

## When in Our Music

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Normally it is not our practice here at First Unitarian Church to recognize birthdays. Even in my small church in Omaha, we found it to be an unwieldy practice. But one day, during my first year here, someone mentioned to me that Glen Barbaras was going to turn 90 on a given Sunday. Like I said we don't normally do birthdays, but this seemed to be the ripest of exceptions. Glen has given decades of his life to service and leadership of First Unitarian Church. Plus it was his ninetieth birthday—on a Sunday. I figured if anyone complained about us not recognizing them on their birthday I could always say, “When you turn 90 on a Sunday, expect us to make a big deal out of it.” I was safe.

The plan was for the choir to surprise Glen with a rousing rendition of “Happy Birthday” as the postlude. We even left the music blank in the order of service. The choir even practiced the song. The fateful day arrived and we were all set for our big surprise. Only a funny thing happened—Glen didn't come to church that day! Now as a testimony to

Glen's constancy of church attendance, the notion that he wouldn't be here never even crossed my mind. Nor Scott's. I even confirmed during the announcements that Glen was at home. I later found out that family were visiting him from out of town for his big day. But here was the problem—Scott and I never discussed a plan B.

“Well, here goes!” I thought. Maybe nobody will notice. I think that may be the seemingly fastest worship hour of my life. The moment of the postlude was coming up quick. I had preached a sermon on vision and moving toward our vision together as a church, and used as my central metaphor in that sermon the Wizard of Oz. That walking together as a church toward our dream was like Dorothy moving closer to her goal of the Emerald City. It was a serviceable metaphor, although I must admit to being a bit distracted during the delivery as the postlude crept closer and closer.

And then the moment arrived. I extinguished the flame, and Scott, reprising his old piano bar days began a rousing rendition of “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” People laughed and then started singing along. As I was about to recess down the center aisle I looked over to Scott playing the piano, I am sure with my mouth agape, and he gave me a shrug. Some of you have heard me tell this story before. Because for me it was the moment I knew that I had been called to the right church at the right time. Too many things went wrong that Sunday, only to have all of them turn out far too well. It was just too perfect.

Scott's little shrug to me said was symbolic of the moment. It said, "You know what, everything is going to be alright because I have your back." And it has been so ever since.

I have been very blessed to work with Scott. To have a colleague like him is a rare thing. You see there an inherent tension between ministers and music directors. It's nothing personal just a point of tension in the roles between the two professions. It all has to do with Sunday morning air time. The musician, used to performing for an audience, wants to put on a good show. The music can start to take up more and more time. The minister is the boss, usually. His or her name and sermon topic define the worship experience. People normally ask, "What is the sermon that Sunday?" and rarely ask, "Who is the special music that day?" Given these differences and the natural human desires of our egos to seek recognition and approval, ministers and music directors can view each other as the competition. Many a church conflict has had its origin in these tumultuous waters.

Scott knows this first hand. For a time he was a Good Offices person for the UU Musicians Network. That job meant that Scott would go to churches where this conflict between the musician and minister was brewing and counsel the musician on what to do. Unfortunately Scott didn't last too long in this capacity. He was asked to stop being a Good Officer for the musicians in the UUA because his advice to them was a variation on a truth he lives by: "Your job is to make the minister

look good on Sunday morning.” That was not the message that most musicians, or most people, want to hear. And yet that selfless attitude is exactly what makes Scott so effective at what he does.

Chapter 17 Tao Te Ching says:

The best leaders are those the people hardly know exist.

The next best is a leader who is loved and praised.

Next comes the one who is feared.

The worst one is the leader that is despised.

If you don't trust the people,  
they will become untrustworthy.

The best leaders value their words, and use them sparingly.

When she has accomplished her task,

the people say, "Amazing:  
we did it, all by ourselves!"

Recently at our Program Staff meetings we have been doing some theological reflection around a reading, and this chapter from the Tao Te Ching was the selection last Thursday. As we were sharing our thoughts on the ancient Taoist writings and their implication for religious leadership, I thought that Lao Tzu had described well Scott's approach. The irony about the tension between ministers and music directors is that when you set your ego aside, you wind up getting what you want. I know Scott is supportive of me and my ministry. He gives me some of

the most honest and unbiased feedback I get. As a result, I trust Scott. I know that if I am ever in a jam, he is going to bail me out with a wink and knowing shrug of the shoulders. And because I trust him so much, I give him a great deal of power, responsibility, leeway, freedom, and yes moments in the limelight. If you think about it he gets all of the attention and kudos that those other selfish music directors crave and with the blessing of the minister! Why? Because Scott does his best leadership when you hardly know he exists. He is behind the scenes, pushing others to the forefront. Make others look good and you will wind up ahead yourself.

We can either be driven by our egos or by our higher selves, what Lincoln once referred to as the “better angels of our nature.” Worship isn’t about who gets the credit, who gets the accolades or the applause. Worship isn’t even about me or Scott—it’s about you. The best worship service is the one that transforms people hearts, souls and minds regardless of it is the sermon or the music that does it. That is the ultimate goal, the reason why we are all here: to catch if but a fleeting glimpse of the Holy in life, and barring that, to at least be reminded that there is some sacred dimension to life even if we don’t experience it directly in this particular hour of our week. It doesn’t matter who gets the “credit” for a worship service. That is irrelevant, or should be. The goal is about connecting to each other and, in the words of our unison affirmation, to all that is sacred in life. No less.

Music is integral to making that connection. The neurologists would point out that music engages more parts of the brain, specifically the right hemisphere, whereas the sermon is typically for UUs up in the left frontal cortex. Music brings a primal element to worship. The repetitive beat of a bass or a drum remind us of mother's heartbeat in the womb. Rhythm affects our bodies and biorhythms. We begin to move in sync with each other coordinated by an unseen force. And without cognitively knowing it, or being able to describe it in words, a feeling of oceanic bliss can wash over us. Obviously that experience doesn't happen to everyone every Sunday, but it happens on enough Sundays to enough people that it can't be a coincidence. Music helps us get there. That is why even secular music concerts you see people sway back and forth with their lighters or cell phones lit. It is almost like Jewish people swaying while they pray at the wailing wall in Jerusalem. Or a child being rocked. Music is a primal experience.

It is for that reason that music can be properly considered a ministry. I remember talking to a friend of mine in the Ann Arbor church many years ago who said, she just wanted the sermon for one hour and nothing else. It made me think of how flat such an experience would likely be on most Sundays. Music ministers to us just as surely as anything else does. And, like all parts of the worship life of the church, music must change and grow with the changing congregation.

Two years ago now, I wanted to push Scott a little bit to meet those changing times. We were doing staff evaluations and setting goals for the year. This was always hard to do for Scott who so often performs at a high level. I needed to find a goal for him that hit that sweet spot between being too easy that he clears the bar too easily or so impossible that it would not be fair to even place it before him as a challenge. But I wanted Scott to push his comfort zone. I wanted him to push our comfort zone. And so I set as his goal to do something musically that was very different than what we might normally do. I told him that “In order to get the highest score for that goal, I would need to hear at least two complaints from members of the congregation about the service.” I wanted people to cry uncle—that’s so different!

I did that, not because I like upsetting people. But because Scott is such a talented guy, and such a nice guy, that he wouldn’t do that. But I wanted to give him full freedom, permission even, to experiment and make mistakes, and have people complain about those mistakes, and then learn from them and then get better. The old saying goes, “If all you ever do is all you have ever done, than all you will ever get is all you have ever got.” In order for there to be growth, there must be change. In order for there to be change there must be risk. Growth, whatever it is, a human being or a congregation, first must start with risk and the courage to take that action. For the record, Scott did take that risk—you all knew it as Bob Marley Sunday. Overwhelmingly people

loved it, but in fact I did get a few folks come up to me to say, “That wasn’t my cup of tea.” Hurray! Not because I am glad that person didn’t like reggae music, but because it meant that we had moved just a bit closer to the edge. Whenever I have challenged Scott to take a risk with something, he has always risen to the challenge. That is not to say that it was always easy, but he was always able to get there.

This month our theme is risk. Music may not at first seem particularly risky business, but for ministers and other church leaders there is nothing more risky than messing with the music in worship. Everyone has their preferences and predilections. Everyone has their beloved traditions from We Three Kings on Christmas Eve to Scott Joplin ragtime to Charles Wesley hymns on Easter. Mess with these sacred cows and there is you know what to be paid. For some the organ is played too much, and for others not nearly enough. Scott has knows that there is no way to win that one. So we just keep going.

Risk, when never taken, makes life dull. Yet when taken too often is dangerous. Too much instability can lead to tremendous loss. But too much stability, staying at home to avoid risk, and soon there is no point to living anyway. To keep growing and staying relevant over the long haul takes creativity, talent, and courage. To be around for twenty years, and to keep it all fresh, is a tremendous accomplishment.

Congratulations Scott. I am honored to have been just a small chapter in

your career at First Unitarian Church. Keep taking risks, keep growing,  
and keep bringing us music. Amen Blessed Be.