

# The Healing Grace of Music

Rev. Ken Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
May 8, 2022  
*Mother's Day "Music Sunday"*

## Readings

From the "Mother's Day Proclamation" composed in 1870 by the Unitarian writer and reformer Julia Ward Howe. Though these days Mother's Day is mostly about cards and flowers – which is quite wonderful of course – the first Mother's Day was a Mother's Day for Peace:

“Arise, then... women of this day!  
Arise, all women who have hearts,  
whether our baptism be that of water or of tears!  
Say firmly:  
We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies.  
Our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage,  
for caresses and applause.  
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn  
all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.  
We, women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country  
to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.

From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own.  
It says: Disarm, Disarm!  
The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.  
Blood does not wipe out dishonor,  
nor violence vindicate possession.  
As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil  
at the summons of war,  
let women now leave all that may be left of home  
for a great and earnest day of council.

Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead.  
Let them then solemnly take council with each other as to the means  
whereby the great human family can live in peace...

From "The Music of the Spheres," by Ernesto Cardenal

The music of the spheres.  
A harmonious universe – like a harp.  
Its rhythms are the equal, repeated seasons.  
The beating of the heart.  
Day/night. The going and returning of migratory birds.  
The cycles of stars and corn.  
The mimosa that unfolds by day and folds up again by night.  
Rhythms of moon and tide. One single rhythm in planets, atoms, sea,  
And apples that ripen and fall, and in the mind of Newton.  
Melody, accord, arpeggios  
The harp of the universe.  
Unity behind apparent multiplicity.  
That is the music.

## Sermon

It is quite likely that the first music any of us heard was a sort of drum... our mother's heartbeat. The first music the simple yet profound and healing rhythm of the heart.

Soon after perhaps we heard our mother humming a melody as she went about her day, or singing a favorite song. And perhaps sometimes playing a recording: Mozart... Bach... or Beatles... or reggae... or blues...

Healing grace. Healing means to make whole. Grace is about a free gift.

To my mind (and heart) that's what music offers: A free gift that can make us whole, or that reminds us that we have always been and will be whole, regardless of, even at the same time as any brokenness or injury to body or spirit.

I expect that my mother sang at my bedside during my first months of life, though I have no particular memory of it. I do remember quite well singing at my mother's bedside during her last months. It was a healing grace for me, to sing and play an old tune ("Yes Sir that's My Baby"... "You Are My Sunshine"... "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot") on the little banjo-uke I carried around with me during those days. As I hope it was for her – if her smiles were an indication, I believe it was

And I recall one late evening in particular. Mom's room happened to be across from the nurses' station at Harbor House Nursing Home, and as I left that night, there were a number of other residents sitting along the wall, most of them in wheelchairs. One of them saw my banjo-uke and he asked – sort of a good-humored challenge actually – if I could play that thing.

Well, what could I do? So I played and sang some of the same old tunes I'd just been playing for Mom, songs I was pretty sure these other residents would know – and they did, some of them singing along... and smiling.

It was a really good moment. Another moment, as I would name it, of healing grace.

Well, I could spend way more time than we have this morning sharing other such moments in all sorts of settings, with many different kinds of music. Here are just a few such moments, which perhaps will evoke some of your own memories of the healing grace of music:

Sitting in the balcony of Roberts Hall, the performance center at Haverford College, transfixed by the dePasquale String Quartet on the stage. Till then, as a teenager I had listened mostly (no surprise!) to the Beatles rather than Bach, to music of banjo and guitar strings rather than strings of violin, viola, and cello. But listening to Bach, Mozart, whatever this group was playing invited me into yet another realm of the healing grace of music. Whatever worry about a paper due the next day or an upcoming exam would drift away on the wings of the music. Healing grace.

Another moment: During those same years, I spent summers as a camp counselor in upstate New York. At one point during one of those summers I found myself quite down in the dumps – I have no recollection of why. In any case (as I may have told you once before) a

number of counselors – my brother Jim among them – had secured tickets at the Saratoga Center for the Performing Arts for a concert by the rock group The Band.

The first half of the concert didn't do much for me as they played new material I'd never heard. Then, after intermission they started playing the songs I knew – for example, perhaps their most famous song even after all these years: "The Weight" – the central message of which is also a grace: Take a load off... and put the load right on me.

Well whatever weight had been weighing me down that night was lifted high and blown away by the spirit and message of that and other songs.

If you know the song – or if you don't – I recommend watching the YouTube 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary recording, featuring Robbie Roberts from The Band, Ringo Starr on the drums, and other musicians from around the world, all the continents, all colors, women and men, guitars, sitar, all sorts of drums. This recording is indeed a healing grace – is for me anyway. When I watched it again the other day, tears came into my eyes again, as they did two years ago when this recording was flying around the internet at the outset of the pandemic and probably as they did fifty years ago that night in Saratoga. Tears of healing grace.

Here's one more story of the healing grace of music in my life:

For several years after college I taught music at the Spear Educational Center, first in Watertown, then Framingham, a school for autistic kids and others with severe learning challenges. I hadn't planned to be a music teacher, much less at such a school. I had just answered an ad for part-time activity aide at the school. Well, one of the activities at the end of the school day was having the kids play color-coded toy xylophones. There really wasn't much music to it – it was more of a matching exercise, just about striking the key of the colored note on the page... often somewhat laboriously and often with plenty of help.

Well, I told one of my roommates at the time, Garrett, about this, and he told me about an experience he'd had attending a Friends School in D.C. The music teacher happened to be John Langstaff – the guy who created Christmas Revels years ago. What Garrett told me changed everything for me and my teaching. He said that Langstaff inspired his classes not by forcing some sort of rote learning, but rather by bringing in his instrument (I think Garrett said it was a trumpet) and *showing* how glorious music could be.

So... next day, or maybe next week, I brought my guitar to class... and so began my four years of sharing music with these kids. Most of them, whatever learning challenges they had, responded to music – whether singing or just beating a drum. It wasn't all easy, cause these kids had been dealt tough hands in life... but no question in my mind that I had the best job in the place, making and sharing music, the healing grace bringing smiles and I hope real joy.

I could go on – and I'm pretty certain you have your own stories of times that the grace of music has been healing to you or perhaps that you've offered the healing grace of music to others – whether playing or singing yourself or sharing a recording that precisely met the heart's need of a friend or child or mother...

For me sometimes it is as simple (you will not be surprised) as picking up my banjo (always close at hand in my study at home) and picking a few tunes.

And goodness, we experience the healing grace of music every Sunday right here. We are so, so fortunate!

In the wider world we observe this too: That cellist playing day after day on the streets of Sarajevo during the seige a couple of decades ago... or another cellist amid the ruins of Kharkiv, Ukraine just a few weeks ago.

How and why does music do this? I hesitate to try to explain this... so I won't. But we do know that music and our response to it is universal; for though there are as many varieties of music as there are cultures on the planet, every culture does have its music, and every human being (of this I'm convinced) requires for soul health the healing grace of music – perhaps ever and always evoking that first music, the music and rhythm of our mother's heart – on this Mother's Day... and always.

One last thought – and perhaps this is the heart of my message for us today; this might in a sense be the whole of the sermon – or the whole point of it: If you find yourself forgetting or neglecting the power of the healing grace of music as you, for example, are listening to the news on the radio... change the station to... well, whatever your music of choice might be. Here in Boston might be WCRB classical, WUMB folk, Kiss 101, Country 102.5... whatever heals your troubled or tired soul.

Yes, we need to know what is going on in the world in order to be good citizens, to discern our ways to be of use. But we need to nourish our spirits too, else we will be not much good to anyone. The healing grace of music, echoing the music of the spheres, can turn the trick.

So may it always be.