

Freeing Our Voices for Worship

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December 2, 2012

Do you know why UU's are generally not known for our singing? We are always reading ahead to see if we agree with the words. All joking aside, today I am going to share with you why singing is an important part of our liberal religious tradition and community life.

Last year, I went on a trip of a lifetime. Ten days in Italy traveling with my mother. Our itinerary included Venice, Florence, and Rome. Not enough time to see everything in those extraordinary places but enough time to enjoy many sights and flavors. The way I like to travel is to carefully plan certain activities and then allow time for serendipity to unfold. On our last day in Florence, we took a walk following a guidebook that I had brought along. After following the map, we just happened to turn down a side street and discovered a lovely square and church.

The church was Santissima Annunziata dedicated to the Virgin Mary. As you know, Italy is a very Catholic country to say the least. So, this was not the first (or last) time we wandered into a church to find a Mass being offered. However, this time my mother and I were delighted to discover that the breath-taking interior was filled with people and the gold tabernacle was glimmering with hundreds of candles.

Only later did we figure out that we happened to be there for the Feast of the Annunciation, the most important date for this Marian shrine. The importance of the ritual was not lost on us given that the pews closest to the altar were filled with priests wearing their vestments. I will never forget the sound of all those male voices joined together in chanting. With the beautiful frescoes of saints above us and the resonance of the priests surrounding us, my spirit was lifted to a different plane, ancient, holy, set apart from every day existence.

During the Radical Reformation, our spiritual ancestors challenged the established order in which the common people had been prohibited from singing in church. Not unlike that Mass where the congregation joined in the prayers but singing was left to professionals. Only the clergy (or a trained choir) sang the psalms in Latin.

This morning's reading was by John Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement with his brother Charles Wesley. The Wesley brothers and Martin Luther were key reformers who upheld that singing should not be restricted to the elect but shared by the entire congregation. All people should sing God's praise in corporate worship. In many other religious traditions, participation in chanting or singing is a key element of the worship experience.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have worked diligently to make sure the words of our hymnals are inclusive and consistent with our principles. Over time we have included songs from beyond the Judeo Christian tradition. Even as our repertoire has changed, we have not abandoned the ritual of singing hymns and songs together during our Sunday services. In my guest speaking at various Unitarian Universalist churches, I have yet to find a congregation that does not have music and congregational singing as a part of the worship experience. Why? By joining our voices in song, we breathe together. Our individual voices blend in harmony. We become part of a corporate body, a religious community. Music has a power to open our hearts and minds to new insights. We might even have an experience of transcending mystery and wonder in which we are held in the loving embrace of the Sacred. Singing familiar hymns can be a source of strength and healing especially during rites of passage.

When I was serving Channing Memorial Church in Newport, RI, the congregation was tentative about singing. Part of my ministry included encouraging more spirited participation. Instead of half-heartedly singing "Come sing a song with me" or "Love will Guide Us" singing like you mean it. Over time, by teaching hymns and making tunes more familiar with repetition, the sound in the sanctuary did improve.

However, without fail after a service when I once again lifted up the importance of singing together, a member would pull me aside and confess "Amy, I can NOT sing" and jokingly tell me that he or she actually did everyone a favor by NOT joining in. One woman explained to me that her Music Teacher in sixth grade told her that she was tone deaf. Ever since, she mouthed the words. Now, this was a longtime member who was active in many aspects of church life from the Board to caregiving to the small group ministry program. She was a confident person who used her voice to lead, to comfort and to share in many settings. And yet, because of what this teacher had told her when she

was 11, for over fifty years, she had carried this idea that her singing voice would somehow take away from the weekly service.

I understand this anxiety. For many years I was terrified of singing. I spent most of my growing up participating in plays. I have always loved speaking and dancing in front of others. However, whenever it came time for the local theatre or my school to put on a Musical, I signed up for the stage crew. I never even auditioned for Grease, Sweeney Todd or Carousel. Cold readings and two-minute monologues I could offer at the drop of a hat, just do not ask me to sing!

As a teenager with dreams of becoming a professional actor, I recognized that this was a fear that I needed to address. I took singing classes. Despite all the practice and vocal exercises, I broke into tears before going on stage. Somehow I got through the recital but it was my acting not my singing that carried me along. My high school teacher gave me a hug and told me that some day I would be able to save my tears for the dressing room.

Once I entered college as a Drama Major, I still did not audition for musicals but I signed up for an Alexander Technique class. Alexander Technique is a method for freeing your voice. More than that, it offers exercises and training to shed habitual tension and recover the natural alignment of your body to move with greater ease. My professor Jane Heinrich assured all of us that all of us were born with the ability to sing. Despite our objections, she said that very few people are actually tone deaf. All people can learn to sing, to use our voices more powerfully, and to become an effective speaker.

One of the first steps in freeing our voices is to recognize if we carry any baggage that keeps us from making a joyful noise. After a period of reflection and soul-searching, a memory became conscious that I had never shared before. Once while singing in Music Class in my new school, Thaddeus a popular boy who was in the row behind me, leaned forward and said to me with disdain, “Why do you sing so loud?”

It is amazing what power words can have on us. I was carrying around this comment like a yoke around my neck. In my unconscious attempt to blend in at my new school, I had cut off my ability to sing with the same enjoyment and positive energy as other types of performing arts.

If you are shy about singing or somehow carry the conviction that you cannot sing, please take sometime to reflect on why you feel that way. What is blocking your open participation in song? Is there a physical injury like neck, throat or back pain that keeps singing from being a carefree experience? Or do you carry some memory or experience that causes you to tense up or become silent?

Singing is an important part of worship. Our hymnal has some familiar songs and others take practice. It can be difficult especially if you do not read music to learn how to sing along. For this reason, we can sometimes feel insecure about hitting a bum note.

Instead of worrying about making a mistake, I invite you to “Sing lustily and with good courage” like John Wesley instructs. Our liberal religious faith upholds your inherent worth and the importance of your active participation. Of course, you will always be welcome here if for whatever reason you cannot or choose not to sing. We invite you to stretch not only your mind but also your heart and spirit in daring to sing. As Wesley writes, “Let not a single degree of weakness or weariness hinder you, take it up, and you will find a blessing.” After all, singing and music is an elemental part of life.

As Carolyn Sloan reminds us “When we enter the world, we do so, not silently, but with a cry, a pronouncement of arrival – ‘I am here!’ Before we can speak, we moan, we babble. We fill the air with our own voices, feeling ourselves vibrate enjoying the sensation that our own bodies create. We are our first song. Every syllable, every coo, every heartbeat and pair of hands clapping, every set of lips humming, every breath, every cry creates yet another movement in the song of life. We are music. Music is our birthright.”

This is the philosophy of *Music Together*, a program designed for children and their caregivers to make music together. I took the weekly workshop when my then infant daughter was barely old enough to sit up unassisted. Our leader, Christopher Carbone, taught us songs, rhymes and movements to play with our babies. What I will never forget was that even before knowing words, these babies would harmonize with their voices. We are all born with musical abilities.

My daughter Liza is almost four. She knows many songs from her family and her school. It is a delight to hear her simply break into song. Yesterday, as she was

balancing along a small wall in our neighborhood, Liza flung her arms wide singing “Fall is in the air! Fall is everywhere! In the wind, in the grasses, the flowers, the trees...” As you can imagine, this joyful declaration opens my heart to the wonders that surround us.

I invite you to remember a time in your life when your very being opened in song. Perhaps as a child you sang while skipping to a favorite place. Maybe you participated in singing around a campfire. A tender memory of singing to a loved one. Was there a time here at Stevens Chapel when the singing of a hymn was deeply moving? Is there a song that you know by heart that brings you strength or comfort? Perhaps it is “Carry the flame” that ends our time together each week as we hold hands in a circle.

Today is December 1st. Is there anyone here with a birthday this week? Month? Wonderful! Let’s sing Happy Birthday to _____.

[Sing: “Happy Birthday!”]

Thank you. Do you know that song is the most recognized song in the English language? It has also been translated into at least 18 languages. The melody come from a lesser-known song called “Good Morning to All” that two sisters, Patty and Mildred Hill wrote as a song for children in 1893. How is it that we all can break out into this song at a moment’s notice? Singing is a way to celebrate one another; a way in which we enter into the simple joy of living. This is not an intellectual exercise.

Now, with the same gusto with which we celebrated _____ let’s join in singing our next hymn. Let’s sing with the same confidence, joy and freedom of expression. The song is a familiar one “This Little Light of Mine” the verses printed in your order of service. This is a song of praise celebrating the spark of creation within you and our ability to bring light and love into our shared world. Sing it like you mean it! Please rise as you as you are able.