

The Sound of Two Hands Clapping © Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

Thoughts to Ponder:

O clap your hands together, all ye people: O sing unto God with the voice of melody. – Psalm 47:1

I got rhythm. – Ira Gershwin

Long, long ago, in Africa, in the communities from which people were captured and hauled away into slavery, the people sang all the time. Their songs were a primary means of expression, reflecting the ongoing events in their lives. Singing provided a means of engaging with one another and their world. Music was inseparable from daily living. Never was it regarded as performance or “culture” – something produced by a few learned people for everyone else to admire. Rather, music was central to the people’s way of telling their ongoing story – like a conversation in which everyone listened and everyone spoke.

Music linked people in physical space (from those buried in the soil, to those walking around on earth, to the deities and God who inhabit the spiritual realm). And music linked people in time (as a way of singing about the ancestors, the present experience, and the future hopes for the children to follow).

The drum had a particular, sacred significance. Drums gathered people in community – to celebrate together and to mourn, to plant together and to harvest, to embark on a journey and to welcome people home. Every aspect of the community was recorded in drumbeat; every part of life produced an associated song and a rhythm tapped out. The drum was sacred, and the drummer the medium through which the rhythm reached the community. The drum was the heartbeat of the community.

Slave traders and slave owners understood the power of the drum, so when Africans were enslaved, their drums were taken away from them. But the slaves remembered their rhythms, and they taught them, transformed, through the generations. Even now, those African rhythms influence American music. But, according to Ysaye Barnwell, from whom I learned much of this history, in slave times, those rhythms may actually have saved

lives.¹ As the slaves sang in the fields, the rhythm in their songs set the pace for their work – so that they worked fast enough so as not to be punished, yet not so fast that they would be worked to death.

The people continued to find creative ways of reproducing their drums. The early black churches were often built raised up above the ground to be as percussive as possible. When dancing was prohibited – which it was – the people created a form of prayer called the Ring Shout, in which they slid their feet across the floor, without picking them up and thumped just their heels to the beat. As long as they never lifted their feet from the floor, they were not dancing, strictly speaking, but they were still making rhythm.

They clapped their hands, and beat broomsticks on the floor to accentuate the rhythm even more. With the raised architecture, broomsticks beating on the floor, feet pounding, and hands clapping, the church building itself became the drum.

The drum, linking people across time and space, from Africa to America, from the ancestors to the present to the dreams for the future. The drum, powerful enough to guide people through atrocities to freedom to the struggle for true equality. The drum, the heartbeat of the community.

I have been pondering that heartbeat of the African community, that drum in all its incarnations, considering what it has to teach me, to teach all of us. Lately, every time I have clapped my hands in beat to a hymn in church, I have thought of that heartbeat. And I have remembered how, even in slave times, the most heinous of times, that heartbeat still found ways to express itself.

Every time I have clapped my hands, I have paid homage to the indomitable human spirit, that spirit that will keep singing rhythmically, tapping, and clapping, long after the drums have been taken away. So for me, the first lesson is a lesson about spirit.

It may surprise you to think of spirit as being a significant foundation of Unitarian Universalism, but it is. Long ago, our forebears cast away any notion that a specific belief in God was a necessary component in our individual or collective theologies. As such, some UUs believe in God or

Goddess – some in multiple forms of the Divine. Some are confirmed atheists, and some are quite comfortable living in the agnostic land of “not knowing.” And yet, in most UU churches, meditations and prayers are addressed to the Spirit of Life, or the Spirit of Love. One of the favorite hymns in many UU congregations is *Spirit of Life*:

*Spirit of Life come unto me,
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close, wings set me free.
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.ⁱⁱ*

Many churches sing that hymn every Sunday. And why? Because we can recognize that we are embodied spirits. There is a spirit we can sense, feel and see operating every moment of our lives – in our breathing, our laughter, our tears; in touch, sound, taste, sight, and touch.

That spirit is what makes me *me* and you *you* and what makes it possible for us to sense each other and to connect with each other. Any one who has stood at a deathbed or beside an open casket knows that spirit of life by its absence. In our living and our dying, we encounter it at every turn. And so we sing to the spirit that finds its home in our bodies, the spirit that shares itself, moving freely in, through and among us and all living things – that inexplicable, miraculous life force that makes our lives possible: the Spirit of Life.

Across the world, across time, the human spirit has encountered innumerable tragedies and horrific suffering. Yet we have evidence that the spirit of life taps out a rhythm long after the drums are taken away. The spirit of life sings in the fields to rise above the brutality of slavery. The spirit of life hopes for a new day, when all people shall be free, and will cease to cause one another to suffer.

Sometimes the spirit of life grows mighty dim. Anyone who has faced terrible sorrow or lengthy debilitating illness, or terrible pain, or blighted dream after blighted dream knows the struggle to keep the flame flickering inside. But when the African slaves had their drums taken away, they still

tapped out rhythm after rhythm – rhythms that continue to make their way into our music and to nourish our spirits today. I find that simply amazing and incredibly moving and inspiring.

So, here we are, a church. Other than singing about the Spirit of Life or maybe hearing a prayer addressed to it, how do we celebrate it? That question leads me to the second lesson I have learned in contemplating the African drumbeat heartbeat: a lesson about worship.

The life spirit fills me and allows me to connect with other living beings and to experience our world in innumerable ways. So it seems to me a significant aim of worship ought to be to help increase awareness and appreciation of that spirit. I sense that spirit when I hear stirring words and music, for instance, when I learn from experiences of others, or when I have moments of silence for reflection.

Increasingly, I enjoy expressing that spirit actively. That is why I like to clap when we sing songs with vibrant rhythms, I like to move my body when I am singing, I like to laugh or weep or sigh. If I am an embodied spirit, then for me, to worship means, in part, to feel the spirit move through my body – to move my body, to *be spirited*.

Sometimes I think UU worship could loosen up, just a little bit, so that, congregants – and ministers, too, for that matter – might feel more comfortable giving expression to the embodied spirits they are.

Now I know I am talking to New Englanders. I don't want to suggest anything too rash.

I am reminded of that Mark Twain story of speaking in New England for the first time. When he spoke elsewhere in the country the audiences howled in laughter. But that New England audience– well, they didn't appear to react at all!

Flummoxed, Twain cut his remarks short and retreated to the back of the hall where he could hear people talking as they left. As the audience dispersed, he overheard one person say to another, 'Wasn't he funny? It was all I could do to keep from laughing.'

I am a New Englander myself. I understand viscerally the kinds of restraint New Englanders bring into the room with them. But I am not suggesting we speak in tongues or froth in a frenzy. Rather I am saying Unitarian Universalists might garner a more full-bodied satisfaction from their worship if they could learn to engage in a more open and spirited manner.

Moreover, I think our survival as a denomination depends on our ability to make our message more accessible to a wider variety of people. Our authenticity as a people who express a yearning to build multi-cultural communities requires an openness to new ways of doing things.

I often hear the stories of people who come to us from more traditional religious institutions, where the articles of faith are clearly spelled out and non-negotiable. Hearing about our freer Unitarian Universalist churches, it's only natural that people who reject dogma seek us out. Sometimes they can barely conceal their shock when they find UU churches that, while liberal in theologies, are conservative in worship style. UUs generally follow an order of worship recognizable, with variations of course, to most other mainstream Protestant churches. We sing lots of 19th century hymns. Our clergy often wear robes and stoles, sometimes academic hoods. We tend to worship in old buildings, in conservatively furnished and decorated sanctuaries.

Our more fundamentalist neighbors, rigid in matters of belief, are often open, experimental, curious, and creative in matters of worship style. *Our* UU churches obsess over what genres of music are acceptable in worship. *Their* churches adopt and adapt the popular music *de jour* to their theology. For them, the message is paramount. Any medium that effectively delivers that message is acceptable. It's fine to bring coffee into the sanctuary (not that I am suggesting that, here), be blasted by Christian rock, listen to a pastor in a Hawaiian shirt, clap or cheer, or leap to your feet for a hymn – just so long as you get the message, you understand the bedrock beliefs, you get the dogma.

Now, I like our worship style in large part. After all, I produce it week after week. But sometimes I worry that Unitarian Universalists might be more wed to a form of worship than they are interested in finding their heartbeat and letting it reverberate widely – or even wildly.

When I was a child, UU churches were considered radical. Nowadays Unitarian Universalism is lumped in with mainstream religions. Mainstream! I daresay that's not because of our message, which is far from mainstream. It's because of the form our worship takes.

What does the future hold if we cling too fervently to our long established way of doing things. Will 19th century hymns attract young people? I love those hymns. I have been singing them my whole life, and for me they have deep meaning. But still I ask the question.

Statistics show that many people under the age of 40 cannot read music because public schools no longer teach music as they used to do. But UU churches hand people hymnals and expect them to decipher sheet music when it is time to sing.

Unitarian Universalists tend yearn for more pluralistic congregations than the ones we often have. Could it be that our worship style accounts, at least to some degree, for our homogeneity? It seems so to me. Our normative expressions of worship are easily traced to 19th century white Protestantism – to the same people, in other words, who took the drums away from Africans and forbade them to dance.

I would love to see us create worship that can help those who are descendants of the people who took the drums away from the slaves build a bridge to those who are descendants of the people who continued to create intricate rhythms, long after their drums were seized. Those drums expressed the heartbeat of the people, a heartbeat that continued to throb in the most excruciating circumstances. What amazing creativity and perseverance allowed that heartbeat to continue to be expressed! What a lesson in the resilience of the human spirit! What a lesson for us to embrace.

I believe Unitarian Universalism has a beautiful heartbeat, a healing, saving heartbeat, and a spirit of hopefulness and confidence the world needs now. Ours is the heartbeat of religious freedom, human dignity, curiosity and openness to new ideas, reverence for life, and above all, love as the bridge to healing. The task before us is to find new ways to tap out that heartbeat so that all feel welcome in our congregations and so that our message

reverberates beyond our walls, bringing a new, transformed pulse to our hurting world.

ⁱ From lecture notes taken during “The Power of Song” course taught at University of Southern Maine, June, 2009.

ⁱⁱ *Singing the Living Tradition*, hymn 123 (by Carolyn McDade).