

***Membership as Improv***  
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**Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka**  
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**Reading from *Jazz Theology: Improvisational Faith***

**Tom Stites, Editor, UU World**

Jazz is not just a music but “a mode of being in the world,” writes the social philosopher Cornel West. It is “an improvisational mode,” suspicious of “either/or” viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements, or supremacist ideologies...The interplay of individuality and unity is not one of uniformity and unanimity imposed from above but rather of conflict among diverse groupings that reach a dynamic consensus subject to questioning and criticism. As with a soloist with a jazz band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase creative tension within the group—a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project.”

...Reverend Suzanne Meyer, minister of First Unitarian Church in St. Louis, writes, “We Westerners seem to have a penchant for organizing our worlds into dualities, into either/or patterns of mutually exclusive options. If something is secular, it can’t be spiritual. If something is sacred, then it can’t contain earthy metaphors. If something is sensual, or emotional, then it can’t be intellectual. If music is played in a barroom then it is unquestionably unsuitable for church. “Blues theology begins by shaking up this kind of dualistic thinking. Blues theology poses the question: What might happen if we were to embrace a more holistic realm of experience? What if we began to experience...timeless truths through the sensual experience in the existential moment? The first truth of the blues is that things are seldom either/or—more often or not, theological truth is discovered hidden in seeming contradictions and unorthodox combinations.”

...Martha Meyer, music director of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Bridgeport in Stratford, Connecticut, finds...parallels [between jazz and Unitarian Universalism]. In a jazz ensemble, she sees a “Unitarian freedom of spirit, a willingness to enter into new territory. But before you improvise,” she cautions, “you have to have a strong sense of what has already been laid down. The accomplishments of those who have gone before must be a part of the mix.” Meyer...also says that a lesson about humility can be drawn from jazz as well. “If you don’t listen to the other players with humility, you’re in trouble.”

**Reading from *The Call***

**Reverend Dan O’Neal**

I suggest that in these days we think of Call not in terms of heavenly subpoena, but in terms of a communal summons...Our Calling is also who we are, our identity which leads to our work rather than the modern reversal of this formula. Our Calling is that which we most passionately are when we pay attention to our deep selves. It is that activity which excites us as we are doing it, which often increases our energy as we engage in it. And it is simultaneously that activity which enhances the health of the entire community.

The surprising and delightful truth of this interwoven universe is that truly to serve the common good we are asked not to become martyrs, slaving away at some task we hate, but to become that which we most passionately are. The community does demand that we place its interests foremost, but then, in a playful reversal, tells us that the way to serve it best is to follow our own passions, [and] necessarily in that paradoxical order.

## *Membership as Improv* Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

Music moves us. Music can be found in poetry, in movement, in the harmony of love upon love, and in the symphony of the changing seasons: like the wild geese I've heard the past several days flying overhead, over lakes still frozen with slush while on the banks budding trees and bushes bend toward the sun as robins and cardinals and red-winged blackbirds respond to the growing warmth as the snow melts and trickles into rivulets cascading down inclines and gutters, clanging through the metal grates on sewers and manhole covers. Music rises up from the deep black earth slowly aerated with earthworms and bugs and field mice. Music – the thumps and hums, the clangs and bangs, the ebb and flow, the volcanic molten rock moving miles below her surface – rises deep from the core of mother earth, calling forth movement and motion through her constantly changing seasonal expressions and rhythms.

As human expressions of mother earth, we too feel music and rhythm rising deep from our own cores, calling us to movement and motion. Calling, as Dan O'Neal observes, "is that which we most passionately are when we pay attention to our deep selves. It is that activity which excites us as we are doing it, which often increases our energy as we engage in it. And it is simultaneously that activity which enhances the health of the entire community."

We gather together today to honor and recognize the collective song of our liberal religious spiritual community. We gather together today as a group of individuals in a community of motion, of movement, each one of us invited and called by the universe to discover and to be our own deepest selves and yet gathering together in a community bound together by one dance of an intricately interwoven choreography to one score of music alternately emphasizing melody and dissonance, harmony and harmonics.

We are a community of seekers who relate with each other like members of a jazz ensemble. Tom Stites, editor of the *UU World* (our religion's magazine), once wrote an article called "Jazz Theology: Improvisational Faith." Stites finds in jazz three metaphors for membership in Unitarian Universalist congregations.

First, jazz and Unitarian Universalism are democratic in the broadest sense. "In a jazz group, as in any community, certain roles need to be filled. Someone [plays] the melody, someone [keeps] time, someone [suggests] the harmonic context. In jazz, each instrumentalist has to understand 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 of understanding 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."

When comparing the movement and direction of a Unitarian Universalist congregation to jazz, this interplay between the individual and the gathered community is one of the most important aspects we have, and yet it may be one of the least understood. The possible lack of understanding is not necessarily a problem of misplaced theology, but of emphasis. The first of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles is our covenant to "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of each individual." While I believe this principle to be true theologically, the remainder of our principles give no guidance on how we are supposed to manage that primacy of individualism when it bumps up against 150 other individuals on a Sunday morning or in annual meetings when discussing emotionally charged issues.

Some people like to say that working with Unitarian Universalists is like herding cats. If we give that metaphor power, like the power we tend to give to our first principle, then we empower a communal life that is out of balance – a life that fails to recognize or give credence to the emotions and motivations and directions we have in common. On the other hand, if we give power to a metaphor like jazz music, then we are saying to each other that in this community we recognize our accountability to one another, and to the wider world that listens in.

The second point that Tom Stites makes is that both jazz music and Unitarian Universalism are inclusive rather than exclusive. “Everybody is welcome,” he says, “and everybody is welcome to improvise. In jazz, improvisation means spontaneous composition of music in the moment it is played. In Unitarian Universalism, it means that each of us must search for our own truth and meaning—and, like jazz players, we draw from many sources of inspiration. And neither jazz nor Unitarian Universalist improvisation is for the faint-hearted. It requires real courage to take responsibility for our own religious lives, both as individuals and as congregations.”

On two Saturday mornings in March we held our most recent UU 101 class, a class for spiritual seekers who were curious about Unitarian Universalism. We had 20 people attend both sessions – by some measures the largest class of seekers in this congregation’s history – and the topic came up about our Unitarian Universalist beliefs and identity. Some people expressed both appreciation for and frustration about the lack of specific approved Unitarian Universalist teachings. As a religion without a creed, it is sometimes difficult to articulate who we are and what we aspire to be. Yet the metaphor of jazz provides us with a handle we may be able to grab. The life of faith as a Unitarian Universalist is not for the faint-hearted. “It requires real courage to take responsibility for our own lives, both as individuals and as congregations.”

In addition, jazz music draws its inspiration not just from holy scripture or traditional music or literature, but from classical music, from Broadway musicals, from pop hits, from children’s songs, and even from rhythms of city life like subway trains and traffic jams. Similarly, we Unitarian Universalists do not draw on only one source, like the Hebrew Scriptures or the Christian Scriptures or the Qu’ran, for our religious inspiration and guidance. We understand that our Mother Earth and great-grandparent Universe continually reveals itself to us. Each day, in our science and in our poetry, in our messy lives and brilliant aspirations, we discover new insights and inspiration. The whole world, both the written word and the realm of music, art, science and action, are part of what we may describe as our liberal religious bible.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not simply follow the conventions and traditions of the past, but we also do not simply go for new inspiration from new revelation simply for the sake of being new and different. Similarly, jazz music is not played simply according to notes printed on a sheet of paper, but it is also not a matter of a soloist playing any note they feel like playing at any time. According to Martha Meyer, one Unitarian Universalist music director, “Before you improvise you have to have a strong sense of what has already been laid down. The accomplishments of those who have gone before must be a part of the mix. If you don’t listen to the other players with humility, you’re in trouble.”

This congregation, like any Unitarian Universalist congregation, has a history and tradition – and yet, as we exhibit here today, we not only allow but also invite new people to join us. By its very nature, new people who come into our community change our shape and our identity. We are no longer “who we were” but are now “something different.” The next time we have new people join our congregation, these people who joined us here today then will be part of this congregation’s history and tradition. In this ongoing dance there will always be tension between those who have been here a long time and those who just arrive.

In the metaphor of jazz, we find some guidance about how to address and play with this inherent tension. What we do in this congregation – in our worship and social action, in our religious education and financial planning – is based on a certain amount of solid knowledge and experience. So before we jump to something new, or as we jump to something new, it is wise to listen to the other players with some humility. Yet, if we don’t break free a little bit from the tradition that has already been laid down, then we are merely reiterating and recycling the conventions and history of other people living other lives.

This brings us to Tom Stites’ third point: When everybody is welcome to improvise, in jazz or in church, some dissonance is inevitable. People tend to regard dissonance as grating and tension as bad. But dissonance can be holy: Liberal religion rests on the theological premise that by coming together with all our differences we summon the holy. That’s because people who are responsible for their own truths

always produce tension when trying to be in relationship. So being part of churches like ours challenges us to learn from each other as we work to resolve the tension and refine our truths.”

I like this notion that dissonance can be holy. One of the most difficult things to do for us as human beings is to sit calmly and be present to chaos. We tend to find it difficult to sit with tension. We want resolution, and we want it now! Again, jazz music teaches us a lesson. Jazz doesn't often seek to provide resolution to tension; in fact, it seeks to create tension!

This past week I learned a little more about jazz theory from our resident musicians – Greg Membrez, our Music Director, and Mark Brekke, our Choir Director. The thing with jazz is that it doesn't create something from nothing, and the “dissonance” we hear is not quite the dissonance we at first might believe it to be. The musical scale in Western music is based on an eight-note octave, and we create many three-note chords on a continuing scale. I learned that for each three-note chord there is a wide range of harmonics that affiliate with that chord. One of the differences between what we call “harmony” and what we call “dissonance” is that most regular music – classical, pop, folk – emphasizes the whole note scale, while jazz emphasizes the harmonics. As Greg told me – a jazz chord will never resolve itself like this (ask Greg to play a jazz chord that resolves into a whole-note resolution), it will always resolve itself something like this (ask Greg to play a jazz chord that resolves itself with a jazz chord).

As I understand it, the harmonics of each chord already exist even though we don't usually hear them. It's just that jazz takes those notes and gives them a voice. Based on it's origins in the blues and black spirituals that arose from our national sin of slavery, I find it revealing that the descendants of slaves who had no voice found a way to give voice to the notes in music that typically had no voice.

I find in this metaphor a parallel for all people who are marginalized. While it may verge on appropriation, I understand the affinity for jazz and dissonance many Unitarian Universalists exhibit. Though the majority of Unitarian Universalists are white and at least middle class, theologically we are on the margins of the wider society. As liberal religious people, we are often in a dissonant relationship with popular society, and so we find a kinship in jazz.

In the liner notes to the 1959 Miles Davis recording “Kind of Blue,” the jazz pianist Bill Evans writes this about the recording sessions:

Group improvisation is a...challenge. Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result...As the [Japanese] painter needs [the] framework of parchment, the improvising musical group needs its framework in time. Miles Davis presents here frameworks which are exquisite in their simplicity and yet contain all that is necessary to stimulate performance with a sure reference to the primary conception. Miles conceived these settings only hours before the recording dates and arrived with sketches which indicated...what was to be played... the group had never played these pieces prior to the recordings and...without exception the first complete performance of each was a “take.”

In live jazz music, as in our lives, even though we may arrive with some brief sketches of what we expect to play, none of us have played exactly in this particular moment, everything we do is a form of a “first take,” and so has a quality to it of improvisation. As one member of a larger community, our individual task is not simply to go off on our own playing our own drum or our own notes, but first of all to pay attention to our deep selves. Then our task is to have the sympathy, patience, and courage to listen to the notes everyone else is playing. When we understand the sketch of the melody we are all playing...or the melody we all *want* to play...then perhaps we will feel as Jimmy Cobb felt. Jimmy Cobb was the drummer on the Miles Davis Kind of Blue album, and he said of the album that it “must have been made in heaven,” and I rather like the idea of visiting heaven each week.