

# PUBLICATION

---

## The Arts: A Critical Part of Coping

Authors: Adam Baldrige, Russell W. Gray

October 08, 2020

**How did Ruth Bader-Ginsburg do it? How did she maintain such a wonderful, positive presence and remain so gracious and generous among the immense pressures of serving as a U.S. Supreme Court Justice while also battling serious health problems? She seemed to move through life with an inner peace and acute sense of the beauty of life despite experiencing so many giant challenges.**

Justice Ginsburg no doubt found a number of ways to cope through it all, but it is worthwhile and even enlightening to stop and reflect on one way that we know she coped: the arts and, more specifically, opera. Among the many things we can learn from Justice Ginsburg, we can also learn to rely on the arts like her as an important coping mechanism.

Justice Ginsburg's love of opera is legendary. According to an excellent and fascinating recent [article](#) in the *New York Times* by opera aficionado Francesca Zambello, Ginsburg attended her first opera at the age of 11 and was immediately struck by it. For years to come, she repeatedly and regularly attended opera performances, including dress rehearsals, opening nights, and closing nights.

Ginsburg herself noted in 2015 how opera provided her with an escape. She explained, "Most of the time, even when I go to sleep, I'm thinking about legal problems...But when I go to the opera, I'm just lost in it."

Zambello relates further how Ginsburg regularly came to opera performances and how deeply they affected her:

When her husband Marty passed, she would come more often. She would always bring someone with her, sometimes another justice. By the last few years, she would appear and come down the aisle and everyone would start cheering. I think that opera just gave her an incredible escape. Particularly after Marty died, it allowed her mind to go places it needed to go to rest from the incredible work that she was doing for all of us. If the tireless pursuit of justice is your day job, it helps to spend time at the Café Momus in "La Bohème" at night.

\* \* \* \*

I remember after Kurt Weill's "Lost in the Stars" at Glimmerglass, being next to her and her just being visibly shaken and weeping from one of Eric Owens's greatest performances. She was very emotional – I don't think she would hide it if she were moved by something; you would know it.

Justice Ginsburg was not alone in recognizing the importance of art in coping with difficult circumstances. Viktor Frankel, for example, relates in his classic book *Man's Search for Meaning*, how he and others managed to cope and survive in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. He relates stories about how at night, after the guards had left them to sleep, the prisoners would get together and recite poetry, sing songs, and reenact plays. Frankel talks about how meaningful the arts meant to their survival.

Similarly, Anthony Ray Hinton, who spent 30 years on death row after wrongly being charged and convicted of murder, explains in his book, *The Sun Does Shine*, how he and other death row inmates found meaning in life

and a better understanding of their predicament by sharing and discussing such books as Harper Lee's *To Kill and Mockingbird* and H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*. The inmates formed a book club and shared passages from the books that were particularly meaningful to them.

Another striking example of the coping and even life-saving power of the arts resides with famed rapper Darryl McDaniels, who you probably know better as "DMC" of the pioneering rap group Run DMC. McDaniels was suddenly hit with depression during a successful time of his career in the 1990s. He suddenly did not want to live anymore. He did not understand why, but life no longer had meaning for him. He decided that taking his own life was the answer.

Over a period of months, McDaniels contemplated that thought and ultimately decided that he would go through with ending his life. On the night that he planned to kill himself, however, he happened to hear Sarah McLachlan's "Angel" on the radio. The beauty of the song and its lyrics about an angel providing comfort and protection during tough times struck McDaniels deeply. The more he listened to the song, the more he was inspired to live. He ultimately sought treatment for his condition and is alive today to tell his story.

So, of the many things we have learned from Justice Ginsburg, and of the many ways she has served as a role model, let's not forget one important one: Remember the arts as a critical part of coping. Let's follow her example of supporting the arts and looking to them as a means to understand and appreciate the beauty and meaning of the human experience. Maybe it's painting or looking at paintings, maybe it is poetry, maybe it's literature, maybe it's a movie, maybe it's a song. In any event, follow Justice Ginsburg's lead and find refuge in the arts.