

Roots Hold Me Close, Music Set Me Free

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Here's something to take you back — anyone remember TV's Mr. Peabody's Improbable History and his "way-back" machine? Anyone else grow up being a fan? The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show was an essential part for me of Saturdays when I was a kid.

In case you are a bit rusty in this important bit of history, the "way-back" machine was constructed by Mr. Peabody, a professorial, bowtie-wearing dog, as a birthday gift for Sherman. Recall that Sherman, fringe-haired, wearing studious dark glasses, was Mr. Peabody's pet boy. Also recall, Mr. Peabody invented the "way-back" machine so he and Sherman could visit famous historical events, and, by extension, be a history lesson for all of us kids from the 1950's and 60's.

At the request of Mr. Peabody ("Sherman, set the "way-back" machine to ..."), Sherman would set the "way-back" controls to a time and place of historical importance, and by walking through a door in the "way-back" machine, the two would be instantly transported there. And, as Wikipedia points out, the machine apparently later returned Mr. Peabody and Sherman to the present, although the return trip was never shown.

So I invite you to step into the "way-back" machine with me.

The date is July 14, 1863, a Sunday, in Dublin, Ireland. There is a buzz around town, because a highly anticipated event is happening today—The St Stephen's Green Unitarian Church is opening for their first worship service. In the years leading up to this date, a wealthy ship owner and member of the Strand Street Unitarian congregation bequeathed over £2,000 towards the total of building a new church. His father had been George Washington's aide in the American War of Independence, and later the USA's first consul in Dublin. When the total of £5,000 was raised, a beautiful Gothic styled building was erected, and today we will visit for the first time.

This building is a credit to its architect, William Lynn, and already people are claiming that it is "amongst the best of our modern structures. The Unitarian Church in St Stephen's Green, a delightful building of Gothic style, has been justly described as the best example extant of a modern Gothic church on a narrow street frontage, the treatment being quite original and altogether admirable." But why Gothic, you might ask?

In this, the mid 19th c. in Europe, there is a spiritual revival in both Catholicism and Protestantism, creating an interest in both Gothic Revival and Greek Revival building styles. Part of this spiritual revival is a reaction to 300 years of obeying a set book of classical rules about buildings.

Years from now, an architect and member of this Unitarian congregation will write that Darwinism plays a large part in the swing to this Gothic style. Churches are desiring to meet the challenge of science, and this has led to a desire to return to a style that was seen as uncorrupted by modern

civilization. Gothic art and architecture are seen as the expression of the Church-- not as it had been secularized—"but having the true faith with its emotional appeal and air of mystery."

Attendees today to this new, non-conformist Unitarian church notice several features that set it apart from churches of other established denominations in its lack of communion table or altar. Some are heard to exclaim how everyone in the St Stephen's Green Church can hear and see the preacher, emphasizing the importance of the spoken word to the Unitarian congregation.

So with that, let us come back to today and my reason for this bit of time-travel. My husband Joe and I had the good fortune to travel to Ireland last fall, in celebration of our 40th wedding anniversary, and I took the opportunity to attend the Dublin Unitarian Church one Sunday.

Traveling is a wonderful experience because it expands our way of looking at the world, shifting us outside of our normal focus, and at the same time, for me, because it places me outside of my comfort zone, which is, indeed, rich soil for growth. You might find this to be true, too.

When I travel, especially to another country, I am aware that cultures differ, customs differ, and traditions differ, and I remind myself of the respect due to cultures and people I don't understand. I am a guest, there to learn about them. And by extension, I am learning things about myself, as well.

For me, feeling like a guest also meant that I felt like an outsider, at least in part.

As I walked up the stone steps of this 150 year old church that rainy Sunday September morning last year, I wondered how it might feel similar to, and different from, this congregation and building, my home.

That Sunday, encountering no greeter or offer of a temporary name badge, I took my seat in the wooden pews and looked around. The front wall holds a huge stained glass window showcasing the revival of the Irish stained glass industry in the early 20th century. This window, which features the themes of Discovery, Truth, Inspiration, Love and Work, contains the image of Jesus with the backdrop of a rising sun.

Below this window are, in six carved-arches, the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, starting with these familiar words "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." To the side of this window is an elevated stone pulpit, carved with words from the Gospel of John, 1:7—"Grace and Truth Came by Jesus Christ." Other traditional stained glass windows filled another wall.

As I was waiting for the beginning of the service, I felt a bit uncomfortable, a little alienated, for all the reasons I just mentioned—although we spoke the same language, I was a foreigner, a guest. And despite reminding myself of the deep roots of Unitarianism in Christianity, and my knowledge that European Unitarian churches are closer to those Christian roots than many churches in America, I just didn't feel like I was in a UU church—my UU church, in other words.

Just as the service was to start, I was handed our gray hymnal, the same one you held earlier. Ah, yes, this feels a bit like home, I thought. O.K.

Then after an opening prayer, a hymn was announced, and sounds of the organ filled the church. I turned to #298, "Wake Now my Senses," and as the congregation started to sing, I started to cry, and I cried my way through the first verse, through the second verse, through the third verse, through the fourth verse, and didn't stop until we got to the last strains of the fifth verse. Something magical, even mystical, was happening as the congregation sang. My alienation evaporated like mist with the arrival of the warm sun.

These are the words I eventually came up with to describe this experience that morning in Dublin: There's no demarcation, no me vs. them, no dividing line between those who hold onto Christian leanings vs. those who find secular leanings are a better fit, vs. those whose Jewish heritage continues to resound in their hearts, and all the other ways of being a UU.

Through my tears, all I could feel was, "Those divisions don't make any sense... These are my people!" This group of Unitarians in Dublin, Ireland, singing together in this beautiful 19th century church on west side of St. Stephen's Green, are a part of who I am just as much as those folks in Columbus are. My tears told me I was home. Home to people who love me, as well as home to people who challenge me. Home.

I recall the sermon I preached here last February, where I talked about my attending the retreat in Boston put on by the UUA for ministers who were in their first year of ministry. I talked about how I always wanted roots that extended beyond being American, because for me that "melting pot" had worked too well. I came from a family that never talked about where our ancestors had come from.

Working on that sermon, I made the decision that I could claim those early Universalists and Unitarians as my personal roots; that I could draw on the principles that guided their lives as they claimed their own thoughtful convictions in religious matters.

I could discover in their lives passions that could inspire mine. That intellectual decision I made last year was helpful, but that experience of crying through "Wake Now My Senses" took me to a place much deeper altogether. A place where I - and we - are connected to others across time, across space, across how we interpret the Mystery of life.

Maybe you, too, have been caught off guard by your own tears or uneasiness, swept away by a force coming from deep inside, when you didn't expect it to happen. Where has it taken you? What have you learned as a result of pondering on what you were called to? Or maybe a better way to express that is to say, what places have you allowed yourself to be taken to?

I recall a similar experience 18 or 19 years ago, as I was sitting in this church on a Sunday morning, on my first visit. I felt an outsider then, too, unsure of why I was here. What was I doing in a church? I thought I left all that behind me. Nonetheless, I remember tearing up listening to "Spirit of Life," especially the words, "roots hold me close, wings set me free." And then it happened the

next week. And the next. I couldn't make any sense of it, but I knew I had to keep coming back to this place to see what that enigmatic call was about.

I was filled with an inexpressible longing, both in my first few visits at this church and in the Dublin church as well, a longing for something I didn't have words for, and so the inexpressible longing expressed itself the only way it seems it could in me, in tears.

This rather "back-door approach" is reflected in David Whyte's poem in his prayerful words, "What is precious inside us does not care to be known by the mind in ways that diminish its presence." As I see it, what holds a deeper value and worth is, at times, too leery to step forward in the face of the rational, where there is insufficient space and respect for it.

In some ways, I have, for too long, tended to value the intellectual while creating some distance from the emotional. Maybe you have, too? What is deeper does have its own voice, and perhaps we must approach it as a guest—one who is open to different customs and ways of seeing the world.

I lived the poet's words, "All those years forgetting how easily you can belong to everything simply by listening," when I realized that I was putting up barriers around Unitarian Universalism by defining it by my terms, when in fact, the faith is much larger than my version of it. I only had to listen, to stop thinking and judging, and listen.

The strength of what it means to be UU is that we do come from many traditions, many ways of looking at what is ultimate in life, and how to relate to that Ultimacy, and our variety can only enrich us if we will listen to each other and look for similarities. Creating barriers is never the answer, I learned. If you've hung around here much, I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "We don't have to think alike to love alike."

Just as in the children's story, the bell-maker's attempts to meld iron, gold, brass and silver were doomed to fail when he could see only the differences of the metals. It was his daughter, with the help of the magician, who helped him to see that it was the similarities that counted. And that is also true of what it takes to be a Unitarian Universalist: it is the elements that unite us that make us strong, while we are made weaker when we let what differs among us define us.

I was thinking of this line between what unites and divides us recently when I thought about an experience I had a year ago or so in the Intensive Care Unit of Mount Carmel West Hospital, where I am privileged to be one of its chaplains. I had been called by a nurse to visit a patient who was on a ventilator—sometimes referred to as a breathing machine--and generally speaking, folks on vents are on pain medication.

But because pain medications can reduce a patient's alertness level, and this patient was going to be tested soon to see if she could come off the vent, she was being taken off these medications. As I stood beside her bedside, I looked down on a pretty uncomfortable patient. And I, too, felt uncomfortable there, but of course in a vastly different way.

Now, as a chaplain, I am with lots of folks in the hospital on vents, many people in the process of getting better, many people in that “we hope they are getting better, but as yet we don’t know” place. And I am also with many people who are taken off the vent and die soon thereafter.

And as you probably know, chaplains work very closely with nurses. Overwhelmingly, the nurses I have met are open to when a family member—or a chaplain—wants to talk to them about the patient’s comfort level. I stand with deep respect of good nurses, their dedication, their skills, and their level of compassion. But in this case, I knew the nurse couldn’t do anything to make this patient more comfortable at this time.

My discomfort level stemmed, in part, from seeing differences. I felt myself breathing freely and comfortably, yet I saw someone with the ventilator’s tube down her throat, and I knew she wasn’t very comfortable. Along with this, all the technology in an ICU room has a way of distancing the healthier person from the patient.

Yet when I looked past all the machinery, and looked into her eyes, I just saw a suffering, scared person who wanted to be pain-free, just as I value being pain-free. I began to relate to her through our similarities. I began stroking her hair, and assuring her that she would get through this, that this pain would end. Eventually I became more comfortable because I got past worrying that I wasn’t able to do anything to relieve her pain and just related to her as she was. And by and by, she did seem to relax a bit.

Accepting our similarities meant that I had to loosen my ideas of how things should be so that I could stand with her, not caught in helplessness. The Celtic knot on the cover of your order of service speaks of that interconnectedness as I see it.

Although the original meaning of these ancient Celtic symbols are only conjecture, as no written meaning has ever been found, I see the symbolism of the interlocking of separate strands, knit together to form a whole. A whole that is better because of its union.

But I want to get back to the power of music, which I clearly felt and responded to, during my first visits here and in Ireland. What is music? On its most basic level, it’s a series of sounds, with spaces in between. But yet it is so much more. For me there is a mystery about music in its ability to evoke deep places.

I have been thinking of the power of music to heal us, reduce stress, and to lessen anxiety. And of course, to open us to unconscious experiences. When I came to this church for the first time, something in me knew I needed to stay here, that I had much to learn, ways to grow, and it was through music that I felt its call.

In the second reading, Elizabeth Harper Neeld speaks of the transformation possible as music takes her out of her verbal, rational world into a creative, symbolic experience. Although I can’t say I understand the mathematical explanation of her piano teacher, I wholeheartedly feel the power of music to transport me to places I couldn’t plan.

I heard a TED talk recently given by Benjamin Zander, the conductor of The Boston Philharmonic Orchestra and a guest conductor throughout the world. (If you don't know, TED is a non-profit that recognizes the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives, and ultimately, the world. Either Google it, or ask a friend to Google it for you.)

Before this quote I am about to read, the conductor talked about playing a piece by Chopin -- or as he pronounced the composer's name, SHOP-an -- to a group of young people, asking them to think of a person they loved who had died. This is what Mr. Zander had to say about the power of music to transform:

"I was in Ireland during the Troubles, 10 years ago, and I was working with some Catholic and Protestant kids on conflict resolution. And I did this, [playing the 'SHOP-an' piece], a risky thing to do, because they were street kids. And one of them came to me the next morning. He said, 'My brother was shot last year and I didn't cry for him, but when you played that shopping piece... he was the one I was thinking about. And I felt the tears streaming down my face. And you know, it felt really good to cry for my brother.' "

I think that would be a difficult piece to follow, as it speaks for itself.

My prayer for you all, and for myself, is that we may be open to how the spirit moves through us, and through the Mysteries of life . . . and music is a wonderful mystery of life. Amen.