



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Let’s Be Singing,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on October 23, 2011

I want to ask you a personal question, and I hope you’ll tell the truth. Do you sing in the shower? Do you sing along with the radio when you’re alone in the car? So do I! So when you sing in private, do you hold back, or do you really let loose? You let it out, don’t you? You sing wide open when you’re in those places where no one else can hear you. It feels good, and it’s good for you.

The question is, do you sing out like that when you’re in the company of others? If not, what are you afraid of? For me, it’s singing off key, or making a fool of myself, or annoying those around me. The funny thing is, if more people would sing out, the singing would be better and nobody would be hanging out there all alone.

Something I love when I’m with my minister colleagues is how well we sing together. It’s amazing, and it almost makes me laugh out loud sometimes, it makes me so happy. You can sing really loud with that group and you don’t stand out. Surrounded by robust singing, my own voice is stronger. They carry me along and I know we’re all in this together. Of course, there are times to sing softly, and quietly, and there can be power and beauty in that too.

What I want you to hear, and to experience today, is that singing is a great spiritual practice. And it’s not for experts, not just for those with trained, or even “good” voices. As the Zimbabwean proverb says, “If you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing.” And it’s portable--you have your voice with you wherever you go. Of course, you don’t have to sing today--it’s up to you. If you just want to listen, and let the sounds resonate within you, that’s fine too.

I’m so glad to have my friend Cathy with us today. For some time now, Cathy has made chanting her primary spiritual practice. About five years ago she went to a workshop with a woman named Ana Hernandez, called “The Sacred Art of Chant.” Ana says, “Even if you are one of those people that have been told repeatedly that you can’t carry a tune in a bucket, it’s not true. You already have everything you need to chant.”

Chant: *Da pacem cordium*

A few years ago I went to a workshop led by the music minister at a church in Boston. We sang all kinds of songs, and he talked about music making worship powerful and deep. He said, “The reason for music in church is to help people open their hearts.”

I love what Bernice Johnson Reagon said in our reading today, how she acknowledges that sometimes we resist really opening ourselves to singing because we're not prepared to be changed, at least not now, not today. She says "Now there are some people who come to church and they try their best to leave the way they came. But the reason you leave your house to go to church," she says, "is to go through this exercise,"¹ to open yourself to being stretched, expanded, changed; to touch that deeper place; to be in touch with the Spirit that moves is in us and among us.

There is a part of our being, Bernice Johnson Reagon says, that gets "tampered with," when we sing, when we run this sound through our bodies. And that part of our being should be tampered with, should be developed and cultivated. Are you with me on this? Are you willing to open yourself, to be expanded, even transformed? Are you even hungry for it? I hope so. And I sense that you are. And that is one reason why I love you, and why it's such a blessing to be your minister--because of your desire to go deeper, to grow as people of faith.

Last week Cathy and I got together to talk about today's service. She told me about a French doctor named Alfred Tomatis who studied the connection between the ear and the voice. His work led him to believe that hearing connects us to the Divine. Dr. Tomatis told a story of being called to a Benedictine monastery for a consultation. The story began when a new abbot had taken charge, a younger man who decided to modernize things a bit. It was the monk's practice to sing their prayers seven times a day. The abbot had decided that they would begin speaking their prayers, rather than chanting them. It would be more time efficient, and they had work to do.

But as time went by, the monks became tired and listless. They tried getting more sleep, and altering their diet, but nothing worked. Eventually they called Dr. Tomatis. He spent some time with them, and he "figured out that the monks had been using chant to charge their systems." He believed that creating those sounds, and hearing the collective sound, fed and sustained the monks. He urged them to go back to their singing, and guess what? Before long, their energy returned.²

Ana Hernandez says that chant has the ability "to draw us up out of our bodies," out of that distracted place Buddhists call "monkey mind." Chanting or singing with others, we benefit from those vibrations entering our ears and resonating in and around our bodies. These benefits can stay with us even after the vibrations have stopped.

Have you ever stood by a waterfall and felt the freshness and coolness there? The pounding water ionizes the air the same way an electrical storm does, and being in this charged air makes you feel good. Singing with others, we're like the instruments in a symphony orchestra, attuned to one another, vibrating in sympathy with one another. It feels good and it's good for us.

Chant: *Sa Ta Na Ma*

¹ Parts of this video available online at <http://blip.tv/bill-moyers-journal/the-songs-are-free-with-bernice-johnson-reagon-500426>

² This story is told by Ana Hernandez in her book *The Sacred Art of Chant*.

Bernice Johnson Reagon grew up singing in the Black church. As a young woman she sang at rallies in the civil rights movement. Early on she witnessed the power of people singing together. She describes what it was like during those times of violence and intimidation. They would be at a meeting or a rally, usually in a church, she says, and “When police or the sheriff would enter mass meetings and start taking pictures and names, and we knew our jobs were on the line, and maybe more...” People would be frightened, but “inevitably somebody would begin a song. Soon everyone was singing and we had taken back the air in that space.”

Singing would stiffen the spines of the people, would remind them that they were accountable to a higher authority than racist law enforcement officers. Singing renewed their strength and courage, and that helped them to change the world.

I’m reminded me of those powerful words of Bobby Kennedy: “Each time a (person) stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, (she) sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Last Sunday I asked you, “Does it seem, some days, that everything is falling apart?” One of you answered back, “Yes!” And I know that others of you feel that way too; some days I think so myself. But it’s not true, there’s always reason for hope, and we need to remind each other of that.

Julian of Norwich lived in England 600 years ago. When she was thirty, severely ill and on her deathbed, she had a series of visions. She recovered from her illness, and wrote down what she had experienced. This became the basis for her life’s work, sharing in writing what she knew of divine love. In an age that believed plagues and violence were signs of God’s punishment, Julian articulated a hopeful theology, “speaking of God’s love in terms of joy and compassion as opposed to law and duty.”³ In the midst of a life that knew plenty of suffering, Julian heard God saying to her: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Chant: *All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*

There’s a hymn that says, “Let every instrument be tuned for praise! Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise.”⁴

Let’s be singing--for our own health and happiness, to quiet our busy minds, to open ourselves to the presence of what is holy. Let’s be singing for the building of connections and the strengthening of community, and let’s be singing to stiffen our spines, so we have the strength and the courage to break down those walls that imprison and oppress. Let’s be singing, so that we too have the hope and the faith that come what may, all shall be well.

Amen.

³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_of_Norwich.

⁴ “When in Our Music,” words by Fred Pratt Green, #36 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.