Opinion
Guest Voices



The Dave Matthews Band plays performs a live concert June 14, 2019, in Camden, New Jersey. (Wikimedia Commons/slgckgc, CC by 2.0 deed)



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Two weeks ago I joined 25,000 people at the Ruoff Music Center in Noblesville, Indiana, for the first night of back-to-back performances by the Dave Matthews Band (known to fans as DMB). The show was extraordinary, powered in large part by the enthusiasm and hospitality of the intergenerational crowd (while most of the attendees were middle aged like me, there were a surprising number of older folks and families with children), and by the sheer talent of a group of musicians that have been performing sold-out shows since the early 1990s. The band is being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame this October.

Dave Matthews and the band took the stage at around 7:30 p.m. without an opening act and played for three hours straight (the show was also broadcasted live on Sirius XM Radio). Fans of DMB will not be surprised to hear about the marathon performance or the no-frills, brief interludes between songs. There is no choreography, pyrotechnics or costume changes; just musicians who switch out a guitar here and there between songs, tune their instruments and start the next song in the set. One of DMB's greatest skills is the group's ability to make songs that are well known and fan favorites sound new and different each night, in a style that feels like jazz but is popularly described in terms of a "jam band" in the spirit of Phish or the Grateful Dead.

There were several times during the concert that I felt a recognizable experience of joy and even transcendence, which reminded me of something bordering on the religious. When nearly every person present joined together in a spontaneous yet synchronous belting of a song's refrain or cheered when the opening notes of a favorite song began, I was reminded in a visceral way of the spiritual power of live music. I have written previously about how jazz music might be one of the best metaphors for thinking about the Holy Spirit. And it was this reality that I experienced again that evening.

This kind of experience isn't limited to DMB, it could happen at a concert by Taylor Swift or Beyoncé or some lesser known but still talented musician or band. The experience of being part of an audience — whether numbered in the dozens or thousands — and listening to live music together, of being in the moment, of not just witnessing but also participating in something unfolding in real time, can be wonderfully overwhelming.



(Unsplash/Yvette de Wit)

When I teach students about the fundamentals of spirituality, I sometimes point to live concerts as one metaphor to think about the unity and diversity of experiencing the transcendent. Given the demographic of my undergraduate students today, I usually suggest they imagine attending a Taylor Swift concert.

I encourage them to think about all the different positions in the arena or stadium where one might have a ticket for the experience: the front row, backstage, somewhere in the middle of the floor, somewhere up in the "nosebleed section" and so on. And then I ask them to reflect on the range of ways the thousands of people are each individually experiencing the same performance.

For some in the audience, the sight and sound might be clear and bold, for others — due to ticket location or physical condition — the visual and auditory impression may be limited or altogether different from the person situated right next to them.

For some people, they might know every note of the song and word of the lyrics, while others may encounter this set list for the very first time.

Still, there may be some people who are not paying attention to the concert at all because they are working the event, selling refreshments or serving as first responders for those gathered.

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The key takeaway is that while everyone is actually encountering and bearing witness to the same performance — there is only one band on stage, playing one song at a time — but the way each person experiences that event varies in as many ways as there are people there. Furthermore, regardless of how hard one tries to understand and imagine and empathize about how another person there might be experiencing, processing, reflecting and responding to the shared musical event, only the individual person has access to that first-order experience and therefore there is something inherently mysterious and particular about each person's encounter with the singular happening.

Now, imagine that instead of Taylor Swift or Beyoncé or DMB performing on stage, the singular event was the very presence of God's self to those gathered. And what if those gathered aren't simply a few hundred or thousand or million people, but all of humanity? God is "performing" (so to speak), reaching out toward us, communicating to us, sharing the divine self with us at all times. The question is less about the presence of the divine and more about how we are experiencing that presence personally.

The practice of spirituality is about taking that personal, intimate, divine experience of the transcendent and making sense of it. This is where religion comes in and the community of faith that helps each person give meaning, language and voice to that divine encounter. We come to greater understanding through communal discernment, liturgical practice and tradition. We hand on frameworks and insights from one generation to the next, helping each person to recognize and process the deeply personal, yet communally shared, encounter with the divine.

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As I was reflecting on the joyful experience of the concert and thinking about this metaphor of live music for encountering the divine, I was reminded of a short video that is now nearly 20 years old. Decades ago, former evangelical pastor and author Rob Bell produced a series of short films that sought to introduce a broad audience to themes in Christian spirituality. One in particular, titled "Rhythm," touches on this metaphor of music for divine encounter. While there are some details in Bell's theological reflection that I wouldn't totally support, I do like the use of music as an image for thinking about God's presence to creation and the range of ways we do or do not respond to it.

I also think that it is no coincidence that some of the most important sacred art over the course of Christian history has been musical compositions, from early Christological hymns through Gregorian chant through Baroque Masses up through the modern "Christian rock" and contemporary liturgical music.

Thinking about spirituality through the metaphor of live music not only invites us to reimagine the universality of God's presence to all, but it also challenges us to respect the particularity of each person's relationship to the divine. We have so many lessons of mystics and saints across the centuries who were, in their time, dismissed or rejected for attempting to articulate their experience of God in ways that were not considered "normal." Recognizing that everyone has a unique relationship to the same God can help us avoid those hasty judgments of others.

And, at our best, we can work to create a faith environment where everyone is experiencing the joy of God's presence together, like one experiences a really great concert.