

This I Believe

I believe in song. I believe in making a joyful noise to God, Allah, Mother Earth, each other. I believe music really is a universal language and can soothe the savage beasts as well as usher in world peace, justice, and freedom. Here's how. . . .

We've always told our stories with songs -- songs of redemption, of triumph, of yearning. Usually though, our most memorable songs are love songs, whether it's love for individuals, communities, or ideas. Music is the real language of love.

Yet, how many of us as we mature, lose our singing innocence? Young children can't resist joining in song. Catch those same kids in high school or as sober adults, and they're too self-conscious -- they've been burned too many times. Thoreau was correct when he observed that "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them."

Yet telling our stories with words and melody is more than just a memory aid, it weaves a rich tapestry of intellect and emotion, of thoughts and feelings. One author calls music "the rhythm of head and heart." That's why song is so important to worship -- an admittedly important love for many of us. Choir members sometimes tell me the only reason they attend church is to sing in the choir -- worship allows them to shed their inhibitions and let their songs out.

Interestingly, recent American hymnals have incorporated more African-American spirituals, Native American hymns, and songs from other cultures. Some claim this is political correctness gone amok. I believe it's a recognition that we can begin to heal our divisions by learning each others' stories and making them our own by singing them together. Who that lived through the 1960s can forget the power of "We Shall Overcome"?

Martin Luther King understood this. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, he foresaw the day "when all God's children will be able to sing . . . let freedom ring!" adding that "if America is to be a great nation, this must become true." I believe that if our world is to survive, this and many other stories must become our shared heritage.

Let's extend that dream. What would happen if Arabs and Israelis learned each others' stories and sang them together? How about citizens of rich and poor nations? Even Washington might conceivably get back on track if we could convince Republicans and Democrats to sing off of the same page!

Lest you think I'm crazy, consider that making music together requires us to listen to each other and to follow the same leader, and that it's pretty hard to pull this off while hating your neighbor's guts. Perhaps replacing politicians looking to score points off each other and diplomats who spend their days dancing around issues with people who are willing to work together under common leadership isn't really so far-fetched after all. Democrats and Republicans, are you listening?