

Overtones and Undertones

Rev. David E. Bumbaugh

[The Unitarian Church in Summit NJ USA](#)

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This morning, as part of our dedication of newly acquired musical instruments, I would like to share aloud with you some random thoughts on music. I know that it seems a very Unitarian Universalist thing to celebrate music by *talking* about it, but that is where my gifts seem to lie.

Music has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. Among my earliest memories is the sound of untrained voices singing gospel songs in the store-front church which was my first religious home. Indeed, my first public performance was as one of those untrained voices--a little boy soprano who sang for revival services and hymn-sings and special events. I sang:
This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ears,
All nature sings and 'round me rings
The music of the spheres.

My uncle, who was my surrogate father, had great difficulty carrying a tune. The only song he could actually sing was "What A Friend We Have In Jesus." He sang it in the bathtub; he hummed it to himself when he was concentrating on a task; he sang it to me as a lullaby. But if his vocal repertoire was limited, he did have a strong sense of rhythm, and so, in the church services, he provided the beat with the big bass drum while my aunt accompanied with the tambourine.

In the dark years, when the great depression still lingered in our neighborhood, and on through the great global conflict which, though it did not make the world safe for democracy, or end all wars, did save the capitalist system--those years when rationing and scarcity limited our options--pleasant Sunday afternoons, were times for long family walks out into the countryside. And as we walked, my aunt led us in song--sometimes folk tunes, more often those same gospel songs we sang in church. And when the war ended, and we finally acquired an aged automobile, the walks were replaced by Sunday afternoon drives, during which the we sang our way along the highway at the incredible speed of thirty-five or sometimes even forty miles an hour, my uncle's drone providing the unvarying foundation of our music making.

When I was twelve, I found my first paying job. After school and on Saturdays, I delivered packages for a local garment store in exchange for the princely wage of three dollars a week. For three years, in all kinds of weather, I cycled around town, into the unfamiliar neighborhoods of the upper-middle-class to deliver the items purchased by housewives on their shopping trips into the center of the city. And as I rode my bicycle,

keeping an eye out for the occasional unleashed dog and the errant drivers with whom I shared the narrow streets, I sang softly to myself.

I earned my way through college by working three nights a week in a factory where we produced trim and door frames for the automobile industry. It was dirty, noisy, repetitive, mindless work which I made tolerable by singing softly to myself--ballads, folk-songs, show tunes, popular tunes, gospel songs and hymns. (Mercifully, the work-place was so noisy, no one else could hear me.) And it was in college that I also learned to listen to music--to sit quietly in a darkened hall and listen while the music--rich, complex, vibrant music--encompassed me and lifted me out of myself.

Music has always been part of my life. For me, music has always been one of the great mysteries of human existence. It is true that music seems to be part of the natural world. After all, birds sing in the trees, cicada's buzz about their release from seventeen years of darkness, whales sing in the depths of the ocean, and wolves serenade the moon. And yet, none of this "music making" begins to touch the variety, the subtlety, the abundance of music in the human context. I sit in a darkened concert hall and watch as seventy-five or a hundred musicians, rehearsed until they have become one organic whole, produce music created by minds long dead, using instruments often created by craftsmen also long dead--the music and the instruments carefully preserved--by constant use--against the ravages of time and forgetfulness and I wonder at the impulse which drives this behavior. And sitting in the dark I seek some logical reason which might explain why I and all these others in the audience are there, silently witnessing this moment, moved in ways I cannot voice, held in my seat by compulsions I do not understand.

I stand with three thousand Unitarian Universalists as together we sing "Rank by rank again we stand, from the four winds gather hither"--a Welsh University tune, whose words have been worked and reworked over the generations--and singing, I feel myself part of something larger and more powerful, a movement through time which has caught me up and swept me along and given shape and definition to my life. I confess that in the course of my routine duties, I sometimes find myself frustrated, wondering whether I have spent my life wisely and well and sometimes, when our movement gets caught up in yet one more evanescent enthusiasm which promises to have little lasting significance for the outside world and threatens only to distract us from our moral and ethical responsibilities, I sigh and wonder is it too late to find an honest job I might do in the few years which remain to me. But while encompassed by the sound of all those voices singing about the journey we are on together and our responsibilities to those who have preceded us and who will follow after us, the doubts and frustrations are banished and my soul is restored. And in moments of quiet reflection, I find myself astounded at the power of music to heal and to mend and to remind and to restore. What is it that happens when, together, we sing with power and abandon? What is the magic which music possesses?

And in quiet times, I listen to a recording of music--some wordless strain--perhaps the "Ashokan Farewell" from Ken Burns' epic documentary of the Civil War, or a passage from Virgil Thompson's "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and I find myself swept by powerful emotions for which have no name but which whisper to me about who I am,

and what I love, and the nature of my commitments. And alone, listening, I weep and I laugh and I emerge with a deepened sense of what matters, even though there is no way to communicate fully what I have felt or give voice to what has transpired.

In music I come closest to entering into the mind and the soul of another human being. Not every composer opens a passage I can enter. But some seem to throw open the door to their thoughts and feelings so widely that I am drawn inside. Mozart and Mendelssohn, Gershwin and Bolling and Vaughan Williams share themselves with me through their music with an immediacy and a power I have no words to express. No matter how familiar the music, when I truly listen, always I find something new, and I feel as if I have been invited into the inmost depths of their minds and souls.

In a book entitled *MUSIC AND THE MIND*, Anthony Storr quotes John Blacking as saying:

[There is so much music in the world that it is reasonable to suppose that music, like language and possibly religion, is a species-specific trait of man.](#)

If that is so, then music must be an inescapable reality in our lives. As Storr suggests elsewhere in his book, music is the way human beings order the chaos that is sound. In my experience, that rings true, and it describes one of the great frustrations of my life.

Walking along Oak Ridge Avenue, I am suddenly aware that up over my left shoulder two squirrels are chasing each other along the lower branches of a maple tree. Their claws clatter with an unmistakable rhythm as they run along the branches. There is a break in the pattern of sound and the leaves of the trees swish with a new tone and rhythm as the little gray acrobats leap from one branch to another and the clattering of their claws resumes. At the same moment, high over head, a flight of geese arrows its way across the sky, the geese, in sequence, calling encouragement to each other. And up in the trees, higher up than the squirrels, the wind moves through the leaves with a low, melancholy sigh. And off to my right, the traffic moving long route 78 toward the City, adds an aboriginal drone of inevitability.

All of this "noise" is happening at once and none of it seems related to anything else. The squirrels show no indication that they are aware of the geese or of me; they are absorbed in their own purposes. By the same token, the geese do not know that I am watching or that the squirrels are there; the wind is profoundly indifferent; and the drivers on route 78, listening to their car radios, think they are functioning as isolates. It is all just noise, just random noise, the chaos of sound. But my mind hears it as related as, part of a larger whole; my mind orders it and hears it as music. And for a moment, standing there on the street, I ache for the ability to capture that music in a form which will allow me to share it so that others can hear what I hear. The music is in my soul, but poor words are the only tools I have to describe the ordering of the chaos of sound which is my response to the world. I love music; I hear it everywhere; I have not the talent to make music. Storr suggests that it is one of the persistent evolutionary ironies that interest in and love of music and talent for making music do not always co-exist in the same person.

If it is true that music is the species specific response of human beings to the chaos that is sound, it must be admitted that not all people order the chaos that is sound in the same manner. Despite the aphorism that music offers a universal language, it must be acknowledged that human beings have created widely divergent kinds of music and that music is as often a barrier and it is a bridge. If you doubt this is true, I would remind you--those of you who are old enough to remember--of the sense of threat and danger and betrayal which accompanied the appearance of jazz, of rock and more recently, of rap music in our culture. Because of its ability to communicate beyond words, to reach directly to the emotions, to create community across time and space, music can, in fact, be profoundly subversive of established patterns. Music has the power to open chasms between the generations and between communities. Generically, music may be a species specific response, but different music has the ability to define different cultures, and changes in music often portend cultural shifts of profound significance.

Perhaps one of the reasons that religious communities do not easily overcome the barriers of separation, one of the reasons why Sunday morning remains the most segregated time of the week in our culture has to do less with intellectual or political differences and more to do with our failure to understand the power of music to define community and to erect walls around that community. Thus, for example, if your experience of worship has as an important element, rich gospel music which invites clapping and swaying and dancing and improvisational singing, the worship of congregations who sit quietly and listen to a baroque organ, some baroque violins, a harpsichord and other period instruments may seem to you strange and perhaps even bloodless. You may leave the service feeling that you were out of place and wondering about people who seem only to worship from the neck up.

If on the other hand, you are accustomed to quiet, attentive listening as a part of your worship experience, to meditating and using music to open your soul to truths often drowned out in the confusion of daily living, the experience of an alternative kind of worship which is loud and busy and enthusiastic may leave you feeling you have attended a wonderful performance, that you have witnessed an exciting and exhausting approach to religion, but when you think about the content you may find yourself feeling just a little left out and wondering about people who seem only to worship from the neck down. I am not suggesting that one form of worship is better than another, or that one form of music is better than another, but that often it is the music and how we use it which defines us as a community.

That certainly was true in that store front church in which I was nurtured so early. And part of my departure from that religious tradition involved embracing a different kind of music to give expression to my spiritual longing. Though I remember the music of my childhood church and can still sing much of it, it is not the vehicle I would use for worship today. It belongs to a different culture and a different community.

What all music has in common, however, is a profound ability to relate us across the boundaries of time and of space. A mystical ability to provide order to the chaos that is our world. How we use music to accomplish this differs from community to community,

from setting to setting, from time to time. Replaying the songs of my childhood in my mind reestablishes my ties with a generation of people who loved me and cared for me and protected me when I needed it most. In my inner ear, I can still hear them singing: "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through." I hear them singing: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." I hear them singing: "What a friend we have in Jesus all our pain and grief to bear." And that music reminds me that though they are long dead, still they are alive in me and important to me. They launched me on the road I have traveled and that road has brought me to a different places and to different music.

I remember the role of folk music in creating community when we struggled to end racism and war in the early years of my ministry. I still hear the voices singing: "Where have all the flowers gone?" I still hear the voices singing: "Oh Freedom, Oh freedom, Oh freedom over me, and before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my lord and be free!" I still hear the voices singing: "We shall overcome, someday." And the music reminds me of where I have been and what has mattered to me and how my community was defined and though my comrades are now separated by time and space and death, they live in me still and remind me of what has mattered to me and what still matters to me. The music sustains the community of memory and hope of which I have been a part.

Here, in this place, I listen to the music and I am invited to share the gifts of unnumbered women and men--the composers who created the music, the artisans who crafted the instruments, the musicians who live with that music and find in it new depths of meaning and expression and who bring the instruments alive so that the voices of the composers and the artistry of the instrument makers may live again, the patrons of the arts who make it possible for the music to be created and preserved and performed through the years. Here, in this place, the music becomes, for me, a mystical experience an opportunity to escape my little local self and enter into a community unbounded by time or space. And here, in the music, I am also reminded of the strange unpredictable nature of our journey through the world. Bach could not have known that his music would be used in this place, so many years after his death, to dedicate a harpsichord and two wonderful violins. The makers of those instruments never imagined that they would end up here, gifts of great generosity intended to enrich our life as a congregation. The artists, drawn together by happenstance and circumstance to create for this brief moment a gift of transient beauty, could never have known that their separate paths would lead them here. And we, from so many different worlds and backgrounds, who have been drawn here into a community of meaning and faith. The music we are about to hear is, my friends, nothing less than a miracle. And, indeed, music is always an invitation to the miraculous.

DEDICATION OF THE INSTRUMENTS:

Last year, the church was given three wonderful gifts. The first of these is the harpsichord which you have heard this morning. Created by William Pferd for his wife, Jane, it was a labor of love. Now it has been given to the church as a gift of love. A number of you contributed to have it restored and renovated. We are grateful to all of you--to the builder,

to the donors, to the restorers and to those who made the restoration possible for the music which graces our lives.

The second two gifts were these baroque violins. Made possible by the generosity of an anonymous donor, these wonderful instruments were rescued from the sterility of a museum display case and set free to make music as their creators intended. We have been enriched by these gifts and the music they make possible and we are profoundly grateful.

In a sense, we cannot dedicate these instruments. They have already been dedicated by the skill of the builders who made them, by the art of the musicians who play them and by the genius of the musicians whose compositions come alive on them. But here, today, we accept these gifts with gratitude and joy that so much effort and talent and genius can live and sing among us. In the words of the Hymn:

How often, making music, we have found
a new dimension in the world of sound,
as worship moved us to a more profound
Alleluia

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may we find the faith to sing always
[Alleluia.](#)