief that he was going to do it. He also humbly shared everything he wrote with Stephen Sondheim.

When asked in an interview, "Don't you think he has better things to do?" Larson's response was, "No" Sondheim said of Larson, "A songwriter who works in the theater must have a sense of what is theatrical, of how you use music to tell a story as opposed to writing a song." Jonathan understood that instinctively. Larson was a truth seeker, a voracious researcher, a news junkie. Eddie Rosenstein said of his friend, "A conversation with Jonathan was always an hour. He was a great conversationalist and he was absolutely curious and generous of spirit. He'd have wanted to know a lot about you, and he'd have heard you, and he was the first person who'd come through for his friends. He was always there for his friends a hundred percent, and that was as much a priority as his work. If I needed one person I could trust, it would be him."

He saw his friends and the world as a community where people need to look out for each other, and so when his friends were sick or dying of AIDS, he showed up. He went with them to support groups, volunteered answering phones for AIDS organizations, and listened and held his friend's hands when they struggled. It's this spirit that came alive artistically in his next and most successful musical, *Rent*. He said that he wrote *Rent* to try to save people, and so that his friends would not be forgotten. When attending a support group with one of his friends, he witnessed someone ask, "Will I lose my dignity?" These powerful words became the song *Will I?* in *Rent*.

Those who worked with Larson on *Rent* said that one of the shifts that he made at that time, which may have led to its success, was that he listened to producers and collaborated with them instead of being a lone wolf. He listened to feedback and he really took it in. He wrote over 100 songs for *Rent*, but just 42 ended up in the finished show. *Rent* touched on a recurring theme in Larson's work, making the most of the time you've got. It also treated all of the characters, the artist, addict, gay and lesbian, drag queen, person with AIDS, stripper, person living on the streets, all disenfranchised in some way, with compassion and respect. He built the characters such that each represents an aspect of humanity that audiences can identify with.

One of Larson's smaller, lesser known projects was composing the score for three dance performances. He did this for his girlfriend Brenda Daniels, who had been part of Merce Cunningham's dance company and was venturing out on her own. One of Cunningham's frequent collaborators and composers was John Cage, whom Larson quoted in his notes for these pieces, most notably these words. "Art shouldn't be concerned with entertainment and communication or symbolic expression of the artist's ideas and tastes, but should help men and women attain a more intense awareness of their own life." That was ultimately Larson's goal, bring his life to the stage so that others could become more intensely aware of their own lives, their connections with others, their fear and love, their choices, their mortality.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who most know as the psychiatrist behind the five stages of grief called death, the key to the door of life. She said, "It is through accepting the finiteness of our individual existences that we are enabled to find the strength and courage to reject those extrinsic roles and expectations and to devote each day of our lives, however long they may be, to growing as fully as we are able." In other words, when you leave the fear of the cage of expectations, love will hold you and give you wings. Jonathan Larson embraced love, followed his passion, and boom, his life came to an abrupt end at age 35 when he was on the precipice of breakthrough. On the eve of the first preview performance of *Rent*, Larson died of an aortic aneurysm due to undiagnosed Marfan syndrome, a genetic disease. Just like the words he wrote, everything is rent. His aorta was torn, and he didn't know it until it was too late.

It's astonishing how prescient many of his lyrics were. His characters literally sang as if it were their final hour. There is no future and no past, as if this moment were their last.

"One song, glory.
One song before I go, glory.
One song to leave behind."

As with all art forms, there was lots left on the cutting room floor. A huge number of pieces Jonathan Larson wrote were never performed publicly or didn't go beyond workshopping. Those that were successful didn't really soar until after his death. Every artist has some duds, but it doesn't mean that you are not good or successful or contributing something meaningful through your art. Jonathan Larson is proof of this.

After his death, his family started the Jonathan Larson Performing Arts Foundation to support up-and-coming artists and to manage his massive collection of intellectual property, which ultimately ended up being cataloged at the Library of Congress. In 2018, the Jonathan Larson Project debuted as a concert made up of unheard Larson compositions, and an off-Broadway version of the project was performed just earlier this year. Lin-Manuel Miranda, author of the famous lines in the musical, *Hamilton*, "You have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story," reflected before *Hamilton*'s off-Broadway premiere, "Jonathan, if you can hear me, you fulfilled every promise and then some. We continue to perform your work, and when we do, someone else's life is changed. Someone else has

permission to tell their story because you told yours. Someone else has permission to dream as big as you did. Someone else will struggle to do their best with the time they have. Someone else will try to find the right words to thank you, thank you, thank you."

So when you are scared about the world or when it seems that the fabric of what binds us together is ripping at the seams, we can do as Larson did, draw a line in the sand and then make a stand. Actions speak louder than words. Embrace today and all its opportunity. As John O'Donohue said in our first reading, "Let's do it now. Instead of being miserable, let's have a blast at it. And if writing a rock musical is your thing, do that." Every moment is a season of love that you can share with others. Embrace life no matter how fleeting, and make the most of the time that you are given. Embrace the failure and disappointment that are inevitable in life, because it's from this that we learn and grow. Embrace your own story. Share it, giving others permission to give voice to their own. When you leave the fear of the cage of expectations, love, a community of friends, the mystery beyond all our naming will hold you and give you wings. So have courage, friends. It'll do your heart good. May it be so. And amen.