

Joyful Noise
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UUMSB

Reading:

“Listening for Our Song” by David S. Blanchard, *Listening for Our Song: Collected Meditations, Volume Four* Margaret L. Beard, Editor

On sabbatical in East Africa, I heard a story of a people who believe that we are each created with our own song. Their tradition as a community is to honor that song by singing it as welcome when a child is born, as comfort when the child is ill, in celebration when the child marries, and in affirmation and love when death comes. Most of us were not welcomed into the world in that way. Few of us seem to know our song.

It takes a while for many of us to figure out which is our song, and which is the song that others would like us to sing. Some of us are slow learners. I heard my song not necessarily from doing extraordinary things in exotic places, but also from doing some pretty ordinary things in some routine places. For every phrase I heard climbing Kilimanjaro, I learned another in a chair in a therapist’s office. For every measure I heard in the silence of a retreat, I heard another laughing with my girls. For every note I heard in the wind on the beach at Lamu, I gleaned more from spending time with a dying friend as her children sang her song back to her. What came to astound me was not that the song appeared, but that it was always there.

I figure that the only way I could have known it for my own was if I had heard it before, before memory went to work making sense and order of the mystery of our beginning. Our songs sing back to us something of our essence, something of our truth, something of our uniqueness. When our songs are sung back to us, it is not about approval, but about recognizing our being and our belonging in the human family.

It is good to know our songs by heart for those lonely times when the world is not singing them back to us. That’s usually a good time to start humming to yourself, that song that is most your own.

They can be heard as songs of love or of longing, songs of encouragement or of comfort, songs of struggle or of security. But most of all, they are the songs of life, giving testimony to what has been, giving praise for all we’re given, giving hope for all we strive for, giving voice to the great mystery that carries each of us in and out of this world.

Sermon:

Music has direct impact on our bodies and brains. Music effects our brain waves, our rate of healing, our stress levels. In a study out of McGill University they found “compelling evidence that musical interventions can play a health care role in settings ranging from operating rooms to family clinics. But even more importantly, we were able to document the neurochemical mechanisms by which music has an effect in four domains: management of

mood, stress, immunity and as an aid to social bonding.”¹ Music is part of the glue that holds community together, to help us mark time in our memories and feelings, and helps us to find our way to articulate the principles by which we live our lives. I only have the study of my own experience, but I believe that music has been an integral part of my development as a person, and in my theology.

I learned how to read music from my grandmother helping me read along with the hymns in church. My dad fixed up an old upright piano when I was small and my grandmother gave me a really old piano book with simple songs like “Hot Cross Buns” and the “Song of the Volga Boatman” in it. I learned how to plunk out basic notes on the piano, and then moved on to the cello when I had the chance. When I was in school I sang in the chorus. I sang in folk choirs in college and grad school, but not until the past few years have I sung very much in a place where I could really be heard outside the crowd. It has been part of my role as your minister to lead in songs, so whether good or bad, you got me! But why do I think it is important for us to sing together? Let me go back to another story..

Many of you have met my parents. They are hippies. Well, hippies in the way of Vermonters and people who lived in Boston suburbs in the 80s. When I was in elementary school, near the end of the cold war, my parents were very involved in the anti-nuke movement, helped run a food coop in the church basement, had a big veggie garden in our yard, composted everything, volunteered for our local coffeehouse, and were involved in every aspect of church life. I took soy yogurt to school in my green cotton re-useable lunch sack, and every grain in our cupboard was in a large bulk container. I was really lucky, but human, so when I left home, my rebellious years were spent drinking Diet Coke by the case and buying non-whole wheat pasta and tortillas. Now my body has let me know I can't eat wheat anymore and can't have caffeine so..., so much for rebellion.

This is the background from which my theology grew, and I came to my understanding of what is important to me, in part, by listening to folk music and music with a social justice message. When I was young I loved Woody and Arlo Guthrie, Ben Tousley, Sally Rogers, Vance Gilbert, Jackson Browne, U2, Sting, and many others. When the early 90s hit, I discovered punk, ska, and grunge and fell in love with that as well. In high school, I listened to field recordings of Bulgarian village singers from the 1960s and the present, seeking out the crunchiest harmonies and reading the translations of songs that helped tell the history of a country that had been invaded again and again, at the crossroads of empires. I belted out justice anthems from the back seat of the car on road trips and sat listening to hours of records in my living room, learning about the passions people had for changing the world. I wanted and want to do that too. My call to social justice work was fueled by the music of my childhood, and continues to be so.

You may remember a couple weeks ago, the story from Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey and the Rock, and the student nonviolent coordinating committee (SNCC) Freedom Singers in an interview with Bill Moyers in 1991. She said, “Sound is a way to extend the territory you can effect.” She talked about how communal singing is a way of announcing that we are here and are real and that “the song will maintain the air as your territory.” This reminded me of how Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger were in concert, always wanting people to sing together, and sing loud. Making music together, especially music that

1 <http://www.mcgill.ca/newsroom/channels/news/major-health-benefits-music-uncovered-225589>

inspires people to compassion, justice work, or heals those in the trenches, is part of why we sing together. It helps us take messages into our bodies, to use our bodies together to share a message.

Songs with justice and spiritual messages help me tap into feelings I have about events in the world, and feelings and thoughts I have about theological ideas before I can put them into words. When I am preparing for a worship service the music in my head leads me to the message for the day. I get to the right language through the music. For example, some days I will be feeling a little Leonard Cohen "Hallelujah" and sing to myself "and even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the lord of song with nothing on my tongue but hallelujah!" In my head that is a shorthand for how sometimes no matter what we do, it all falls apart, and yet, I can and will still sing hallelujah, and I *need* to sing hallelujah to find the strength to move forward. That it is all intertwined, the faith needed to move forward, and how the act of moving forward informs my faith. But is way easier to sing it than say it.

Sometimes a song will get stuck in my head, because it is trying to tell me something. Kris Delmhorst is a lovely singer who lives in the Pioneer Valley and has a new CD out with a song that I have heard her sing live a couple of times, and I just know there is something in it I need to understand, but I can't quite get there yet. Here is the chorus:

Do you know that we're homeless
Do you know that we're lonely
Do you know that we're only passing through?

Do you know that you're holy
Do you know that I love you
Do you know that above you is blue?²

I think that it is about the empty places inside and in society, the ephemeral nature of our existence and possessions and that what really matters is love and looking up at the blue sky, but I don't *know* yet, so I am singing it a lot until I do.

Music can also be where we name and share our joy. For some of us, the act of singing our joy, amplifies it. When I sing some glorias, or hallelujahs, old spirituals, or music that has meant a lot to me, it affects my body and brain in profound ways. When I sing, I am with the people who I learned the song with, or who were on a road trip with me, who I danced and sang with. It grounds my body memory, and moves into the present. When we sing together and share joy, we create a touchstone for when need it down the road, and practice engaging our whole bodies in experience, not just our language, or brains. Back this summer we sang a song together that has a theology that is important, but also for me, brings me back to a time when I was accepted into a community that was not my own. So when I sing it, it is about more than the words and music, but shared experience. And now after singing it together on one of our first Sundays in *this* building, I remember the light shining on all of you, as you sang and shared in this song. Sing it with me if you remember.

Make us aware we are a sanctuary
Each made holy and loved right through
With thanksgiving we are a living sanctuary anew

2 Kris Delmhorst, "Homeless", 2014

When I sing that song, I feel the welling inside me to figure out what it means and how to be a sanctuary. When we sing loved right through, I feel it differently than saying it. The music moves through me and I experience the love coming out of, and through me. Two Sundays ago I talked about what I say to myself before I preach and when I am doing ministry work, "not of me but through me." That song gets there too, not of us, but straight through us.

I am sharing all these stories with you today, so that you can see behind my process a little bit and know why I put so much music in our worship together. For me, music is one place where I process what I don't know yet, and what I want to understand better. It is also a way to claim the air, use our bodies in worship, and connect with our feelings about spiritual concepts before we have to put them into words. For some people, that is not at all where they find that space, and that is why we also have elements like silence, sharing and sermons in our services as well. Later this month, I will be preaching about silence, to follow up on a cool sermon that Peter Bluhm will be sharing with you next week.

It is important in spiritual community for us to be in worship together, and experience our theologies in ways that connect our whole selves. For many of us music is a way to get there. It doesn't matter how great our voices are, or whether we can read music, but that we may be open to being transformed by the experience of trying, failing, learning, sharing, being together and using our bodies to express what it most important to us. Singing and playing music helps us find our way to articulate the principles by which we live our lives. Raising a joyful noise, being here for such great music as we have today with The Lucky Three is such a blessing, and can help us open up to the questions we don't even know we have yet.

Singing, singing with you is my prayer

Being, being with you is my prayer.

So may it be.

Amen.