



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Music and the Muse,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on November 7, 2010

Last Sunday, when we remembered those who have died, I read to you from Mary Oliver’s poem “When Death Comes,” including these lines:

I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,  
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth  
tending as all music does, toward silence,

Last week the sermon was about silence and this week it’s about music. Music and silence may seem in opposition to one another. But they’re not--they’re actually related. The poet says music tends toward silence. There are times, hearing a particularly beautiful or powerful piece of music, that I love the silence which follows as much as the music itself. At a performance, I sometimes wish people would hold off on their applause for a moment, and just let those notes hang in the air and reverberate in our bodies. Something I love about music in church is the silence that returns when the music ends, and the spaces in between the notes.

Does anyone doubt that music has the power to touch our spirits? To heal us, and inspire us, to comfort and challenge us? As a preacher, I’m regularly reminded of the limitations of words. Music touches a depth that words alone seldom reach. In words that made it onto a bumper sticker, Hans Christian Andersen once said, “Where words fail, music speaks.”

The idea for today’s sermon came from Dan Wilson, a passionate musician himself and the leader of our Spirit Band. A year and a half ago, Dan won my offer of “a sermon of your choice” at our church auction. He knew he wanted to hear a sermon about music. He wondered about the connection between music and the spirit. He asked, “What is the relationship between music and the muse?”

I had to look this up. What I found was that the word music comes from mousa, the Greek word for muse. In ancient Greece, the word mousike was used to mean any of the arts or sciences governed by the Muses. The muses were those goddesses or spirits who inspired literature and the arts, who were the source of the knowledge in poetic lyrics and myths.

If you asked, “Where does music come from?” what would your answer be? From the mechanics of an instrument, a vibrating reed or set of strings? From the genius of the human heart and

mind? I don't know. But my hunch is that though music can well up within us, it comes from somewhere beyond us. Many artists, humbled by the act of creation, see themselves as only the medium through which creativity flows. The ancients, asking themselves the same question, must have answered, "From the muses, of course"--from those sources of creativity and wisdom we cannot see, but whose energy we can feel as it flows through us.

My daughter Emma has been playing the violin since she was five. When she was 9 or 10 the two of us went canoe camping together for a couple of days. A campsite with only two people can be pretty quiet. And something I noticed, was that she hummed to herself much of the time. She had a bunch of tunes in her heart, ones she had learned by ear, and they made it to her lips, though I don't imagine she was conscious of that. She's 15 now, and still does this--driving her to school on Friday, I heard her humming a tune.

For me this is a sign of a connection that that which is holy and good. I think of lines from a spiritual: "Over my head, I hear music in the air. There must be a God somewhere." There's music all around us--over our heads, pulsing through the world, if we have hearts open to hearing it.

Through the ages, mystics and musicians have understood music as coming from somewhere beyond ourselves. Many have imagined the human body itself as a musical instrument. Hildegard of Bingen called herself "the lyre and harp of God's kindness." The Sufi mystic Rumi, in a poem encouraging the spiritual practice of fasting, saw the body as like a wind instrument. He wrote

There's hidden sweetness in the stomach's emptiness.  
We are lutes, no more, no less. If the soundbox  
is stuffed full of anything, no music.  
If the brain and belly are burning clean  
with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.

A few minutes ago we sang "Let every instrument be tuned for praise! / Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise! / And may God give us grace to sing always."

I like to think of us as instruments, tuned for praise. I'm not a musician or a great singer. I won't be doing a solo any time soon. But I love to sing. A year ago, at a conference for ministers, I joined the choir. Singing with my colleagues at our closing worship service brought tears to my eyes, and was a deeply religious experience.

I really appreciate the trained musicians we have here, both our wonderful music director and talented members of our congregation, some of whom are playing today. But I'm sure they would tell you that music is too important to be left only to the experts. Music is meant for all of us. I'm sure they would also tell you that they weren't born musicians--they became good through practice.

If you want to strengthen your body, you exercise. If you want to grow in the spiritual life, you pray, or meditate, or something--you commit to a practice. If you want to deepen your capacity for singing or playing an instrument, you practice. One of the benefits of practice is that you begin to develop a kind of memory--when I go to my prayer place and kneel or sit on the floor, I don't have

to think about it. I can drop down into that time because I've done that for a long time now. I know a number of hymns by heart. This makes them portable--I can sing them in the car, or when I'm out for a walk, or anywhere. A minister friend of mine once asked me, "How many prayers do you know by heart?" It can be helpful, he said, to have prayers in your heart. They will be there when you need them. Practice makes us ready, it provides the opportunity for grace to come in and do the rest. You practice, and then you're ready to play. Let's not forget, in this serious world, that we need to play.

When we were interviewing for a new music director here, Claudia said something that warmed my heart and made me want to work with her. She said she saw music as a ministry. To have this perspective shapes all that you do. It reminds you that you're serving something larger than yourself, that every encounter offers an opportunity to be of use. I love how Claudia's helping us to deepen and broaden our music here, and I think she'd agree that we've only just begun! (But I'm not going to sing that song...)

Bernice Johnson Reagon is the founder of the African American a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock. Talking about congregational singing, she says you don't come to church to leave the same as you came in. Whether you know it or not, you come here to be transformed. She says "'Singing is running this sound through your body. You cannot sing a song and not change your condition.'"<sup>1</sup>

As a young woman she was an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, using her voice, often at great risk, to force social change. She talks about the power song had back then to transform situations and to keep hope going in some very tough circumstances. She says there would be mass meetings when the police or sheriff would come in and that would send a chill through the room. But then someone would start singing, and the others would join in, and she says, they would take that space back from the segregationist authorities. She says, "It's very important not to suggest that singing made fear disappear. Because you really knew the danger, and that did not go anywhere. But singing could help you to stay and hold your stance."

You know at those meetings, when a leader took up a song, and people joined in, they weren't using hymn books. They knew those songs by heart, or learned them on the spot. On Martin Luther King Sunday, we have a breakfast with our friends from Calvary Baptist Church. At the end we stand and sing the Black National Anthem, Lift Every Voice and Sing, and we sing We Shall Overcome. We join hands while we sing and it's a powerful moment. But you know, you can't hold hands and hold onto a song sheet or a hymnal at the same time! You need to know the words.

We Shall Overcome is pretty easy because it's repetitive, and the person leading the song calls out the words to the next verse. Lift Every Voice is a great hymn. It expresses the power that music has to change us. To open our hearts, to nurture our spirits, but not just that--to inspire us to join hands with others, to join our voices with others in order to change things. It describes the struggle of black people in this country for justice and equality and it inspires me to want to be

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<sup>1</sup> Bernice Johnson Reagon, interview with Bill Moyers, available at <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/11232007/profile3.html>

part of that ongoing struggle for liberty and justice. I want to challenge you. Will you learn Lift Every Voice and Sing, so in January you can sing it, without looking at the words?

<sup>2</sup>Pam: “Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty;”

Frank: Not just one or two voices, or most voices. Every voice. Lift every voice and sing. Because we each have a part to play.

Pam: “Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea.”

Frank: We each have a song to sing. Can you see the power and the beauty that’s possible when we join our voices together?

Pam: “Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us; sing a song full of the hope the present has brought us.”

Frank: May music course through our bodies, so that we might be changed, formed into the people we were born to be.

Pam: “Facing the rising sun of our new day begun let us march on till victory is won.”

May the spirit that is behind the music move in us, light a fire in our hearts, and bless us on our way.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> At this point in the sermon, Pam Pearson, a member of the choir, sang lines from *Lift Every Voice and Sing*.