

## **WHAT I LEARNED AT THE UU MINISTERS' INSTITUTE**

As I may have mentioned in the last couple of sermons, I spent most of my time at the recent Ministers' Institute singing, in the workshop by Yesaye Barnwell and the Institute Choir led by Glen Thomas Rideout. Over the years, you may have noticed how much I like to sing, not that I am any great singer, but I have always enjoyed singing. You may remember that I grew up and went into Ministry in the United Methodist Church. It has often been said that Methodists sing their theology, and it is largely true. Unitarian Universalists sing our beliefs, too, but we may not always cover the full range of what we want to express in just a few songs! And some of us just have to read ahead to see if we agree with the lyrics!

The full name of Yesaye's workshop was:

### **Building Vocal Communities: An African American World View.**

Yesaye talked to us about how important singing has been and is for African and African American communities at least from Slave days up to the present. Almost all her illustrations were vocal and we were always invited to join in the song!

You are probably all aware that many of the songs sung by slaves gave instructions for those who were being conducted north on the Underground Railway. Different phrases in verses told those slaves on the way to freedom where and when they could get help, who they could trust, and where to find the next station. The lyrics in songs often took phrases from the Bible, but the Moses or Abraham or Myriam mentioned might have been a local conductor rather than the Biblical figure. There were thousands of Spirituals from the time of slavery beyond those few that we may know. Yesaye is involved in an effort to preserve more of those Spirituals that are not well known.

I think that I mentioned previously that neither Yesaye nor Glen Thomas gave us sheet music. They both had us rehearse and memorize the words and music and keep at it until we could sing the songs. We were able to look at some of the choir music later and a few of the songs we sang with Yesaye are in our 2 hymnals or otherwise available in a written form. Particularly during slavery, there were too many people who couldn't read to rely on written music anyway. We learned the music as singers have learned it for thousands of years, though much of what we learned has already been lost to my memory since we stopped practicing. It isn't just the songs that captured my attention, but the way that a singing community becomes stronger.

Yesaye also took us through the music of the Jim Crow era and up into the songs of the Civil Rights era and even up into the modern period with some of her own songs and other songs expressing the feelings and needs of the Black community today. Since many of us had been around during the Civil Rights era, we appreciated the songs of that period and the ways that some songs kept growing new verses to fit the particular moment or demonstration. We talked about the power of music to express the claims of justice through it all. The music builds the community but also expresses the hopes and dreams of the movement.

So here is the really important idea and it is not a hard idea. The things that we do together build up the community. Singing together is one of the most important things that we do to build up the community, but the projects we undertake together, the marches we join in, the demonstrations we attend, the workdays we come to around the church, even the committees and groups we join, all these help to build up our community. And the sense of community is usually the most important way that we talk about this congregation on any survey. Now, the marches, demonstrations, workdays, committees, groups and projects all allow us to pick and choose where we engage and what we believe, but when we sing together, if we do not agree or trust each other we may have to read or think ahead to see whether we can sing any song!

At any meeting in the United Methodist Church, prayer was always in order, meaning that there could be lots of breaks at difficult times to pray for guidance or sometimes lobby further for a position in the guise of prayer or to pray for those idiots who disagreed with us. In a musical community, songs might be used in the same way to give time for breath during really heated debate or to lobby in a more creative way.

In African American Communities and in other Indigenous Communities around the world, singing, drumming and otherwise making music together may be a way to work out differences and may take hours or days rather than 3 concise verses.

Rather than sending an individual away or even to a professional counselor in some cases, the community might include the wayward individual in song or music until the differences are worked out and the community is singing together once again. Singing with a community really can be a balm for the soul. I have sung with church choirs since I was a child and I have always found support and friendship among those who sing together. I can hardly imagine being a part of a church and not singing. It is such an important, powerful, and beautiful way of connecting with others. It is like being in a Covenant Group but in some ways even better!

To sing together is to be included in the life and work of the community. Even when we may feel like an outsider or struggle with our identity, when we sing with a community we are included and accepted. Singing communities may rearrange the order to sound better, but everyone can sing, and unless one is stone deaf everyone will sing better while singing with the community. When we sing together we are part of something larger than ourselves, we are truly members of the community.

I know we each have stories to tell, so with the rest of our time this morning, I would like to invite you to share a few words about when you felt most strongly that you were a part of a community and what that meant to you!

I will bring around the mic for anyone who would like to share a few words or a song!

Thanks for singing together, sharing our voices and your stories today!

May our community continue to grow stronger from all that we do together! May it always be so!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!