

**Dramatization of Bob Fulghum
Conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony**

ODE TO JOY!

PHYLLIS: *This morning, we bring back one of my favourite sermons ever, a dramatic adaptation of Bob Fulghum's story in his book Maybe, Maybe Not. On Celebration Sunday, we spoke of the role this church has in calling us to say "Yes." "Yes," to life, to love, to truth." Bob Fulghum offers his own exuberant "Yes," in this piece.*

You have a role in this drama. As the piece comes to its climax, conductor Richard Peck will step on his podium to invite the choir to sing Beethoven's famous choral work "Ode to Joy." This choral "Yes" is one of the great works of music. As Fulghum reminds us, that work was sung at a time while the Berlin wall was coming down, Mandela was being released from Ellis Island, and democracy was stirring in China. We invite you to join with the choir as the conductor signals everyone to rise and join in the chorus. The song is hymn 327 in your hymnbook. Sing with gusto, whether you can sing on key or not. Or, if you can't sing, follow our interpreter and sign. Sign with exuberance, Sing or sign a great "yes" to life, to truth, to love, to hope, to freedom, to joy.

Now, sit back and enjoy.

PHYLLIS: In All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, I mentioned my respect for symphonic music. Beethoven's Ninth in particular. In my secret life, I fantasized that someday I would rent a hall, a symphony orchestra, and a great chorale -- and personally conduct that giant piece of music while simultaneously playing the kettledrum parts.

About a year after the publication of Kindergarten, I received an astonishing call from a representative of the Minneapolis Chamber Symphony. The fantasy in my book had been noted. Would I be interested in conducting at least the final movement of the Ninth? My presence would give them some useful public attention, and I could fulfil my dream. How about it?

I assumed they knew what they were doing, or they would not have asked.

They assumed I knew what I was doing, or I would not have written knowledgeable about Beethoven.

And I assumed that what I had always heard was true: that an orchestra really doesn't need a conductor. All you had to do was give the downbeat and gyrate your arms in time to the music all the way to the end and take a bow.

As for Beethoven and his Ninth Symphony, I had read the available literature and attended live performances of the piece. On many occasions I had conducted it -- while standing alone in my living room.

Of course, I could do this.

On behalf of my new self-image as the Legendary Fuljumowski I accepted.

JOHN: There were not just a few things Fulghum did not know about what he had gotten himself into. For one thing, the orchestra was in turmoil -- in one of those seasons of self-destructive chaos that arts organizations are prone to endure. Its founding conductor had been fired by its board. Key musicians had resigned in protest. A new conductor had not yet been hired.

By the time the new conductor arrived, the season had been announced. He and the orchestra were privately appalled to hear about Fulghum. The conductor came to visit him in Seattle, and with gentle forbearance he inquired:

RICHARD: "Just how well do you read an orchestral score, Mr. Fulghum?"

PHYLLIS: "I don't read music at all. Is that really a problem?"

RICHARD: Mr. Fulghum, Beethoven's Ninth is so difficult most professional conductors don't attempt it until they have years of experience. In the final movement alone there are at least thirty-one places where the conductor has to stop and start the orchestra with sensitive changes in tempo.

Moreover, a chamber orchestra doesn't normally include the Ninth in its repertoire, since it has twenty-six musicians. We will have to add players. Not only will there be fifty musicians to lead, but there is a hundred-member chorus to conduct, plus four soloists. Though everyone is a professional musician, very few, if any of them, has ever performed the Ninth. Just getting the group to come together as a cohesive ensemble will be a major task.

As for your success at armchair conducting in the living room, the truth is that you are undoubtedly about a half-second behind the music. You can leave and go to the bathroom and come back and they will still be playing. In the real concert setting the conductor must have the complete score in his head. In the real concert hall, the conductor must be thinking seconds ahead, knowing everything that has happened, is presently happening, and is going to happen in the next minute -- all at once.

"In sum, what you want to do is . . . is . . . is . . . so . . . so completely . . ."

PHYLLIS: "But I really, really want to do this."

RICHARD: "We are in deep shit."

JOHN: They made a deal. The conductor would help Fulghum in every way he could to learn conducting in the most elemental way. Which proved a little easier than Fulghum expected, since clarity and simplicity and consistency were far more important than dramatics.

Fulghum promised to do something he had not done since high school: to learn something -- in that wonderful phrase -- by heart. To memorize the piece so thoroughly it would always be a part of him.

And to translate the score into some idiosyncratic form Fulghum could follow.

They would give it six months. If Fulghum would pull it off, well and good. If not, Fulghum promised to become catastrophically ill a week before the performance and not show up at all.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE –[TWO-THREE MINUTES]

[Jim, This should be a fairly quiet selection.]

PHYLLIS: One week before the concert, I presented myself to the maestro in a nervous-but-ready-as-I'll-ever-be condition. We worked daily. While he played through the score on the piano, he cajoled and shouted and sang me up and down the changes.

He never said it, but I believe to this day he knew I couldn't do it and he knew I knew I couldn't do it, but he would leave it to the disaster of the first rehearsal to speak the truth to me.

This man had a Yale Ph.D. and is a gentleman and a scholar. He also has a wicked sense of humour, so I also suspect he did not want to miss out on what promised to become one of the great comedy moments in recent symphonic history.

JOHN: It was only at this stage that Fulghum learned about the distemper of the orchestra. The wounds of the war over the leadership and personnel changes in the orchestra were not healed. Contract negotiations between the union and the board had not been settled. And to top it off, the season would begin with the tacky idea of a chamber orchestra doing part of the Ninth with an amateur wannabe at the podium.

It was true -- they didn't need a conductor.

What they needed was a minister.

Fulghum knew how to do that.

By looking at the orchestra through the lens of ministry, Fulghum saw the obvious -- namely that musicians appeared to be a great deal like people he knew well.

It's easy to be fooled. When you sit out there in a great concert hall and these handsome, beautiful, formally dressed, talented people walk purposefully onto the stage with their shining instruments, they seem like minor gods. Not a care in this world.

If you go to a closed rehearsal, where only the musicians are present, you will find a raggedy bunch of people not unlike those you see in a checkout line at a supermarket. They have come to work -- to do their job -- and go home. Since they are overworked and underpaid, you quickly learn that the beautiful black outfits you see from the audience are, upon closer examination backstage, likely to have been assembled from the local thrift shops.

PHYLLIS: I learned that with the core group of the orchestra, there were a couple of divorces in progress, a mother dying of cancer, a family in financial crisis, some rivalries and jealousies, a drinking problem, and the tension of us-versus-them between the regular players and the extras hired to do the Ninth.

The orchestra wasn't feeling good about itself. The musicians' humanity was somewhat in disarray. So when this fool amateur conductor showed up and said "Teach me," "Help me," "Give me your best and I will give you mine," their mood changed from depression to amused distraction. They needed respect, and great respect was surely mine to give.

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First rehearsal.

I stood on the podium, raised my hands, and, with crazed confidence, gave a hopeful downbeat. And they played!

MUSICAL INTERLUDE – [TWO TO THREE MINUTES]

[Jim, someone will be miming conducting you at this point. Whatever you pick should be introductory to a movement. You will play for several minutes and then fade out.]

JOHN: For the very same reasons that everything goes haywire at times, everything works sometimes, Like this time. It wasn't great -- they stumbled and fumbled and lurched along, but they hung together and it was done. Fulghum couldn't believe it. The orchestra was amazed. The conductor was dumbfounded. And Fulghum was ready to pack up and go home.

PHYLLIS: Once was enough. Thank you very much. The thought of three more rehearsals and three performances left me limp.

The conductor, on the other hand, felt rejuvenated. What impressed him was my apparent lack of reliance on the score -- I never looked at it. Yet I seemed to anticipate every entrance of every instrument. I was focused like I had radar working. He couldn't believe it.

"But that's nothing," I said. "If you watch them, just before they are about to play, they hold up their instruments in the ready position, and you just wave at them -- COME ON IN -- and they do. I thought you knew that."

He was always checking the score --he'd never noticed.

Professionals don't know everything.

Well, we came to the first performance. The World Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota -- a full house. I explained to the audience that I represented them and anybody among them who had always wanted to conduct. I apologized for not carrying a conductor's baton. Every time I had used it in rehearsal, I had thrown it into the chorus.

I turned, stepped up on the podium, inhaled enough oxygen to approach hyperventilation, and gave the downbeat. For better or worse, we were off. I felt the way a surfer must feel slicing along inside the curl of a mighty wave.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE [TWO TO THREE MINUTES]

[Jim, this should be a fast section. Again, someone will be conducting and you should plan to be going much faster than written. Play for a few minutes and then fade out.]

PHYLLIS: My problem was that every time we came to a change of tempo, I experienced an adrenaline rush and came in waving my arms at a speed about ten beats faster than normal. Once, at a place where we were supposed to go from a slow sixty-two beat to a fast three beat, I whipped in at about ninety beats a minute -- the upper limit for strings for a sustained passage. We were smoking. Moving like a runaway train. I told the orchestra later it was a powerful moment.

A religious moment.

Because I'm thinking, OHMYGOD, OHMYGOD, and I look down at the first cello madly sawing away, and she's looking across at the first violin, who is likewise pumping his fiddle for all he's worth, and she silently mouths "OHMYGOD, OHMYGOD" to him.

JOHN: The next day, one critic called the performance "crisp."

Truthfully appraised, the performance wasn't good or consistent or even competent. But Fulghum, the trained seal from Seattle, had balanced Beethoven's ball on his nose while clapping his hands in time to the music. For what it was, it was what it was, and what the people came to see: the Maestro Fuljumoski on a roll -- leaving the audience feeling any one of them might have conducted at least as well.

PHYLLIS: Came the final night of a three-performance series, I was in trouble. I didn't think I could do it again. Drained, exhausted, and oversatisfied, I was also worried about the value of what I was trying to do. Just doing barely well enough to get through this thing was an insult to the greatness of the music and the talent of the musicians. Nobody had to tell me that. I knew. I remembered that most of the musicians had never done the Ninth before. This might be their only chance. And because of me, they would have done it only in a half-baked way. They would never know what it was like to do it at the top of their form. Now that I really knew what I was doing, how could I possibly do it? In the attic of my secret life, my committee was giving me a beating. Who did I think I was?

There was a larger consideration, too. Here we were in the World Theatre about to do Beethoven, and in the theatre of the world great dramas had recently taken place - events that called for this music to be played. The Berlin Wall had come down. Mandela had walked free. Democracy was brewing in China. We were about to play the music associated with great triumph -- the "Ode to Joy" -- played when barriers fell, when freedom came, and humanity touched glory for a moment. Music made out of Beethoven's defiance of his fate of deafness and old age.

I wondered how I could possibly go through with this ego trip of mine and stumble through the Ninth one more time.

JOHN: The hall was packed. A black-tie evening. The orchestra and chorus filed onstage for one last go at this preposterous task. The lights dimmed in the hall. Fulghum climbed slowly up the stairs to the stage and stepped slowly up onto the conductor's podium, and turned slowly to the orchestra to ask the musicians for their attention as if they were ready to begin. Fulghum paused.

PHYLLIS: No, I couldn't do it.

In that expectant silence, I turned to the audience and told them of the struggle going on in my mind. I talked about Beethoven's great cry of "Yes!" that was contained in this music, and about the sorrowful silence from which it roared.

I told them the story of Fulghum the wannabe conductor, who only now understood what he had got himself into. I told them about the real people who played in this orchestra. I spoke of the human triumphs going on in our time that paralleled the spirit of the music.

"I can't dishonor this man or this music or this spirit."

I asked the real conductor to come and do it justice.

I turned to ask the musicians to give it their all. And when I turned back to the audience, they had replied to my unspoken request for their consent by spontaneously rising from their seats to stand so as to be as much a part of the music as they could. Everywhere in the hall the mood was yes.

The maestro lifted his baton, and Beethoven carried us away.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE [TWO TO THREE MINUTES]

[Jim, something lyrical here -- perhaps an early part of the final movement? -- for a couple of minutes.

PHYLLIS: And me? Where was the ex-maestro while the music flowed forth?

Having never sung in the chorus on this thing, I thought I'd just go back and stand in with them. True, I don't know any more about German than I do about orchestral scores. So what? If I could conduct it, how hard could this be?

I sang.

JOHN: It was the orchestra's finest night. The Musicians were finally united. The chorus and soloists poured out a mighty sound. For a time, all of us in the hall could believe in the power of the human spirit to overcome evil. Beethoven lived. We lived. Nothing grander could be said or done at that moment in our lives.

At the end, when that marbled music rumbled down the hill of the heart like a landslide, people cheered their lungs out, pounded their hands together, hugged each other, threw flowers, and wept. What a night -- what a world -- what a life! Yes!

MUSICAL CONCLUSION [TWO TO THREE MINUTES]

[Jim, choir, congregation sings Ode to Joy]