

***“Music is Our Birthright!”***  
**Lecture for the**  
**Brandeis Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (BOLLI)**  
**Reverend Maddie Sifantus**  
Tuesday, December 4, 2007

**Reading**

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 humming, every breath, every cry creates yet another movement in the song of life. We are music. Music is our birthright.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to begin by thanking you for having me here with you today. What a privilege to speak to folks who already understand the importance of lifelong learning. I truly believe that part of what I am talking about today will be preaching to the choir! One the premises of my work with the Golden Tones this last twenty years is the importance of learning as we age. As they used to say in my old aerobics class, “use it or lose it”! As I have prepared for today, I have reflected about what it means to be a life-long learner as the paths of a life twist and turn—both my own and those of the people I have been called to work with, in my own ministry, with other ministers and professionals, and in my work with the Golden Tones.

I would like to take a moment to thank the members of the Golden Tones who were able to be here with us today. Their presence with us can say more than I can say in words. The rest of the group is down the road at this very moment performing with our Assistant Director, Deborah Foner, for the folks at the Wellesley Senior Center, as we do most holiday seasons. With us this morning are Jean Benton of Waltham, Delight Clay and Phyllis Sonnenschein of Natick; Ellen and Marvin Greenberger and Ruth Anne Argento, all of Framingham; Roddy and Bob Bernstein, and Carole Felz and Lina MacNeill of Wayland. Before I begin my remarks, I would like them to sing our Golden Tones theme song, written many years ago now by Lina MacNeill, who is our founding pianist and who, at almost 95 years old, still plays for us part time. Please listen to the words of the song Lina wrote as they speak to the mission of the Golden Tones.

---

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

## GOLDEN TONES THEME SONG

What a joy to be alive and free to come and sing for you.  
There was a time, many years ago when we all worked  
Some raised children too.  
And now they're grown, and we are free to come and sing for you.  
Music gives you such a lift,  
It melts away your cares and woes.  
So come along, join with us and sing,  
We are the Golden Tones.<sup>2</sup>

I was asked to discuss with you my “journey as an artist, singer, geriatrics worker, and minister to my role as the founder of the Golden Tones.” That sounds like my whole life story! That could take way more than an hour at this point in my life! Instead, I will use the frame of music and ministry to look briefly at that journey, leading to where my work is today—to where I “let my life speak”, as educator to the educators Parker Palmer puts it. And, if the word “ministry” is too religious for you, please think of it more as a “call to service.” After all, as you will see, it took even me almost fifty years to call it ministry!

So, a few words about that journey: I am the oldest child of a musical family. In fact, you have met my mother, Lina MacNeill, who wrote our Golden Tones theme song and who is the founding pianist for the Golden Tones. Until his death in January, three weeks before what would have been his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, my father, Harold MacNeill, sang with the group. In fact, his last concert with the Golden Tones was the day before I had to call 911 from the Golden Tones Holiday Party. He was able to sing until the end of his life. It gave his life meaning and purpose, not to mention something fun to do and a way to continue social interaction with other people. My sister, Bonnie Catto, a professor of Latin and Greek at Assumption College and a professional cellist, also participates in Golden Tones concerts on an occasional basis, at our special galas and at fundraisers for the organization.

The theme of music has run through our life as a family and through my early experiences in churches. I can not remember a time in my life when I was not aware of music. There is always a song or melody running through my head. My growing up years were spent in artistic and musical endeavors. My mother remembers me sitting on the floor drawing with my crayons and singing, singing, singing. I remember that by the sixth grade I was taking piano

---

<sup>2</sup> MacNeill, Lina. Circa 1992.

lessons, violin lessons, and voice lessons. I was not necessarily happy about all that practicing! But my love of music and especially singing stayed constant.

As a small child, I was also fascinated by organizing people and things. Or, as Bonnie said later, I was always bossing her around! For instance, I used to play library, putting little pieces of paper in the back of my books with scotch tape and making my siblings and friends check them out. With the help of my mother, I used to put on little plays in the basement, with old sheets precariously draped across string hung from the ceiling. And then there was the circus in the back yard with my sisters in leotards pretending to be aerialists on the swing-set. Probably the most telling imaginative play can be seen in the picture of me about eight playing “church”, with my half slip around my neck as a liturgical vestment, the family Bible on my violin stand, draped with napkins, and a very serious expression on my face. What I would give now to hear the sermon I was delivering to my family and stuffed animals! How amazing, though, that it took me until my forties to recognize the minister I was playing in those early days? But perhaps not so amazing given the lack of women role models in ministry for girls growing up in the fifties. Being a minister was just not an option.

In high school, I continued to study classical piano and voice, but I began to be involved in other kinds of singing, especially folk music, which was so popular in the Boston area at the time. My favorite coffee house in those days was the Club 47 in Harvard Square, where Club Passim is today, which was probably my first experience of a community growing up around music. I still run into people I knew from the line waiting to get into the Club 47! By the end of my high school years, I had my own folk group with my best friend, Lorin Rowan, which performed all original music. Our very first performance was at the Club 47, which, for me, was like beginning my career at Carnegie Hall. As I entered Rhode Island School of Design to pursue art after high school, I joined my first rock band, which performed all over the Northeast. Eventually I sang in a number of bands and did extensive studio recording. I still sing with Lorin Rowan, in fact, and with my professional vocal trio, TVS (The Vocal Section)—and both of those have appeared with me in churches, providing music when I provide worship and a sermon. Along with the fun of singing and the struggle to make a living, I became interested in how I could connect with people through song.

My parents had raised us in the Episcopalian church, and as a teenager, I could not relate to its liturgical tradition. After high school, as so many do, I pulled away from my faith tradition

and looked at what else was out there. I read widely, from both the Western and Eastern religious traditions and philosophy. Somewhere along the line in my young adult years, I started attending the First Parish in Wayland, ostensibly to find a spiritual home for my son. I discovered that this was a “coming home” for me-- the discovery that I was something called a Unitarian-Universalist and had been all along. I really enjoyed listening to the choir at First Parish and joined it within a few weeks. In that way I began my return to singing classical music, which has resulted in another career as a soprano soloist. In the First Parish choir, I learned much about the power of music to create community within the larger community of a faith community. I began to notice that the “choir people” tend to also be quite involved in the church in other ways. They are dedicated and faithful people. Choir people know the stories of the church. They are there week in and week out. They hear all the sermons and see the needs of the community. And many of them jump in to fill those needs. If you give someone some music they love to sing, they will often jump in to help an organization in a myriad of ways.

After I had been at First Parish just a short time, the minister and the religious education director saw something in me that I didn't—or wouldn't see--in me: the person that would become a minister. They asked me if I would help lead the youth group. I don't remember feeling much trepidation. After all, at that point it had only been a little over a decade since I was a teenager myself, and I remembered well what that had been like. And I think the fact that I was a singer in a rock band meant that folks thought the teenagers would relate to me. As has happened time and again, I think I learned much more from that job than the kids learned from me. My organizational skills were needed, as I planned events, newsletter articles, and youth worship services. My listening skills were needed as we discussed the frills and the depths of the lives of teenagers in the suburbs in the eighties. My skills for compassion were tried and tested as major life events affected the youth group members and their families. I became interested in group process, curricula, lifespan education, values clarification and much more. By the end of the seven years of youth work, I was beginning to think of myself as a “youth minister” and folks started asking me why I wasn't going to seminary.

Me? Seminary? That was too expensive for a newly single parent. Too time consuming. What would be the purpose? I didn't see myself as a parish minister. And as my son neared the age to attend youth group, I felt it was time to move on. But exactly while I was saying goodbye to the youth groups, the opportunity that turned into the Golden Tones appeared. It was twenty

years ago that this life changing event occurred for me, although, as I have found is often the case with events which change my life, I didn't realize it at the time! I was asked if I would be willing to lead sing-alongs at the Wayland Senior Center. I innocently agreed to give it a try, having no idea what I was signing up for—that it would take over my life! The original group of ten singers I found on that first day has become the vibrant, active Golden Tones which for many years now has done over sixty concerts a year! And it was with them that the nudge towards ministry came again—knocking on my door much louder now.

Some of the Golden Tones have called me “teacher” but what is more to the point is what they have taught me! I have seen a group of ten people come together around music and form bonds of incredible depth. I have formalized a life long interest in aging into two degrees in elder studies from Lesley University. My first thesis on the work was written in 1992: “Choral Music, the Well-Elderly and Its Implications for Senior Centers.” Along the way I became interested in the spiritual implications of aging. I came to understand that “the spiritual needs of {elders} really are those of every person, writ large: the need for identity, meaning, love and wisdom... Basic needs do not change with age, but they are often intensified.”<sup>3</sup> I wrote a second thesis in 1997: “Singing Through Our Lives: A Senior Citizen Chorus as Ministry.” This thesis was accompanied by a documentary that we produced “in house” that we are still using to show funders and others about the organization.

During the early years of the chorus, I began my study in order that I could better run the group and to understand why the group was becoming so successful. My research into the different approaches to aging was necessarily interdisciplinary in nature. I explored the Anthropology, Sociology of Aging, the Psychology of Aging, the Physiology of Aging, the Psychology of Music, Psycho-acoustics, Music Therapy and more. My earlier writing and study show the results of this research.

Later I began to spend a lot of time reflecting on how this multidisciplinary work was intersecting with my own spiritual path. I came to see that this work was, for me, ministry and an extension of my Unitarian Universalist faith. I began to explore a theological approach to it, in addition to the other academic disciplines. For me, the academic basis for my work and the search for meaning came together in a mutual way. And because it is a search and part of the

---

<sup>3</sup> AARP. *The Clergy: Gatekeepers for the Future*. Preamble, the section on spiritual well-being, White House Conference on Aging, 1971.

mystery of life, there will perhaps always be more questions than answers-- new questions being asked. The journey goes on.

It was this interest in the theological implications of the work and the wish for the accountability of professional ministry, which finally led me to begin studies at Andover Newton Theological in 1995 and to ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister in 2002. I am Affiliate Minister at First Parish in Wayland and what is called by my denomination a “community minister”, because most of what I do occurs in the community, rather than within the walls of one faith community.

Some more about the Golden Tones. This season is our Twentieth Anniversary. The small group of enthusiastic music lovers that began meeting in 1988 to sing the old, favorite songs of their younger years has grown into an extremely active group of performing elders which this year has had sixty performances scheduled at all manner of nursing homes, assisted living and other senior residences, community events, senior club and AARP meetings, and the Zoo Lights festival at the Stone Zoo. This year there are more than fifty chorus members. When I look out at the group, there are now only two regular members who have been with me since the beginning. Life goes on—just as I was in my thirties when it began.

Music has been central to my work with elders and has led me to new exploration as the years with the Golden Tones have passed, and I have learned the stories of so many. I became fascinated with the issues, needs, and opportunities of the elder years-- at first from the point of view of what I was doing—what we were doing together—but then in a broader way. The excitement and sense of adventure I felt with the members of the Golden Tones contrasted markedly with the messages about aging I was receiving in our culture. When I first heard the title of Jimmy Carter’s book *The Virtues of Aging*, I thought—that’s an interesting title! Carter writes on “the worry about the physical aspects of aging and the prejudice that exists toward elder(s)” known as ageism which is similar to racism, sexism or homophobia. When Carter mentioned the title of his book to a few people, “most of them responded, ‘Virtues? What could possibly be good about being old?’” As he says, “the most obvious answer, of course, is to consider the alternative to aging!”<sup>4</sup> But, as he recounts his discussions with his wife, Roselynn on the meaning of the word *virtue*, they “decided that both basic definitions of the word were applicable: ‘a particularly beneficial advantage’ and ‘an inherent quality that is admirable.’ In

---

<sup>4</sup> Carter, *The Virtues of Aging*, 8-9.

other words, the virtues of aging include both the blessings that come to us as we grow older and what we have to offer that might be beneficial to others.”<sup>5</sup> And then I love the quote by baseball great Satchell Paige: “How would you know how old you is if you didn’t know how old you was?”

Some stories from my work with the Golden Tones:

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. 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*.

### **LET ME CALL YOU SWEETHEART**

Let me call you "Sweetheart,"  
I'm in love with you.  
Let me hear you whisper  
That you love me too.  
Keep the love-light glowing  
In your eyes so true.  
Let me call you "Sweetheart,"  
I'm in love with you.<sup>6</sup>

We probably began that day with *Funiculi, Funicula*, an Italian song about singing that we used to use as our theme song. This was before my mother, Lina MacNeill, wrote the theme song you heard a short time ago.

### **FUNICULI FUNICULA**

Some think the world  
Is made for fun and frolic,  
And so do I! And so do I!  
Some think it well to be all melancholic,

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>6</sup> Beth Slater Whitson and Leo Friedman.

To pine and sigh; to pine and sigh;  
But I, I love to spend my time in singing  
Some joyous song; some joyous song;  
To set the air with music bravely ringing  
Is far from wrong!  
Harken! Harken! echoes sound afar!  
Harken! Harken! echoes sound afar!  
Funiculi funicula`, funiculi funicula`,  
Joy is everywhere! funiculi, funicula`.<sup>7</sup>

As we got towards the end of our performance that day in the rest home, we sang something—I no longer remember what—that reached this woman who was staring vacantly. 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.

As I have said, one of the disciplines I explored in the early days of my work was that of music therapy. A Music Therapist at Beth Abraham Hospital in New York City, Connie Tomaino, says: “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.”

Perhaps you have seen Oliver Sack’s new book, “Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain.” He says in his Preface: “...for virtually all of us, music has great power, whether or not we seek it out or think of ourselves as particularly ‘musical.’ This propensity to music shows itself in infancy, is manifest and central in every culture, and probably goes back to the very beginnings of our species. Such ‘musicophilia’ is a given in human nature. It may be developed or shaped by the cultures we live in, by the circumstances of life, or by the particular gifts or weaknesses we have as individuals—but it lies so deep in human nature that one must think of it

---

<sup>7</sup> Luigi Denzo and Peppino Turco, 1880.

as innate.”<sup>8</sup> He says that “music occupies more areas of our brain than language does—human are a musical species.”<sup>9</sup> What a powerful tool to connect with people, from the well-elderly who make up the members of the Golden Tones to the frail elderly living in a nursing home!

More stories:

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 to 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 your church or synagogue!

I had the wonderful opportunity when I was on sabbatical a couple of years ago 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 a 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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

---

<sup>8</sup> Sacks, Oliver (2007). *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, ix-x.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., flyleaf.

<sup>10</sup> Bell, John L. (2000). *The Singing Thing: The Case for Congregational Song*. Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

that some can and some cannot. (And) those who can't have all been told (by someone)."<sup>12</sup> What a tragedy!

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.

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, 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.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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 twenty years since I founded the Golden Tones. It was the stories that sent me into the ministry—stories and the need for colleagues and accountability, since I was often with individuals and their families at particularly vulnerable times. Running the Golden Tones 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 perhaps your Priest, Rabbi, minister or pastor does. 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. On Sundays I often lead worship in UU congregations and beyond, exploring the themes of liberal religion or those relating closely to my work with the Golden Tones: building community through music, issues of death and dying, aging issues and the possibilities for ministering with, to and for the

aging members of a congregation, creating an ethical will, and more. I lead ecumenical services in nursing homes for residents and their families.

Yes, it was leading the Golden Tones which 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, the Islamic Center and synagogues over our 20 years. 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. And we do intergenerational work with schools and faith communities. We have performed at Harvard and Lesley universities, other schools and colleges, and for many years at the Wayland dump for Earth Day! As we often sing, “we are the music, we bring the music”. Our voices are raised and they are indeed a beacon in the night.

I could tell you so much more. About the power of humor to bring life and coping skills when things look grim. We use a lot of humor in our rehearsals and our performances. I could talk about keeping alive the great songs of the American Songbook and how we often sing forgotten verse of familiar tunes which really tell their stories. I could talk about philosophy in those song texts. How about “Enjoy Yourself! It’s later than you think”?! Or “When you’re smiling, when you’re smiling, the whole world smiles with you?” Simple truths. Simple wisdom. Maybe.

I could talk a lot more about the power of music with those with dementia, how it can transcend levels of awareness, how it can bring strangers together and make them friends, how it can be used in positive ways—but also how it can be used to manipulate emotions. Music has been used to accompany soldiers into battle—but it is also used therapeutically for those injured

in battle, a practice that started during World War II. The power of music for reminiscence is particularly compelling. How I plan musical programs and the selections we sing carries my intention to help elicit memory in both our singers and the audience. It always does.

### **THE WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER**

There'll be bluebirds over

The white cliffs of Dover tomorrow,  
Just you wait and see  
There'll be love and laughter

And peace ever after tomorrow,  
When the world is free,  
The shepherd will tend his sheep,  
A valley will bloom again,  
Jimmy will go to sleep

In his own little room again  
There'll be bluebirds over

The white cliffs of Dover tomorrow,  
Just you wait and see.<sup>13</sup>

One more story—and this one took place in one of our UU churches a couple of years ago—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. At the time Margie King Saphier's ministry took place in her work in hospice and her ministry with the Partaker's prison ministry, as well as in the congregation where she took part in much of the ministry of the church. Since that time, she has been called by First Parish in Concord. That day, 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: *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

---

<sup>13</sup> Nat Burton and Walter Kent.

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!

### **HE’S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS**

I end our time together this morning with these words which I have adapted from John Bell’s book *The Singing Thing*:

“...something extremely rare happens whenever a (gathered group)... 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 (or concert) some will be missing, others will be new and the likelihood is that the [service or the concert] will require a different selection of texts for singing.

So, if we can but sense it, every time a congregation or group sings, it is offering an absolutely one time only gift to the [Spirit of Life].”<sup>14</sup> At least in my mind.

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.<sup>15</sup>

### **GOD BLESS AMERICA**

While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,  
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free,

---

<sup>14</sup> Bell, John (2000). *The Singing Thing*. Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 80-81.

<sup>15</sup> Joe Raposo.

Let us all be grateful for a land so fair,  
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.

God Bless America,  
Land that I love.  
Stand beside her, and guide her  
Thru the night with a light from above.  
From the mountains, to the prairies,  
To the oceans, white with foam  
God bless America, My home sweet home.<sup>16</sup>

#### LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH

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 as our Father,  
brothers all are we,  
Let me walk with my brother,  
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.<sup>17</sup>

#### 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 Lover's Lane, my dearie.

---

<sup>16</sup> Irving Berlin, 1938.

<sup>17</sup> Sy Miller and Jill Jackson, 1955.

Wedding bells will ring so merrily  
Ev'ry tear will be a memory.  
So wait and pray each night for me  
Till we meet again.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Richard Whiting, 1918.