

“We Bring the Music”
A Worship Service at the First Parish of Stow and Acton (MA)
Reverend Maddie Sifantus and the Golden Tones
March 5, 2006

Quotes:

“And when on wings of song we fly, high above the mountain,
softly on gentle breeze, a whisper in the wind.
We are the music; we bring the music,
With every breath, with every word, with every sigh.
We are the music; we bring the music,
Our voices raised, a beacon in the night.”

Carl Strommen

“How would you know how old you is if you didn’t know how old you was?”
Satchell Paige

Message for All Ages *My Family Plays Music* Judy Cox, adapted Sifantus

I have a family. We all love music.

I have a mom.
She plays fiddle in a country-and-western band.
She plays in honky-tonks and sings sad songs
about broken hearts while people dance real slow.
When I play with her, I play the **tambourine**.

I have a Dad.
He plays cello in a string quartet.
He sits onstage at Symphony Hall.
In a black tailcoat and a white bow tie.
When I play with him, I play the **triangle**.

I have a sister, Emily.
She plays clarinet in the marching band.
We cheer and wave as she struts down
Main Street in the big parade.
When I play with her, I play the **cymbal**.

I have a brother, Paul.
He plays lead guitar in a rock’n’roll band.
He wiggles and he spins and he shakes when
He plays for the dance in the high school gym.
When I play with him, I play the **cowbell**.

I have an aunt Saffron.
She plays vibes in a jazz combo.

She plays soft, cool sounds at the Blue Note Club.
Her hands dance the mallets up and down
The bars—pung, pong, ping.
When I play with her, I play the **woodblock**.

I have an uncle Woody.
He plays saxophone in a big band.
He blows swing tunes at the Paragon Ballroom
While dancers glide beneath the flashing mirror ball.
When I play with him, I play the **maracas**.

I have a grandma.
She plays banjo in a bluegrass band.
She picks mountain melodies for folks who sit
On folding chairs and tap their toes to the spunky beat.
When I play with her, I play the **jug**.

I have a grandpa.
He plays tuba in a polka band.
He dresses in lederhosen and a hat with a feather.
His cheeks puff out round and red
As he blows oompah-pah, oompah-pah.
When I play with him, I play **rhythm sticks**.

I have a great-grandmother.
She plays the pipe organ in St. Peter's Cathedral.
On Sunday morning we sit straight and still
As she pumps out music
That swells like waves
When I play with her, I play the **chime**.

I have a my cousin, Dean.
He plays bongos at the Full Ear Café.
He slips his drums between his knees and raps
And pats them with his hands,
Keeping the beat while people recite
Poems that don't rhyme.
When I play with him, I play **my Indian bells**.

I have a my niece, Sadie.
She plays pots and pans, drumming on them
With a wooden spoon.
She plays LOUD!
When I play with her, I play the **big soup kettle**.

This is me. I play tambourine, triangle, cymbal, cowbell,
Woodblock, maracas, rhythm sticks, chime,
Bells, and soup kettle.
Daddy says I'm a percussionist.

The members of my family all love different kinds of music,
But we all love one another.
And when we get together, we celebrate!

Pastoral Prayer

Today I would like to meditate on music-- on players of instruments and singers of songs. Take a moment to think of the power of music to bring people together, to bring us joy in times of celebration, and to bring us to tears in times of sadness and times of reminiscence. For those of us who are older, we remember the music of our youth and our young adult years... the music of our church or synagogue, the sounds of our parents' voices singing, family and friends gathering around a piano, the songs on the radio and in the dance halls, the songs of musical theater. We remember the melodies that have accompanied our lives. We pause in silence to remember.

And we give thanks:

We give thanks for singers.

All types of singers.

Popular, concert singers and tuneless singers in the bath.

Whistlers, hummers and those who sing as they work.

Singers of lullabies; singers of nonsense and small scraps of melody.

Singers on branches and rooftops.

Morning yodellers and evening warblers.

Singers in seedy nightclubs, singers in the street;

Singers in cathedrals, school halls, grandstands, back yards, paddocks, bedrooms, corridors, stairwells and places of echo and resonance.

We give praise to all those who give some small voice

To the everyday joy of the soul.

Readings

From *Finding Your Voice* by Carolyn Sloan¹

When we enter the world, we do so, not silently, but with a cry, a pronouncement of arrival—"I am here!". Before we can speak, we moan, we babble. We fill the air with our own voices, feeling ourselves vibrate, enjoying the sensations that our own bodies create. We are our first song. Every syllable, every coo, every heartbeat and pair of hands clapping, every set of lips

¹ Sloan, Carolyn (1999). *Finding Your Voice: A Practical and Spiritual Approach to Singing and Living*. NY: Hyperion, 7.

humming, every breath, every cry creates yet another movement in the song of life. We are music. Music is our birthright.

From Connie Tomaino, Music Therapist at Beth Abraham Hospital in New York City

There's this ability in music, to reach the innermost self and by making that connection, music provides a revelation for the individual—that's where the transformation comes. Whatever it is about music and however it's processed, there's this capacity that music has to touch us at the core of who we are, and to help us retrieve things, be it speech, memories, or physical abilities.

From "The Songs of Life Abound" by Claudia Blake

I am startled to wakefulness by the loud, triumphant call of the red-bellied woodpecker, eager to notify me that he has survived the night and greets the day with enthusiasm.

The mockingbird begins, taking attendance of all the flyers in my garden as she patterns her song so perfectly that, without careful attention, I cannot tell if legions are present or only the expert mimic.

The cardinals sing back and forth in comforting domesticity. They are clearly two, joyfully and seriously watchful over one another.

Do you remember the day you learned that humpback whales, too, sing?

And did you know that elephants, as mockingbirds, create songs by assembling the sounds of their environment? Now, as the modern world encroaches, they sing in the voices of diesel lorry engines, rattling over the very bad roads of the savannah.

Perhaps you heard NPR's Marika Partridge describe the song-filled visit of a group of Masai to her home in Tacoma Park. The Masai say... *when we sing to one another ...we feed each other, we nourish each other spiritually... singing is a way of connecting to one another with more than words.*

Sermon: *We Bring the Music*

First Parish of Stow and Acton

Sunday, March 5, 2006

Reverend Maddie Sifantus

Let me start my words with you this morning by telling you some stories. After eighteen years of the Golden Tones, there are a lot of stories! The Golden Tones now sing at over sixty concerts and events every year. We do indeed bring the music!

Back in our early days, there was a very tiny rest home that we used to visit regularly in Framingham. It was an old fashioned place—not like the fancy assisted living facilities that are being constructed these days. Being there really felt like being in someone’s home but everyone who lived there was old—of course I was probably 17 years younger at that time. We would perform in their dining room and the residents would sit at their lunch. We could smell the overcooked green beans, as we sang gathered around a rickety old upright piano which was used the rest of the month as a plant stand.

It was a mixed population gathered there, some of whom could attend to what we were doing, and some of whom could not. I remember one woman in particular who was staring vacantly in front of her during our hour there, staring at nothing I could see. I am not sure what we sang that day—probably the old songs like *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* and *Funiculi, Funicula*, an Italian song about singing that we used to use as our theme song. This was before my mother, Lina MacNeill, who is our founding accompanist, wrote the one you heard at the start of our service this morning. As we got towards the end of our performance, we sang something—I no longer remember what—that reached this woman. She looked up at me and into my eyes. There was a clarity in those eyes, and they looked deeply into mine, it felt like into my very soul. The feeling of the spirit moving between us was palpable. It was a profoundly moving moment for me, as I felt the power of music—especially human beings singing together, to make connections and to be transformative. This woman no longer had the power of speech, but she still had the capacity for spiritual feeling and remembrance of times gone but not forgotten. We brought her the music.

Then there is the story of Mike, one of our first men. He told me a story soon after he joined that I have heard many times since—that when he was a young boy, he was told not to sing. Some teacher in grade school thought that perhaps he was tone deaf. What is more likely is that the teacher did not know how teach tone matching or how to deal with someone who needs

to sing in lower keys—often the little boys. What a curse for life to think that you can't sing! To not be able to join in with your friends at camp or in scouts when they sing together! To keep silent in church!

I had the wonderful opportunity when I was on sabbatical this past August to spend a week with the Iona Community in Scotland. Part of my time there was in a workshop with John Bell who is one of the world's leading experts on congregational song, among other things. There is a West African proverb that I use as my signature at the bottom of my email which says "If you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing." I was excited to find in John a kindred spirit who believes in the capability of all to sing. He talks in his book *The Singing Thing* about what he calls "vocal disenfranchisement". He says that "if an group of people is asked, "How many of you cannot sing?" one in four will raise their hands to confess tone-deafness, no sense of pitch or some other musical deficiency."² So, I ask you right now—how many of you think you can't sing?

Bell says that "when this quarter of (those gathered) are asked why they cannot sing, nearly all will say, 'Because someone told me.' And that someone will inevitably have been a person who was in a position of authority over them or who was in close friendship or kinship with them."³ What a tragedy! What a stab to the inner core! Bell goes on to say that this is a particularly Western predicament, because in other cultures, everyone presumes that everyone can sing...hence the West African proverb I so love: "If you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing." But in our Western culture, "this presumption has been replaced by the belief that some can and some cannot. (And) those who can't have all been told (by someone)."⁴

There are a very few folks who have physiological reasons for why they can't sing an accurate pitch, and there are ways to work even with them...but for most folks, the reason they are what they might label as "tone-deaf" or "tuneless" is more psychological. But perhaps that is not really the right term. It is more that of a catastrophic effect—a curse if you like—of being told at a young age that they "can not". That they could never get it right. That they could never "fit in" with the others. And of course this happens with many other things besides singing.

² Bell, John L. (2000). *The Singing Thing: The Case for Congregational Song*. Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 95.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Take me for example: I always knew that I could sing, and I did sing from my earliest days, as far as I can remember. But along with that singing as a little child, I was always creating—drawing, painting, whatever. I loved anything creative. When I was about ten, one of my most frequent companions of the time looked at a drawing I was working on and said—and I will never forget it!—“You will never be an artist!” How I was cut to the core! In my mind, I was *already* an artist! It was my birthright, just as singing was. And, in a moment, it was snatched away. I would never be “good enough”. I remember the feeling I had in that moment to this day. And I also remember the feeling I had some years later when I was accepted as a student by Rhode Island School of Design—I showed her!

But how often those early memories keep us from doing something that we might want to do and obscure even the very desire we might have for trying something! How someone’s remark can haunt us down the years! Probably each one of you can remember something that some one said to you that has stayed with you. If it was that you can’t sing and you are over sixty, perhaps it is time to join the Golden Tones and find out that you can!

With that, we get back to the story of Mike. You remember Mike—the man who joined the Golden Tones despite the pronouncement of doom in his childhood that he could never sing. Something made him change his mind and decide to give us in the Golden Tones a try. Perhaps it was the fact that his friend Victor was also joining the group. Perhaps he was looking for something to do after the death of his wife. Perhaps it was the fun that he saw us having when he saw and heard us singing for the senior club. Maybe it was the fact that there were no auditions to join—there still aren’t. Or maybe he thought, “Even *I* can sing as good as that!” For whatever reason, he began coming.

Mike had a loud and boomy voice, and I put him in between several other men. He did not read music at all, as some who join us don’t, but he could pick up some of what we were doing by rote and by being surrounded by others. He became very enthusiastic about his participation in the group and instrumental in creating some of the early skits that the group does as part of our programs. I still remember his *Bridge Over the River Quai*, as he tried to march with two wayward women, dressed in pseudo-military garb. Both of those women now live in nursing homes, and they still sing with us when we perform there. Most especially I remember his singing *Old Man River*, which featured our men. When they got to the “tote that barge, lift that bale”, there was no one more enthusiastic than Mike!

But what I remember the most was story he told me one day which made me understand the power of what the Golden Tones had become, through the people who had come together with their gifts, the needs of the senior years, and making music, singing. Mike said that he had been to a friend's funeral that week at the Roman Catholic Church he attended. He said that all of a sudden, he realized that, for the first time in his life, he was able to read the music in the hymnal and sing with the congregation the liturgy of the mass. That he could truly participate with the congregational life of his chosen faith community for the very first time at age seventy-something! As he told me this, tears were streaming down his face—and they were soon streaming down mine as well. We brought the music to Mike, and he was able then to bring the music into his faith community in service of his God and in memory of his friend.

There are countless stories like these in the eighteen years since I founded the Golden Tones with my mother; you could hear more from our members in coffee hour. Or you could talk to our community ministry intern, and hear about what she sees as we bring the music. And I will get to one more before I close...but I want to tell you a little bit about our organization. For one thing, it is my full time call as a minister with the Unitarian Universalist Association. I am a community minister, but I don't practice ministry inside the same sanctuary walls every week as Tom does here. I am out in the secular world much of the time, walking my UU faith in many different arenas, focusing on the "inherent worth and dignity" of each individual across the entire life span. You may remember that I was right here in 2003 leading worship that morning exploring the theme of thinking about death and dying. I could talk a lot more about what community ministry is, what it looks like, who does it and more, but that would be for another day. Suffice it to say that community ministry has been one of the tracks of ministry in our UUA since 1991, along with Parish Ministry and the Ministry of Religious Education and has roots going back to the earliest days of Unitarianism and Universalism.

The Golden Tones was what finally sent me into the ministry—to seminary, the fellowshiping process and ordination. I just had to know how it was all working, as it became clear to me that it was the *making of meaning at the end of our lives*, combined with the power of music, and the physical act of singing together that was co-creating what became the Golden Tones with what some call God, the divine, or spirit. I was fascinated how a diverse group of people could come together around music, bringing joy to each other and to audiences, as well as being there for each other through the sad times. I was amazed at how much I was learning by

doing what started out as a “little volunteer job”! About how the members felt it was their new family. And how we could participate in many faith traditions in our own authentic voices. We have brought the music to many UU churches, Baptist churches, Methodists churches, Lutheran churches, Roman Catholic churches and synagogues over our 18 years. This past fall we sang in the Islamic Center of Wayland as part of the Interfaith Clergy Association’s Thanksgiving Service. We have sung at funerals, memorial services, ordinations and installations.

We have sung inside MCI Framingham Prison for the women incarcerated there. We have sung at every sort of community event and senior group, including yours here in Stow. And we do intergenerational work with schools and faith communities. We have performed at Harvard and Lesley universities, other schools and colleges, and most years at the Wayland dump for Earth Day! As we sang earlier, “we are the music, we bring the music”. Our voices are raised and they are indeed a beacon in the night.

One more story—and this one took place in one of our UU churches last year—the United Parish Church in Quincy. The Golden Tones were asked to sing at the installation of a community minister, an unusual event in our association. Community ministers are usually endorsed by a parish or affiliated as I am with First Parish in Wayland...but they usually are not installed, which shows a higher level of commitment by the congregation to the community minister. Margie King Saphier’s ministry takes place in her work in hospice and her ministry with the Partaker’s prison ministry, as well as in the congregation where she takes part in much of the ministry of the church. The Golden Tones all took a bus ride from Wayland to the historic Quincy church. As part of the service, they sang the old spiritual that we did as the hymn: *He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands*. I told the Golden Tones to sing it the way we would at any performance, with their usual enthusiasm and that we would try to get the congregation in this staid old puritan church to get into the moment. I told Carole Felz to strut her usual stuff—be her authentic self—and to throw the world around as if she were at one of our concerts or a ballpark. And the congregation did come through, clapping and singing and batting the world around! But even more happened. Another community minister colleague was there for this moment, and it was a transformative one for her. She was up next in the order of service, and as the last notes of the spiritual, this diminutive woman with her head in a turban made her way to the podium to lead us in prayer. She stood there a moment and what she said was, “If the Golden Tones and that woman can do that, I can do this!” And she whipped off her turban showing her newly bald

head from her chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer. It was a magic moment for all of us present. And it took place in church!

The Golden Tones do bring the music. And you here can bring the music to each other each time you gather. I end our time together this morning with these words which I have adapted from John Bell's book *The Singing Thing* which speak most particularly to the congregation but also to those of us in the Golden Tones:

"...something extremely rare happens whenever a congregation sings to [the Spirit of Life, or as John would say, sings to its Maker]. For not only are there ten or fifty or five hundred individual voices giving their unique gift as they open their mouths and sing; there is also the unique blending of high and low voices, sharp and flat, sophisticated and rough-tongued, male and female, old and young.

The chances are that never again will every one of these people be in exactly the same place singing these particular hymns and songs. At the next service of worship some will be missing, others will be new and the likelihood is that the [service] will require a different selection of texts for singing.

So, if we can but sense it, every time a congregation sings, it is offering an absolutely one time only gift to the [Spirit of Life]."⁵

Sing! Sing a song.
Sing out loud. Sing out strong.
Sing of happy, not sad.
Sing of good things, not bad.
Sing! Sing a song.
Make it simple, to last your whole life long
Don't worry if it's not good enough for anyone else to hear.
Sing! Sing a song.

Hymn *Let There Be Peace on Earth* Sy Miller and Jill Jackson

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me
Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be
With God our Creator, children all our we,
Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.
Let peace begin with me; let this be the moment now.
With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow:
To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

⁵ Bell, John (2000). *The Singing Thing*. Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 80-81.

Choral Benediction *Till We Meet Again*

Smile the while, you kiss me sad adieu,
When the clouds roll by, I'll come to you.
Then the skies will seem more blue
Down in lovers' lane, my dearie.
Wedding bells will ring so merrily,
Every tear will be a memory
So wait and pray each night for me
Till we meet again.

Raymond Egan and Richard Whiting