



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Music and Spirituality: The Nexus of the Connection,”  
a sermon given by Sheila Wotring  
on September 6, 2015

As have many of you, I became a UU having been raised in another faith: in my case, Catholicism. My journey here followed a path fraught with tragedy: my alcoholic, manic depressive father's suicide when I was only 12, coupled with my mother's early accidental death during my senior year at college: these left me with floundering faith. Seeking counsel from my campus priest at confession, he advised me that in order to be “forgiven” for my “sins,” I had to break my engagement with my Protestant fiancé.

So I went shopping for another faith, and having attended a service in every denomination, I decided I was meant to be a UU. But what I missed most about my childhood and young adult faith was the music: the beauty of the Gregorian chant, the organist's sonorous, complex accompaniment at designated places in the Mass, so predictable and so soothing. Also, I think perhaps my grandmother having been a church organist, and my mother's brief career as a concert pianist, further influenced my love of music: my mother's playing the baby grand piano in our living room (I remember Rachmaninoff, or Gershwin, her favorites) drifted upstairs nightly after we four children were ostensibly asleep. It was hard to acclimate to the Protestant hymnal after such a heritage.

I was to discover, however, that her music was indeed the source of my ability to regain a sense of communion with my spirituality I thought was not a component of my new found “rational” Age of Enlightenment faith. Shortly before she died, she performed as soloist for a production of the American composer Menotti's “Amal and the Night Visitors,” a moving opera about the three wise men, and I think this was the beginning of my being able to associate the beauty of music, the opera's libretto, my mother's playing, and spirituality.

The summer after college, as did most women of my era, I married (yes a Protestant) and began attending the UU society in New London, Connecticut. After having three children in five years, and dealing with my husband's increasing alcoholic and abusive behavior, (I was after all an “adult child of an alcoholic” susceptible to the pitfalls thereof), I set off on my own with my three children under the age of 7 on a rather frightening journey: to discover how to recreate myself, as a wage earner and single parent in graduate school, and working part time teaching two courses at the University. This was the early 70's, the second wave of feminism as it was called, and my studies shored me intellectually, while joining the UU society in Storrs, CT, sustained my faith, but there was no church music in that very small group. Luckily I discover *Morning Pro Musica* on GBH at this time, and Robert J. Lurtsema became my morning companion and spiritual guru thru music for the next two decades.

After graduate school, my first full time teaching job brought me to Massachusetts, and to supplement my low starting salary, I became the RE director for the North Parish in North Andover, around 1980. Now a very large society, at the time I had only 25 students enrolled in RE classes, but luckily, the church generously sent me to Star Island for RE week, and it was there, during the nightly ritual of the candlelit climb to the chapel, where in truly spiritual communion, other conferees shared their music and their musings, so my journey was tremendously enriched.

Several years later, my college asked me to assume teaching a course which involved the history of western culture, a requirement for all Fine Arts majors (which included budding musicians), from the caves of Lascaux to the Age of Enlightenment, in 15 weeks. I never got farther than the death of Mozart in 1797, which luckily coincided with the American Revolution as a fait accompli, the publication of Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Women, our Constitution's successful implementation, the beginning of the French Revolution.....the modern era's beginnings. A requirement I added to the course's text and lectures was that each student had to visit the Museum of Fine Arts, attend one classical play, and one classical concert, in addition to the text and class attendance. The college financed their Museum trip with myself as guide and chaperone, the MRT in Lowell let the students attend at minimal cost, and I discovered that every December, just before the semester was over, the Andover Community Chorus and Phillips Academy Orchestra gave a free performance of the *Messiah*.

Most of my students had never been to a classical concert, so this was mind blowing for most of them; a live orchestra of period instruments in a chapel whose acoustics rival Boston's symphony Hall, a chorus of about 75 voices, and a conductor who was as much an entertainer as an accomplished concert master. After the first year, I joined the chorus myself, later convincing my sister, sister-in-law and one of her colleagues to join as well, and for the last twenty years I have done this almost every first Friday in December. Because I am short- ish, I'm usually at the end of the first row, and next to me are placed the tympanist and the trumpeter. That experience transformed me, transporting me back to where I'd begun., Even though, as a Unitarian who does not think of Jesus as God, but as a great and inspiring teacher who guides my life, Handel's music coupled with the beauty of the faith the libretto embodies, has been instrumental (and I could not resist the pun) in bringing me back to where I began....associating faith with a fugue, spiritually with a symphony. The force.

Later, when I later began some post graduate study in the philosophy of language, I came across the ideas of Susan Langer, who hypothesized that the origin of language was through joint ululation and festal dance: think of native American Dance and chant combined, or the Cambodian monks' throat singing and horn playing, or the high pitched grieving sounds of middle eastern women which come from the back of the throats, not unlike the keening of grieving Irish women; all these elemental emotions are expressed in melodic sound, and reach to the roots of our primordial need to communally enact rituals of faith.

Think of Pythagoras, whom we studied so many years ago in algebra, who as both a mathematician and a musician, discovered that "if one string is 2 times longer than the 2<sup>nd</sup>, though equal in tension and thickness, it will sound exactly 1 octave lower; a 3:2 ratio creates an interval of a 5<sup>th</sup>, (C-G). a 4:3 ratio is equal to a fourth (C-F); this is always true, and constant. (I thank Wikipedia for refreshing my memory on these details.) From this he devised a theory of the

universe as a model for a musical system, and vice versa, and concluded that music's effects on people was an "ethos," essential for the formation of one's character. His famous "Music of the Spheres."

Even earlier civilizations than the Greeks used music as "cantation"; the earliest known Hebrew "cants" are mentioned in the Old Testament (which predates Pythagoras). We all remember Joshua and the Battle of Jericho, after seven days of trumpeting by his army, the walls fell down and the heirs of Moses at last lay claim to the Promised Land. Some trumpets! David is described in I Corinthians as an "amateur" musician for Saul, but later as King, he is said to have organized the 1<sup>st</sup> official musicians' choral group for worship. In II Chronicles, Solomon as King augments the voices by 120 trumpets. Music from the Jewish tradition, in psalms (which were sung), hymns, chants by cantors, became the basis for early Christian music, like the Gregorian Chant I loved so much from my childhood Catholicism. And so we have come full circle, I think, and as "Love is the doctrine of this church," I shall quote in closing from my favorite author: "If music be the food of love, play on"<sup>1</sup> So we shall sing "in harmony with the divine."

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, "Twelfth Night," Act I, Scene 1, (ll. 1-3).