

There is a hymn I've grown fond of, we'll sing it in just a little while. It says: "Let a dancing song be heard. Play the music, say the words. Learn to follow, learn to lead, feel the rhythm, fill a need. Let it be a dance we do." The hymn we sang earlier said, "when our heart is in a holy place, we are blessed with love and grace. When we tell our story from deep inside, and we listen with a loving mind, THEN, our heart is in a holy place."

I want to talk about that holy place this morning. More than that, I want to urge you to seek that holy place. Often and repeatedly. Even when it feels like work, I'd like to ask that you seek that holy place.

You should know, I believe a faith community can and should be such a holy place. While it may sound overly simplistic, I believe we create a holy place by simply telling our stories from deep inside and listening with a loving mind and an open heart. In so doing, we learn to follow and we learn to lead. That's how we fill an important need. And that's when we truly dance with one another, in step, in rhythm and without stepping on each other's toes---possibly causing injury.

I don't know where or when I first learned the importance of differentiating between the words and the music. But it's proven to be a valuable tool over the years and I want to share the concept with you. And I hope you're able to take it to heart.

Think of your favorite song. What do you like most about it? Are the words most important or is it the music? The easy answer is both. But I want to push you a little bit and ask that you take a closer look. I suspect in most cases, the answer is more nuanced than that. I suspect in most cases it's either the words or the music that carries the vitality, the potency, the overarching theme of the piece.

There are some pieces of music where the answer is straight forward. In many pieces of classical music, for example, and in much of jazz, there are no words, and we are attracted to that music because of the melody or the rhythm or the mood it conveys. Or maybe it's the simplicity or the intricacy of the piece that captures us. On the other hand, as best I can tell---I'm not a fan of country music, it's almost always the words that matter most. Likewise, with the blues. Those genres seem to be about the story they tell. The stories of lost love, sadness, futility and of being done wrong.

Music has the power to move us and the power to calm and embrace us. Music has the ability to alter our mood or to bring out particular qualities in us. When I hear certain pieces of music, I've got to move, snap my fingers or dance. Music like that makes it much easier for me to get certain kinds of work done---like doing house work or mowing the lawn.

Then there's music that's quiet background music. Sometimes it has words but often it doesn't. Certainly, the words at that time don't matter. It's the atmosphere that's important, it warms the room and provides a bit of company, as I focus on whatever I'm doing. I know many people enjoy classical music that way—pleasant, melodic motifs that keeps them company and warms the space they're in.

There are some pieces of music I love to listen to for the story they tell. In *A Turtle's Dream*, Abby Lincoln, sings of life down here below, from a turtle's perspective. I don't know if its intended or not but I understand the song to be comparing life down here on earth with life in heaven. I find it a very spiritual piece of music. Roberta Flack sings a song called *Jesse*—it almost brings tears to my eyes. It's a ballad with a simple, pretty melody, but it's the story she tells of missing Jesse that's so potent. Has he gone to war, left her, you just don't know. But she pines for him to come home. She tells him she's left the light on the stairs and still sets the table for two. I remember being shocked when my 5 or 6 year old daughter cried when she heard that song some twenty years ago. In retrospect, I think she was responding to the melancholy music, while I was taken by the lyrics.

How often does that happen, one person hears the music while another hears the words? For some of us, we seem unable to hear the music when certain words cross our ears.

There is someone with whom I have meals out sometimes. More than one wait-person has fallen prey to the evil eye, by asking the simple question, "What can I get for you miss?" This person most decidedly does not see herself as a Miss! Someone else sitting at the table might hear the simple music of inquiry, an offer to serve.

While I chuckle silently, at the same time, I understand the reaction. There was a time in my life when the word "boy" would reverberate throughout my body, whenever anyone put me and that word in the same sentence. Even when there was clearly no disrespect intended, such as when a friend would say "boy, are you lucky" or "boy, you really screwed that up".

I had to train myself to listen to their intention and not just their words. The term can still rankle, but I've gotten better at hearing the music and not getting twisted by the word itself. It's required conscious effort and patience to get to a place where I don't allow myself to be held hostage by a particular word.

We all live by a list of shoulds. One should do XYZ and should not do ABC. Some of these shoulds are shared, while others are not. This is where the work is. This is where discernment and self-reflection is required. The list of shoulds we live by are often so ingrained in us, we think of them as normal, neutral, truths. And we non-consciously assume they are so normal, natural, and neutral, everyone should adhere to the same list we live by.

The truth is, almost no-one shares our same list of shoulds. There is an interesting dynamic that exists within human communications. We can think faster than we can listen. And we listen faster than we can talk. It has been said that music is as much about the spaces between the notes as it is about the notes themselves.

There is always a time lag, space between the notes. And because we think faster than we can listen, our minds, memories and emotions, often fill in the spaces between the words we hear.

Our strong tendency is to allow our list of shoulds and should not's to creep into the space between the words we are hearing. While we are listening, our minds are often busy at work.

Our egos are often running full speed to ensure that we are seen as bright, competent, sufficiently whatever—well travelled, nice, attractive, any number of things. And our egos are also busy trying to keep hidden our anxieties, pains, fears and disappointments. This dynamic often manifest as judgment about the other person.

That's why the song tells us to listen with a loving mind, because THEN, our heart is in a holy place. This is the holy place I told you I wanted to talk about today. This, our faith community.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Poughkeepsie, knows how to do community. I'm constantly told by new comers how friendly this place is, how comfortable it is to be here.

In my almost two years with you, I've come to see for myself how much this is a community. There are relationships here that go back twenty years, and more. There are adults here who knew this place as a child. Every now and then, I'm surprised to discover long standing relationships between people, who at first glance, I'd never put together.

This place knows how to do community! I say, play to your strengths.

Others might say—if you've got it flaunt it!

Let us build on our strength. Let us leverage our ability to do community and stretch to build that Beloved Community. That's the place where we tell our stories from deep inside and listen with a loving mind. It's where we learn to follow and we learn to lead. And in so doing, we fill a very important need. The need to simply be accepted; accepted for who we are, as we are. It doesn't sound like much but it's so big, so important.

That Beloved Community *is* within our reach. To reach that place, we'll need to traverse some prickly landscape. In order to get through those prickly spots, we'll need dedication, conscious attention and some help from our friends. And to maximize the help from our friends, we'll need to listen with an open heart, to hear the music and not just the words.

This is especially important for us, because many of those prickly spots have to do with words; words on our should and should not lists. And of course, the meaning, emotions and experiences we associate with those words. Words such as God, Jesus, spirit, spiritual, religion, faith, sacred, holy, worship, church, sanctuary, ritual. The list is not all inclusive, nor in any particular order.

These are words that for many of us, carry emotional baggage. These are words we seldom experience as neutral terms. For many of us, these words are either positive or they have negative connotations----that we ourselves ascribe to them. Please refer back to your should list.

Some of these words are notoriously prickly for Unitarian Universalist. Terms such as God, sacred, religion and worship, often pull at our UU faith community. Others are potent primarily here in our local environment. For example, the words church, versus Fellowship, is primarily a local issue. Likewise, is this a sanctuary or the main meeting room?

To reach that Beloved Community, perhaps we should employ a foundational theory of positive negotiation strategies. The theory says that when you reach impasse, and can not find agreement, you need to move to a higher level of analysis. At some point, a higher level of analysis will generate common ground. At some point, I suspect we all believe in life, even if we can't agree on just how that life should be lived.

In other words, we need to listen to the music, and not get hung up on the words themselves. We need to listen with an open mind, better yet, with an open and loving heart. When we speak from that place deep inside, it makes it easier for the other to listen with an open heart. When we listen with an open heart, it makes it easier for someone to speak from deep inside, as they know they will be accepted for who they are.

This may all sound simplistic, but it is anything but. Learning to listen with an open heart and to speak from that deep place inside each of us, is a long and determined process. It correlates with the saying that we are often our own worst enemies.

We do ourselves, and the world a great favor when we learn to listen with an open heart. First and foremost, an open heart helps to unshackle ourselves from our own limiting beliefs. An open heart is a salve to our own emotional pains and the anguish of fear and the need to self-protect.

Listening with an open heart helps other people feel safer and supports them venturing into the depths of their own being. What could possibly be a better gift to give? What could possibly be more loving?

This is the work that is required of us in order to pass through the gates of the Beloved Community. But we can't get there alone. We need the help and support of a community, a faith community. And more than that, we need some form of accountability to something bigger than our individual shoulds lists.

In a family structure, we have some accountability to the norms of that family system. In the business world, we have some accountability to policies and procedures, our boss and even co-workers who depend on us. In Unitarian Universalism, in this faith community, we have accountability to each other by way of a covenant to be in right relations with one another. In this community, we have accountability to each other through shared membership in this Fellowship.

Let us be a people who listen to the music! Let a dancing song be heard. Play the music, say the words. Learn to follow, learn to lead, feel the rhythm, fill a need. Let that be the dance we do.