

“Our Song”

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Meriden, CT

September 16, 2012

I’m new here. Some of you are too. As for this morning, each of us is new, brand new to this day, and we find ourselves gathered for what we call worship. In our faith tradition we don’t necessarily worship something or someone, though that’s an option. We move into a state of worth-ship, of reflecting and wondering and thinking about and feeling what is worth our deepest attention. If our minds wriggle and the rest of us follows suit, it’s difficult to do this. I struggle as much as any of you with what Buddhism calls monkey mind. My monkey mind confirms Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* every day of my life.

Yet I and we are called into a respite from the inner/outer/all-around chatter of our day to days as we enter into a mode of worship. It is in such a mode that we might catch the faint strains of “our song.” Unitarian Universalist minister David Blanchard makes it clear that there are many modes of being that allow us to hear “our song.” Sunday morning worship has no monopoly on such an epiphany.

I love David’s notion that each of us is born with our own song. Just as each of us has our own smell, our own sound, our own facial features, so we have our own song. If we let go of the literal, we need not think of our song as a melody with lyrics. The First Book of Kings in the Bible’s First Testament, which some call the Old Testament, serves up an extraordinary rendition of how such song may be discovered.

Elijah is the student. The legendary lore of this figure of the 9th century BCE spans the narratives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But it is in the First Book of Kings that we find Elijah the student faced with what each of us faces when we’re searching for that which matters most in a space of sanctuary. Elijah is in flight from Jezebel, who had threatened to kill him because of what we won’t go into detail about right now. Known for his allegiance to “the one true God,” Elijah was not on good terms with anyone who didn’t honor this deity. In flight, he ended up at Mt. Sinai, known as the “mountain of God,” and spent the night in a cave, not quite the Marriot of his day. As the text reads:

While Elijah was on Mount Sinai, the Lord asked, “Elijah, why are you here?”

10 He answered, “Lord God All-Powerful, I’ve always done my best to obey you. But your people have broken their solemn promise to you. They have torn down your altars and killed all your prophets, except me. And now they are even trying to kill me!”

11 “Go out and stand on the mountain,” the Lord replied. “I want you to see me when I pass by.”

All at once, a strong wind shook the mountain and shattered the rocks. But the Lord was not in the wind. Next, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

12 Then there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire.

Finally, there was a gentle breeze [or in some translators name it, “a soft whisper” or “a still small voice”], [**b**] **13** and when Elijah heard it, he covered his face with his coat. He went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.

What is it about “a gentle breeze” or “a soft whisper” or “a still small voice” that allowed Elijah to recognize a sacred presence, perhaps the inner sanctum of his own soul? What I find extraordinary about this story and the implications of Elijah hearing what he presumably heard are how it resonated for a far larger community (a much longer story for a much longer morning) and the unexpected form of his epiphany.

In the tradition of East Africa, we might say that Elijah heard his song. He heard it by emerging from his cave, just as we’re called to emerge from our caves of heart and mind. He heard it by listening, just as we’re called to be still and notice our own breath and “the soft whisper” of breath of the person sitting next to us and the “still small voice” that courses through this gathered community this morning. It comes to us in the sacred act of listening.

Whether seated in this sanctuary or tending to the story of a friend or sitting at the bedside of a dying parent or savoring the cry of a new-born or pausing to notice the sky in the burnished rays of twilight, when we let go and let be, we catch a strain of our song. It is distinct for each of us and common to all of us. It is distinct to this congregation and core to all who gather in a communal search for truth and meaning and love and justice and grace and gratitude.

How shall I learn your song? How does your song/my song become our song? How can I discover the melodies that rise from each of you? How might we blend our “soft whispers” and “gentle rhythms” into a communal choir carrying the singularity of our Unitarianism and the inclusiveness of our Universalism?

As an ancient God asked a fleeing Elijah, “Why are you here?” so might we ask of ourselves, “Why are we here?” Perhaps we’re not fleeing anything; perhaps we are. Surely each of us is seeking something intimate and ultimate, a measure of meaning at the roots of which we are yet transcending the small scope of “me.”

“Then I may learn,” sang our youngsters, as we echoed the words of their song in later verses.

“When I am frightened, will you reassure me?
When I’m uncertain, will you hold my hand?
Will you be strong for me? sing to me quietly?
Will you share some of your stories with me?”

On into...

“When I am troubled, will you listen to me?
when I am lonely will you be my friend?
Will you be there for me?.....”

The haunting lyrics and plaintive melody embody the yearning we all feel—the need to be held in the loving embrace of one another’s compassion, acceptance, and commitment. Like Elijah the student, we too are students—learning to care, learning to give, learning to love. This morning our children were the teachers, singing the song that was their song that became our song; and we listened and learned, then sang with them.

In Blanchard’s words:

“...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 to the human family.”

I wonder how many of us were sung to as children. How can I ever forget the sonorous bass of my Grandfather Edwards, he who spoke by bellowing but sang a lullaby with the utmost tenderness?

*Over in Killarney Many years ago,
Me Mither sang a song to me In tones so sweet and low.*

on into:

*"Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra, Too-ra-loo-ra-li,
Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra, hush now, don't you cry!"*

My grandfather knew absolutely nothing about Killarney. He was Welsh from the bottom of his vocal chords!

It didn't matter. I can hear the love across the years blending into the love that resonates with the song I am learning from you, sharing with you in cycles of listening, hearing, learning; listening, hearing, learning, loving; listening, hearing, learning, loving, stretching hearts and minds together...together.

“I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again,” writes Margaret Wheatley. They are the first words of her work that I refer to again and again: *turning to one another: simple conversations to restore hope to the future.*

“What would it feel like to be listening to each other again about what disturbs and troubles us?” she asks. “About what gives us energy and hope? About our yearnings, our fears, our prayers, our children?”

... If we can sit together and talk about what's important to us, we begin to come alive. We share what we see, what we feel, and we listen to what others see and feel.”

How are we with each other? How do we behave with one another? How do we live this faith grounded in covenant? In the congregational covenant that you forged last spring, you tend to this:

“As members and friends of the congregation, we covenant to:

Cherish the well-being of the congregational community above our personal preferences.”

Each element of this covenant enriches the whole. You aptly conclude with how you will approach disagreements: by

“Remaining engaged in the process with love, compassion, and respect.

[and]

Listening deeply to others, addressing differences directly while encouraging all voices to be heard. “

...even, I trust, the still small voice, the soft whisper, the song that measure by measure is and becomes your song, our song.

We listen for our song. It's the only way we can learn it, by listening. It comes to us when we least expect it, when we are down and out and a seemingly random note of hope courses through a conversation or simple silence. It comes to us when we are restless, as if changing key signatures from moment to moment. It comes to us when we remember to play and are open to accompaniment.

How can I learn and discern this evolving song? By listening. By listening to each of you and all of you. By presence. By being present for and with you. And by ministry that is shared. Ministry may be my profession, but it is our calling.

We have begun. Let's continue in one-on-one conversations. Between now and the end of the year, I invite each of you to schedule a time to meet with me for at least a half hour conversation. I want to hear your story. I want to hear your song. I want to be with you and minister with you to gather the strands of your singular songs into a magnificent transformative “our song.”

If you bring me a wish list, I can't promise to be the good fairy, but I will listen. So please, tap my shoulder in coffee hour, give me a call, or send me an e-mail with two or three options for getting together. I'll get back to you promptly and we'll set a time.

How shall I learn your song? How does your song and my song become our song? How shall I discover the melodies that rise from each of you? How can we blend our “soft whispers” and “gentle rhythms” into a lively chorus carrying the singularity of our Unitarianism and the inclusiveness of our Universalism? Let us find out...together.

Amen

Sources:

David S. Blanchard, “Listening for Our Song,” at <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditations/submissions/22281.shtml>.

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