

## **Music: Magic, Prophecy and Revolution**

A tribute to retiring Music Director Barbara Miller

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The power of music is not to be underestimated.

Music can reach where words and reason cannot.

Music is embodied storytelling: it communicates with a specific cadence and tone and measure that can cause us to move our bodies in time with that cadence and tone and measure.

We begin to anticipate the next beat, the next word, the next note and we feel our hearts synchronize with the beat. Music transcends mere notes and becomes magic.

Now magic is a funny thing. It must be handled and wielded with care and consideration. The magic of music is most dangerous in the hands of a revolutionary.

Throughout time revolutions have ridden on the beat of a drum and the songs of justice with voices lifted together, spinning magic together, becoming more than the mere sum of their parts, more than notes on a page, more than voices in the wilderness.

The magic of music and of song lifts and binds us to one another through a shared physical experience of the spirit, of the mind, of the heart, and reminds us that we belong to something larger than ourselves and that we are important and valued and a piece of that greater thing.

Throughout history whenever a despot sought power, whenever an authoritarian regime emerged, one of the first things that they did was to attempt to silence the artists, the people who spin magic through visual arts, through dance, through music, through the written word, through poetry and song. Because despots know well that people united in song, moving to the beat of a drum, hearts synchronized in that magic, can overcome armies and oppressors and occupiers.

People with song are impossible to keep down.

We know that songs are how the message of revolution is carried in the open, but carefully coded to bring hope to the hopeless and to pass on information that the occupiers and oppressors cannot see.

Enslaved Africans in that horrible time of American history when people were owned by other people, those enslaved people sang to keep up their spirits, to lift up one another with hope in a situation that was clearly, clearly beyond hope.

Songs were the way information was passed in those times as in any other time. When the people sang "swing low, sweet chariot" in the fields of a plantation, it was a song of escape and of freedom "swing low sweet chariot comin' for to carry me home."

And they'd sing "I looked over Jordan and what did I see? A band of angels coming after me comin' for to carry me home." "Looked over Jordan" was the message that the freedom train would leave by the River and that's how you would travel home to freedom.

"If you get there Before I do, tell all my friends I'm coming too comin' for to carry me home." That song sung in the fields of plantations spread the word their freedom was available if they could get themselves to the River where there would be angels to carry them home.

And they knew but not everybody would make it, not everybody would make it at the same time, so if you get there before I do, you tell my friends I'm coming.

That's revolutionary stuff, and it is no wonder the totalitarian regimes and despots and dictators try to ban music, try to control poets, try to outlaw seditious language because it has the capacity to give hope, to bind people's hearts on to one another and to resist all manner of oppression.

Church music, of course, is its own kind of magic. Church music is how we participate in an experience of the spirit by aligning ourselves with each other, by breathing in and breathing out at the same time, by saying together words of affirmation and inspiration; and that language is so important. We cannot understate how important that is.

And so it is through this lens that I see music directors as prophets and revolutionaries. It may be challenging for us to imagine some of the staid church music directors that we've known as revolutionaries and prophets, but they are every bit as dangerous to injustice as librarians and teachers.

Barbara Miller has been the music director of this congregation since its birth. She has been leading you all in song, in music, in moving your body in whatever way you can, encouraging you to synchronize your breath with others, encouraging you to sing even if you don't think you can.

"Everyone can sing," she tells us. Music is about participation, not perfection. It is about community and it is about joining our hearts with our voices and sharing in a spiritual experience that touches our hearts even when our very protective brain would rather not acknowledge our tenderness. It is how we come to know what is in each other's minds, hearts.

In my four years here, working with Barbara, it seems every week I am again amazed at how she has selected exactly the right music for whatever it is that I had in mind.

I've never had such a skilled, trained, educated, *intuitive and attuned* musical colleague in my ministry. When we first met, I didn't understand how significant a role Barbara played in the worship service. I had only ever worked with hired musicians who showed up and played what they were asked to play. Many of them were not Unitarian Universalists, but simply musicians glad for a gig.

It was not long, though, before I understood how special Barbara is. We would consult regularly about my thoughts and ideas for the services coming up--talking about sermon titles and themes and how I would like a series of sermons to go; where did I want to start and where did I want to end, and what the middle would look like.

What I learned was she didn't go home and simply flip through the hymnal and find something with words that worked. She went home and meditated and thought deeply about our conversation and what my goals were and how I wanted to move people and inspire people and what message I wanted to deliver over the course of time. Then she would take into

consideration the voices in this congregation. Barbara knows every one of you, every one of you. She's had conversations with every one of you, and if you've ever participated in singing she knows a little piece of your mind and your heart.

So Barbara would take into consideration the people we have, the voices we have, the skills we have. Some of us, like me, are really bad at keeping a simple beat, while some can spin their voices in magnificent descants that seemed to twirl around the other pieces of music in voice and song and Barbara took all of this into consideration with her thoughts about the spiritual message and she would select her hymns and she would select her pieces of music, and invariably they were perfect.

An excellent musician is a blessing to find. A Prophet who knows her audience is a blessing and perhaps even more rare than an excellent musician. An excellent musician who is also a Prophet with her heart set on justice is a revolutionary force indeed.

Today we are celebrating and recognizing more than 20 years of service and leadership Barbara Miller has provided as music director for this congregation. She has traveled hither and yon with various bands of willing singers and has been fearless in that ministry. Barbara is by nature a private, introverted person, but with music she is every bit the Prophet willing to stand in front of a crowd and lead them through difficult challenging things, teach them lyrics and rhythms and cadence that they don't think they can do but that she *knows* you can because she has sung with you and knows your mind.

The power of music is the power of magic, it is the power of spirit, it is the power of love, it is the power of justice and a beat inside of each of us – with the beating of our heart and our natural instinct to move our bodies when we feel that beat, when we hear those words that bring comfort or inspiration or revolution.

I cannot count the number of times I have left the church on a Sunday humming the last hymn of the day, my heart lifted, my soul comforted, feeling inspired and grateful and blessed. That happens because of music.

I'd like you to join me in just a silent moment and think about times that you've left the service singing or humming, and the number of times you've found yourself humming or singing a hymn in the middle of the week because it was in your heart and needed to come forth. Let's take a moment and remember a couple of those times. I know you've all got them.

Let's come back now.

What I want from you today and going forward is to think of Barbara and the magic of music directors everywhere in terms of love's revolutionaries.

I want us to appreciate deeply in our hearts the way Barbara has brought music to us, and encouraged us to engage and participate and to remember that music is magic and it can be dangerous stuff when used for freedom and justice.

Let us remember that when we sing together, something magic happens -- beyond the magic in each of us -- when we sing together something happens that is a kind of spiritual magic that comes from a shared experience of the heart.

Barbara will remain with us in a part time capacity and as a volunteer member who helps out as she can, but we won't see as much of her visibly with our music each week. God knows she's earned a break. But I want us to carry in our hearts always the knowledge that we know a prophet and a revolutionary whose only weapons are music, voice, and her heart. The UU Congregation of the South Jersey shore has been blessed to have Barbara Miller as its music director for all this time, and I as your first called minister am so grateful for all that she's done.

May that gratitude be our shared practice and prayer.

Amen.