

SONGS OF OUR LIVES: TELLING OUR STORIES, SINGING OUR SONGS!

*Take Me Home Country Roads, Sunshine on My Shoulder, Leaving on a Jet Plane,
Blowin' in the Wind, Rocky Mtn High, We Shall Overcome,
This Land is Your Land, Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Sound of Silence,
The Hills are Alive with the Sound of Music, My Favorite Things,
Christmas Carols (English & Deutsch), Church Hymns & Youth Songs*

When I was in high school, I started writing songs. Many had religious or spiritual themes, most dealt with nature, and though I liked them at the time, I'm not sure I want to dig that far back into my past to bore you with any of them! I haven't written that much in the way of lyrics or poetry lo these many years as an adult, but occasionally I will put something together for a service or event. Most of my writing over the last 4 decades has been sermons and reports! The sermons certainly also tell my story, but the songs we sing tell our stories in ways that touch deep places in the soul!

When new people come to the church, one of my favorite things is to hear them tell their stories of the journey that brought them to our community. Even in the short forms that we use for such moments, the journeys of our lives are amazing. There are usually a few similarities, but our stories are each different and each wonderful. At Pacific Unitarian several years ago a group formed to write and share their autobiographies. The members found it to be a challenging but wonderful group and activity. Many of us have at one time or another written our own obituaries for some workshop or another, and even that activity can be quite thought provoking—how do we want our lives to turn out, what do we want on our tombstones, how do we want to be remembered? The stories we tell about ourselves and the songs that describe our lives are tremendously important!

I know that we have shared songs during I-pod Sundays previously, and you may have done this during those services, but today I want to invite us each to think again about the songs that tell our stories today, either songs that we

wrote or songs that were important to us at different stages of our journeys. Which songs really tell our story? Which songs describe what we were experiencing? Which songs tell of our hopes, dreams, longings, and fears? Music so often captures feelings in a way that conversation and written prose will not do. Collections of hit songs from different eras, often organized by decade, have long been popular. Those who lived through World War II often can remember the songs of the 40s, while those of us born later may remember the energy of the 50s, or the upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement or Anti-war efforts of the 60s and 70s, or unique things about succeeding decades. One musical event, Woodstock, in many ways still defines my generation more than 4 decades after the event. We each have our songs, the ones that tell the story of our era and the ones that tell our own individual stories. Particularly the songs we sung and heard when we were adolescents seem to stick with us throughout our lives.

As much as our individual stories may differ, the songs of our era and the experiences that we shared as an age cohort often capture a big portion of our journeys. Just trying to explain some experiences to someone from a different generation is a good illustration of that commonality that we share with our age cohort but not with other groups! If we have sung the songs or danced to the songs, they tend to be in our bodies as much as in our memories, so that the songs I sang and played on the guitar in the high school years are much easier to remember than most others. For dancers, the music to which they have danced tends to stay with them. Music creates body and soul memories as much as just auditory memories! The part of the country or world that we come from also makes a difference in the songs that we really deeply know, and this too is part of our individual and family stories.

Often, by singing the songs or listening to the songs and music of our era we can take ourselves back into that time and experience again what we were feeling when we first heard them. Sometimes the memories that come are bittersweet or even painful when we share our songs, but those too are pieces of our journeys, segments of our experience of life that should not just be forgotten. Assuming that most of us learn from both pleasant and painful

experiences, we ought not to look back so harshly at the mistakes we have made along the way. Asking what we have learned from each experience is probably more helpful and certainly allows us to see the humor in many instances that we couldn't have seen at the time.

And the music plays on, the songs we remember clearly and the ones that were just in the background at the time but perhaps still create feelings in us as we remember moments far back in our history. Even those of us who may be tone deaf and can't sing a note still remember the songs and music of our youth! And the memory of those songs can help to unleash many other memories of days gone by.

Over the years, I have known a few religious troubadours who came in and told the stories of their lives and beliefs through music. We have a few Unitarian Universalists who do that. Among other things they share the culture of our religious community. Similarly in the science fiction series about the Dragons of Pern by Anne McCaffrey, there are harpers who go out to the settlements to educate and entertain by singing the songs of the people. They memorialize the history as well as making new events festive. I love that imagery of beliefs being shared in music. Of course, as a Methodist growing up, I am quite familiar with the idea of sung theology and beliefs, for the Methodists probably more than any other American group have a history of singing their beliefs. But we Unitarian Universalists also have many songs that express our beliefs, hopes, and dreams. All the hymns we have sung today fit in that category for me. You may each have others that better express your beliefs, but these are some of my favorites!

As I listened to Manny from Loki Rhythm telling the audience at the Emerson Coffee House on Friday evening telling the stories of the songs the group was playing, I was reminded again of how the music tells the story of both groups and individuals. Ballads and poetry also tell stories, sometimes in a condensed fashion that makes the highpoints even more memorable.

I also recall one Star Trek episode in which the captain had to figure out the story of some alien race by deciphering a story which seemed vaguely reminiscent of Beowulf. Apparently that people had no concept of telling a story in prose, so they seemed to be speaking in riddles which turned out to be an epic ballad of sorts. Anyway, the captain figured it out to save the day. The stories we tell and the songs we sing may leave out a few details, but they remind us and tell others of our journeys, our history, our beliefs, hopes and dreams.

So what is the point of this sermon? These aren't really new ideas, but I guess I want to make the point of how important music is in our lives and in our stories. There are universal images and ideas, as many of us know from dream work, but music is important to all human cultures and is used to accompany if not convey most of our important stories. The differences in the music of different generations helps to define and in many ways shape each generation. The music of each religious community also helps to define the community. What do our songs say about this community and Unitarian Universalism? How do they tell others about us and invite others to join us? What song best tells the story of our community?

For many UU communities, I think the first hymn in the big hymnal, *Let Nothing Evil Cross this Door*, was long the most descriptive hymn of the community. I would like to believe that the hymns and songs we have sung today are better in describing who we are now. We are still a place of refuge, but we are also much more!

And what about our individual songs? I asked you to think about your songs, the music that tells your story? I would like to invite you to share the one song that has been the most important for you and the way that it tells your story:

Thank you for sharing your musical story and for listening to mine! I hope that we can continue to share our stories in music, poetry, prose and discussion as we continue to build our community! So may it always be! Amen!

