

# WHY WE SING

Sermon for Abraham Lincoln Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
January 2012 by Pam Blevins Hinkle

CHOIR SINGS: "There is More Love Somewhere"

I love that song. There is more love somewhere, more joy, more peace, more hope ... I don't know where, but I KNOW it's there SOMEWHERE. **Three** times in a single verse the song proclaims it ... there is more love somewhere. Not there MIGHT be love or there COULD be love, but there IS more love... more peace...more joy.

This traditional African American hymn is what's known as a "zipper" song, where you "zip" in one new word or phrase in each verse. (Our opening hymn, Come and Go with Me, is a zipper song, too.) This repetitive, almost chant-like, form is what helps us find the deep center of the song.

The text, melody, and form combine weave together and connect the deepest of human yearnings with an unshakable hope and unswerving faith. A personal faith made corporate (gesture) by our collective singing ... the desire of our hearts brought to action in the voice and made tangible by sound ... a sung statement of conviction and determination. "I'm gonna keep on till I find it." Keep on walking, working, searching, believing ... you can fill that in for yourself can't you? While you sing? ... keep on keepin' on till I find it. It's a declarative song.

Anyone see Les Mis? Who knows the chorus? (Choir sings). *Do you hear the people sing? Singing a song of angry men? It is the music of a people who will not be slaves again! When the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drums. There is a life about to start when tomorrow comes!*

All right! **That's** a declarative song, a rallying cry ... expressing anger, solidarity, and hope for a new future. It's a fictional song, yes, but there are plenty of songs that really did change people and change the world.

The coal miners of Appalachia sang... *And by union what we will, can be accomplished still. Drops of water turn a mill, singly none, singly none. (invite everyone to sing with me)*

In the struggle for gay rights, Holly Near sang...*We are a gentle angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.*

In South Africa, whole communities sang *Senzenina*...."what have we done?" the song asks, "Our crime is that we are black."

And one of the chief cultural expressions of the Civil Rights Movement was collective singing. *Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.*

These songs were not just fun group activities or something to fill time during a march. They weren't just tools used in a calculating way to evoke emotional fervor. The songs unified the people, transcended spoken word, gave heft and depth to the struggle, and allowed people to see with the heart as well as the mind.

Consider those words ... Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day. Speak those words with me now. (speak) Now, let's sing them. (sing)

Tell me ... which one made you believe? Which one brought you joy? Which one connected you to the people around you? Which one would give you the strength to stand up, to put yourself **on the line** for the cause of **radical** love and justice?

Bernice Johnson Reagan, who sang with the Freedom Singers during the civil rights movement, and founded Sweet Honey in the Rock, told Bill Moyers in an interview that if you decided to sing, you also decided to let the vibration of the music change you. Amen to that!

Here's a quote from that great contemporary philosopher, Bono of the rock band U2; he said, "Music can change the world because it can change people."

This is part of the answer to why we sing. (PAUSE)

As I prepared for this talk today, I was curious to know what **others** thought about why we sing. So I used one of my favorite research tools ... Facebook. Here are some of the responses: (have two readers read them back on forth without attribution)

"Stories stick with you better in song."

"Singing "Calms me, centers me, reminds me to breathe, connects me to the divine, helps me create as a visual artist."

"Singing (rather than just even listening to music alone) allows you to feel the vibrations in your body. To sync up your breaths with others. You embody the energy of the Spirit born on the music."

"If you sing with others, you simultaneously create, build and dissolve a once-in-a-lifetime community. Fleeting experience, permanent memories."

"It's our first language, our animal language, and all chirps and whinnies and hisses praise God."

"To scare the children."

"Because it allows my soul a voice."

"All mammals have their sound of **joy**. Ours is song."

Journalist and poet Edmund Clarence Stedman understood the joy part. He said “Faith and Joy; these are the ascensive forces of song.” The “ascensive” of forces ... I love that!

Yes, singing does lift us up...but not **only** up. It moves us from one place to another. It’s a medium, a **doorway** between the seen and the unseen ... between the physical world and the world of dreams and passions, thoughts and visions ... a doorway between spirit and matter. (reference to opening words).

Karl Paulnack, director of music at Boston Conservatory, writes about music’s place in the invisible world. He writes this: ...”the ancient Greeks said that music and astronomy were two sides of the same coin. Astronomy was seen as the study of relationships between observable, permanent, external objects, and music was seen as the study of relationships between invisible, internal, hidden objects. Music has a way of finding the big, invisible moving pieces inside our hearts and souls and helping us figure out the position of things inside us. “

This is why **I** sing ... it helps me figure out the position of things inside here (point to head) and inside here (point heart). So I’m always looking for ways to sing ... it’s why I love to be with choirs like this great group here ... why I love to chant ... why I’ve chosen a personal spiritual practice that uses song as prayer. (PAUSE)

I want to BE a song, to BE a prayer ... to be an **instrument** of the sacred, and a voice of love in the world.

CONGREGATIONAL SONG: LET THE WAY, *Sing through voice, play through my hands. Let the way be open* by Abigail McBride

What did you feel, just now, in that singing? (Pause) Did you notice what was **inside** the sound? It was MORE than sound, it was also your intention, and our **shared** intention ... or to use religious language, it was the sound of our prayers.

I hope you were able to let go of the negative self-talk that so many of us struggle with. I hear many heartbreaking stories about mean music teachers or family members who tell us we can’t sing ... stories that have crippled countless voices, and stoppered many beautiful prayers.

We are not here to be Frank Sinatra or Beyonce. What matters is the **intention we put into the singing.**

When the civil rights protesters sang We Shall Overcome they weren’t thinking about voice quality or how it would sound to the person next to them, they were thinking about changing the world.

When we sing in church, we are here to be the choir of the whole, to raise the sound of compassion ... we’re here to make manifest our values and our connection to all creation.

If you put **that** into the singing, it WILL be beautiful, its meaning will **vibrate** inside you, change you ... and the collective resonance WILL change us ... if you let it. (PAUSE)

I first learned about the power of intentional singing when I was artistic director of the Indianapolis Women's Chorus. The chorus was preparing a song, a difficult song, with a powerful text. They LOVED it and worked hard to master it. In the performance, however, they didn't quite nail it despite their heartfelt delivery...and in that fraction of a second between the cut-off (gesture) and the applause, I remember thinking, "Oh, what a pity...they blew it." And then the audience went absolutely berserk with their cheering and clapping. I confess that my first reaction was performer-based, not pastoral. I wanted to turn to the audience and shout, "Don't reward THAT!" Then it dawned on me ... the audience HEARD the intention in the singing, valuing it BEYOND musical mastery.

This is what we have to remember when we sing together in community ... to bring our intention to the sound ... the singing makes VISIBLE our intention, makes visible our wholeness--as individuals and as a community—makes visible our unity.

WE ARE ONE, by Brian Tate ... sung by the choir.

We are one. We are always one when we sing together. There are so few opportunities to sing together these days. Remember when **everyone** sang the national anthem, not just some soloist? Now admittedly, that song is not my favorite on many levels. It's a dreadful melody with a range that's too big for the average singer ... and the rocket imagery is not what I'd choose for a national song ... but I'm terribly sad that no one sings it any more. How many opportunities do we get to sing together to say, "Yay, America!" Why can't we sing it together with respect for what IS good about this place we call home? How would that change us to put some affirmative intention in THAT song? What if, while we sang it, we thought about the importance of freedom and liberty?

You know, we don't have to think the same thing, to sing the same song together. We don't have to think the same thing, to sing the same song together. We can transcend the text as individuals to be present to the large connective value, the larger intention.

That's true on Sunday morning, too, or anytime we are with worshipping communities. You don't have to agree with all the words ... singing is more than the words ... and it's what's going to stick with you. 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister Henry Giles said, "A song will outlive all sermons in the memory."

And singing is the only place in worship where our **wholeness** is valued and engaged. Noted hymn writer Brian Wren, who wrote 9 hymns in our own Singing the Living Tradition, says "When we sing from the heart, with full voice, some of us use our bodies more thoroughly, perhaps, than at any other time in worship." He's right. Singing brings together our bodies, our voices, our minds, our hearts." Conductor Anton Armstrong of St. Olaf's prestigious choral programs says it well: "Body, mind, spirit voice ... it takes a whole person to rejoice."

And we WANT to rejoice, we WANT and NEED to liberate this wholeness ... and whether your sense of that invisible world is dreams and visions or the it's heart of God , we crave an **embodied** encounter with it.

Let me tell you another story. About 10 years, I attended a national conference of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses in Texas. The evening concert featured many choirs including the Lavendar Light Gospel Choir from NYC, the only gospel choir in the network. I was seated about half way up this large hall that seated 1,000 on the main floor.

The choir was AMAZING! Their energy and fire made me want to clap, I wanted to shout, I wanted to dance. But when I looked around I saw that EVERYONE was immobile...stiff and seemingly unmoved by what they were hearing ... and this was an audience of SINGERS! So I sat still... but before long my butt started to wiggle uncontrollably in my seat. Finally I just gave in and gave up to the excitement and joy I was hearing. I hopped up and clapped and danced my way to the end.

During the applause, I glanced around... and saw that the WHOLE back half of hall was also on its feet in wild participation....while the front half sat without moving.

As we all filed out at the end of the evening, a woman in the row behind me said, "Thanks for giving us all permission to enjoy it."

That made me so sad. We don't need permission ... not in a concert ... and most especially not in church.

We need to let ourselves plunge into where the music takes us. We need to not care who's looking or listening. We need to dive in. We need to listen to the truth inside us ... the sound of our body, mind, heart, and voice working in harmony. You don't need permission to be whole

And this is why we sing ...

To be whole as individuals and as a people.

To give voice to the intensity of our hope and desire, and to proclaim the solidarity of our conviction.

To release our agony and our joy, and to embody that unity and harmony we wish to see in the world.

To find salvation from our fear and the dark parts of ourselves, and to make visible our love.

To cry out to one another, and to whatever we hold most holy.

This is why we sing.

WHY WE SING, by Greg Gilpin, choir sings

Closing Words:

May we find the courage to carry our voice and our song beyond the safety of these walls, beyond the familiarity of our own kind and our own community, beyond the privilege and comfort of what is known into the unfathomable and messy mystery.

And may we remember that a tune, sung together, has the power to change hearts, build communities, combat despair and isolation, and remind us that we are connected to one another and to the Source of Life.

With our song, let us go out.

With our love, let us go out.

With our joy, let us go out into the world.