



Endless Field:
More with Ike Sturm
July 4, 2024

Transcript



Sara Hayden: I see the endlessness of this field of God holding this space where we can find ourselves at any point in that and if the field is endless (laughs) and we are all in the field, then it's okay to be at countless and infinite places on that, in that space, within that space. We can find and connect with one another. It's such a beautiful and open way to, I think, foster spirituality, foster a sense of self-awareness and deeper connection to the people in our lives and even the creatures in our lives, the non-human beings we're surrounded by and fed and uplifted by and nurtured by, it's so generous.

And I'm so drawn to the power and liberation that I sense from your devotion or, or willingness to enter into improvisational types of work, in the way you were saying, "I find these connections, these people, these relationships, and ab- leaning towards those." And I'd love to hear you talk about some of the benefits of what you have received not predicting the future (laughs) or having to predict the future as you outline your goals in how your work develops, how your play develops, but also, and your life develops, but also some of the challenges of that. 'Cause you started this incredible ministry, Jazz Mass in New York City in the context of a, I would imagine a job description that was more fluid than a lot of job descriptions in ministry. There's a liberation within having a job description and sort of, "Here's what you're doing this year and here's the single-mindedness of a particular position with consistent year-to-year funding," and yet these spaces that are just so highly generative and blessed and it, spiritually rich are not always found in those places, and sometimes, I would venture, are more found in places where we don't have that kind of stability and we don't have that kind of predictability.

Ike Sturm: Yeah. What a beautiful question. I, I think that my mind is flooded with images of what my community feels and looks like. I, I just got to play the other day with this wonderful big band that I played with in New York City and, uh, we were playing at Hunter College where I teach a little bit and I love the students there. I've gotten to know them a little bit and this room was backed. It was, like, fluorescent lighting, like, too small of a room, and we had essentially two big bands together. There's probably almost 50 musicians with instruments in this very small room. And I was kinda marveling post-COVID at our, our (laughs) ability to do this once again.

Sara: Yeah. (laughs)

Ike: But honestly, it was really well-conceived. It was, like, a very soulful idea, the way that this was put together. We played only a few songs, then the students came up, they got to ask questions. They got to sit kind of in between, like, one by one, A, B, A, B, like this professional band and then the student band that I've actually conducted. And so, like, to see them all mixed together in the group and see them absolutely lighting up, like, hearing what the possibilities are with this music. And we actually played together this music that they had practiced and that we know as a professional band.

And I was just kinda marveling at, like, how it was really well-conceived but it was not a corporate environment and it was, like, creative and it was really alive and it was intergenerational and it was incredibly diverse. I guess I'm trying to figure out what I'm trying to learn from that experience, which is just that, to me, it just seems that when we're allowed to be free, it's sort of like parenting. Like, I, I have two wonderful teenagers-

Sara: Yeah.

Ike: ... that are teaching me all the time and you can say, "Oh, this is exactly how it's gonna be and you're gonna do it my way and that's the end of it," and then there's this whole spectrum. What I noticed about the educational context was that the students we l- absolutely lit up and I thought, "Their entire summer, for those that really got the invitation, no one needs to tell them what to do."

Sara: Mm.

Ike: "They're gonna know that they-"

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... "need to dig in."

And one of them said, like, "I'm noticing how, like, to do this stuff on a high level, to make it look this easy, you have to put in a ton of time and effort."

And I thought, "My gosh, as a teacher, you're always trying to get students to do that-"

Sara: Wow.

Ike: ... but you can't say that to someone, th- someone needs to have, like, a fire within them to generate enough energy to pursue that.

And so to your question about, like, these space, it's, like, fire having oxygen or having enough space. It's like you need to be able to have room for something to ignite and to, like, burn on and to, like, catch (laughs) fire and to, like, the idea of, like, these spaces that have been created for me, I've certainly helped to, I worked hard to nourish those spaces, but I feel like they've been gifts to me.

My friend Dale Lind is, he was the jazz pastor at St. Peter's where I worked for 17 years and he was my teacher and my mentor. I love him so much and he's celebrating his 60th ordination anniversary in a couple weeks, which I'm gonna get to perform for and speak at and-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... I'm quite intimidated to be honest, because I'm like, "How"-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... "do I begin to describe what this person means to me and, and the ways in which his life has, like, provided that fuel for me to be able to create these spaces and nourish these spaces." And I'm sort of witnessing it, even when I'm leading, I'm just witnessing it. I'm listening and I'm seeing and hearing.

For me, it's a really ah- wonderful way to connect to God and to see what God is doing in the world because it doesn't have to be that view that we can have of the divine sometimes where things are being forced on us or demanded. It's, like, this really inviting, loving way of being. And I just keep seeing that in these spaces.

So when you do have an institution or some kind of church organization that, that understands that in the way that our cohort has, actually, Sara. I feel like I've seen that so much in our, uh, in the way that you lead our group and the way that the whole thing has been set up. There's a lot of freedom and as a result, like, I'm excited to get together today with one of our cohort members, with Katrina, to talk about initiatives in this kind of Hudson River area and I'm starting to connect more with pastors around here to think about what is this time telling us? Where are we being led?

Sara: Mm.

Ike: What kinds of opportunities are being created in our midst and what are we being called to, like, in terms of organizing?

'Cause the interesting thing is there really is some intention that has to go into this stuff and over time, you really do have to, to wanna do this stuff. And I, I so thrive in these spaces where people know and trust that I am working really hard to connect people-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... to try to forge new connections. And I'm constantly reaching out to people and having people over to my house in a week, this kinda ministry gathering and then have an outdoor concert, like for our community. We'll probably have 50 people in my backyard. And it's just, like, for me, I can't help it. I'm so excited about it, I can't wait to have people here, hanging out and listening to music. And a lot of this ministry work that we're talking about has really influenced the way I do that. Like, instead of a really finely carefully curated program, it might be a little bit more open-ended. Like, we're gonna probably invite a couple people up to sing that are just kinda coming into the fold any day now, you know?

Like, yesterday I met with someone, I thought, "Yeah, why don't you bring your guitar over and sing a tune? I have a sense that y- that's gonna be really good for you and good for everybody else." And-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... I try to stay, like, very flexible around that stuff, but there's always a lot of work that goes into making it happen in the first place.

Sara: I hear you say that and I think that's such an important component to lift up. You've used the phrase "well-conceived." This is well-conceived, it's not (laughs) thrown together. It's put together with great intention and a sense of learning and responsiveness between everyone who's contributing. I get the sense that you're being tapped on the shoulder by the spirit of, like, "This is, call in this person to the project." And those kinds of practices, the way of doing that kind of work and collaboration, as you said, is full of rich blessing and just ha- so highly intersectional and, and it takes, I think, enormous bandwidth, a j- kind of a sense of intellectual responsiveness, spiritual responsiveness, relational responsiveness that isn't contained within sort of a timeline or spreadsheet in the same way that a lot of our projects are because you're seeking input and collaboration that's authentic from the folks who've gathered, right? You're not saying, "Here's what I want you to do and y- just do it this way and then we'll have our project together." But it's a much more of a call and responsiveness type of creation.

I'm struggling with w- for words because I've felt it in your presence when we were all together on New Orleans, our New Worshiping Community cohort back in April for a retreat. And I saw the ways in which you and one of our colleagues, Erin Hogan, who's a vocalist and musician. You invited us into this space which you called a concert and named Kindred in reference to the spirit that you were seeing among our group and also Erin's own New Worshiping Community, located in Boston.

And we had gathered together with about 100 New Worshiping Community leaders who represent groups of people and identities from around the globe but all of us live in the United States now, but it's just a highly diverse in every way, beautiful group. And we had experienced a very creative worship together of folks offering different practices, words, songs, acknowledgements, and at the conclusion of that, you and Erin had said, "Come to the space in New Orleans," again, one of the cool things is you had intentionally found all the instrumentation you needed from friends and colleagues and relationships with other musicians living in New Orleans, 'cause you're in New York City, all your stuff's there.

We also met at Zoe's New Worshiping Community, the Labyrinth, which is right, smack in the middle of Tulane and Loyola's campus. Right in the middle, it's a café space, New Worshiping Community for college students. And you said, "Just come, you can relax here, you can be present here. It's not this typical concert where you have to just put everything aside and listen to what we're playing. We're trying to invite you into something."

And I wasn't sure what to expect because my typical experience with concerts is not the same that you were inviting us into. And I saw you and Erin begin to offer these gentle invitations for a- those present to rest, to reflect, and then eventually to contribute to the gathering itself. I was just blown away. I guess

I, what I'm saying is I was struggling for words because it's difficult to take a h- experience of the Spirit in that moment and share with someone outside of that experience what it's meant to you.

Ike: Yeah, thank you for painting a picture of that and reminding me of that experience, Sara. I was so glad you were there with us and I feel like I've been struggling maybe in a similar spirit of, like, trying to explain what it is that we try to cultivate or what it is that happens in these spaces. And I r- love this light bulb moment after that when you came out and you said, "This was so fun. How can we do this all the time? (laughs) Like, I loved it."

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: You know, and it was so fun to see you experience that and have that emotion. I love how you, you mentioned call and response and I think for me, like, when, my parents are both musicians, were both musicians and my dad was this wonderful composer and arranger and teacher, and my mom w- took us to church and my dad didn't go to church when I was a kid but it was, like, this, I find interestingly, my life is this very interesting puzzle of all these different influences and things that happened in my life. And through the music, like, my house was so alive with musicians, coming through, being invited in. I remember being a kid and Bobby McFerrin, like, coming to the house. My dad did some projects with him and-

Sara: Oh, wow.

Ike: Dianne Reeves, this a-

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... amazing singer, like, came to our house-

Sara: Ah.

Ike: ... and I remember, like, them having this party and seeing her. This, uh, like, very special person come to our house and I'm like, is all these feelings that I, I didn't have words for and still don't, but I, I knew something was happening in the house. And so I saw a lot of these spaces and learned from these musicians. And growing up and loving this music so much, you, I feel like there's a grace in the music that permeates everything. Like, everything that a musician does as a jazz musician is to listen to everyone around you at all times. The only thing that matter is that moment and what are the tones, what are the textures and timbres and dynamics and forces at play? And taking all that in and trying to support other people and the people that do that in the highest level, those are the ones that you seek out and tho- that's, like, what you're aiming for all the time. And I'm still am.

And I think they're wonderful things to shoot for, like, as people, like, to be listening. And they're very spiritual attributes, they're Christlike ways of being, to be a listener and to be a supporter and to be graceful and to be forgiving-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... to be present. And so as a musician, I see all those things that are lifted up and I'm like, "Wow. Weirdly, this was this music that was not welcomed in sacred spaces years ago and maybe it's to some extent today," and to me, I'm like, "Boy, that sure sounds like a natural," obviously there are cultural things. I know that, you know, there are extra-musical elements that come into play, but boy, in terms of the music itself, it sounds a lot like what a spiritual person would be interested in.

Sara: Yeah.

Ike: And for me, I feel like my training has been in this capacity and, and this context and now it's everything I've always practiced, everything I've always admired.

And so one thing that's worth naming in the process though, that I think get in the way of the corporate kinda mindset is that it is messy. It is real and it's, like, you can't show up in those places without a sense of the blues or the call and response or these things that are, like, painful, which, to me, connects it even more deeply to Christ's message and to, like, real life-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... in a way that gets away from a lot of church services that I experience where it's, like, things get placated or things get overly simplified. And it's like, that is not the human experience. There is pain everywhere that we all are very conscious of and maybe in some ways not conscious enough of. And I think that the music has a way of holding all of that, like, beyond language, beyond words. But the feelings are so, so deep in that music.

And I think that's why for me sometimes I get frustrated with, like, corporate structures or church structures or different worship contexts where it just feels like we make it smaller than it is. That we make it-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... less able to hold all the things that God creates us to hold. And I feel like the music gives us this incredible model of, like, how to be in the world and how to treat other people and when we've been doing this stuff at Times Square, it's, many times it'll start out and in my mind, my prefrontal cortex will go, "This isn't gonna work. This isn't working. The form," it was the same thing in Alaska. "It's not gonna be complicated enough, the form's not there. X, Y, Z," critical kinds of thoughts. And then all of a sudden,

things start to flow and y- and then I can feel myself relaxing and going, "Thank you, God. Be patient with me."

Sara: Mm.

Ike: "I'm with you. Thank you for being with me."

Sara: Mm.

Ike: And everyone feels that and we've, (laughs) a- my favorite image from that gathering is that every time we finish, I look around and I say, "Thank you, everyone. Like, amen, let's go home." And everyone just smiles and sits there and they don't move. And I'm like, "Okay-"

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: ... "for real, you need to go home now." And they'd just smile and they're absolutely content, absolutely connected to God, to one another. I just marvel at it. And it, we didn't even do anything complicated. It's like we were just together, we were visited by the Spirit. We were inhabited. It's not-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... a complicated thing and it, I guess in some ways it's incredibly complicated.

Sara: Yeah.

Ike: But it's also, like, we can experience it, we can be graced by that.

Sara: Yeah. In no way does the simplicity and the intention diminish what's being experienced in that moment. That's such a cultural tension, right? Of, like, "Oh, these people are just playing in a room together and seeing what happens." I feel that you've channeled so deeply into this blessing and God is saying to you, "Here's this bread, here's this blessing." Like, it's for you to hold and to set aside the other things in your hands so that you can hold it and to choose what is there with you in that space and to pay such deep attention to your community that you can meaningful invite, include, and receive from the other people in that space is everything.

Ike: Hm.

Sara: You know, I wanted to ask you this question that you and I have talked about some and, you know, the traditional roles that the church has credentialed people to do and every church and every tradition has their own methodology for credentialing. Presbyterian churches is specific as well, at time beautiful,

at times cumbersome. And we've spoken before about the, I don't mean frustration in the sense that you're angry about these but just the ways in which movement gets frustrated and stopped where communities of faith that are looking for and hearing these incredible experiences that you are conceiving in the context of the Spirit with other people, that are these rich, manifold blessings. And thinking, "Well, Session has asked us to find a choir director." Or, "We are in the l- on the lookout for a stated supply pastor." (laughs) You know, we have these roles and thinking, "What if the person that God is calling in that moment, or what if the blessing that is possible in that moment is not coming packaged in the way that even we decently and in order, Presbyterians, people of faith, anticipate? And what does it take for us to hear that and give it a try? Give something new a try?"

So I, I'm curious, in your answer to that question of, like, what recommendations do you have for folks who say, "We're not where we need to be and we've tried the models that we've inherited and it feels stale to us. It no longer feels alive in the same way. We sense aliveness even out of the church spiritually in ways we don't see in our church anymore."

That's sort of a one question but the other question is how do you feel like a pastor? (laughs) And do you? Are you a pastor? Do you feel that role and is that important to you?

Ike: Yeah, it's so important to me. Really touches me in a deep level that you'd ask me that. I think ever since I was in middle school I actually really felt this. I moved around a lot as a kid and some of that, the instability that, or isolation that happened in that time invited th- (laughs) me into really connecting with God on a very deep level. And I sensed a being held and kind of a connection to God in a really meaningful way in that time and beyond. And I think it's looked a lot of different ways on the surface but I think all throughout, there's been this sense of whether it be teaching or music or the other, like, kind of elements of my work life, I guess I try not to get too connected to identity or have work be my identity, but it's something I guess I wrestle with because it is who I am. Makes me emotional thinking about it.

This stuff is very important to me and so my, my music is such an extension. Like, you work, you reach so deeply to try to make your music express exactly what's on your heart and what God is calling you to and so that becomes really inextricably linked to who you are. And so it's challenging work to try to extricate yourself from some of those narratives and some of those identities. And I've been doing a lot of hard work around that in the last few years and, like, becoming a freelance musician and doing ministry work that's a little more off-grid, that's, like, less supported in terms of, like, a brick and mortar kind of, like, church job.

The model that comes to my mind when you asked me the question was this model of the student the other day, where they said, "These people that makes this look so effortless have put in so much time." And I feel like I'm a student in this model and saying, like, "How do you learn the blues? How do you learn these, like, difficult art forms that we've been talking about?" It's not through having an easy path. It's not through, like, having something given to you along the way.

And actually, Sara, I really remember that conversation that you brought up where we were talking about frustrations and how fitting into a preordained kind of role in the church, especially for me being a

bass player and being a jazz musician and having these sort of odd, not technically being a pastor in terms of, like, a degree, but I feel like a lot of my friends kind of come to me and sort of treat-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Ike: ... me in that, in that way. And I've sort of just been wondering about that and been curious about that. And I like that. I like that when my friends feel like they can rely on me for some kind of support.

And I also recognize the areas in which I'm not a pastor, in which I haven't been trained and I have been surrounded by amazing people like the pastors in my life, like you, Sara, and many others that've been incredibly supportive to me. And so it's like a band where you're like, "Hey, how great that we have one another, and how great that I can suggest certain ideas that resonate with me and that have been brewing my whole life," and you do the same with me with one simple email where I'm like, "Wow. I need to go think about this for a minute." Like the music, we can encourage each other and we can work with each other, and I think these churches that might have ideas about expanding, how wonderful. Move into a new area and be curious, be listening. Be open to what your community offers or the people that might be around the corner, they might be an intern or they might be someone who retired that has this absolute passion for what's gonna happen in your space.

The conversation you and I had was so helpful because you were, in your style, you were able to let me express myself and be honest. And through that process, I kinda went away with that thinking about it and going, "Wait. Maybe there's some other things that I'm being called to do right now to dig in a little bit more deeply, to make something, to create a context, to create a gathering, to create, you know, a New Worshiping Community, whatever it might be, and then maybe some of these other opportunities will follow that, rather (laughs) than waiting for this magic thing to kinda fall in your lap."

And so, that feels like what I'm being called to right now, but I'm trying to stay open to where the Spirit is moving.

Sara: Mm. I have one final question for you that you've touched on a bit. When you think about some of the stories that resonate most deeply with you, looking at Jesus and the way He spent time with people, I'm curious how those things and which of them have shaped your life and your connections between people."

Ike: Hm. I'm so amazed by these stories. I love talking to my kids about it and thinking about, like, kind of how weird these stories actually are.

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: Like, kind of how strangely Jesus showed up. Like, I mean, h- w- once again, we, we like to kind of institutionalize Jesus or we like to, like, put him in these very, like, understandable spaces and it's just not how it was. Like-

Sara: Mm.

Ike: ... I always think about, like, who would Jesus be hanging out with in my little framework, in my little community. And I always try to, like, take a hint from that and be like, "Oh, this cat." (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Ike: That's what I would say in my jazz language. "This is the person. Like, open my eyes." You know? Or me, like, ih- in the, ih- I love your question that be, like, I feel like I'm in this weird situation or I'm weird in, like, all the ways that I naturally am. Like, I'm a pretty funky combination of different things and what does that mean? How can I be loved being that way?

Sara: Mm.

Ike: And, um, I know that I am and I'm so grateful-

Sara: Wow.

Ike: ... for that.

Sara: I'm so grateful for you. Spending time in your presence and reflecting on your relationships and talking about being loved and what love is. I feel that potency and look forward so much to wh- what is unfolding right now and what will continue to unfold through your tender and loving attention. You've taught me a lot about strength and courage and freedom in the Spirit and I'm just so thankful for this recorded conversation we have together.

Ike: Me too, Sara. I'll cherish that and I'm so thankful to you for your example in my life and my friends' lives and, yeah, it's just been such an open door and I'm so grateful.