

# The Mountain Disappears

Leonard Bernstein | from the NPR series *This I Believe* | 2006

I believe in people. I feel, love, need and respect people above all else, including the arts, natural scenery, organized piety, or nationalistic superstructures. One human figure on the slope of a mountain can make the whole mountain disappear for me. One person fighting for the truth can disqualify for me the platitudes of centuries. And one human being who meets with injustice can render invalid the entire system which has dispensed it.

I believe that man's noblest endowment is his capacity to change. Armed with reason, he can see two sides and choose: he can be divinely wrong. I believe in man's right to be wrong. Out of this right he has built, laboriously and lovingly, something we reverently call democracy. He has done it the hard way and continues to do it the hard way—by reason, by choosing, by error and rectification, by the difficult, slow method in which the dignity of A is acknowledged by B, without impairing the dignity of C. Man cannot have dignity without loving the dignity of his fellow.

I believe in the potential of people. I cannot rest passively with those who give up in the name of "human nature." Human nature is only animal nature if it is obliged to remain static. Without growth, without metamorphosis, there is no godhead. If we believe that man can never achieve a society without wars, then we are condemned to wars forever. This is the easy way. But the laborious, loving way, the way of dignity and divinity, presupposes a belief in people and in their capacity to change, grow, communicate, and love.

I believe in man's unconscious mind, the deep spring from which comes his power to communicate and to love. For me, all art is a combination of these powers; for if love is the way we have of communicating personally in the deepest way, then what art can do is to extend this communication, magnify it, and carry it to vastly greater numbers of people. Therefore art is valid for the warmth and love it carries within it, even if it be the lightest entertainment, or the bitterest satire, or the most shattering tragedy.

I believe that my country is the place where all these things I have been speaking of are happening in the most manifest way. American is at the beginning of her greatest period in history—a period of leadership in science, art, and human progress toward the democratic ideal. I believe that she is at a critical point in this moment, and that she needs us to believe more strongly than ever before, in her and in one another, in our ability to grow and change, in our mutual dignity, in our democratic method. We must encourage thought, free and creative. We must respect privacy. We must observe taste by not exploiting our sorrows, successes, or passions. We must learn to know ourselves better through art. We must rely more on the unconscious, inspirational side of man. We must not enslave ourselves to dogma. We must believe in the attainability of good. We must believe, without fear, in people.

*Composer, conductor, pianist and educator Leonard Bernstein was longtime music director of the New York Philharmonic, where he led the highly successfully Young People's Concerts series. Bernstein forged a new relationship between classical and popular music with his compositions "West Side Story," "On the Town." "Candide" and others.*

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Composer Leonard Bernstein on the importance of individuals and the potential for good in people. This essay comes from the NPR series *This I Believe*, which features brief personal reflections from both famous and unknown Americans. The pieces that make up the series compel listeners to rethink not only what and how they have arrived at their beliefs, but also the extent to which they share them with others.