



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

**With A Song in MY Heart:
A sermon about Music**

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As you know, I grew up in Minneapolis, on the Great Plains, and my memories of landscapes are most profoundly from our trips to my Uncle's farm in Western Minnesota and our vacations in the pine forest and lake country in Northern Minnesota. At my Uncle's farm, the land was open and big, dominated by distance and by wind. I always felt free there. Up North it was different; silence was dominant and darkness, stillness and I felt not so much free as secure.

Open and closed. Open and closed. Sound and silence. Remember that song – the sounds of silence? Hello darkness my old friend? Both places in my childhood had their particular sound – I am not sure I can describe them – the plains had an open and wide sound, brought on, I would guess by the wind and the sense of distance. The woods were quiet and still. One of my all time favorite songs is Bob Dylan's Girl of the North Country – it captures that closed in, quiet, dark sense of the northern woods. The plains remind me more of Bach - I always experience space in Bach's music; or in the Köln Concerto by Keith Jarrett or even more specifically a song by Jarrett and Jan Garbarek called My Song.

Open and closed. One two three four. A one and a two – at home, my family listened every Sunday night to Lawrence Welk – my Dad's favorite musician.

I hear those sounds – Dylan or Jarrett, Lawrence Welk, and a world appears to me, and I can see the great distance of the plains, the dark woods, and my Father's face.

The Aborigines of Australia believe that the creation of the world happened through song. In that time before time, the ancestors of us all - of all living things - began to sing the world into existence. And as they did, as mountains were sung into existence or rivers, or trees and flowers, certain melodies came out so that everything thing in the world has its own melody. And those melodies met and interwove and harmonies were created.

The ancestors, as they wandered through the world they had created through song, left trails of notes and words that found expressions in the features of the landscape. These trails are called songlines. An aborigine can walk along these songlines - and these are real paths, real trails - and sing them. These are actual songs telling of the events in the lives of the ancestors.

And, the aborigines believe it is our job to keep singing the songs. In that way we keep the creation going. The earth reveals itself in song and our lives are measured in song. The aborigines of Australia are not the only ones who believe this. Native people around the world have traded song as the means of peace along boundaries. Songs told Inuit travelers how to navigate the polar seas.

What melody does the Arroyo Seco sing? What is the tune for the San Gabriel Mountains? What is the melody of the Sierras or the Mojave? How about the 210?

It is a wonderful way of looking at the world, I believe. I know that I look for order in what often seems like a chaotic existence; I want to believe that I can live in harmony - in harmony with you, in harmony with those I love, in harmony with the world around me. And so this idea that the world was sung into existence is very appealing.

Bruce Chatwin who wrote about the Australian Aborigines in the book Songlines writes this: I have a vision of the Songlines stretching across the continents and ages; that wherever humans have trodden they have left a trail of song [of which we may, now and then, catch an echo]; and that these trails must reach back, in time and space, to an isolated

pocket in the African savanna, where that first person opened a mouth in defiance of the terrors around, and shouted the opening stanza of the world song, 'I AM!'

I have read before from Sigurd Olsen's 'The Singing Wilderness' about the Boundary Waters canoe Wilderness Area in Northern Minnesota, and his comment that humans have been listening for the song of wilderness since the beginning of history. Annie Dillard in describing a religious experience writes of it as if she were a bell, lifted and struck.

Music. It has been there since the beginning of history. Since someone hit a rock or a piece of wood or their chest and created a rhythm. A one and a two. Probably a rhythm in sympathy with the beating of the heart. And then the sounds of the world – the wind and the call of a bird, the human voice. Rhythm got married to melody and music was born. A way of saying 'I AM.' A way to describe the world – the external and the internal world.

We seem not to be able to human without music. All human cultures have music – an astonishing variety of kinds of music but it is there universally. What's your favorite song? Remember a time you fell in love and music was a part – I remember 'Heavy Weather' by Weather Report and Wayne Shorter's saxophone. I remember listening to Henryk Gorecki's 'Symphony Of Sorrowful Songs' sung by Dawn Upshaw the night of September 11, 2001 in Washington DC in a darkened sanctuary as we listened to fighter planes patrolling the sky above the nation's capital. In our minds' eyes we could still see the Pentagon and the Twin Towers in flames, the awful fall of persons the length of the World Trade center towers. No words could match the music; Gorecki's songs captured the terrible sorrow of that day

A couple of years ago, Joshua Bell, a violin star, took his Stradivarius violin and played for 45 minutes at a subway station in Washington DC. He played six classical violin selections, including a very difficult and beautiful Bach piece. He had his case out for donations. In 45 minutes he got \$32 from 27 people and just 7 people stopped to listen. 1097 people in total passed by in those 45 minutes. So much for music.

On the other side, Vedran Smailovic who became known as the Cellist of Sarajevo, was a musician who defied the city's snipers by playing for 22 successive days in the rubble of an explosion that claimed the lives of 22 of his fellow Bosnians as they lined up to buy bread. He played off and on for two years in Sarajevo, in public, at different times to foil snipers, and his playing provided courage and solace for many in that war torn town.

Music. Sublime and ridiculous. Beautiful or wrenching, melodic and disharmonious. Tosca and Tommy. Beethoven and B. B. King and Louis Armstrong and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Shankar and Schumann. Gilberto Gil singing 'No Woman No Cry' by Bob Marley. Riots followed the first public performance of Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring.' Bob Dylan was booed at the Newport Folk Festival when he played an electric guitar. The Catholic Church banned the musical interval of an augmented fourth, the distance between C and F-sharp because it seemed so dissonant as to be the work of the devil. People screamed with anticipation for Elvis and the Beatles.

Music – since the beginnings of religion and the human quest to relate to and describe the holy, music has been at the center. David soothing Saul with his lyre; the Psalms are songs, meant to be sung in the temple. Bach said all his music was a simple attempt to glorify God [he also said that playing was simple – all you have to do it hit the right notes at the right time!]

Indian ragas are often prayers; tabla players find ecstatic trances. All around the world, music and the spirit are linked.

So we have music here in our services, and the purpose of music is to help to bring us closer to the sacred. The purpose of worship, as Abraham Heschel said, is to prepare us for sacred moments, for those moments when the holy breaks in on us.

Now I know that we all have our likes and our dislikes in music and that sometimes we will translate likes and dislikes into value judgments – that one kind of music is better than another. I am reminded of a conversation the wonderful soprano Renee Fleming had with the wonderful rock and roll songwriter and performer Elvis Costello. Fleming started out as a jazz singer and moved on to opera; she has a gorgeous voice. She stated that classical music is

the most artificial music of all, created from the head, mostly an intellectual activity. Jazz, she said, or folk, or perhaps especially blues, come from the heart, and, she went on, since we are both head and heart, both are important, and one is not better than the other.

So, just because we like – for whatever reason – one kind of music more than another does not mean it is better than another type of music. There is certainly a lot of very mediocre classical music, just as there is a lot of mediocre jazz or rhythm and blues – but some in each kind soars and brings us closer to the heart of life.

Let me go back to the role music plays in worship. I have shared before Emerson's criticism of Unitarian worship as being for the neck up only and that it was a 'corpse cold' religion. Emerson fully believed that we all seek passion in our living; we desire to be connected in a real and visceral way to something greater, something deeper.

He did not mean to lose our head in favor of the heart, but to combine them. Whatever else UUs might be, we do, and I hope always will, celebrate the intellect, that we also THINK about what we believe and what we hold to be right and true, that we always place reason at the very center of our faith, that we question and wonder.

Our worship service intends, somehow, to deepen connection in three ways – first of all with our selves, with that part of us we call the soul, the spirit, that sense of ourselves where integrity and identity meet. Secondly, we connect with each other – first with those in this community, sitting together in this room matters a great deal, and this is symbolic of our connection with the whole world, the world of human community, the world of nature. And thirdly, we connect with the transcendent – with God, with Goddess, with all the gods and goddesses of our lives, with all that is holy, the sacred, the divine – you pick the word.

So this year as we think together about our future and music on Sunday morning, remember that the goal of our faith is to help prepare us for sacred moments, and to help us create connections.

There is an old saying that God comes into a church through many doors and windows but the devil comes in through the music program – actually the saying is through the choir – but look at them over here – have you ever seen such an angelic group? Of course the point is that our love of one music type or another is just a matter of taste, and that any music can be an avenue to the transcendent.

And, as we know music changes and tastes do too. A recent study about church growth suggested that churches that had drums grew, those without did not. But, churches that have poor music, drums or not, will never sustain themselves, nor bring out the best in the human spirit.

I assume – perhaps I am wrong – but this is what I assume – I assume that you hope my sermons will both comfort and challenge and inspire. You come here with head and heart and soul seeking sustenance. I assume – maybe this is wrong too – that the readings should do the same. That in the words spoken here Sunday morning – mine or others, you look for the words and sentences, the thoughts, that might unlock something, might break a bind, might deepen a connection – might urge you to a life lived more fully.

Yes? Or no? And so the same with music? Not music just to please you but music to help you – to challenge or to comfort? To inspire or to encourage, to speak to your head, your heart and your soul? Yes? Or no?

I am no fool not to realize that there can be conflict in this so I ask all of you for your patience and indulgence as we listen to each other this year. We have claimed, from the very beginning that ours is a progressive faith, that we all can continue to grow. From our beginnings we have looked forward, not back. We have not ignored the past but have not been bound by it. We still can look to ancient wisdom but not ignore modern wisdom. Truth is not the property of any age. We read the Bible and Shakespeare and Emerson, but not just them. We look to Mary Oliver and Szyborska, Wendell Berry and others – contemporaries.

So with music, too. We still should hear Bach and Beethoven, and Mozart, but also Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello, Duke Ellington and Thelonius Monk, David Byrne and Corrine Bailey Rae, Gnarl Barkley and Iris Dement and Jerry

Garcia, Natacha Atlas and Anouska Shankar, and Tom Yeakle and Jim Lang. Music hasn't stopped finding ways to express something deep about the world and our lives, and so the music we listen to must and will change – a blend of old and new. Helping us prepare for sacred moments.

So, friends, sit back and listen, and sing and dance. Let the music of your life be heard and hear the music of the lives around you.

Oh there is a song in my heart