

Is Music Worship?

by Linda Whyte-Burrell

Ishmael, deliberating on whether or not to join Queequeg in his evening prayers to his wooden idol: "what is worship?... Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth---pagans and all included---can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship?---to do the will of God---*that* is worship." In this instance, Ishmael concludes that the will of God is "to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me".

I use this particular quote because the church book group is reading Moby Dick....at my suggestion. What was I thinking? Read Moby Dick and write a sermon at the same time...and take care of the beloved grandson MJ. There's a word for that kind of self abuse...

My question for this service is whether music is worship. When I gave the sermon title to Helene Gursuny, chairperson of the Worship Committee... and musician, her response was a vehement, "You're damned right, it is!" I could have stopped with that... but I wanted to comment on the appropriateness of Jazz to worship---to Unitarian Universalist worship in particular.

Music as worship. Music has always been associated with worship. Probably, the earliest songs, songs of thanks and praise, uttered thousands of years ago, were raised up in response to a good find of berries...or a safe and successful hunt. Those may have been relatively tuneless chants accompanied by hands clapping or striking thighs or bones. But they must have been spontaneous expressions of the emotion of the moment. Joy and thanks for being alive with stomachs full; thanks to whoever or whatever was believed to have "provided". Could voices have been raised in song while hands painted the walls of caves in Lascaux, France or on rock walls in the Australian outback or in the North American southwest?

Psalm 66 in the Holy Bible begins: "Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands: sing forth the honor of His name: make His praise glorious."... And voices do sing praise to one Supreme Power or another in ALL lands. Hymns from ancient Sumer, written on tablets fifty-two hundred years ago sing praise of the Goddess Inanna. Gregorian chants, for centuries have moved and inspired people to worshipful states. Johann Sebastian Bach's genius flowed while creating music to accompany and enhance worship. Probably many who enjoy his music today are not aware that much of it was composed to be played in church. Buddhist chants are experienced by many

as a means to connect with the Sacred. And currently, Keerton, a sacred form of music from India, is being played and explored by Westerners. The creation of an African drum, as well as the playing of it, is undertaken as a sacred act. One addresses the tree in prayer, seeking guidance and skill, before even felling the tree which will be carved into the instrument.

What makes music sacred? Who's to say music is or is not worship? Each and everyone who hears the sound and feels the vibration of it, brings to it an individual life experience that interprets the music into something personal. The listener can make it sacred in the way it is received. The musician can make it sacred in the way it is offered. To return to Herman Melville's idea of worship being "doing God's will", who hasn't spoken of artistic talent as being a gift from God? If an artist---musical, visual, movement or written---is gifted by God; then certainly using that gift is God's will---worshipping, to quote Ishmael.

One often hears artists speak of getting in the zone, meditating or performing some practice to release, through intuition or without conscious control, what is it they are trying to express. As a painter, I know that that is my plan before I get to the doing of it... Remembering to---"let go, let God" --at the time I actually work is sometimes forgotten; and I end up with "controlled" mush on the paper. But, that creating---improvisation---making something new---and personal---is the goal. And that is the goal of the Jazz musician: creating something new and personal. When one plays classical music, when one plays hymns, one is expected to play pretty much what has been played before. But in Jazz, one is encouraged and urged, often through spontaneous applause, to search and reach and discover some new personal truth.

And so it is in Unitarian Universalism. We are all one "ginormous" combo... here to encourage and urge each other to search and reach and discover some new personal truth. We each come to this faith community with different histories of spiritual growth. Some of us come somewhat injured from past religious experiences. Some of us come here jaded or disappointed. Other religious traditions have not satisfied us, or answered our questions and our needs. Some of us have had someone else's beliefs forced onto us. Some of us have not had much exposure at all to a formal religious journey. Some of us are in families with different beliefs and so seek a community where each family member can worship in an accepting and affirming circle. Whether the individual's spiritual practice incorporates

a Christian, Buddhist, Judaic, Neo-Pagan, Atheist, Humanist or Agnostic tradition---or even a combination of some of these traditions---we support each other and encourage each other in our diverse beliefs.

In this faith community, Unitarian Universalism, we jam, we groove, we improvise---we reach out, we experiment; and mostly, as a group, we hold it together, as we support each other. Some times the notes are jarring and strange---but we hold it together as we support each other. Some times the notes are lyrical and melodious---and we hold it together and support each other. We don't know when the tune will end, or where it will end---and we hold it together and we support each other. We each have a voice. We each have separate spiritual views and beliefs and needs. And we hold it together. And we support each other in our separate spiritual journeys.

Most religions teach certain beliefs. Followers are required to learn passages of sacred texts; to recite creeds and dogmas and Doxologies. Many people embrace that stability, the security, of firm answers given and held. And then there are us. At one time the popular bumper sticker for UU's was "Question the answer". We are endlessly searching. We want to explore every possible answer. We test and question and discuss. An old UU joke is that when UU's get to the Pearly gates and are confronted with "the Big Question"---we want to start a discussion group about the question! We accept nothing as certain. Improvising, we build our own system of beliefs. There is even a UU curriculum entitled "Build Your Own Theology". And just as a fine Jazz musician has a strong base of knowledge of music, in general, and the tune, in particular---from which he or she then journeys to explore the possibilities; so too UUs have a strong ethical and spiritual core from which we explore the possibilities of the ethical and spiritual life.

Recognizing the similarities between Jazz and UUism, many of our UU churches regularly hold Jazz worship services. All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City has once monthly Jazz Sundown services. In April 2006, while visiting our moved-away member Ruthe Eshleman, Joan Patterson and I with Ruthe attended a Jazz service at the Unitarian church in Lancaster P A. (As an aside, that church is now served in partnership by Tricia Newport Hart, who served us for four years, and her husband Peter Hart Newport). UU minister Tom Goldsmith who instituted Jazz Vespers at

First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, states that he "periodically performs Jazz Memorial services for unchurched musicians whose only religion is their music." And as for worship, who in this room has not hummed or even bopped to "When the saints go marching in, when the saints go marching in; Oh, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in"? Are not those words, in any musical arrangement, a wish, a prayer, to go to a better place?

Music transcends all languages and all boundaries. Everyone knows it. Everyone feels it. In the movie "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" music was seen as the way to communicate with extraterrestrials. In the book The Life of Pi, the boy Pi is found to have been attending worship in, and studying, three different religions. When clergymen from the three faiths question him to the point of harassment---"Why are you doing this?" Pi responds passionately, "I just want to love God!". In other words, he just wants to worship... Three different faiths... Worshiping with the "pagan" Queequeg... Jazz... Unitarian Universalist searching and questioning and improvising... However you do it, its worshipping... Doing the will of God--- whatever you call The Sacred. The Supreme Power. The Source of All...It is in music. It is in this music we call Jazz...

So, while something sacred stirs in the spirits of these musicians today, and they search and reach and create some new personal truth in their music---we will enjoy... and worship... each in our own way... the Unitarian Universalist way.

Blessed Be. Ashe.