

FASCINATIN' RHYTHM
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS ~ *Marcia McFee (resource)*

Leader 1: In the beginning was the noise... (*drums rumble, slap*) and the noise begat the rhythm... (*begin rhythm*) and the rhythm begat everything else, and the dance began.

People: As rhythm sounds, creation happens.

Leader 2: We are a people bound together through sacred sound.

People: As rhythm sounds, our hearts become one.

Leader 1: Our faith leads us to a world reverberating like a thousand different thunders.

People: As rhythm sounds, community happens.

Leader 2: We are part of a rhythmic universe as we pulse together.

People: As rhythm sounds, opposition ceases.

Leader 1: We are all companions of life's rhythms in our stillness... (*rhythm stops*) and motion,

Leader 2: In sound and silence, in darkness and light, our souls are uplifted.

People: as rhythm sounds, (*rhythm begins again*) we are standing on sacred ground.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *I Ain't Gonna Paint No More!* ~ *Karen Beaumont*

(Told in the music of a familiar folk tune, this story is about a boy who paints everything in his house, even all his body parts.)

READING *Prodigal Songs (excerpt)* ~ *Glen Thomas Rideout*

...I am one of many people whose lives have been affected deeply by that music. I am one of many who have found strength in the sound, and been renewed by the solidarity that springs out from our body's music. Our bodies create music to soothe us, to comfort us, to pass time, but there is even greater potential. When we have the courage to lift up our voices, to clap our hands in time, to sway or to dance, we offer the world a music like no one else's. You have a voice that no one else will ever possess, a rhythm that is so special because only you live in it. When you sing, you offer an uncompromising gift of yourself to a universe begging to hear more.

We can truly, easily be ourselves when we sing, and I think that's what scares many of us (myself very much included) from singing more. When our bodies make music we are loud and we are quiet, we are in tune and not quite, we are robust and piercing, thin and fragile, unrelenting and unsure. I get the same pit-of-the-stomach feeling every time I must sing, every time a rehearsal begins, every time a worship service starts with a song. But I think of those moments that my congregation sang to me. I remember the courage of those words and I remember that within me lies the same power to sing strength and hope into the lives of those with whom I share my music, and it becomes less and less important whether or not I am afraid.

To sing is to give voice to your self. It is to allow the body's innermost aspirations to have space to speak with color and with inspiration. When you sing, your sound is rich with your history and your opinions, your heritage and your hopes. And so you must sing. We need your voice. And because your story is forever changing, because your voice is like no other voice, and because your voice and your voice and your voice and my voice comprise the uncompromising strength that is our voice, because through our singing we save lives, we must sing always.

Full text of reading found at: www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/prodigoal-songs/

MESSAGE

"Everything moves in rhythm. Atomic particles, waves of electrons, molecules in wood and rocks, and grass, and trees, and amoebas, and mammals, and fish, and birds, and reptiles, and the earth, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and we ourselves...all dominated by rhythm."¹ "Everything in the universe is a beat system, and every system is regulated by its own a beat."²

All of us 'got' rhythm. "Rhythm, a major element of music, is a primal force in our lives."³ It begins for us as human beings at a few weeks' gestation, when the human embryo develops cells that begin to 'beat together'. Those first cells go on to form the heart. And, the first thing we experience in utero, is our mother's heartbeat. Rhythm is part of who we are. Rhythm is a fascinating thing.

A few years ago, the Rev. Robert Latham was the guest speaker at the Canadian Unitarian Council's annual conference. His focus was on collective visioning, or more specifically, he was looking at how a congregation or an association can create a vision that everyone can buy into. It was from him that I learned about the principle of entrainment.

Do you know what that is? Well, entrainment means just what it sounds like...en-train-ment...to get on board. Given his focus, Latham was using entrainment to illustrate how it is that we can get into a common beat with one another, to be on the same page, or to sing the same tune. Said differently, when we share a common vision our hearts beat as one, because we all chose to get on the same rhythm train.

Literally.

Did you know that the actual heartbeats of people who care for one another beat in a common rhythm? Studies have shown that the heartbeats of lovers synchronize when they are together, and suggest that two people's ability to sync up heartbeats can be an indication of whether or not a relationship will last. (BTW, our theme packet suggests a couple of spiritual exercises that involve syncing your heartbeat with that of another.)

It's even possible to measure, by the extent to which that synchronicity exists, how bonded we are to the people around us.⁴ For example, if the heart beats of all those watching a dangerous

¹ Quote from medical professional Stephen Rekhausen (sp?) as quoted by Robert Latham in <https://vimeo.com/137077214>

² Robert Latham

³ From *Mind, Music & Imagery: Unlocking the Treasures of Your Mind* By Stephanie Merritt pp 120-123

⁴ <http://www.yourtango.com/201170777/similar-heart-beats-could-mean-long-lasting-love>

sport were monitored, it would be possible to tell which of the audience were relatives or loved ones of the players simply by seeing which heartbeats matched those of the players.⁵

And did you know when you are separated from your dog for a period of time, your heartbeat, and that of your dog's, will sync up when you are reunited?⁶ And what about cats. Cats purr at a frequency of 20 to 50 hertz, a rhythm which is helpful in speeding the healing process of bone injuries, as well as soft tissue damage to ligaments, tendons and muscles. Spending time with a purring will lower your stress levels, calm your nerves, boost your immune system and reduce your blood pressure.⁷

And this is fascinating too...maybe especially for our choir, or any of you who sing in a choir. I think we all know that yogic breathing and meditation and prayer recitation is beneficial to our heartrates. But recent studies in Sweden have shown that singing with others, particularly in unison, has a similar benefit.

Now, some of this is physiological. Singing regulates activity in the vagus nerve which is involved in our emotional life. When we sing, says neuroscientist Dr. Bjorn Vickhoff, "...the vagus nerve, which runs from the brain stem to the heart, becomes activated in a pump-like fashion. You exhale when you sing, and that's what activates the nerve which in turn reduces the heart rate. Since this triggers an emotional response, the singing creates a shared emotional pattern among the choir members."

Now, that in and of itself maybe doesn't seem like such a big deal...we sing together, we inhale together, we exhale together, and our heartbeats line up. But what is perhaps more interesting is that when we are able to sync our heartbeats...consciously or unconsciously...we both trust one another more, and we are more likely to cooperate with one another. A collective consciousness is created, increasing our sensitivity toward one another.

Further, songs that have a slower beat and are more structured rhythmically, like hymns, Vickhoff says, can help the members of a congregation connect with and open up to each other. Hymns serve the religious function of drawing a group of people into a shared experience. Fascinating.

You have perhaps heard me say before that collective singing has provided me with some of the most religious experiences of my life. It often brings tears to my eyes... emotions well up in me so that my throat closes... I experience chills or even weakness in my body... the feeling is sometimes so intense that I wonder if I can handle it. Its power can even scare me. Still, I love to sing with you, and for you to sing with me.

Let me return to the idea of entrainment. Rhythmic entrainment is a principle of the universe...it is how things work....and from what my unscientific mind can tell, is similar, or even identical to, the law of coupled oscillators. These principles refer to the tendency for rhythmic processes...like heartbeats...or oscillations to adjust in order to match other rhythms...that is, to get on the same rhythm train. It's found in the way fireflies light up in synchrony, and in how we adjust their speech rhythms to match each other in conversation,

⁵ <http://io9.gizmodo.com/5797994/how-two-peoples-heartbeats-become-synchronized-even-when-they-are-far-from-each-other>

⁶ <http://www.iflscience.com/health-and-medicine/dog-and-their-owners-heart-beats-sync-when-theyre-reunited/>

⁷ <http://pawesomcats.com/2013/10/02/the-healing-power-of-a-cats-purr/>

and even in how we adjust our sleeping cycles to the cycle of light and dark.⁸ We see it in swarms of insects, schools of fish, and flocks of birds. Every time we get together, and particularly if we are involved in a common activity...like hymn singing or even watching a football game... our heartbeats tend to sync up, creating a collective consciousness, or a hive mind.

When our bodies do something together, our brains work together too. And then our hearts beat together. The more we 'do stuff' together, the more likely we are to care about the each other and the higher our commitment to the common good.⁹

Rhythmic entrainment was first discovered in Holland in 1656 by the scientist Christiaan Huygens who designed the pendulum clock. During his experimentation, he found that if he placed two unsynchronized clocks side by side, over time, they would gradually synchronize.¹⁰ How and why this happens is apparently still something of mystery... but it does happen...over and over...pervasively...throughout the natural world.

All over the natural world, which is to say, also in our brains. Our brain functions can be described as the cooperative activity of bunches of neurons. What those neurons do together has a wave to it...that is, they oscillate. They have a kind of swing, moving to and fro, like a pendulum. They beat, and they tend to want to cooperate.¹¹ And so they fire together.

You know how things are nested...sort of like the matryoshka dolls that Rosemary Ganley shared last Sunday? What happens on the micro level happens at every larger level of life form. The processes that happen in our cells are mirrored in the way our brain operates, and the way our brain operates is evident in the patterns of our interactions, and the way we interact and communicate with one another is copied in the relationships between organizations within society and the world. I think the reverse is true as well...that large patterns influence the patterns at the tiniest level. There is an interdependent web of all creation, and we are a part of it.

And we feel its rhythm...whether or not we are conscious of it.

So what's the lesson for us here? Well, there are several lessons, actually, from my point of view.

First, a primal beating rhythm exists. I've never thought of the concept of God as being anything like a drum beat, but this exploration of rhythm has led me to consider that idea. Call it the spirit of life, call it a larger-than-any-of-us pulse, call it a sustaining power...there is a beat of life upon which we can rely, that is constant, that thrums with the turning of the earth and the spinning of the planets. It is found in stardust, and fireflies, and blades of grass. It's found at the highest peaks and in the deepest of waters. A primal beating rhythm exists. You can count on it.

Second, when we come together as individual beating hearts...and particularly when we sing together, or engage in a collective activity, or show sympathy for one another...our individual

⁸ <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/experience/InTimeWithTheMusic.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.inverse.com/article/6399-our-heart-beats-sync-up-when-we-trust-each-other>

¹⁰ <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/pub/huygenss-clocks-revisited>

¹¹ <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/experience/InTimeWithTheMusic.pdf>

hearts find a common rhythm. Again, this is comforting, but it is also empowering. You see, it's not just that hearts will find a common rhythm...they will actually attune themselves to the strongest and loudest beats. So it behooves us to find the rhythms that embody our values and our visions, and then to sync up to those beats...to jump onto those rhythm trains.

This means that our choices matter. The more we join forces and bodies and hearts, in communal activity that focuses on love and justice, the more powerful those beats will become. It's like adding drops of water to a bucket. Each drop, each heart, matters. In the reading Sheena shared, Glen Thomas Rideout said:

"We need your voice. And because your story is forever changing, because your voice is like no other voice, and because your voice and your voice and your voice and my voice comprise the uncompromising strength that is our voice, because through our singing we save lives, we must sing always."

The world needs your voice. We need your voice. The rhythm of love, the rhythm of peace, the rhythm of inclusion...all of these need your voice and your heartbeat in order to grow louder and larger, and by that means to attract even more beating hearts.

Finally, there is hope for us, any of us, all of us, when we feel out of sync. If all of what I've said is true, and I believe it is, then what is needed in such moments is to get close to the heartbeats that are calling out to your deepest longings. When you are out of rhythm, find those people and those values...those places that are telling the truth...those voices that are affirming and loving...and then sidle right up to them and simply breathe. Breathe. Slow down the anxiety and the fear. Breathe. Be with those hearts. Feel their beat.

And then your one little heart will do the rest of the work. With time, with repetition, it will sync right up with that stronger heartbeat. Like a respirator, being with others and participating in communal rites is life-saving. Our natural tendencies to cooperate and synchronize will help your heart to find a rhythm of connection.

There are lots of drums beating out there. Lots of loud, pulsating, and confusing rhythms that would have our hearts learn to beat by themselves and to believe that there is no way to connect authentically and fully. Those arrhythmic beats try to tell us that we are isolated beings. That's a lie. But it is true that the more we immerse ourselves in those messages, those drumbeats, the more our hearts will feel as if they are beating alone.

You are not alone. None of us is alone. The stream of life runs through our veins and pulses within us. We just need to find the right train, the right beat, and then get on it. Because together, our hearts are stronger.

Blessed be.

CLOSING WORDS

The Gardener of Eden ~ James Broughton

I am the old dreamer who never sleeps
I am timekeeper of the timeless dance
I preserve the long rhythms of the earth
and fertilize the rounds of desire

In my evergreen arboretum

I raise flowering hopes for the world
I plant seeds of perennial affection
and wait for their passionate bloom

Would you welcome that sight if you saw it?
Revalue the view you have lost?
Could you wake to the innocent morning
and follow the risks of your heart?

Every day I grow a dream in my garden
where the beds are laid out for love
When will you come to embrace it
and join in the joy of the dance?

Say yes! So be it!