

# *Sunday Afternoon Thoughts on Listening to a Brass Quintet*

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Several weeks ago, I found myself sitting up there on the balcony, waiting for the first Afternoon Music concert of the year to begin. The Westfield Brass Quintet would be presenting music which was all unfamiliar to me. I have never been disappointed in an Afternoon Music presentation, but I was waiting with special anticipation for this concert; for I have a special love of brass instruments. As I sat up there, watching people come into the church, I found myself thinking that this moment was, in some ways, iconographic--symbolic of an important thread which has woven itself into the history not only of this congregation, but of Unitarian Universalism as a movement. From the very beginning, we have been a people with a peculiar love affair for the arts. Our roots go deep into the Italian Renaissance. Music and art and expressions of beauty have always been a significant aspect of our peculiar spirituality. Sponsoring and supporting these kinds of intimate concerts is not an incidental aspect of our community life, but grows out of our central understanding of the good life.

I was sitting quietly, as these thoughts drifted across my mind, when I found myself remembering an incident I hadn't thought about in a long time. Years ago, while I was serving my first congregation after graduating from Seminary, I had occasion to be looking for something in the church files. In the course of my search, I stumbled across a letter, addressed to the Search Committee of the church at the time they were trying to decide whether to invite me to become the candidate for the ministry of that congregation. The letter was from a faculty member of the Theological School, answering the committee's request for his evaluation of me as a potential minister. Now, I know that I should have put the letter back in its folder and gone on about my business. In truth, my curiosity overwhelmed me. I took out the letter and I read it. The author suggested to the committee that while I had a certain rough, undeveloped talent for ministry, the committee needed to understand that because of my background, I was burdened with various deficiencies. I had little acquaintance with real culture--exhibited no evidence of having been exposed to art, to theater, to fine literature, or to good music. In the judgment of the letter writer, I would probably prove to be an adequate minister in a smallish congregation which did not demand much from its professional leader.

I returned the letter to the file drawer, wondering why, in the light of such a ringing recommendation the search committee had dared to invite me to candidate for the post of minister, and why the congregation had voted to call me. It served

me right, I admonished myself, for reading letters I had no business reading. But as I thought about the evaluation the letter offered, I had to admit that basically it was right. The fact is that my background was not what one would expect for a Unitarian Universalist minister. Growing up, as I did, in a poor working-class family, in a desperately poor section of a small city in the mountains of Western Maryland, I had very little exposure to high culture. In my home, the only art on the walls was religious calendar art--pink angels and insipid pictures of Jesus. In my home the theatrical tradition consisted of Saturday movies--mostly westerns. Except for an occasional children's' drama presented for the schools, I cannot remember ever experiencing live theater as a child. It is true that I read voraciously, but not critically. Nor was there anyone to talk with about my reading or to help me address insightful questions to the books I read. Occasionally we took summer vacation trips to visit an Aunt in Brooklyn, but nothing I experienced on those trips would have led me to believe that there were any museums or theaters or concert halls in New York City. For us, high culture was a walk through Times Square and a visit to Coney Island. But music was another matter.

To be sure, I had no experience of fine music. We did not attend concerts; we did not listen to opera; I was a teenager before we acquired a phonograph. But the life of the family was stitched together by music. To begin with, our church was the local corps of the Salvation Army. Among my earliest memories is the sound of the Salvation Army band. Undoubtedly, my love of brass instruments is rooted in that experience. The trumpets, the cornets, the trombones, the double-belled euphonium, the bass drum and the tambourine resounded in the large store-front which served as our sanctuary. The music was not great music, and I would guess that the musicianship was not especially good, but the sounds of those instruments touched my soul in a lasting and permanent way, and made me a lover of music.

Of course, it was not just the brass. It was also the fact that everyone was involved in the making of the music. When the band was not present, someone would belt out tunes on the old upright piano. My Uncle Jim would beat time with the bass drum; my Aunt Martha would shake the tambourine and beat it against her knee and her wrist and her palm, and the entire congregation would clap in rhythm while singing together. I don't know what it sounded like from the outside, but within that communal experience, the music provided a sense of ensorcellment, of enchantment, of being part of something larger and richer with a life, with a vitality of its own.

And that experience carried over into other aspects of life. When we acquired our first automobile, it was, of course an elderly vehicle which had seen much service before it entered our lives. It had no radio. Nor did we miss the radio; for, as the four of us traveled the highway, on our way to visit relatives, or just out for a Sunday afternoon drive, we sang together. We sang the songs we sang in church, and the words and the tunes of those songs burrowed deeply into my soul and shaped my values and concerns in ways I could not have predicted at the time. The songs were melancholy, full of resignation and surrender, offering hope only

in some other world than this. "This world is not my home," we sang. "I'm just a-passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore." We sang, "Tempted and tried, we're oft made to wonder why it should be thus all the day long, when there are others, living about us, never molested though in the wrong." We sang, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home." We sang, "You've got to walk this lonesome valley, you've got to walk it by yourself. There's no one else can walk it for you; you've got to walk it by yourself." We sang, "Will the circle be unbroken, by and by, Lord, by and by? There's a better land a waiting, in the sky, Lord, in the sky." We sang, and in the singing I learned, viscerally, the bone-deep despair, the hopelessness, the disappointment of those who feel that have no portion in the society in which they find themselves. That learning still influences the way I see the world and the judgments I make of society and often it pours itself into my sermons.

I learned to love music. I never learned to make music. When I was quite young, the Salvation Army Captain decided I should learn to play the cornet. He found a shiny, silvery, slightly dented instrument, and set about to teach me. He worked at it like a monk doing penance, but at last he decided that I had no talent for the instrument and gave it up. It was a great disappointment to me. I would have loved to have been able to make that instrument sing. Instead, I was destined to be a boy soprano. Not the kind of boy soprano you may thinking of, with the cultured, trained voice. I had no training. I had a sweet voice, a meticulous pronunciation, and a standard radio-announcer's accent, and so I was dragged from one revival meeting to another, from one hymn-sing to another to sing for churches full of strangers until I was old enough to say no and make it stick.

When I was in the fourth grade, in a burst of noblesse oblige, the school decided to teach some of the children of the poor to play the piano. They gathered us in a classroom for one period a week, and passed out folded cardboard sheets on which keyboards had been printed. We opened them on our desks and spent the class time moving our fingers over the flat cardboard. None of us, of course, had a piano at home we could use to hear the sounds which corresponded to the movements our fingers were making, nor would we have been permitted to take the music books home with us if there had been a piano. Needless to say, none of us ever learned to play the piano. But there was one teacher in that school who did give me a great gift. She brought in her record player and recordings of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade" and she played it. She told us how to listen and what to listen for, and it was as if I were hearing music for the first time. I must tell you that I do not remember that teacher's name, but I remember that she opened for me a door that I would walk through years later, a door into a world of endless delight and profound enrichment.

I never learned to make music; but I learned to love music. It is a constant part of my life. Those of you who have visited me in my study know that there is almost always some kind of music playing--whether I am writing a sermon, drafting a letter, reading a book or talking on the telephone, there is almost always music.

The radio in my car is almost always on. When I am home alone, the music is playing. I find a world without music depressing. And so, it is no wonder that I regard Ken Hopper's ministry to this congregation and to this community one of the great spiritual gifts I have encountered over my years in this profession. Whether it is a Sunday morning service, or a Sunday Afternoon concert, or a special program, Ken has touched my soul over and over again in my more than four years as your minister, and I know that he has performed the same service for many of you during his ten years as Music Director for the Unitarian Congregation in Summit. If it be true, as it is, that the ministry of a Unitarian Universalist Congregation is a shared function, shared by professional and by lay people, by preachers and teachers and leaders and musicians, then Ken has set us all a high standard for competent, dedicated, committed, inspired ministry.

These were the thoughts which drifted through my mind as I sat up there in the balcony, waiting for the concert to begin. I moved around in my ladder-back chair and heard it complain under my weight. The thought passed through my mind that undoubtedly, the excellence of the music goes far to explain why people seem willing to sit so long on these less than comfortable chairs. Then the musicians came out into the room and the music started. It was strange to my ears. I found myself thinking that this was not something which would send me rushing to the record store to see if it was available on a compact disk. But as I gave myself over to the music, as it entered my soul and worked its will with me, I found myself surprised by unexpected beauty and I found my definitions of the beautiful challenged and expanded. The brass instruments did their old magic for me, and I found myself thinking of that grade-school teacher who taught me to listen to Scheherazade, and of occasions in this church when I have been taught to listen differently and have been profoundly enriched by the experience.

As the concert proceeded, and the musicians explained the music, and the composer shared the process by which he created his composition, I found myself wondering about this thing called music. What is it that music does for us that we surround ourselves with it? No other creature uses music as we do. Looking out the open window, I could see small birds fluttering around, flying from branch, to bush, to ground and back again. Birds sing and so do whales, and there is some evidence that occasionally individual members of a species improvise, create their own melodies and songs, and even teach them to others. Human music is undoubtedly rooted in the same primordial impulse, but no creature uses music as we use music. We, alone, build temples for the hearing of music. We alone, adorn every aspect of our lives with music. It stitches together past and present, it communicates to vast audiences truths for which there are no words, it comforts in times of sorrow and travail, it voices our joys and our delights, it amuses and surprises and delights, it challenges and confronts and accuses, it soothes our babes, it marks our great rites of passage, and it sings our passing.

Suddenly, that Sunday afternoon, I was aware of new presence in the chapel. As the musicians filled the space with the sound of brass instruments, a small black spider crawled along one of the decorative corners of the column in front of me.

She paused for a moment, as if contemplating the abyss upon which she had stumbled. She could have turned and gone back the way she had come, but that is not the way of the spider. Suddenly, she cast her tiny body into the air, and on a silken thread too slender for me to see it, she lowered herself down into the vast nothingness. Down and down she descended until she touched another surface. Then she climbed back up her silken thread to the decorated corner. Again she cast herself into empty air and descended an invisible thread, only to climb up again. Slowly, steadily, the spider conquered the abyss, building an invisible web across a vast emptiness, creating connections where there had been none, linking distant places, taming the abyss and making the empty air her home.

It occurred to me that this is what music does for us. Music is the web which bridges the "chasm of our separateness." Music tames the chaos of existence, linking us to each other, despite the daunting distances of time and place and culture and convention. In music we hear and understand the unity of the human experience in ways not otherwise available to us. Our music is older than our words, and making music together is older than any theological system, older than any form of government, and keening over our loss and rejoicing in our blessings is older than any psalm or lament. The songs we sing to our babies are amazingly similar, regardless of the language or culture by which we have been shaped. Music invites us into the innermost recesses of another human soul, there to discover the unity which makes us one, "despite time and death and the space between the stars." Music is the web we weave to allow ourselves to brave the abyss, to connect across dauntingly empty spaces, to discover, in each other and in the world we share, a beauty which makes this world luminous and rich and filled with grace.

As a very little boy, growing up in a community often defined by hopelessness and despair, a community which often felt isolated and cut off, having no portion in the outside world, we faced the darkness, we tamed the chaos, we gained the courage to live by singing and by making music. It is the most human of the arts, the closest to the religious impulse. It is the web we weave across the chasm of time and space, making one community of all who have ever lived, sending a message to those who shall inherit this world from our hands. And this is the message: This is our song, received from those who were here before us, enriched by our living; sing our song with your voices, make it sing with your instruments and the silence which has fallen on us will be broken.