

Music Sunday: The Glorious Music of Life!

Dallas Bergen and the Music Ministry of First Unitarian
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
Earth Day, 21 April 2013

Call to Worship

Come ye into this house of worship! Come in and find peace and rest, inspiration and aspiration, fellowship and love. Come in and find light for your darkness, a friend's touch for your loneliness, and music for your soul. Come in and let your heart sing for all the blessings that are yours this day.
Amen.

[Elizabeth A. Parish](#)

From our many and varied paths, we arrive here as individuals, to create a community of love and commitment and hope. Please join me in saying our Congregational Covenant, which gives voice to this aspiration:

Love is our doctrine, the quest for truth is our sacrament, and service is our prayer. To dwell together in peace, to seek knowledge in freedom, to serve life, to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine, thus do we covenant with each other and with all.

Sermon

(The sermon that follows was written with the intent to guide its spoken delivery, not to be read by others.

The polish of spoken eloquence and the authenticity of improvisation create a much different experience for the listener. The disconnect from the other elements of the service also leaves it incomplete.

Please excuse its rough nature.)

Choenyi is one of our students from the RPSM Parkdale Choir at Queen Victoria school. She is a dedicated and hard working student... disciplined... follows directions well, sets a model example for her classmates, and is a talented musician. I had the pleasure of having tea with her father, Ngawang Dhakpa, who shared with me their family history. I take great interest in the stories and struggles of new immigrants to this country. Though not an immigrant myself--all of my grandparents either came to Canada as children or were born in Canada--I have a great respect for those who came to this country and built their lives anew. My Japanese grandmother's family were fisher-people on coastal British Columbia until they were interned during the second world war. My Chinese grandfather came to Canada, paying the requisite "head tax". My father's ancestors were German Mennonites from the Ukraine, and fled to Canada as their lands were seized by the Bolsheviks...

Choenyi's family comes from Tibet, but they have lived as refugees in four countries other than their own, since China's annexation of Tibet in 1950. Ngawang's parents, Choenyi's grandparents, fled the country, losing six of their children on the way. They became separated in their flight over the Himalayas and Choenyi's grandfather was captured by the Chinese, bound, and made to march back to be imprisoned. As the convoy crossed a bridge, grandfather, in a desperate bid to escape, jumped from a bridge... spared from death, he escaped to Nepal and renewed his effort to find his family. He made it to Nepal but was quickly detained by Nepali authorities, who saw his manacles and assumed he was a fugitive. Eventually, the Nepalese released him, but he was still left destitute and alone. Eventually he and his wife were reunited, and they started their life anew in Nepal later India in the city of Dharamsala, home of the Tibetan government in exile. Without travel documents or identification, the status of Tibetans who fled was one of persona non grata. Nepal was a small communist state that relied heavily on Chinese support, and thus, were beholden to the Chinese on matters of Tibetans in exile. Little was done to help them gain travel documentation and live a life as a citizen of Nepal.

Ngawang's grandfather pledged to keep Tibetan culture by educating the future generations, even though public assembly by Tibetans was outlawed (and thus cultural events were too). He taught Tibetan opera, and Ngawang, influence by his father to uphold and keep Tibetan customs and traditions became a renowned doctor of Traditional Thai Medicine.

Recognizing that their children would be born into the same troubles of being refugees, without papers and marginalized in Nepal or India, Ngawang made an effort to get to the United States in order to give his children the best future possible. His success as a doctor meant that he tended to over 100 patients per day, from the impoverished from far off villages, to government officials, diplomats and dignitaries. He had several patients at the US embassy, and they helped him and his wife Dolma get entry visas to the united states. But first they had to obtain fraudulent passports... which is the ONLY way for Tibetans in Nepal and India to travel abroad. They were successful and made their way to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Dolma gave birth to two daughters in the United States, and Ngawang continued to work in Dharamsala, traveling abroad, treating and teaching his regular patients and colleagues, including the Governor of St. Petersburg. After repeated denial from the US government for refugee status, they decided to make a bid with Canada, crossing at the Fort Erie crossing. They hired a driver to take them to the border, hearing that it was dangerous to travel by bus, as authorities often checked these vehicles for illegal immigrants. The family stayed at Viva Casa, the largest refugee shelter in the US, with Dolma and Ngawang taking turns, with one sleeping, and the other keeping the bed bugs off of their daughters. If you go to the Vive Casa website, on the director's welcome page, she posts a presentation she gave at the UU church of Amherst, NY about the work of Vive... apparently supported by a number of UU volunteers... be proud by proxy!

When the family tried to enter Canada, they went the "come clean" route, and told the absolute truth... the truth about their fraudulent passports, their generations as refugees, their desire to make their life in Canada. With documentation to support their story, they were given refugee status, and documents, for the first time, giving them their true names and an official date of birth--that they had to choose--which they never before had. It was the start of a new life.

Les Miserables tells the story of Jean Valjean and his life's journey, beginning with his lengthy imprisonment, all due to an original offense of stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving nephew. Valjean is released after 19 years, but faces the common obstacle of reintegration into society after having been through the criminal justice system. Not given tools to reintegrate, Valjean does what he knows best and tries to steal the silver of the bishop who shows him kindness and gives him refuge. Valjean thinks the silver would be the means to his freedom, allowing him to start his life anew, but when the plan backfires and the police catch him making off with his loot, the bishop teaches him that it is mercy and kindness that will be the key to his salvation and rebirth. the bishop, truly compassionate, follows his Christian teachings by offering his cloak also, turning the other cheek, and loving his enemy. He insists to the officers, that he gave him the silver... and goes on to tell Valjean that he forgot the candlesticks too.

(singing ...)

You forgot I gave these also;
Would you leave the best behind?

So, Messieurs, you may release him
For this man has spoken true.
I commend you for your duty
And God's blessing go with you.

The constables leave.

And remember this, my brother,
See in this some high plan.
You must use this precious silver
To become an honest man.
By the witness of the martyrs,

By the passion and the blood,
God has raised you out of darkness:
I have bought your soul for God.

This is the transformational moment where Valjean commits to a life of mercy and kindness. he becomes incredibly successful and wealthy, becoming the owner of a burgeoning factory and even the mayor of the town in which he starts his business. All this through living his life in the service of others... he cares for one of his workers, Fantine, who is also a prostitute, doing all that *she* can to give her daughter a future. When Fantine succumbs to Tuberculosis--or the broken heartedness of shattered dreams--Valjean swears to care of her daughter. He frees Cosette from the abusive couple to whom she has been orphaned (or enslaved).

Choenyi's family history has similar struggles... being marginalized by society, in their case, refugees in Nepal and India... second-class persons (not citizens)... not living as fugitives as Valjean, but as refugees... and the same way that Fantine gave all of her self in sacrifice to the future of her daughter, they have done the same, though with greater success. Their story is one of sacrifice, of pride... with countless examples of them doing the right thing along the way.

Ngawang expressed how thankful he is that his family is in Canada, saying that Canada is like a mother/father to them. That the country supports them and ensures their health, well-being, and education. They are a hard working family, taking none of the offerings of the country for granted. They have committed to ensuring that their children know their history, are proud of their culture, and understand the sacrifices their parents have made. They've instilled in their daughters an awareness of what has been invested in them... they know how important it is to succeed, to value their culture, to take their studies seriously. Father and mother, Ngawang and Dolma have diligently taken ESL classes since their arrival in Canada. Ngawang is receiving skills training at the YMCA and Dolma is pursuing her nursing credentials. Ngawang may never be able to get the required credentials to receive a license for his medical practice, but he continues to treat those who seek him from his home. He charges nothing, and when donations are given, he sponsors children's education and medical needs for Tibetan exiles in Nepal....

The Dalai Lama issued Ngawang's certification from the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute. He was greatly inspired by the words of his holiness, who said to him, "I am just a monk, praying for the peace of the world, but you are a doctor, healing with your own hands. Treat every person who is in need with the urgency and care that you would give to your own kin."

RPSM has been a gift to them... subsidized music lessons and choir for their daughters... what a pleasure it is to teach in a classroom of new Canadians--all who can be shown welcome, kindness, and grace. Being part of a program committed to their future and success, like those governmental programs that do that same... to ensure their success in integrating into Canada's cultural fabric.. becoming model citizens, contributors to society, financially, culturally, artistically. As a nation, we invest in the parents, and the parents in turn, invest everything in their children. Desel, Ngawang and Dolma's eldest daughter, was in the choir the first year we formed and as one of the older students in the class, helped to teach the younger students and manage the behavior of the youngest. Choenyi, who sang for us, will lead us in a breathing meditation at the beginning of each of our classes, and is quick to volunteer to conduct or sing solo.

What a puzzlement the story of the Boston bombers is... in some ways, no one is satisfied with the complex story of Tamerlan and Dzhokhar. Not easily categorized as Islamic extremists, nor domestic terrorists... not a Mohammed Atta, nor a Timothy McVie, nor a Dylan Klebold. Two unique individuals with individual stories; not new immigrants, yet not American citizens, Caucasian in the truest sense, but not "white" by what that means in America. Perhaps these things all contributed to them falling between the cracks... 10 years in America. Djokhar seemed relatively "normal"... first year

of his studies, liked to party with his friends, was well-liked, successful in wrestling, good looking... wrestling captain, college scholarship... but without the positive home life... What went wrong? Maybe it was that his parents never adjusted, and nor his older brother who came not at the age of 9 or 10, but in his mid-teens... his parents divorced--perhaps due to the pressures of the struggle to "make it" in America. Father went home, and mother seemed to have lost her way; was charged with shoplifting, returned to Dagestan... Tamerlan was a lone wolf. successful as a boxer, a golden-gloves winner who said he'd rather box for the USA than his native Russia--not really a surprise given his family left Chechnya as refugees during the war with Russia--but was unable to get his citizenship. but also said he didn't have any American friends, said he didn't understand them. I can't help but wonder how things may have been different had his parents had access and taken advantage of all of the resources available to new immigrants; to ESL classes and job training. What if the boys had had a RPSM--subsidized music lessons or ensembles--a musical community. I'm not one to dismiss boxing as all savage violence... there is tremendous physical and mental discipline required... the clubs and teams can be places of strong relationships and community, but one thing I think is true... as a boxer, you can be a lone wolf... never having to get really close. Singing in a choir is different. The sung voice is the expression of our own souls in sound... you can't hide behind an instrument... or behind your gloves. We must make ourselves vulnerable... not physically, as in boxing, where the learned response to vulnerability is to protect yourself, to be bigger, faster stronger, but *emotionally* vulnerable, where, if you're to continue with the discipline and find success, the only way to overcome the vulnerability, is to learn to trust others, to find courage and self-worth (through their support)... a trust that is created by everyone involved in that community, creating a community of trust and mutual help and respect.

[Brené Brown](#), considered a world expert on vulnerability and shame (If you aren't familiar with her, check out her books or her TED talks online.) said this on Connection:

"I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."

She has also said:

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path."

To experience connection, to recognize our own vulnerability and then make ourselves aware of the vulnerability of others... that's when we can master loving-kindness.

Loving-kindness meditation is one of the 10 perfections of Buddhism; the six or ten traits to be practiced and perfected, that lead to spiritual enlightenment. In loving-kindness meditation, one first contemplates loving-kindness of the self... then extends the mantra to others, starting with loved ones, family, teachers, and ending with enemies, and all of humankind. The Tibetan practice of Tonglen, similarly, involves breathing in and accepting--but not bearing--the suffering of others, and breathing out joy and happiness for all sentient beings.

(A few recent psychological studies suggest that loving-kindness meditation may impact health and well-being. One study done at Stanford University suggests that a short 7 minute practice of loving-kindness meditation can increase social connectedness. Loving-kindness meditation has also been shown to reduce pain and anger in people with chronic lower back pain. Researcher Barbara Fredrickson at the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) found that loving-kindness meditation can help boost positive emotions and well-being in life.)

When we think about being compassionate, we become compassionate. Mahayana Buddhism discourages a race to master the 10 Perfections to become a bodhi, an enlightened one. It is more compassionate to take one's time, to delay enlightenment, so that one may serve the needs of more people along the journey.

And so friends, let us find the courage to attend the needs of all humankind along our journey, making ourselves vulnerable so that we may live as our truest selves, in right relation with each other. Like the bishop, let us show grace and mercy when it is most difficult and least deserved. Like Jean Valjean, let us give our lives to the service of others, and like Ngawang, Dolma, Desel and Choenyi, let us never lose faith as we confront the obstacles life sets before us, be forever grateful for the blessings we have received along the way, and use those blessings to diligently work towards a better future.

May I; May you; May we all be filled with lovingkindness. Amen.

Closing Words

Friends, may your ears and hearts be open to the sound and soul of the glorious music of life. May you sing its song with courage and with gladness, in sweet harmony with one another.

Go in peace.