

## “Sing on...”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden  
Meriden, CT  
May 4, 2014

Vermont Railroads! It’s my mnemonic for the necessary elements of song. For those of us who need reminding about what a mnemonic is, it’s a type of reminder—a symbol in the form of a word, a sound, or an image, for example, that you can easily connect with whatever it is you want to recall. So how exactly does Vermont Railroads serve as a helper for me remembering the elements of song? V-T-R-R-S [pause] Voice, Tone, Rests, Rhythm, Spirit. A song that moves me—whether it’s folk, jazz, blues, classical, a spiritual, or another genre entirely—has each of these. Another way of saying it is that without voice, without tone, without rests (that is, brief periods of silence), without rhythm, and without spirit (which can also mean breath) a song isn’t.

Does a song need words? Some might say so. But what if we hum it? Is humming just a series of blurred words?

Does a song need someone to sing it? It helps, but what about a song that has been written and not yet sung? Can a song come alive without being sung?

As children, many of us voiced fragments of songs, echoes of tunes we had heard in our family or in the neighborhood or maybe on the street or even in church or synagogue. Each hearing and each little echo are memory builders for later associations. Sometimes those associations begin early.

I know a two-year-old little girl who adores clementines and is quite capable of consuming three or four at a single snack time. As she carefully peels each, she offers an accompaniment: “O ma darlin’, o ma darlin’, o ma darlin’ clementine...” and on into what is now a full three verses, though she does take liberty with the words.

One of the most commonly memorable of experiences for any of us is singing *with* someone. Duets, trios, quartets, and choirs need not be organized as such. Singing together can happen spontaneously. One of my most precious memories was visiting my grandparents on their Iowa farm and after dinner, gathering in their parlor around the upright piano, with my grandmother playing and later me playing, and joining our voices in songs that became so familiar we knew them by heart.

It is our good fortune today that we are joined by a choir of young women and men who have been singing together as a choir with a history of close to 30 years. None of our young guests is even close to 30, but I’ll bet that when my longtime friend, James Backmon organized what was originally the New Amsterdam Boys Choir in 1986, he didn’t imagine that the story of this choir would extend across generations—or maybe you did, James...

Each of you who are singing in the choir this morning has perhaps met one of the original participants. You hold one another's history in the medium of song. You have inherited a legacy and you are building a legacy for the youngsters who will come after you. Those of us in this congregation are grateful recipients of your gifts so generously shared.

When the children of this congregation were invited earlier to sing a song familiar to many of you, I noticed a few parents and others singing along. I revel in those words and that music from the late Joe Raposo.

“Make it simple, to last your whole life long.”

Simple and perhaps profound: like “Wade in the water,” an African American spiritual with so many layers of meaning for whatever generation, whatever choral gathering, whatever the historical context in which its sung. It's a song that moves the waters.

Back to Joe Raposo's lyrics:

“Don't worry that it's not good enough for anyone else to hear.”

“Sing! Sing a song.” And don't worry, because it IS good enough for whomever is fortunate enough to hear. Carrying a tune is not a requirement for deep-hearted singing! Okay, if you have perfect pitch, you might wince at some of us; but remember the “spirit” of singing. Spirit, soul, heart—all lend credibility to whatever strains we empower with melody. Perhaps that's why “Spirit of Life” is a song that touches the very soul-bones of those who hear it for the first time and then sing it and then sing it again and again. Think of “Spirit of Life” as “Song of Life.” It's ALWAYS more than good enough for anyone anywhere to hear, because it opens our hearts to ourselves and to one another.

This afternoon when the New Amsterdam Boys and Girls Choir performs in concert, we'll hear a selection from the late Pete Seeger, a master of inviting people to open their hearts to themselves and one another in song. While he sang for thousands, millions perhaps, from his backyard in Beacon, New York to Madison Square Garden, he gave voice to old songs, to old songs he adapted, and to songs he wrote and then expanded when others offered more verses, including his beloved wife, Toshi. Accompanying the *New York Times* obituary of this iconic figure, who died this past January at the age of 94, was an article curiously titled An Appraisal. Its first paragraph reads as follows:

“Pete Seeger sang until his voice wore out, and then he kept on singing, decade upon decade. Mr. Seeger...sang for children, folk-music devotees, union members, civil-rights marchers, antiwar protesters, environmentalists, and everyone else drawn to a repertoire that extended from ancient ballads to brand-new songs about every cause that moved him. But it wasn't his own voice he wanted to hear. He wanted everyone to sing along.”

I like to believe that Pete would have approved of Vermont Railroads as a mnemonic for the core elements of a song. Voice-Tone-Rests-Rhythm-Spirit. But I wonder if he might not have noticed a missing element—“together!”

What a gift it is that we share in the legacy of fellow creatures who once lifted their voices and opened their hearts in song, and that the members of the New Amsterdam Boys and Girls Choir are here with us today, a living legacy of song in our midst. Together, let us lift our voice and open our hearts as we sing “My Life Flows On in Endless Song.”

---

**Sources:**

“A Folk Revivalist Who Used His Voice to Bring Out a Nation’s” – An Appraisal by Jon Pareles, *The New York Times*, Wednesday, January 29, 2014, A1, 18.

“My Life Flows On in Endless Song,” Words: Early Quaker song; Music: American gospel tune, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 108.

Joe Raposo, “Sing,” (1973)

“Spirit of Life,” Words and music: Carolyn McDade, in \ *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 123.