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Music as Liturgy or How Music Helps Us Worship

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Liturgy is the formal, ritual, conduct of the religious service, very strict in the orthodox churches, but also very important in the liberal church. This process helps ensure parishioners all get what they have come to church for.

You may notice that the songs we sing set the mood throughout the service. The mood varies according to the need deemed necessary through the service with its ups and downs. This is deliberate and takes quite a bit of thought and planning, not only by the minister but also the music director.

I picked this topic because I have always thought that UUs do not get the most from the music as they could. I did not put too much thought into this until earlier this year when an incident occurred that brought upset and anxiety within the church. It made me put some real thought into music and my personal biases, which I have always thought were rational. More on that later.

Sitting still does not make your body happy unless it is a specific exercise to do so. Life is motion. When motion stops there is no life. Our bodies and all of the cells in it are in motion. Stillness works for meditation and prayer, actual effort to see yourself, to meet the one who says I, to find the forces that drive your thoughts, thoughts that start in the gut and blossom into emotions first.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science journal *SCIENCE* in April 2014 focused on the tools to observe proteins at work. "It has been observed that there is an intricate ballet where individual proteins are in constant motion, sampling an ensemble of different conformations and perhaps changing interaction partners as they play their part in a particular biological process." For more, I recommend watching the TED talk on protein folding where it is shown, following these methods and more advances, how some proteins fold to become motors, spinning or even sliding motors.

So, with a little imagination you can see why music is so important in our lives. Our bodies join the

dance of its parts. When music excites us, the harmonies affect our entire being, down to the very molecules.

Music has had an impact on my life from early on. I remember drum lessons before piano lessons only vaguely. But from the third grade on, I played euphonium. I picked up the double bass in high school. During my youth my siblings and I played in the fireman's band together, and marched in dozens of parades together. I was in the high school band from the 6th grade on. By my junior year, I was playing solos in front of the band with more arpeggios than I could imagine. We played all kinds of music in the band, including Mozart concertos. I had a great experience playing the bass and began making money at it while in high school. It paid my way through college. I played in the college band and orchestra, and the college jazz band, traveling all over the state of North Carolina the year I was in college there. As a musician, I learned a lot about life from meeting people of all types while playing. My socialization was advanced early on because musicians accepted all of the people our society is just beginning to seriously accept and respect.

However, I had a great awakening my freshman year in college. A friend who was taking Music Appreciation enticed me to listen to his music and read some of his text to discuss it. My appreciation of all the music I had played grew immensely. Years later I took the same course at NYU and loved it.

By playing music, I learned that you perform best when it affects your emotions and that music excites the full range of emotions. By studying music, I found that writing music can be purposeful. You can set out to effect any emotion you want by selecting the right key, rhythm, and employing all sorts of changes and chord substitutions to change the emotions developed, slowly or abruptly. Poetry can do similarly, but I think music is even more effective. Words have a longer path to the gut than music.

I learned by playing jazz that development of the genre was competitive. Musicians worked hard to get to people's emotions. By studying European music, commonly called classical music, I learned that development of it too was competitive. Johann Sebastian Bach was even competitive with at least one of his benefactors. For more on that, read Gödel, Escher and Bach. Playing and studying music as a mature adult, I came to understand that competition is a fundamental part of all music production. There are even gospel competitions. All of the big extravaganzas are about competition. Competition! Who knew? The winners are those who are best at deliberately grabbing your emotions.

Now music is a universal language. Unlike words, you do not need a translator. But competition is among the listeners as well as the performers. Players know emotion is important, if not everything. Listeners are different. There is a class of listener who think that music is cerebral. They typically think you should sit still while listening. Other listeners are kinetic, and the music serves as an excuse to move. The former seem to be mind people and the latter body people. Through socialization, some think this is according to race, especially the mind people. That could be my bias hanging out. But, it is my experience. In my opinion, none of us starts out a mind person. That has come about as a process of socialization. Parents even move, sit in rocking chairs to soothe cranky, unable to sleep, babies. The babies are already learning that music is related to motion. Somewhere along the line that is frowned upon. Oh, you think this is just my prejudice? Well take a look at dancing babies on the internet.

Movement is a big part of life in the human domain as well as the animal kingdom. Studying emotional literacy has helped me to understand that to be free is not intellectual but emotional. Freedom to move your body is part of it. Stress and tension need release for you to be free. Body movement and dancing are a good way to release it. Prayer and meditation are much better when the tension is already gone before you begin. The full experience in life needs action in mind, body, and spirit.

So to bring this back to how music makes our services work, we need to look for a bit at how we program music here at UUCA. One reason to do this is so you too can make suggestions about the songs we sing, the musicians we hire, and the programs you would like to have.

We try to open with happy, upbeat music that gets you on your feet and thinking positively about being able to be with like-minded people for at least an hour a week for worship of the way of life encompassed in our 7 and 8th principles. Trying not to repeat the tunes too often is difficult because we try to not have to read music while singing and hence knowing the tunes is important so only words are needed, words that we can read on the screen. Often, we have welcoming music that is light but warm and inviting. Even popular music can be played during gathering time. We experimented with the choir making an entrance, which is also a good way to begin a service on the up beat.

So, the songs we open with allow us to move and release the tensions we bring to church, a week's long buildup of stress and anxiety. We are getting it out so we can later prepare for meditation, a balm in the busy lives we all have, even those who are retired and trying their best to improve social justice in our society.

Later, the songs we sing in preparation for meditation, help us to get into the mood of introspection, calming our minds and releasing the noise that too often still prevails. Studying about bias has taught many of us that everything is connected. Our gut reactions feed our emotions. Our emotions drive our thoughts. So if we reduce the tensions through music, we release the emotions and cut off the thoughts that are noise. When we are deep in meditation, we can actually see our thoughts without interacting with them. It is very different than when we let our thoughts drive our gut in a circular stressful fashion.

We leave meditation ready to receive knowledge. Hence the reading and sermon follow. This is not always the case. Sometimes it is better to have music immediately after the meditation. The subject determines the order and the mood the music must support. Our bodies request no abrupt changes in mood swings. We are here to heal not to be

wounded. It is important to note that sometimes we are here to be uncomfortable, on purpose. Some learning requires it. The subject requires it and we try to use music, where appropriate, to lessen the sting. We are in loving company, so sometimes it is the company that helps us, along with the music to absorb the message that is difficult. Nevertheless, we each have the responsibility to absorb the message.

The offertory music can be soothing. After announcements, we try to end on a sober note to sing and then extinguish the chalice. We greet each other in total support, with our love for one another readily apparent. All of this is slowly absorbed over coffee and chat before we go to adult learning or leave for home.

The music has been the main connector between the different parts of the service, a service covers many of our needs.

During our service we try to pay attention to the 8th Principle, just as we do in our meetings and in our lives. But I told you that I had an awakening after an incident in the church that I had to work hard to understand and check my own bias. We are a social justice leader in Annapolis and Anne Arundel County, and we say we want to be more racially inclusive. In order to do that, we have to invite people of color to the church. Any opportunity to do so, we should. So, if you want to have a program that includes African diaspora music, it behooves us to not miss the opportunity to invite an African diaspora person or group to play it. When we invited a group of white teenagers to do so, that made me work hard on my own bias. I had to ask myself if I was being unfair in my judgement. All of the people who made that decision are, in my opinion, good people. So why was I concerned?

When I say that everything is everything, it is not idle talk. If we want a world that is in any way fair, then in everything we do we need to ask whether we are ensuring inclusivity. Is there an opportunity to do so in this instance? Any missed opportunity keeps us that much longer from having the world we say we want.

For me, music is one of those areas that has been exploited the most. So many African American artists have been copied, style and all, and whites

have made the money those artists should have made. This is difficult to discuss because I definitely do not want you to think I am against artists sharing music. But in my lifetime, I have known so many artists whose music has been, in the vernacular, ripped off. We Unitarian Universalists need to think about that seriously, so we are not doing the same thing. The top earning, blues artist, Elvis, was deliberately taught to take African American artists' music and sell it, producing much higher income. In fact, several artists he stole music and style from were near poverty. Only by thoughtful and deliberate action will this kind of action cease. This is spiritual thinking and acting. This is overcoming socialization that says everything I do is okay.

So, this is how we get into difficulty. We sing a variety of music in this church, thank goodness! When we want programs that have ethnic music, we need to hire ethnic musicians so they gain the following and can make a living. Otherwise all we are doing is increasing their competition. It is like the investments we kept from South Africa to end Apartheid. Our money and our venue can count if we are understanding how everything is everything.

So, let me end with this. Music is what brings us together and helps us to have similar stress relief, prepares us to get the benefit of meditation, and help us to leave, most of the time, upbeat and ready to face another week of opportunity to live the life of the 7 and 8th Principles. I ask you all to think about how we can expand the music we hear and sing, without worrying about the words. Recognize that sometimes we sing European music in another language containing ideas that are abhorrent to UUs, but with total enjoyment. That is a good thing when the music itself meets our needs. Let's do the same thing with music with English words.