

**PERSPECTIVE
CONFRONTING THE ABYSS
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Rick Wilson is the Academic Division Culture Department leader for the New England Region. For 15 years, he was both the conductor and director of the SGI-USA Boston Renaissance Chorus. He studied music at Harvard and received his master's degree in orchestral conducting from the New England Conservatory of Music. Below, Rick ponders the role of the SGI arts division member.

A couple of nights ago, I went to a performance of “James Joyce’s The Dead,” a musical adaptation of Joyce’s famous short story. A theater critic who attended a performance a few days after the Sept. 11 trade-center attack wrote in his review that the final scene in particular was a profoundly cathartic experience for everyone in the audience. Even watching the play now, with the horrors of Sept. 11 somewhat less immediate, I was moved, touched and heartened.

In the final scene, the main protagonist, Gabriel, and his wife, Gretta, are alone in their room following a Christmas party. Gretta has just told Gabriel a shattering story from her girlhood involving the death of a young man she once knew. Hearing it has caused Gabriel to question the very foundation of their relationship. He sits in the darkened room, gazing out the window as the snow gently falls, while his wife sobs on the bed. He slowly and quietly sings, “The snow is falling, all over Ireland, it falls on the living and the dead.” Other characters from the play appear like apparitions; together with Gabriel they sing these words over and over. As the curtain closes, Gabriel walks to the bed, and tentatively touches his wife. They embrace.

In this final embrace, Gabriel and Gretta confirm something we have come to care about, and with which we can identify: their own commitment to each other, and thus to carrying on in the face of difficulties. But it goes deeper. We feel Gabriel and Gretta’s commitment as not merely mutual, but extending to everyone they know and care about—an acknowledgment of the need we all have for each other. And it goes deeper still, with the image of the silently falling snow outside the darkened room. Does it represent the implacable forces of the universe, before which everyone, living and dead, fade into nothingness? Does it represent the tears of an eternal and compassionate cosmos?

In the end, who can say? What matters is that we are moved and changed. It is the power of art to touch us in ways that include our intellect, but go beyond it. No matter how gloomy or dismal the subject matter—think of Shakespeare’s tragedies—the act of creation itself, and our sharing in its outcome, is, at its best, powerfully affirming.

As SGI-USA members, we are so fortunate. Our Buddhist practice regularly connects us with our own creative center, “the flowing movement of life” (*August Living Buddhism*, p. 42), as SGI President Ikeda has described it—Buddhahood itself. As SGI-USA members involved in the arts, we are blessed again: We can channel our revitalized, awakened creative self into the work we do, and into an open, deeply satisfying enjoyment of the work of others.

Early in the play, Gabriel says something like this: “Life often reminds me of ice skating on a pond. You slip and you slide, you try not to fall, you hold each other up. Every so often a crack opens in the ice beneath you. You look down, and you are reminded that

beneath this thin layer of ice lurks a dark abyss.”

The art that touches me most deeply comes from artists who—their work tells me—acknowledge, confront, accept and savor this abyss, this darkness, without fearing it. They have uncovered and come to identify it in its depths with what President Ikeda describes as “the inexhaustible creative source” (*August Living Buddhism*, p. 40.)

Let us strive to be like that. Let our own work embody our ever-deepening sense of the wonder, sanctity, indomitable power and indestructibility of life. Let us understand, and convey, each in our own way, this truth of truths. No matter how ferocious the forces that oppose us, there is nothing to fear.