

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

When the Music Stops

Reverend Sara Goodman

Sunday 9 December 2018

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Readings for Sunday December 9th, 2018

The first reading is **DIFFERENCES OF OPINION** by Wendy Cope

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HE TELLS HER

He tells her that the earth is flat
He knows the facts, and that is that.
In altercations fierce and long
She tries her best to prove him wrong.
But he has learned to argue well.
He calls her arguments unsound
And often asks her not to yell.
She cannot win. He stands his ground.

The planet goes on being round.

The next reading is **EVIL** by **Langston Hughes**

Looks like what drives me crazy
Don't have no effect on you
But I'm gonna keep on at it
Till it drives you crazy, too.

The next reading is **WHEN TO SPEAK, WHEN TO KEEP SILENCE** by **Mark Belletini**

When the machetes of injustice
tear apart the fabric of the nation and
the world,
I speak up.

When the sunset resembles purple and
orange vine
entwined like lovers,
I sigh in silence.

When the mud of deceptions and
trickery smear the mirror of public life,
I speak up.

When the moon rests like a thin slice of
lemon in the sparkling glass of morning,
I smile in silence.

When the insecure bully me,
or the greedy clutch at the common
purse,
I speak up.

When a song lifts my soul aloft like a
lark,
I swoon in silence,

When wars and rumors of wars destroy
the hopes and lives of children,
I speak up.

When I am overcome by the sheer
reality of a communion of life
connecting every human, adult and
child on this one world earth,
I give thanks in silence.

When I am restrained by systems of
control,
manipulation, denial and duplicity,
I speak up.

When words cease,
the breath moves deep and slow,
and the inner and the outer are as one
for a time
I wonder in deep, deep silence.

When the Music Stops

Back in my youth, my boring youth, I sometimes went to concerts or dances. At my performing arts high school they were usually band concerts and modern dance shows, but occasionally I went somewhere kind-of cool, like Lilith Faire to see the Dixie Chicks and Sarah Mclachlan or the Rocky Horror Picture Show.

I loved the music and the crowds singing along to the songs we all knew. The community of people who were mostly strangers, connected by a shared appreciation for this particular music. Looking at each other and earnestly singing as loudly as we could because the volume was up so loud that it didn't matter what our voices sounded like. Dancing together in our seats, connected and a little beyond shame, because we were all there looking foolish together.

The part I liked the most though, was that deep ringing silence that happened in my ears when I finally got in the car to go home. The shadow of the music that lingered with me, like the after-image behind your eyelids when you stare at a light too long. A humming seashell noise, or like listening to the world through cotton balls. An impossible to ignore reminder that I was part of this huge loud thing - and am still a little bit.

And I think of its opposite: the deeply lonely silence of turning off music in an empty house. Before I turn music on, the house feels friendly and my thoughts chug along in my head without a care in the world. Then I want to play my favorite song on Spotify, or one of Jamie's toys starts to sing as I scoop it into its basket. When it's quiet again, the silence is so loud. The house echoes with the sound of no-one-there, and my thoughts are deafeningly loud. I am reminded of my aloneness.

Sometimes when this happens I feel bereft, like I've suddenly looked up from my book to see that I've come to the end of the line on the subway-"last stop, everyone off" - alone on a formerly crowded train.

In both scenarios when the music stops the silence is so loud.

You know when sometimes you're at a concert or a party and there is loud music playing, so you're shouting to someone about how desperately you love them and then suddenly the music goes quiet and you've embarrassed yourself and them in front of a giant crowd of people? Oh right, no, that only happens in the movies.

Although, once, when Kurt Vonnegut's daughter Nancy was small, she was taken to a ballet or concert, but the entire time she couldn't see what was happening because she was behind two older ladies deep in conversation who were gesticulating animatedly. Suddenly the music, until that point the music had completely drowned them out, suddenly the music stopped and one of the women said at full voice "Oh you use oil? I always use butter!"

I imagine the aisle full of ballet patrons politely applauding the dancers while laughing or glaring at the women. Confusion, discomfort, humor all mixed in together. And I imagine the women, immediately realizing – covering their mouths – cheeks going red. Would the speaker slouch in her seat embarrassed? I would, if it were me.

And yet, I bet the women looked around and gave the stink eye to anyone glaring their way. If they happily chatted away through a concert, why would they care what others thought?

*Looks like what drives me crazy
Don't have no effect on you (said Langston Hughes)
But I'm gonna keep on at it
Till it drives you crazy, too.*

I also find it frustrating and a little fascinating that there are some folks who go to the Y swim classes and chat with their friends the entire time, ignoring the instructor, planting themselves in the center of the pool without any sense that other people might need to move right where they are standing. You have to have a certain level of fierceness in you to ignore social protocol so boldly.

And lately I've been thinking about social protocol, about our so-called rules. For a time, I had interest in sociology, and theories of why people are how we are – on a large scale, not individually, as psychologists' study. I wondered about social replication, why some mores changed overtime while others didn't. I didn't study sociology very long or very hard, so I never got to the part where sociologists looked at power imbalances and structures of oppression.

Lately people of color in our denomination have asked us to examine power and structures of oppression in our culture as Unitarian Universalists, a culture dominated by whiteness. A culture that says that white people are better than "everyone else." A culture that replicates norms and mores and rules that marginalize otherness, while at the same time appropriating other cultures, claiming and integrating art, spiritual practices, and music of other cultures without acknowledging the hurt it could cause.

One way this culture of white supremacy manifests is in social rules like punctuality, perfectionism, and privilege. Social rules like “you don’t talk during the ballet” “give respect to the instructor in swim class, by listening and participating” Both, at the root, about getting our money’s worth, about respecting those in power.

As white people within Unitarian Universalism and in the American culture at large begin to see what people of color have been telling us for generations, we have to ask ourselves, as Mark Belletini does: *When to Speak, When to Keep Silence?*

*When the machetes of injustice
tear apart the fabric of the nation and the world,
I speak up. ...
When the moon rests like a thin slice of lemon
in the sparkling glass of morning,
I smile in silence.*

*When wars and rumors of wars destroy
the hopes and lives of children,
I speak up.*

*When a song lifts my soul aloft like a lark,
I swoon in silence,*

*When I am overcome by the sheer reality
of a communion of life
connecting every human, adult and child
on this one world earth,
I give thanks in silence.*

To Belletini, then, beauty and contentment keep him silent. Injustice and suffering require him to speak up. As we heard last week from Victoria, it is in listening to our still small voice that we find a public, outside voice.

And, yes. YES, we need to speak up, speak out, we need to speak truth to power, and call our representatives, and protest in the streets. We need to act in solidarity with those who are marginalized. And sometimes that means keeping quiet. Sometimes acting in solidarity means listening to a person with direct knowledge about something you think you know about.

He tells her that the earth is flat

*He knows the facts, and that is that.
In altercations fierce and long
She tries her best to prove him wrong.
But he has learned to argue well.
He calls her arguments unsound
And often asks her not to yell.
She cannot win. He stands his ground.*

The planet goes on being round.

Sometimes keeping quiet means making room in the conversation for voices that haven't been heard in a while, or ever. Sometimes it means showing up when we are asked to be there for a protest, not creating our own.

Sometimes solidarity means speaking up to other people of privilege. Sometimes it means breaking social protocol and saying to your friend, your neighbor, the person sitting next to you in the pew: I know you are a good person, and I know that you wouldn't want to do anything that hurt someone else, and when you said that that black woman was articulate, that was racist. Or when you said you didn't need a microphone, that left out people with hearing disabilities. Or not having armless chairs in your restaurant make it impossible for fat people to eat here.

Sometimes solidarity means being the annoying one, the person who gets eyerolls behind their backs, or glares from those around you. Sometimes doing the right thing means going against the norm, talking over the music, shouting through the cacophony, hoping that when the music stops your voice will be heard.

Sometimes you are so passionate about what you are doing that you bring along a whole slew of other people who want to sing earnestly along and look foolish together, making loud music that cannot be ignored and that rings in your ears when you part, reminding you of what it means to be a part of the beloved community.

May it be so. Now Let Us Sing – Literally – Hymn #368: “Now Let Us Sing”