

Singing for our Lives

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, April 8, 2018

First Unitarian Universalist Church

Rochester, Minnesota

READINGS

The Snow Is Melting Into Music by John Muir

I Hear America Singing by Walt Whitman

Songs for the People by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

SERMON

Ev'ryone suddenly burst out singing,

writes poet Siegfried Sassoon,

*And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom
Winging wildly across the white orchards
and dark green fields
On, on, and out of sight.*

*Ev'ryone's voice was suddenly lifted,
And beauty came like the setting sun.
My heart was shaken with tears
And horror drifted away.
O but ev'ryone was a bird
And the song was wordless,
The singing will never be done.*

Under the Minnesota capitol rotunda,
watching the little voting designation lights on the side
of the voting indication board,
and the cameras of the deliberations within the chambers,
among signs saying *Love is Love*
and signs saying *Marrige = 1 man + 1 woman*,
the activists, and the clergy, began conspiring.

“Let’s start singing” one said.

“Okay” – we all said.

And we did. In the midst of the echo and noise
of a rotunda filled with people and hopes and dreams
and chants and opposing signs and tension,
we needed to find breath and rhythm.

(Oh, I woke up this morning with my mind)

And we sang –
song after song after song –
to infuse the space with sound and faith and hope and love –
so that the harmonies of freedom
echoing down the years
from those who defied their physical chains
by freeing their own soul,
those who were willing to take the long view, enter the long haul,
with art and beauty and love and strength –
we sang freedom songs and spiritual songs,
we sang songs to remind those in power,
and to remind ourselves,
that there is a song in the heart of justice work,
of social change and transformation
that is beyond the self
and transports us into community –
it was to remind those in power and remind ourselves -
that we were singing for the lives of our kindred,
and the life of our world.

*Everyone was a bird,
and the song was wordless,
and the singing will never be done.*

We also song *going to the chapel*, and
what the world needs now
and *this little light* –
history was in the politics
and beauty was in the singing.

And as there came an announcement,
waiting for the vote,
a silence took hold of the space,
people embraced in hope, and in fear, held hands in prayer,
and what began as a quiet vote,
and small lights lit up on the voting board outside the Senate Chambers,
came a small cheer, and then a growing thunderous roar,
when marriage equality came to Minneosta –
and the rotunda filled with cheers and joy and hope –

and the people, after having sung together,
in this interfaith and communal congregation
that had gathered in the capital rotunda,
we sang, *Amen, Amen, Amen!*

*Our world, so worn and weary,
Needs music, pure and strong,*
wrote Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
Music to soothe all sorrow.

There is a long tradition,
spanning time and century and culture,
of the centrality of song –
of communal singing
capturing the essence, the spirit,
of a movement, of a generation, of the work
for a more just and equitable and beautiful world.

That's why we hear songs constantly
at some of the most poignant or hopeful moments –
each year on Dec. 31 as the ball drops in Times Square
we hear the somewhat haunting, yet hopeful words
of John Lennon singing *Imagine* –
we heard the Korean folksong *Arirang*
as both North and South Korea shared a team
for the winter Olympics in Pyeong Chang –

These songs are not some simple sappy sentiment
that *everything will be okay or all is well*
at times they are a lived reality,
and other times they are a desperate hope,
all mixed up with the grief and hardship and struggle
of culture and violence and despair –
and yet, and still, there is something in the singers and the song,
that remind us of who we want to be –
what we want to create, together.

The people of Estonia have long turned to song – songs of identity and struggle, of hope and of possibility.

Song Festivals there, dating back to 1869, have captured the spirit and heart of the country – 20,000-30,000 singers draw crowds of over 100,000.

Communal singing has been at the core of the people of Estonia for centuries.

For years under the Soviet era, songs included propaganda, and yet, in the midst of deep censorship and Soviet control, Estonian composers and artists created music, and sang songs, in defiance – they had to be creative.

Composers wrote music that seemingly express love of country, while more deeply referring to the country before USSR control – lifting up self-determination and a government failing the people.

The song “Mu Isamaa On Minu Arm” or “Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love”, was written from an old poem and slipped by Soviet censors in the late 1940s, but was then not allowed to be sung in the 1950s.

By the 1960s, it regained a place in the singing festivals against Soviet wishes, and at the 100th anniversary of the singing festivals, in 1969, the choirs on stage and the audience all began to sing it, in the face of Soviet orders to leave the stage.

Nobody left. They kept singing – a military band was ordered to play to drown out the sound of the singers, but just a mere hundred instruments was no match for hundreds of thousands of singers.

Eventually, the Soviet leaders invited the conductor back on stage for an encore, trying to give the impression that they had allowed this to happen. And they sang again – for their lives.

In the 1980s, something happened Estonia.

As part of a creative, artistic, revolution, people began gathering, giving the impression that they gathered only to sing, but behind the scenes, they were gathering to organize and work for their own independence.

Thousands gathered –
and in June of 1988 over 100,000 Estonians gathered,
singing songs of protest for five nights.

This became known as the *singing revolution* –
a non-violent, artistic expression of dissent and protest
as a revolutionary act of defiance.

Core to their organizing was singing,
and after years of music and song,
and political resistant strategy,
and while there was more than one strategy and approach
to the work toward independence,

and it was, as social transformation always is,
messy and complicated
and tense among those working for the same thing,
Estonia regained their independence, non-violently, in 1991.

*Ev'ryone suddenly burst out singing, writes the poet,
As prisoned birds must find in freedom
Ev'ryone's voice was suddenly lifted,
And beauty came like the setting sun.
My heart was shaken with tears
And horror drifted away.
O but ev'ryone was a bird
And the song was wordless,
The singing will never be done.*

This month marks the 50th anniversary
of the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King was well versed in the power of music,
as is clear from the freedom songs
that infused the civil rights movement.

He also spoke of the power of music beyond protest songs.
Speaking of the Blues and Jazz, Rev. Dr. King wrote,

*“Many things come out of oppression.
God has endowed we creatures with the capacity to create—
and from this capacity has flowed the sweet songs
of sorrow and joy that have allowed [us]
to cope with this environment and many different situations.*

Jazz speaks for life.

*The Blues tell the story of life's difficulties,
and if you think for a moment,
you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life
and put them into music,
only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph.*

*Modern jazz has continued in this tradition,
singing the songs of a more complicated urban existence.
When life itself offers no order and meaning,
the musician creates an order and meaning
from the sounds of the earth which flow through the instrument.
Much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States
has come from this music.*

*It has strengthened us with its sweet rhythms
when courage began to fail.
It has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits were down.*

*For in the particular struggle of the [Negro] in the United States
there is something akin to the universal struggle of all people.*

*Everybody has the Blues. Everybody longs for meaning.
Everybody needs to love and be loved.
Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy.”*

Rev. Dr. King drew from a rich tradition
of slave songs and spirituals,
all of which were a way of expressing
the deepest meanings of what it meant to be human
and to be surviving slavery.

Maybe you know the words,
..and before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave

It was protest – it was defiance –
that their soul could not be bound,
that their soul would never be a slave to another –
even if their physical reality was bound.

And, it was a song of hope and possibility –
of true and real freedom in this world, this life,
somehow – but it began in the heart.

At the 50th anniversary of the march in Selma,
thousands of people gathered in the small town of Selma, Alabama –
filling every street with groups of people,
a several-block bottleneck of those waiting
to cross the Edmund Pettus bridge,
the site of bloody Sunday –
a chance to march across the bridge
and remember the courage it took then,
and the work that still remains.

Right in the middle of the street,
just a few blocks back leading up to the bridge,
was a giant piece of canvas on the ground.

The people,
as they marched and chanted and sang,
parted, like the red sea,
around this canvas of art.

On it were words and images of hope and freedom,
struggle and joy, love and possibility –
children drew pictures of the flowers, and the sun,
their loves ones –

people drew tears and names of loved ones gone,
in the center were hand drawn pictures of Dr. King,
the bridge – billy clubs and dogs and hoses –
as well as hands and arms linked and joined together.

You wouldn't quite think it fit,
at least not quite in this space –
right in the middle of the road,
right in the midst of thousands upon thousands of marchers
on the way leading toward the bridge of reverent memory –
right there, was color, and paint, and canvas,
and people cleared a path, parted their formation,
to make way, to make space, to make hallowed
the sacred ground
and the simple, sacred practice of the community –

like a scroll laid across the chipped and broken pavement,
there were brushes and pencils and markers at the ready,
awaiting any soul wanting to add their story, their color,
to the shared canvas of that day.

Because when we think a little more deeply about it,
when we take a moment to pause and remember –
we recall that art comes out of struggle.

Some of the most inspiring poetry and writing,
some of the most exquisite paintings and sculptures,
some of the most powerful
stories, songs, legends, music –
are right down in the center of the street in the middle of town –
where you fear they will be trampled
but we know better – and we make way
for art and music and creativity
to be the hallowed ground
beneath our feet.

The song “Gathered Here” comes out of San Francisco,
written in the midst of the AIDS crisis,
as a song of solidarity and hope in community,
in particular, in an open and affirming church.

It was written by Phil Porter,
a minister and artist in the United Church of Christ.

In a time of fear and loss,
grief and uncertainty,
friends would gather for comfort and strength,
knowing that strength comes in community,
in support and love for each other
right in the midst of challenge, and despair –
even as their own or friends bodies were failing,
they gathered as one strong body.

And so think of being in that space,
think of the community that formed
out of the grief and uncertainty, the beauty and hope,
they sang as in prayer –

*Gathered Here, in the Mystery of the Hour,
Gathered Here, in one strong body,
Gathered Here, in the struggle and the power,
spirit draw near.*

It takes creativity,
it takes grit and determination
and persistence
and resilience
to face fear,
face oppression,
face force and hatred
with harmony and rhythm and song –
to meet injustice or totalitarianism
with art and beauty and community –
with a shared vision, a shared voice
large enough, strong enough, beautiful enough
to sing down the drums of war
and march to the sound of hope.

Sometimes,
to hold the breadth of a story,
or to hold the depth of a struggle,
or to hold the realities of life –
you need some song,
some color, some expression
of life and vibrancy and resilience
that has the strength, of one strong body,
has the struggle and the power to draw people together –
you create those moments
right in the middle of the street,
right in the middle of your work or tasks or relationships –
you sing and make a space
within your own heart
for a song to take root
and for something beautiful to grow –

you find, right in the middle of your path,
laid out on the chipped and broken pavement like a sacred scroll,
something of hope, of struggle, of beauty,
filled with color and harmony and love –
to remind you of the beauty there is in a world transformed.