

"Making Music Together"
Rev. Karen Fraser Gitlitz
Unitarian Fellowship of Salt Spring Island
All-Island Service
April 26, 2009

Reading by Karl Paulnak

From the welcome address to the freshman class at Boston Conservatory, given by Karl Paulnak, pianist and director of music division at Boston Conservatory:

The first people to understand how music really works were the ancient Greeks. . . . The Greeks said that music and astronomy were two sides of the same coin. Astronomy was seen as the study of relationships between observable, permanent, external objects, and music was seen as the study of relationships between invisible, internal, hidden objects. . .

I bet that you have never been to a wedding where there was absolutely no music. There might have been only a little music, there might have been some really bad music, but I bet you there was some music. And something very predictable happens at weddings-people get all pent up with all kinds of emotions, and then there's some musical moment where the action of the wedding stops and someone sings or plays the flute or something. And even if the music is lame, even if the quality isn't good, predictably 30 or 40 percent of the people who are going to cry at a wedding cry a couple of moments after the music starts. Why? The Greeks. Music allows us to move around those big invisible pieces of ourselves and rearrange our insides so that we can express what we feel even when we can't talk about it.

Anthem "One Voice" by Ruth Moody
(Pick-up Sticks and All Island Choir, directed by Phil Hallman)

This is the sound of one voice
One spirit, one voice
The sound of one who makes a choice
This is the sound of one voice
This is the sound of one voice

This is the sound of voices two
The sound of me singing with you
Helpin' each other to make it through
This is the sound of voices two
This is the sound of voices two

This is the sound of voices three
Singin' together in harmony
Surrendering to the mystery

This is the sound of voices three
This is the sound of voices three

This is the sound of all of us
Singin' with love and the will to trust
Leave the rest behind it will turn to dust
This is the sound of all of us
This is the sound of all of us

This is the sound of one voice
One people, one voice
A song for every one of us
This is the sound of one voice
This is the sound of one voice

Sermon "Making Music Together" Karen Fraser Gitlitz

What is the sound of one voice?

From earliest times, voice – an extension of breath – has been a sign of life: here I am, I speak, I act, I am alive.

Karl Paulnack, author of our reading, tells the story of Olivier Messaien, the French composer, who, when incarcerated in a concentration camp during the second World War, composed a quartet for the four instruments available – piano, violin, cello and clarinet. This “Quartet for the end of time,” as it was called, was then performed in the camp, for about 2,000 prisoners and guards.

Paulnack asks: why do this? Why choose to compose and perform in such a time and place, in the midst of the struggle to get enough to eat, to survive, to stay alive? Why do we find such evidence of music, art and poetry created in the camps, and similar places, by people experiencing such horrific conditions?

Paulnack suggests that the answer must have something to do with survival. Making music must be a helpful survival tool. Perhaps it is a way of saying “Not only am I alive, but my life has meaning” when everything around suggested meaninglessness and despair. Perhaps it is the very act of making such a statement that keeps hope and will alive.

[For Paulnack's lecture, see <http://pianotree.wordpress.com/2008/09/06/inspirational-speech/>]

I had long wanted to be able to sing. I am one of those many people who left childhood having taken a couple of adult comments to heart, and decided that I should NEVER sing anywhere other than the shower, and maybe even not there.

I carried that hurt with me for many years. I was well into adulthood when I decided – with encouragement -- to take a risk. A man I respected promised that he could work with

anyone who joined his choir. He knew that not everyone would end up being able to sing a Mozart aria, but he said that everyone can learn to follow a musical line in some capacity.

When I went up to him later, privately, and asked if that was really true, he asked me what part I sang. I said ‘the part that keeps quiet’.

He got me to mimic sounds on the piano, and shortly thereafter said “there is nothing wrong with your voice, you just need practice training it, to be able to hear what’s being played, and follow it.”

This seemed pragmatic, reasonable, and not so scary. So I joined the choir. I did not become a diva. I did find it difficult. But not in the way I expected. Experience gave me more insight into what I had been avoiding. No wonder criticism had left me feeling crushed. I felt exposed and vulnerable every time my voice was distinguishable. Leaving aside all of our normal adult stuff about judgment and what people may or may not be thinking about us, there is the simple fact that it is physically difficult to sing when we’re closed up, and protecting ourselves.

I found opening up awkward: it left me feeling a bit like some newborn creature that hadn’t quite learned how to open its wings – and I’d seen enough discovery channel documentaries (let alone life experience) to know the danger of not being in a position to defend myself. And not just from others – but from my own emotions, which might well up and catch me by surprise, leaving me more vulnerable.

Singing required a whole different theological orientation – it required a belief that I was ok, my emotions and feelings were ok, and that I deserved to take up time and space. Singing requires trust in ourselves and each other.

Giving voice to song creates space for our feelings – gives them respect, if you will.

Music, as the ancient Greeks had observed, is a laboratory of the soul.

And this is just one voice, one choice.

What if there is more than one voice?

**Pick-up Sticks sing: This is the sound of voices two
The sound of me singing with you
Helpin’ each other to make it through
This is the sound of voices two
This is the sound of voices two.**

With two voices, we have a relationship. We move from action to interaction.

Teresa Leite, a music therapist, tells of her long-term work with people dealing with chaos and extreme life challenges. She is a sort of musical companion, setting up a conversation where she and another person can play with sound. They set up patterns, take turns leading and following, listening and intervening – practicing a range of human responses, all without need to draw on words.

This relationship two people form as they make music together is just as profound as any other type of relationship.

A successful musical relationship adds to our storehouse of positive experiences, becoming a part of our life story.

At one point I worked at a drop in centre, where a music therapist would come once a week. She sat and talked to the women, asking if they had any songs they wanted to sing. In an environment that was quite chaotic, people would gather ‘round. One person might suggest a song, and sometimes (not always) another person might join in – an experience of togetherness that was rare in that environment. Some of the songs were beautiful, some silly, some sentimental and some sad.

Often the songs harkened back to an earlier time in people’s lives – perhaps recalling good times – but always they brought a reminder of a larger experience than the current existence on the street.

As I thought back to experiences at camps and other places, singing songs from my own life history – songs that I remembered from childhood, or a particular time in my life, I remember the feeling of that circle, the bond that was created. Something was shared that did not need words, something felt that defied explanation – an interior object, the Greeks would have said.

Three of the churches I where I was a lay person or a student had choirs. And in all three churches, the choir was a special group, with a strong sense of identity.

Musical experiences can be both an experience and a symbol of community. A symbol is a concrete sensory experience that has meaning beyond itself. When we speak of the growth of trees (something we can see and touch) and understand something about our own lives in that growth, the tree is functioning as a symbol.

Some of our most powerful symbols have to do with our kinesthetic experience of our own bodies. Eating and digesting are examples of this: when digestion stands for a way of understanding the world, for example. Music is such a symbol, because making music is a bodily experience.

When harmony – a musical experience – stands for our understanding of how to live in community, it rests on our own experience of learning to hold a part as others sing theirs – for some of us this comes more naturally than others, but most of us have to work at it. The

concentration required to sing up when the person beside me is singing down, says something about the work of living together in community: the work of expressing ourselves clearly, stating difficult feelings openly and without attachment, responding to the other person without dominating, or being submerged by them.

In community, we each have our part. But what if there are many voices, so many that an individual cannot be distinguished. What happens, then?

**Pick-up Sticks sing: This is the sound of all of us
Singin' with love and the will to trust
Leave the rest behind and it will turn to dust
This is the sound of all of us
This is the sound of all of us.**

Some of my favourite singing experiences have been in large groups – the first time I sang at Sunday morning worship at our Canadian Unitarian Council annual meeting, the hair stood up on the back of my neck. The first time I sang at the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly – with over a thousand people in the hall – tears formed in the corners of my eyes, and the person beside me wept openly.

In the Hindu tradition, the sacred syllable “Aum” is the sound of the life-breath of the universe. That sound is both prayer and recipient, and it is the basis of all sounds. Chanting “Aum” is believed to access healing, and free one from all sorts of uncomfortable states.

In the Jewish tradition in the book of Genesis, also held sacred in Christianity, the word for breath, RUAH, is also the word for spirit, and one of the words for wind. RUAH is used to refer to those things which are life-giving, as well as those things that are in motion, and transient. Life itself, of course, is transient.

At the beginning of Genesis, as the story goes, we are told that the breath, wind, or spirit of God was hovering over the primeval deep – a sort of pregnant waiting that is intimately connected to all that comes after.

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, we learn about the creative force of the universe by studying our own creativity. The first action is like breath, or wind. The formation of creatures is like pottery.

These stories may or may not hold meaning for you. But like all religious stories, they offer insight into the human condition. Describing the creative force of the universe by reference to breath and pottery links the daily necessities of breathing and making containers for food and water with what we would call the arts – song or music, and the visual arts.

Perhaps, as we participate in what our culture likes to cordon off with the label 'arts and entertainment' we are participating in the very stuff of life.

The theological word for this sort of experience is salvation. I know, this is a word that Unitarians sometimes shy away from. It has a lot of negative connotations, mostly because of the way that some religious traditions have tried to set down laws about what will or will not bring them salvation.

But salvation means healing, or bringing to wholeness, and so really it is a concern for each of us, and it is not something that someone else can dictate.

We each need to ask what brings us wholeness, and how we can be whole people.

Acceptance is a part of it. We cannot heal by avoiding the parts of ourselves that feel hurt or broken. Neither can we heal by attempting to remove all traces of the experience of brokenness – this would be wishful thinking.

When I look at the people I admire, they are self aware in a way that is not blaming, and they are not ashamed of themselves. Neither do they think of themselves as perfect. The best word, I think, is comfort. They have a degree of comfort and awareness of who they are.

Karl Paulnack tells the story of a man, a pilot, who attended a concert at his retirement home. During the concert he began to weep, and when the pianist explained at the end of the piece that the composer, Aaron Copeland, had written the music for a friend, a pilot, lost in the war, the man was so disturbed, he had to leave the room. Later, he came to talk to the pianist. During the music he'd remembered a friend he hadn't thought of in years – a pilot like himself who'd died in wartime. He was so disturbed, he said, that the music had affected him in this way.

Music does affect us. When we listen to it, and especially when we make it, we have the opportunity to actively engage with our own inner movements.

In these challenging times, we must nurture and encourage these ways of relating to our internal objects, not just one-on-one but in groups, in our communities.

Singing is one way to do this.

When we are singing, we are singing our own salvation.

So sing out loud!

Amen. Blessed be.