

*Sermon Music Makes the Message*

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Interior Dialogue:

Sarah: Okay, here I am, first service, so far so good.

Lore seems to know what she is doing, the choir likes her.

Lore: Okay, so far so good. Sarah hasn't made *too* many bloopers. Maybe this is going to work out.

Sarah: I have to stay on her good side. Word is, ministers end up leaving if they get into it with their music directors.

Lore: I wonder what it will be like working with her. If she's awkward, I'm outta here. I work too hard for too little to have to deal with a minister who throws her weight around.

Sarah: God, I hope she isn't like my last music director. He only wanted to play music by old dead European *guys*.

Lore: God, I hope she isn't like the minister in my last church, he sang off-key right into the mic.

Sarah: He'd hand me the list of music he was going to play for the entire year and then take off.

Lore: I hope she isn't welded to the gray hymnal. Some of them have their fifteen hymns and that is it. BORING. Why don't ministers like the teal one?

Sarah: Nice organ. Oy, what if she's one of these maestros that keeps us pinned for 20 minutes after the service with a grand performance? I could pass out from hunger! That wouldn't look so good on my first day.

Lore: What if she starts talking with people during the postlude. I hate that! Here I am, sending people forth on a high note and they'll be talking! How rude!

Sarah: Or, what if she's like the one who used to surprise me with top hits of the 50s for the musical response to prayer. That was awkward. I'd bring them to tears with my prayer

– I do a good prayer if I do say so – and he'd launch into something by Harry Belafonte.

Lore: What if she's earnest – God save me from earnest ministers. Everything is so SERIOUS. I'll have to liven things up to keep the congregation awake.

Sarah: What if she's dedicated – God save me from dedicated music directors. They want to PRESERVE SACRED MUSIC and that's *all*. What about pulling the congregation together into one living being?

Lore: Music is the energy that drives the morning and pulls us from one moment to the next. Why don't ministers get that? It's not all words, words, poem, words.

Sarah: Music is the energy that unites us. Why don't music directors get that?

Lore: I hope this works.

Sarah: I hope this works.

Sermon: Music Makes the Message

Those of you who hoped for Jazz Sunday with Jeannie Gagne and Stan Strickland will be disappointed. There was a death in Jeannie's family. We're sending her our thoughts and prayers and hoping she and Stan will make it later in our

church year. Those of you who hoped to find out who put the ram in the rama lama ding dong will be equally disappointed because I have no idea! This morning, I'm going to give you a peek behind the scenes at how we construct worship. Believe it or not, there is method in our madness! I'm also going to share with you some perspectives on growing not only our church but our denomination. The minister, the music director, the RE director, the worship committee – we all think about how do we make Sunday morning effective: what is the need being addressed, what is the work of the church, how does worship fit in? Let's start with a great quote by the Rev. Dennis Hamilton, recently retired from the Horizon Unitarian Universalist Church in Carrollton, Texas:

"If we want to get to where people live, we need to touch their hearts, what is most important to them. ... To do this the service needs to do more than make us think. It needs to get under our skin, into our hearts, and breathe the spirit into our souls."

What's the fastest way into our hearts? Mhmm, through our stomachs! Fastest way to our souls? Through our ears! I've told you in all seriousness that I was happy to be called here because of your great food and great music. It's the truth. It's the truth because you care enough about each other and what goes on here at this church to give it your very best. It is my responsibility to honor your best with my own. It's the truth because if we want to grow this church, build relationships with others who could be our friends, we've got to work together, eat together and sing together.

I've brought six suppositions with me about worship and what it will take to enlarge our appeal:

1. There is a dominant culture, including musical culture, in every congregation. I'm going to ask you later what you think our dominant culture is. It's not just about what we provide here, it's also about what people think evokes a sense of the sacred, or just brings you to a different place.
2. Music defines the congregation's culture of welcome.
3. To grow, we're going to have to grow in diversity rather than just reach out to people we think are like us, somehow. Crafting meaningful and attractive worship experiences that will appeal to a variety of people is essential to our continuing success. But the catch is, we may have a "big tent" approach to welcoming folks but maintain a "pup tent" when it comes to the worship experience. So, our hopes and intentions for worship may not be met by what we do.
4. Music has power. Music is the emotional engine that drives the flow of morning worship. There is a flow of energy from music and words that stir us up, or quiet us down.
5. Creating worship that can be experienced not only in church on Sunday mornings, but repeated at other times of the week in any other medium may also be critical to our success in this day and age. People come to church not looking for a performance, but for excellence.
6. Newcomers and long-time members who join us in the flesh or on the airwaves may now have more sophisticated expectations of worship. They look for worship that is powerful, seamless and unified, yet authentic. This requires a higher level of planning and collaboration than ever before.

So here is Middleboro. We have excellent music, and with Susan's help, I'm able to develop not just ideas but an emotional framework around the ideas.

Worship at its best is collaboration in the truest sense of the word. When ministers, musicians, and worship leaders combine their talents, the results are inspirational and transformative. But it is music that is the most accessible element that sets the tone of the worship service, draws the community together, and offers a sense of the sacred. Music defines the congregation's culture of welcome. Done intentionally and well, our music ministry can most easily portray the congregation's commitment to "drawing the circle wide".

Music is central to this effort. It stirs our spirits, creates community, and provides an emotional context for our message to be heard. However, it can also be one of the most problematic and challenging aspects of worship. The call in recent years to build a wider repertoire of musical offerings in order to appeal to a wider variety of tastes and levels of musicality has stirred some controversy. Change in harmonization and accompaniments, taking it to a different place altogether. Those who like world music, it's welcome, but to those who are not, it's REALLY different. Robert Benson was all set to sing the tune Hyrfrydol last Sunday and lo and behold he's hearing some strange rolling twiddly bits before we launch into "Blue Boat Home" and suddenly he's not so sure about the whole venture!

The oldest, and sometimes most familiar, music in our churches originated with the English, and the Methodists and Baptists. Gradually we came to feature Eurocentric music, then Jewish then American folk and then our tastes went international. We adopted sacred music traditions from Africa. From Africa, our music took on influences from Cuba, then South America and then came back to us. Jeannie Gagne and Rev. Tricia Tummino introduced a variety of styles, pushing our envelope and making some of us uncomfortable. It is human to yearn for familiar tunes and harmonies that evoke our sense of the sacred. What we do here is to preserve some traditions while we explore others. Whatever we do, we give it our best. Style but has to have excellence.

In any congregation, there are dominant cultural assumptions about music. These assumptions are critical to a congregation's sense of identity, standards of excellence, and theological leanings. However, the minister, musicians and congregants may have differing views on what constitutes excellence and what evokes a sense of the sacred. The capacity of music to stir the emotions...Congregations that wish to become larger, stronger, more diverse and more relevant may still struggle with the idea; wondering if such changes will have a negative effect on the quality of their worship experience. This struggle is no more clearly manifested than in their music ministry. Having a dominant musical genre – be it classical, folk, jazz, etc. – is neither right nor wrong for a congregation.

This is particularly important if growing the congregation in diversity in membership is an avowed intention of the church. How do we use music to bring greater diversity to our congregations? If part of its purpose is to grow in numbers and diversity, how will the worship experience contribute?

Congregational discussion:

- What evoke a sense of the sacred for you, personally? There are no right or wrong answers here. classical music on the organ, simple poignant music on guitar, bells, chimes, drumming. We like global music, variety, strong melodies, excellence, drawing the congregation in.
- What is “appropriate” music for us/What is the culture of our congregation around this?
- Where wouldn't we go and why? (How are we served if there are places we cannot go together?)
- How do we figure this out?
- Do you think there's agreement on this?
- What is good worship, and how does it apply to Unitarian Universalism?
- How do we know we've been to a Unitarian Universalist service?
- We like to avoid style without substance, but we've been accused of having substance without style!

Things to Consider

We like to avoid worship that:

- Feels like a mile wide but an inch deep.
- Is centered on one emotional experience, happiness or guilt or fear.

We want to make room for substance and depth and the gamut of experiences, not just happy and excited.

If we want to improve our worship experience and broaden our outreach and appeal we're going to have to do three things: figure out the dominant cultures here; understand how music functions in worship; and, encourage relationships between clergy, musicians and worship volunteers.