

The Music of Our Lives  
A Sermon by Summer Minister Elizabeth Marsh  
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**Part I: The Music of Our Lives**

Each of us has different responses to music—some of us can't live without it, and sing and play instruments as often as we can. I know that many of us here make music as a spiritual practice: singing, playing piano, guitar, and other instruments can be a way for us to connect to a sense of something larger than ourselves.

Others of us enjoy singing in church, and might have the radio or a favorite CD playing in the car; or happily dance the night away at Glen Echo. Some of us can't sing to save our lives, and participate in Sunday hymns by standing and listening to the swell of music surrounding us. Each of us experiences song in different ways.

It is easy to make the case that life would be much less rich without music. Imagine a Sunday church service, for example, with no music. Just spoken words and silence. There might be a reading, a prayer, a sermon—but no piano, no choir. Many of us would find it hard to call that “church.” Even a Quaker meeting for worship, in which worship takes place mostly in silence, people sometimes feel moved by the Spirit to sing into the silence.

One of my teachers in seminary would start each class with all of us singing a hymn. She said that when we sing a hymn, it's like praying twice. The act of making music together speaks our hopes and our sorrows in ways that mere words cannot.

Music requires both sides of our brain, the linear left and the holistic right; it requires us to take breath into our lungs and feel vibrations in our throat, to use our fingers to call notes out of wood and metal. Simply put, making music is a whole-body experience.

Music is all around us. Many years ago, a friend was driving in the car with her boyfriend, who was a jazz musician. My friend, who was driving, was saying something at length to her boyfriend, and at one point, she paused and waited for him to respond. When he only kept staring out the windshield and was silent, my friend grew frustrated. She asked him, “Were you even listening to me?”

At this, he awoke from his reverie. “I'm sorry,” he said. “Yes, I was listening to you, but not to your words, exactly. I was listening to the music of your voice. And the rhythm of the car wheels on the road, the hum of the engine.”

Ever since then, my friend has been listening to the world differently. Her musician boyfriend listened carefully to the jazz numbers created by the world around him.

Loud solos by the fridge working overtime in the summer heat, the percussion of car doors slamming. The melody of wind whooshing through sea grasses; layered over the constant rhythm of heart beats, rain patter, footsteps, the rhythms that keep the songs moving.

When we pay attention to the world this way, our imagination opens up to an awareness that creation is happening around us all the time. Creation isn't just new people or plants being born every day, although it is this, too. Creation is also the debut every moment of new sounds, or old sounds paired with new beats—a coffee cup clattering to the ground and the human gasps in response.

Someone once said that sounds are the voice of God speaking to us. What a complicated holiness it is that speaks to us in this symphony of sadness and jubilation, all at once.

If the sound of music is holiness speaking to us, then there are times when the Holy Mystery gives voice to sadness and love in even the unkindest of places.

Picture Sarajevo, 1992, a terrible time of war there. People living in fear of their lives, never knowing when snipers or bombs could rein destruction; their only food sustenance is the bread, lentils, and water for which they must wait in long lines.

Children don't go to school. Adults keep going to work, if there is work for them to do. People go on living their lives, to the degree they can during a state of war—working at hospitals, caring for each other, trying to make it through to another day.

One day, in a neighborhood just like any other in Sarajevo, a long line of people waited. They stood patiently for endless hours, waiting for a truck to bring them bread. They waited from the morning until late in the afternoon.

“Suddenly there was a great explosion. A shell had exploded, just steps away from them. In the first instant there was utter silence... shock... and then chaos” as people realized what had happened. People poured from houses and apartments to see what had happened and to begin pulling the injured and dead from the wreckage. Rescuers came in cars, and yet even some rescuers were hit by snipers. In the end, 22 people were killed.

“The whole town was filled with pain.” Neighbors and friends had died. The next morning, a man who lived nearby went out to look again at the hole in the

ground and in the buildings. "The area was adorned with flowers and wreaths. He had brought his cello, but he didn't know what to play.

Tears slid down his cheeks as he thought about the people who had died. He opened the cello case and somehow... something guided him to begin playing. Part way through, he recognized what he was playing -- Albinoni's 'Adagio', [which originally had been found in scraps in the bombed out city of Dresden during World War II<sup>1</sup>]. This 'Adagio' had emerged from him as his musical prayer for peace."

The cellist is named Vedran Smajlovic. He continues telling his story: "When I finished, I noticed that people had stopped to listen and cry with me. As I talked with them I realized that this healing music helped us all to feel better. It provided us with hope.

"That was when I decided to play the same piece at the same place each day as a dedication to the 22 people who were killed in the bread line."

And so he did. For 22 days, this man braved sniper fire and mortar shells, to pray for peace in the only way he could—through music.

Smajlovic continues, "I was afraid," he said. "Everyone who's sane is afraid when there are bullets and shells in the air. But when I play, the darkness is lifted and I am able to show the world my other feelings. Music is love that connects people. My wish is for everybody to be able to share this."<sup>2</sup>

This story is moving because of one man's courage to bring beauty into a place of war. He shared his deep faith the power of creation is just as great as the power of destruction. His response "was to answer war with harmony."

Even if music to express sadness is the only sound we can make, we must make it, for "the only reasonable answer to war is harmony. If we answer violence with violence, we create a vicious, unending cycle. The answer to violence has to be creative energy, not more destructive energy."<sup>3</sup>

The story of the Sarajevo cellist is the story of one man who risked everything to let beauty flourish.

## **Part 2: Fill Our Lives with Song**

Music draws people together, and it draws us to our deeper, nobler selves.

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1 From *My Hero Project: Hero's Hero: Vedran Smajlovic*, <http://myhero.com/go/hero.asp?hero=vedrans>, accessed July 10, 2010.

2 Elizabeth Wellburn, *Echoes From the Square* (Rubicon: Oakville, Ontario, Canada, 1998), <http://echoesfromthesquare.ning.com/page/transcript-1>. Accessed July 10, 2010.

3 *My Hero Project: Hero's Hero: Vedran Smajlovic*.

Music enlivens and enriches. I invite you to think of the times when you've heard just the right lyrics set to just the right tune and you've been moved to tears, or finally understood a bit of life in a new way.

Is there a song that made you shout "Yes! That's it!?" Perhaps a tough experience with friends or family was made lighter through a rousing rendition of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" or "Jingle Bells." How has music called you out of your slump, your numbness, and sent some kind of energy moving through you?

Our lives are drawn together when we make music together. A powerful example of this is one of the songs in our teal hymnal, called "Siyahamba." You may recognize it in your mind's ear--Siyahamba is Zulu for "We are marching," which is often the English title for the song. Unfortunately I didn't plan for us to sing it today, but I wonder if we might sing a few bars of the English right now, just a capella, to get the song in our ear ....

The song's form, words, and tune are easy to sing and remember, and it really gets people going. We've sung it in this congregation, as have countless Unitarian Universalist and other religious groups throughout the world. It's lively and energetic, and has a compelling history.

It's a freedom song from South Africa, and it originated in the time of Apartheid. It was originally written in Zulu, and the Zulu version is included in our hymnals, too. Like many people who face oppression, the Zulu found motivation and hope in making music together. It was written to get people going, to keep them going despite living in an Apartheid state.

What did the Zulu people do when they were faced with the violence and destruction of Apartheid? They sang. They sang Siyahamba, and surely other songs, to move their bodies and souls. Just this morning on the NPR radio program "Speaking of Faith," international reconciliation mediator John Paul Lederach spoke about the healing power of music.

"Music," he says, "permits people to feel touched again. When they've experienced unspeakable violence and they numb themselves just to survive, singing is a way for people to express their pain in a way that they may not be able to speak with words." He goes on, "Music can enable healing to happen in a much deeper way, and helps someone feel like a person again."

Joining voices together in music can rouse our souls to do the hard work that needs to be done, so that we and others might live in abundance. If we are to be active participants in peace making, our souls must be awake. Making music can revive us from numbness, can express the sadness and grief that words alone cannot speak. It invigorates our souls with a renewed sense of life.

The warm, cinnamon music made by a cellist in a war-torn street of

Sarajevo; the stirring percussion and melody inspiring people in South Africa to challenge hate and death. Harmony is the only response that directly resists destruction of any kind. We can protect our hearts from pain and numb ourselves from feeling sorrow, but when we do this, we can't help but become anesthetized to love and joy. Rather than give into despair and grief, when we need something that will lift our spirits and give us the strength to continue on, we can surround ourselves with music.

The poet Jack Gilbert says that to deny beauty in our lives is to deny that beauty is happening other places in the world. He writes,

The poor women  
at the fountain are laughing together between  
the suffering they have known and the awfulness  
in their future, smiling and laughing while somebody  
in the village is very sick. There is laughter  
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,  
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.  
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,  
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.  
...We must have  
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless  
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only  
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.  
We must admit there will be music despite everything.

To be estranged from beauty is to let violence and destruction have the last word. This is what people mean who regularly engage in anti-war protests, even after more than eight years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. "I come out here every week," one of them says, "even though I know our small group won't change U.S. foreign policy. I come here every week because if I didn't come, I won't be changed. Being here every week changes me."

May our souls be awakened by joining in song, whether in voice or with our ears alone, so we might always remember what compassion feels like. May we find the strength to risk comfort so that beauty might flourish in our hearts and in the world.