

# HOLY DISSONANCE AND DEMOCRACY

A Sermon Delivered for  
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist  
Sunday, October 7, 2007  
The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Responsive Reading 576      *A Litany of Reconciliation*      Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley

If, recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community,  
the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white,

**It will not matter.**

If you are female and I am male,      **It will not matter.**

If you are older and I am younger,      **It will not matter.**

If you are progressive and I am conservative,      **It will not matter.**

If you are straight and I am gay,      **It will not matter.**

If you are Christian or Jewish and I am not,      **It will not matter.**

If we join spirits as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be  
lessened, and that does matter.

**In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.**

Reading                      from *The Guide to Classic Recorded Jazz*                      Tom Piazza

In a jazz group, as in any community, certain roles need to be filled.  
Someone has to play the melody, someone has to keep time, someone has  
to suggest the harmonic context. In jazz, each instrumentalist has to under-  
stand his or her role in the group well enough so that he or she can  
improvise on it and not just follow directions. Playing in a jazz group  
involves both responsibility and freedom; freedom consists in under-  
standing your responsibility well enough to act independently and still  
make the needed contribution to the group. As such, a jazz performance is  
a working model of democracy.

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A pianist (arpeggio), a bass player (bum-bum-bum), a drummer (badda-bing!), find themselves performing with a rather hapless Tony Bennett wannabe (Hm!). As they're rehearsing, right before they start a tune they tried the previous night, the pianist says to the singer, "Wait a second . . . I'd like to try something different on this one. After the drum solo (badda-bing), and the bass solo (bum-bum-bum), I'll play the intro for you. But this time I want you to come in after only seven bars, and sing a minor third BELOW the key I'm playing. Then sing the verse a half step ABOVE that key, but go to the bridge after eleven bars, and sing the bridge a fourth above that. Then on the last verse, sing a whole step sharp for the first five and half bars, then drop down a half step as you go to the coda six and a half bars early."

The singer, stunned, just looks at the trio and says, "WHAT?! I can't do that."

And the pianist replies: "WHY NOT? YOU NAILED IT LAST NIGHT!"

Some dissonance is holy. Some is not. In a real democracy, to tell the difference, we all learn by listening to one another.

Let's face it friends: ours is a clearly improvisational faith. We don't all read off the same score. We don't all come from the same background or assumptions. Even when we may be tempted to assume that we do. Because the deepest temptation for good people today lies in asking, "Why can't more people just be like me? And share my taste, my philosophy, my beliefs and predilections – because I'm so obviously right!"

This isn't unique to us. I often all it 'the universality of human narcissism.' But it is may be the functional equivalent of what our religious forebears called 'original sin.'

When John Mark Thomas purchased the right at our First Parish auction last Spring to have me preach a sermon on a theme of his choice, he called for one that would answer at least some of the following questions:

"Are there any Republicans in First Parish?" Oh, yes! I'm reminded regularly that not everyone here interprets the signs of the times in the same way. God bless all honest minority voices. Especially when they don't just speak, but really dialogue.

“We’ve made room for gay folks. But where are the black families, Hispanics?” Good point. Many of encounter considerable ethnic diversity in the workplace these days. But America is still largely segregated in its residential neighborhoods and congregations. Less than 4% of Needham’s population is ‘of color.’ Fifty years ago the town was 80% Protestant. Now it’s almost 80% Catholic or Jewish, at least by identity, if not practice.

But the diversity I most miss, in a suburban church, is actually diversity of age. Get on the T in Boston and you lots of young adults, 18 to 35. But not here in our midst. Next year, when we have a building of our own, Lucas hopes to fix that – launching a young adult group, aimed at ministry to, for, and by young adults. Of whom there are many both in Needham and around Route 128. But as our urban churches have learned, one big issue in attracting a more diverse congregation is diversity in music. Lucas knew that, when he helped start a second service with more contemporary music at his home church in Cincinnati.

Whether it’s a jazz service at sundown, as in New York, Salt Lake City, and downtown Boston, or the blues theology of the minister at our St. Louis church, or the broad range of music UUs in Nashville, Austin, Tampa, Baton Rouge and elsewhere find at worship, our fastest growing churches are learning that just because our New England ancestors were ‘God’s frozen people’ doesn’t mean we have to be. In Portland, Oregon, where over 1000 people often worship at First Unitarian’s two services each Sunday, Music Director Mark Slegers likes to arrange for Latin music on pledge Sundays, so folks can sort of “samba up the aisle to place their pledge cards in the basket.”

But when I mentioned to one of our own congregants how excited I was to be doing a jazz service today, she sniffed and said, “I’ll be staying at home, that morning.” She can tolerate folk music, she said. Even the occasional spiritual. But jazz? Really! That, for her, simply isn’t church. It’s just too much body for her spirit. To which I say, isn’t that the point of church: that we’re here to embody the Spirit, in all its diversity!

Another question John Mark want addressed has to do with economic and class diversity. Are we effectively excluding low-income or less-educated people? Well, our flock does have twenty MDs, at least twenty PhDs, and lots of lawyers, engineers, and MBAs. But there are also at least twenty folks in our midst who live on disability income;

another twenty who never went to college; and lots who, while more down-to-earth than intellectual, share a high degree of ongoing self-education, questioning, and curiosity.

But what about liberal ‘political correctness?’ asks John Mark. Do we have room for pro-lifers, handgun advocates, immigration opponents, Bush lovers, war supporters? Well . . . just this week, an interview I did for The Bob Edwards Show on NPR and satellite radio was broadcast across the country. Not in Boston, sadly; but on 200 stations. Edwards interviewed me as a spokesperson for that seeming oxymoron ‘liberal religion.’ So I was at pains to point out that only 20% of Americans adhere to the Religious Right, despite the fact that they have been a key part of the conservative coalition for 30 years. Only another 20% are so much their mirror opposites as to be fundamentalists of the left – secular and adamantly anti-religious, *a la* Bill Maher – whom I can find quite funny, but not at all charitable, kind, or generous – which is the original meaning of “liberal.”

Most Americans are somewhere in the middle, blessedly: improvising, listening; despite polarizing politics and a mass media that fights for ratings by feeding us constant conflict, controversy, contradiction, colorful language, and caricature. There are powerful forces that want to keep us polarized: to keep democracy ‘thin,’ so that you never really talk to someone different from yourself about underlying issues, or find nuance. That would be to thicken the mix of what we have in common, and threaten those who want to stay on the top. But in the jazz of real, thick democracy there is more going on than just thin and simplistic dualities, than either/or patterns.

To be sure, political scientist Robert Putnam of Harvard is probably right when he says that all communities are built on trust, and that high levels of diversity are often associated with lower levels of trust. But so is Alan Wolfe of Boston College when his interviews tell him that diverse people often have far more in common than they realize.

We Unitarian Universalists often worry that we have such a consensus around basic principles – the inherent worth & dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another, and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of democratic processes; the goal of world-wide community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and respect for the inter-

dependent web of all existence, of which we're but a part – that we've developed a new creed, and that we don't engage enough with those who question or challenge our values.

I understand such worries. I like engaging controversies. That's why I started "The Needham Lyceum," as "a weekly forum on public affairs, spirituality, culture, and science," and I miss doing it this year, without our own Meetinghouse in which to host it. But I also like having discussions, whatever our differences, guided by our principles. After all, if democracy really is like jazz, does involve both freedom *and* responsibility. As Winton Marsalis puts it, a jazz band [or a community] "works best when participation is shaped by intelligent communication." The point of dissonance is not simply to be argumentative, or raucous; it is to carry on a free-form conversation that is inclusive of disparate and new voices, and bring them to newer forms of harmony and reconciliation.

I don't mind dissent and holy dissonance. On the radio, for example, I spoke about those of in the religious world who are not given to denying the full worth and dignity of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters; who are not interested in restoring patriarchy; who are distressed when the abortion issue, for example, is used to deny the full moral agency of women.

But the next day a woman contacted me saying, in essence, that not all people who oppose abortion want to deny the moral agency of women, and that she is one. Replying, I said that it is quite possible to support choice and want to reduce the rate of abortion, but that too many abortion opponents have no such desire, but exploit the issue. She and I ended up having a good, jazzy dialogue, full of nuance and mutual respect.

But have you ever noticed how passions over issues can be inverse proportion to their importance? Take the question of what color the exterior of our Parish Hall will be, for example! How many of you want it a warm, welcoming yellow? How many wanted it white? And how many really don't care? Take note Parish Committee before deciding. The Building Committee itself divided 4 to 3, by the way.

Personally, I hope whatever color the outside, we make room on the inside for what my colleague in St. Louis, the Rev. Suzanne Meyer, calls 'blues theology' – that is, for the kind of religion that resists dividing the world in secular and sacred, head and heart, body and soul, either/or, and seeks a more holistic, healing form of experience.

My friend Tom Stites, who was both founder of Jazz magazine many years ago and the long-time editor of the *UU World*, likes to quote jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, who often told noisy nightclub audiences, “Listen, this can heal you.”

What is important, it seems to me, is to recognize, as any good jazz player does, that it’s easy to get trapped in yourself, in your own narcissism, and stop listening. Stop hearing the voices and experiences of others. Even if they are younger, or have different taste, or other modes of self-expression, or politics, or background, chances are you have more in common than you know. The trick is to trust the process, holy dissonance and all. And that, in the end, is a faith affirmation.

Tom once ended a piece in the *UU World* on jazz services in UU congregations with a quote from Tom Piazza, from whom we took today’s reading. “The spirit that jazz embodies will never die,” he once wrote. As long as we can play again Ellington’s “Ko-Ko,” or Coltrane’s “Crescent,” or Armstrong’s “West End Blues,” what we’ll have is “proof that the individual and the group *can* be reconciled, that African and European cultural streams *are* compatible, and that the blues *can* be held at bay. And when the balance sheets are toted up for this country, let no one miss the sweet justice that the greatest artistic expression of the American ideal has come from the descendants of slaves, who found the true meaning of democracy and the very essence of freedom.”

For if we free ourselves to listen, then we can free ourselves to make music together, to resist oppression, and maybe even to sing out loud together. So may it be.

Amen and amen.

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free.  
I wish I could break all these chains holding me.  
I wish I could say all the things I could say,  
Say 'em loud, say 'em clear for the whole world to hear.  
Say 'em loud, say 'em clear for the whole world to hear.

I wish could share all the love in my heart,  
Remove all the bars that still keep us apart.  
I wish you know what it means to be me,  
then you'd see and agree everyone should be free.  
Then you'd see and agree everyone should be free.

I wish I could give all I'm longing to give.  
I wish I could live like I'm longing to live.  
I wish I could do all the things I can do,  
Though I'm way overdue, I'd be starting anew.  
Though I'm way overdue, I'd be starting anew.

I wish I could be like a bird in the sky.  
How sweet it would be if I found I could fly.  
I'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea,  
Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know how it feels to be free.  
Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know how it feels to be free.

Benediction

For all who came here seeking God,  
    May God's blessing go with you wherever you go.  
For all who came here seeking to embrace life more fully,  
    May life return your enduring affection.  
And for all who came here seeking a new and truer path,  
    May a way be found, and the courage to take it --  
    bopping along, and listening always.

Go in peace! Amen