

Good morning!

Last week, Rockway's grade 12 class travelled to Old Quebec City — it's a beautiful city, full of neo-Classical architecture, historical monuments, excellent food, and a very unique blend of French and English styles. On the second day of our trip, right across the street from the cafe where my friends and I ate lunch, was the Notre-Dame de Québec Basilica-Cathedral — one of the oldest cathedrals in North America, with construction beginning in 1647. We decided to visit.

You enter the cathedral through a little side-room, and as you do the first thing you notice is a sign asking you to be quiet, and informing you that prayer candles can be purchased for \$3 each. When you go through a second set of double doors, you're in the space itself.

It's a breathtaking space. The arched ceilings seem as tall as the sky itself, golden saints perch on every second pillar. Intricate stained-glass windows of Biblical scenes cast rainbows over the room. Every inch of it is worked in years of craftsmanship. Most notably, though, 30 feet above the altar — and by altar, I mean not only the physical table but an entire interior space devoted to, among other things, a miniature golden replica of the St Peter's Basilica — 30 feet above the altar, dominating the cathedral, is a giant golden star-shaped dome of six pillars, each supported by a golden angel. The columns meet at the top with a giant golden pearl; the pearl, in turn, is topped by a golden statue of Christ, surrounded by solid golden rays of glory, flinging the gold cross to one side. (I cannot emphasise enough how much gold this place is coated in.) In the back, completing the look, is a wall-spanning pipe organ.

As a proud Anabaptist Mennonite, I've been raised to have a certain mistrust of cathedrals. Seconds after we recovered from the awe, the realisation swept through our group. This basilica must represent hundreds of thousands of hours of work, millions of dollars in labour and materials cost, and precious resources from around the world, all for... a shiny display that the Quebecois were, in fact, Catholic. Imagine the world, we thought, if that magnitude of time and labour and money had been dedicated to welfare, or to economic reform, or to increased access to healthcare and education.

Now, Catholics as well as other denominations fond of building big churches do defend this particular allocation of resources, arguing that people's spiritual needs override their material Earthly needs. Now, even if you completely accept this argument, it is still difficult to justify quite this level of opulence — but more importantly, I don't believe that either

- people's spiritual need to do Mass in a big shiny cathedral, nor
 - my initial reaction that it was merely a gratuitous display of power,
- were the full reason for why the cathedral was built.

When I was about 8 years old, I wrote my mother a Mother's Day card. Before we begin — I promise this is relevant — what you must understand is that I quite like my mother. Now, I understand that liking one's mother is usually considered normal behaviour in human beings, but when I was around 8 I thought she was literally the coolest person alive. And so Mother's Day dawned, and I set to work.

I don't remember all the details, but I believe I wrote her some German poem that I had learned at school. But underneath it, I made an illustration:

- A shamrock
- the shamrock had hearts for leaves
- it also had the highest-quality ladybug my 8-year-old self could render

- the ladybugs' spots were also hearts
- the entire thing surrounded by a slightly bigger ring of hearts
- a smiley face
- Love, Vanessa.

Way over-the-top, right? Like, after one set of recursive hearts, you've sort of gotten the message. But it was vitally important to me that she understood: on this day, set apart for this purpose, I was communicating an experience of my relationship with her that I couldn't describe in words. And it was, objectively, a ridiculous design. But I was making it because it was the best way I had to show her what I knew her to be.

The annotated Bible I have prefaces the book of Genesis in this way, slightly paraphrased:

"Michelangelo, perhaps the greatest artist in history, painted Rome's famous Sistine Chapel to retell Genesis' story of creation.

Michelangelo had 6,000 square feet of ceiling to cover — the size of four average house roofs. Anyone who has painted a ceiling with a paint roller has caught a hint of the physical difficulty of such a task. But Michelangelo's plan called for 300 separate, detailed portraits of men and women. For more than three years the 5'4" artist devoted all his labours to the exhausting strain of painting the vast overhead space with his tiny brushes. Sometimes he painted standing on a huge scaffold, a paintbrush high over his head. Sometimes he sat, his nose inches from the ceiling. Sometimes he painted while lying on his back. His back, shoulders, neck, and arms cramped painfully.

In the long days of summer, he had light to paint 17 hours a day, taking food and a chamber pot with him on the 60-foot scaffold. For 30 days at a stretch he slept in his clothes, not even taking off his boots. Paint dribbled into his eyes so he could barely see. Freezing in the winter, sweating in the summer, he painted until at last the ceiling looked like a ceiling no more. He had transformed it into the creation drama, with creatures so real they seemed to breathe. Never before or since have paint and plaster been so changed.

But, as Michaelangelo knew very well, his work was a poor, dim image of what God had created. Over the plaster vault of the Sistine Chapel rose the immense dome of God's sky, breathtaking in its simple beauty.

My group of friends walked on. Passing your long way down the rows of pews and towards the altar, your eyes are drawn towards the ceiling. Arches soar, gold gleams, patterns trickle their way from column to column — and, every 20 metres or so, there is a simple painted patch of sky.

My partner told me it was a common feature of churches. I had to think about that one for a bit.

About mid-November of last year, I was sitting in my Advanced Functions class. The teacher was telling us how the slope of a curve at a given point could be approximated by finding two very close points on that curve and finding the slope of the straight line between them. This was fairly standard.

And then she started doing something really interesting. She said that we could think of the approximate slope as a function of the distance between those two very close points — and then, with a little algebra, we could *set that distance to zero*. The points were on top of each other. This wasn't some approximation — this was the exact slope, the exact rate that the curve was changing, at that one, precise, infinitesimally small point on it.

I understand that that doesn't mean a lot to those in the audience that aren't math people, but I am my parents' daughter, and as she slowly wrote out the miraculous final equation I felt this excitement hit me that was simply too big to be contained. The wonder, and the awe, simply had to be expressed. My hands started flapping, I started bouncing a little bit in my chair, there was a giant grin plastered against my face and I would have run circles around the room squealing if I could. I don't know how to describe a feeling like that in words! But it has to go *somewhere*. Some feelings refuse to sit still.

How do you create a space for God?

As Christians we know, or we believe, or maybe we even just suspect, that there is a force out there that breathed the universe into being, that sees the sun burning bright enough to power all life on earth with a hundredfold the energy to spare, that draws the oceans back and forth, that watches the unfolding of complex and ingenious life systems with a diversity that we're still barely beginning to understand.

And as Christians we know, or we believe, or maybe we just suspect, that this force is grand enough to contain and order the entire universe, and yet individual enough to love each of us personally. And we believe that, two thousand years ago, this force walked the earth in a fragile human form, and told us many beautiful stories. And you can't not make artwork to that.

But how do you create something that does this justice? How can we, tiny mortals who are messy and irrational and also kind of smelly, convey the grandeur of the universe? And how can we express the feelings we get from contemplating it? My friends wandered off, and I looked around at the cathedral — the endless gold, and the effort poured into every inch, and the golden Christ towering over everything — and what I saw was a group of mortals' desperate attempt to express infinity.

Something about love seems to compel us to create ridiculous works of art. When words fail, when the feeling inside your chest defies comprehension or categorisation, you have to make something, and hope it says enough. The Catholic community of Quebec City signed its Mother's Day card and handed it over to God, and it was beautiful.

Believe me, this by no means negated the other emotions that I felt in contemplating that cathedral. Glory or no glory, this cathedral was built on exploitation and wasted resources. Its very prominence in the city spoke of the eradication of a people that had been inhabiting and worshipping on the land for thousands of years. It still, to me, represents an immense amount of time and effort that was poured into a symbol of God, rather than the people He ordered us to care for on Earth.

But how do you build a space for God? How do you make God... fit?

You have all been very patient this sermon. I have asked a lot of questions. I have a few answers.

Answer number one: God has already built the space for us. I felt wonder, looking up at that soaring ceiling, and I feel the exact same wonder now, looking at the sky. Can we ask for a better symbol of glory than the sun? Can we find anything more lovely and more intricate than the fractal patterns of tree bark and leaves? And how can we ask for statues of angels bearing the mark of God when, at any time, I can look around at all of you cuties? I, for one, stand content in my cathedral, barefoot on the grass, right here, and I think God gets it.

But answer number one still isn't fully satisfying. Rain and frost and mud and mosquitos make for poor cathedrals, and indoor spaces seem like a necessary condition for temperate climates. More importantly, it seems to be a vital feature of our species that structures we build to honour something should try to capture some of that thing's essence. There is something to putting time and care into what you love, something that generations after you will be able to use and appreciate and love like you did. As over-the-top as it is, you do **feel** God in the Basilica. The building itself seems to worship. Is there not something to that?

I guess that's answer number two: you try. And you understand that whatever you build will only be a poor shadow of God, but you make beautiful things anyways. And you try not to exploit people along the way.

Is the Notre-Dame de Québec Basilica-Cathedral a good example of answer number two? I'm not sure. But it is a rather breathtaking attempt at it.

Answer number three is, my apologies, another question: when you're making a space for God, who says you gotta build a cathedral?

Human creativity isn't limited to architecture. Human expression isn't limited to frescoes and carved marble. Human unity isn't limited to rows of pews or stations of the Cross.

It's a beautiful day. I'm feeling gratitude, and awe, and just plain good ol happiness. So let's make a house of God, shall we?

pitch pipe