

Music & Mediation: Resolving Conflict in a Warring World

It was in Alaska, right before the first Gulf War, that I first realized how music can “teach us how to hear the world differently,” as jazz critic Jed Rasula once said. I was in the Air Force “Gateway to the West” jazz band and my unit was temporarily deployed to Alaska, waiting anxiously to hear if we would be sent to the Middle East.

A big part of our job was public relations. I guess we put a good face on all those weapons of mass destruction, and there we were in Alaska, where some public relations officer had gotten us into the annual Fairbanks Folk Music Festival ... and fish fry! It was counter culture central, Alaska style. Now this P.R. officer was either grossly incompetent, or wise in the skillful sense of the word. As we took the stage I looked up a dry, grassy hill to a sea of tie-dyed shirts, leather hiking hats, and long hair. These were mountain men and mountain women. Their little mountain kids ran around barefoot. As soon as we approached the stage in our dress blue uniforms, a good third of the audience just got up and left. I think the rest stayed out of either stubbornness to give up *their* folk music festival to the military invasion--or curiosity.

We kicked off our set with a screaming arrangement of “How High the Moon.” No reaction. But after we’d played a half dozen charts I noticed the mood start to change. The response was subtle. People smiled amongst themselves, then a few heads started to bob. Some people danced in the back. By the end of the show we got a standing ovation.

“Well, I guess we have something in common,” a Fairbanks local said later. And then, “good jazz.”

For that period of time we mediated, through music, a great gap. Our uniforms, which were an affront to the values of that community, became less important than our common humanity which they could see, and feel, through the music.

Many have noticed the powerful effects of jazz. Sharon Welch, a professor of religion at the University of Missouri, says that she has learned from jazz how to work with limits and opportunities, possibilities and ambiguity, obstacles and challenges. She says it reveals a new model for resolving conflict, even globally. “In jazz,” she says, there is a model of “responsiveness without progress or repetition, without self-abnegation or self-righteousness. As part of the cultural resources of Americans, it can lead us into a new way of resolving conflict.”

Avant guard composer Jonathan Harvey says that “music is both emotionally intense and possessed of a deep sense of harmony.” He points to how music disproves Aristotle’s Law of the Excluded Middle, which says that a thing cannot be two things at once—The Law of the Excluded Middle, which says a thing must either be this thing or that thing and cannot exist in ambiguity. Think of how many times this dualistic notion has gotten our world into trouble. Right versus wrong. Us versus them. Evil doers versus, well, who? But music offers us an alternative, for as Harvey says, if music is to be meaningful, it must be more than one thing at a time. Beautiful and abrasive. Harmonious and dissonant. It must exist in ambiguity, or as poet John Keats put it, it must be full of “contradictions . . . uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

When Harvey composes music, he says he pulls “together these dark conflicts and contradictions in an intuitive drive toward the promised land of unity.”

Risk. When they play, musicians risk their individuality, their sense of autonomy, even their egos. Conflict is inherent in the fabric of what they are doing. In fact the greater the risk, one might argue, the more powerful the outcome. Think of the John Coltrane piece we heard earlier, “A Love Supreme.” When that recording was released it blew people’s minds. They just hadn’t heard anything like it—a fusion of bebop intellectualism, Coltrane’s own drive toward

unity and healing, and love. A Love Supreme, a more powerful and spiritual piece of music I've never heard.

What if we could approach all conflict with this in mind? What if we could approach all conflict with the same drive toward healing and unity and love?

Creating music takes commitment. It is more than thinking things through--it's delving into the midst of a complex tradition and feeling your way through a lifetime of accumulated stories and feelings. I attended a conference last year, led by Sharon Welch, titled "Being Good Neighbors in a Brave New World: Truth, Justice, and Jazz." Welch's work is foundational to what I'm talking about this morning. Of course, at this conference were the requisite periods of lecture and workshop discussion groups. But at one point in the weekend we were treated to a demonstration by jazz pianist James Williams, one of Art Blakey's former Jazz Messengers.

The concert was an optional evening session, and after eight hours of sitting in a hotel chair I didn't feel like climbing onto a rented school bus and being carted across town to where the concert was being held. In fact, probably two-thirds of the conference participants didn't get on that bus. It was such an intellectual thing to do: dive into the theory without going to a place of risk; absorb the intellectualism of the conference while missing the heart that was behind it. The concert was a place of risk: what kind of jazz would be played? aren't I too hungry and tired to go? do I even like jazz?

Actually the jazz I listened to that night wasn't easy for me to get into at first. I'm a fan of bee-bop and free jazz forms where combinations of instruments throw ideas back and forth, build on each other's ideas and references, engage in an intricate challenge and response that ultimately resolves into the great "AH!"--the awesome, "OH YEAH." Here was a single guy sitting at a piano playing from the American songbook. (He later told me he was playing what he

thought Unitarians would like.) As the evening progressed, however, I watched this lone piano man start shift things up a little, respond to us. It all came unglued for me when he played “Old Man River,” with a syncopated on-the-edge-of-the-piano conclusion that pushed right into our zones of risk and said “listen to my history, where I’m coming from.”

That conference got me thinking, but it didn’t get me acting. I often congratulated myself during that time for the work I did at a peace magazine I edited, as its managing editor, called the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*—which kept me going but didn’t get me acting. Even as a seminary student, I often do a lot more thinking and preaching than I do acting. And what is acting? For me, it is anything that gets me out of my personal arena and engaged in the larger world.

It took the anniversary of the second U.S. Iraq invasion to get me out of my editor’s chair and marching through downtown Chicago protesting the second Gulf war. Up to 10,000 other people were there too, along with 1,100 police officers to keep us in line.

I marched that day, trombone in hand, with “Environmental Encroachment,” a performance group that I’ve played with over the years, and the All American Anti-War Marching Band. “EE,” as we’re known, has the mission of mediating bleak environments through Mardi Gras style music, costumes, and creative play.

I’ve been in protests before, but that day’s had a soundtrack, and we were part of it. The two bands didn’t even know each other’s music. We just listened to what the other was doing and improvised along, loudly!

As I played and marched past rank upon rank of blue helmeted, armed police officers, I noticed some things. I saw two activists arguing passionately over the structure of the event and the poor negotiating strategies of the organizers. I saw an outraged marcher screaming at me with

a bull horn trying to turn us around because we had compromised ourselves by marching down Clark Street, instead of Michigan Ave, to avoid arrest. I saw a few of the police trying not to enjoy the music, especially our rendition of “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

At an earlier point in my life I would have come away from the protest in a rage that could have lasted for days. For some reason that I can’t yet identify, I wasn’t filled with that level of rage that I once would have experienced. Instead, I was actually thinking about Sharon Welch’s idea that everyone there that day was playing their part in a great jazz set. We all had something to say, the marchers, musicians, speakers, police.

Let’s push a little more at Sharon Welch’s metaphor of jazz music as it relates to conflict resolution. What does it take to improvise? First, a respect for the tradition, one we can learn and practice without falling into repetition. Next, a respect for other players. As James Collier once said, the worst that can be said of a jazz player is that he or she doesn’t listen. Finally, an openness to learning, working with difference and novelty, and practice--lots of practice.

If we look at the chord progressions that are written into every jazz score as that which binds musicians in community, the logic of jazz teaches us something else about transformation: that the social fabric is not held together by our intellectual ideals, but through the reality, and proximity, of people interacting with each other. That is, the ground of social transformation is not the ideal versus the real—*not* the ideal versus the real—but the real versus the real.

Those police officers on the street and their guns were real, and the danger and risk were real. Well say hallelujah! We have challenges in our work to be sure. As Welch points out, there are mutually exclusive strategies to work out, like the protester physically trying to turn the band around so we could get arrested and really make our point. There are fractious coalitions, like the two organizers who were arguing about the best way to protest. There are power struggles, as I

felt so viscerally in the presence of so many police and their weapons. Like jazz musicians, how do we bounce off of one another without falling off the stage? How do we play up our mutual strengths and at the same time check and limit, says Welch, the corrosive effects of the weaknesses? How can we respond to, play with, and work with the weaknesses in another's, or our own, responses? When we do, "we swing."

How can we, next, turn from an ethic of control, where we try to change each other and make them into us, to an ethic of risk, where we accept that we can neither undo the past nor control the future, but only exist responsibly and compassionately in the present. When we turn from an ethic of control to one of risk, we are challenged to live creatively with, as Welch puts it, "the disjunction between the clarity of our moral imperatives (justice, peace, equality) and the ambiguity of our efforts to implement those ideals in our economic and educational systems and in a foreign policy focused on diplomacy and cultural power rather than military force."

I've come to believe that when we, as Unitarian Universalists, as believers in the value of peace, fail to put ourselves with our collective voice into the middle of things that are dear to our hearts, we have done a disservice to the world. You know, the world deserves a lot from us. And if we don't join the chorus of people demanding justice, of people demanding an end to violence, of people demanding that we answer to our higher selves, of people taking risks, then we aren't doing all we can to engage in the world.

Giving voice to our values doesn't have to be big or loud. It can be joining a vigil, writing a letter, forming a study action group—anything that moves us from the personal toward engagement with the global community around us.

I think the world deserves to hear our song.

If we believe in peace, if we are against war, the world deserves to hear our song!

If we are in consensus that violence is not the only answer, then the world deserves to hear that song.

Go now and sing. May it be so in our lives and communities.