

Unitarian Universalism as Jazz: *Freedom within Form*

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Beacon UU Congregation

At some point, it became inevitable that my father's record collection would outrun the shelf space in our den. Several times a week, he would arrive home from his medical office with the latest acquisition from the National Record Mart in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh. I would often sit with him in the den while he sipped a cocktail, unwrapped the cellophane, carefully placed the new LP onto the turntable and dropped the needle.

It was an eclectic education in music – the perfect counterpoint of Bach, the romance of Chopin, the Broadway beltors like Ethel Merman, the smooth standards of Mel Torme, and the folky political ballads of Bob Dylan. And then, there was Jazz – the sultry samba of Astrid Gilberto, the tight arrangements of the Dave Brubeck Trio and Byrd's soulful whine.

Jazz was somewhat inscrutable to me. Confusing. I asked my Dad once why he liked Jazz and he replied: Because it's honest and pure creativity." He might have also used the word "cool," but I can't rightly recall.

To this day, Jazz remains as "hot" as it is "cool." Yet, even so, Jazz is (and probably always will be) an offbeat, slightly esoteric taste; hovering on the fringes of the mainstream "with its notes flying like spirits in the air;" a bit subversive in its creative freedom and smooth sensuality.

Listening to Jazz, really listening to it, requires some effort. And creating it, crafting it, giving it life, requires a kind of visceral immersion in one's creative well. Pop culture be damned. Charlie Parker is not Justin Bieber. Ella Fitzgerald is no Miley Cyrus. There are no synthetic bubble-gum melodies, no lunch boxes, no concert pyrotechnics. And so be it. Jazz is Jazz.

I've often argued that of our seven Unitarian Universalist (UU) principles the one that is most unique religiously is #4: "We promote and affirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning." In essence, we have a *jazz religion* -- slightly offbeat and subversive, hovering on the fringes of the mainstream, creative, free, dynamic.

And as with Jazz, crafting a deep expression of our beliefs, creating and claiming our religious identities as UUs, requires some effort, too, and a kind of immersion in our *spiritual* wells. "Old-time religion" we ain't. Ralph Waldo Emerson is not Augustine; Henry David Thoreau is no John Calvin. We have no Catechism, no promised Rapture, no Sunday morning pyrotechnics. And so be it. Unitarian Universalism is Unitarian Universalism.

Jazz is a different drummer's kind of music and Unitarian Universalism is a different drummer's kind of religion. In fact, the parallels between the two are quite remarkable. Both have evolved from more strident and orthodox forms and both have been shaped by numerous sources.

More than anything else, though, Jazz and UUism are each deeply personal, in that they ask the participant to seek and create with both freedom and integrity within a fixed but flexible framework. Despite appearances or misconceptions to the contrary, neither Jazz nor UUism are "free-for-all." Imagine what that would sound like? A cacophony of noise! Imagine what kind of religion that would be? Ungrounded chaos.

As I mentioned, immersing oneself in and appreciating the intricacies of Jazz takes some work. The same holds true for Unitarian Universalism. An interviewer once remarked to author William Faulkner, who crafted some of his finer (but more challenging) works in a kind of *Jazz* style, that "some people say they can't understand your writing even after they read it two or three times. What approach would you suggest they take?"

To which Faulkner replied, "Tell them to read it four times!" The essence of UUism is a bit like that, too; hard to grasp even after its been explained to us a few dozen times, or even after we've been "active UUs" for years. The aspects of our free church tradition which we do seem to grasp reasonably well, and which we have guarded fiercely and proudly for centuries, are the UU emphasis on the authority of reason and conscience, on direct access to spiritual truths, and on individual freedom of belief.

Earlier, I noted that both Jazz and UUism draw from a variety of eclectic sources and claim honorable histories. Jazz is the product of the merger and transformation of musical roots from Africa and Europe. These include African rhythm patterns, voice/instrument interchange, and staggered entry of instruments. European influences include diatonic melodies and certain forms of harmonic structure.

UUism is the product of merger and transformation, too. A progressive liberalizing of Protestant Christianity, and an affirmation of the wisdom in all world religions, Enlightenment values, humanist ethics, and an openness to transcendent mystery and wonder in the world, to name just a few. But there is that essential framework that prevents a self-indulgent free-for-all.

In Jazz, the structure includes some agreement about tempo and beat, rhythm and melody. The players comprehend that they need to be awake to welcome the break or some stop-time.

For UUs, the structure includes not only the seven principles and six sources listed in the front of our hymnal but also some foundational theological concepts that have evolved over centuries. It isn't all a postmodern off-the-cuff jam, and it's not meant to be.

My colleague Paul Rasor astutely notes that "many of us UUs are so eager to reject our religious past that we try to start over from scratch every generation." And I agree with Paul's conclusion that, ultimately, this approach to Unitarian Universalism is both unnecessary and self-defeating.

Jazz musicians usually don't improvise from scratch. Rather, they improvise *off of something*. And that's what we need to do to mature spiritually and personally. The musician Wynton Marsalis once noted that "Jazz, is one of

those dazzling diamonds of creative industry that help human beings make sense out of the comedies and tragedies that contextualize our lives." Something similar can be said about our unique spiritual path as UUs.

We can begin by researching the melody and harmonies and syncopation that comprise our tradition. Then, we can commence with creatively adding beats from our religious upbringings (as I have with my Jewishness), along with the rhythm and key that make the tune resonate for each of us in our quests for truth and meaning. This may not be a classical composition for faith, but it satisfies many of us nonetheless, and that's what matters. It moves us along the path. (starting Points...mention here)

That said, it's simply not accurate or fair for us to be defined or to self-define, as some of us do, as merely "creedless." In his book *Finding Time*, former UUA President Bill Schulz remarks that "to affirm creedlessness alone may be to get the process right but to lose one's vision of what is most important along the way.

If Unitarian Universalism is to be a religion worthy of its name, it must provide a faith in substance and not just style, in meaning not just in manner, in power and not just in process. In other words, we need to create an honest but dynamic composition that is multi-dimensional whether we are atheists or still resonate with a personal God.

The danger we UUs face, as do all people of faith, is in taking short cuts, slapping together a melody here with a musical phrasing there, and convincing ourselves that we've accomplished the same depth of experience. As Schulz suggests, we should acknowledge that "religion is not a pastime but a discipline; not an amusement but a craft."

And, the same can be said of Jazz. Woody Allen, Jazz aficionado himself, once quipped, "I read *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. It's about Russia." That's how some of us treat our religious lives -- casually, quickly, superficially, and not surprisingly, they fail to satisfy us.

Although we might not always be aware of it, our tradition is more refined than a haphazard *cacophony* of borrowing, hyphenating, and rejecting. Clearly, UUism is not a *cantata* that can be easily messed up if we botch the notes. It's Jazz. And most of us are likely glad of it. Remember, though, that we're still obligated to undertake both a *free* and a *responsible* search for truth and meaning; or to continue our musical metaphor, to embellish the melody with both creativity and integrity as we strive to avoid what Unitarian prophet William Ellery Channing calls "the accidental impulse."

Not surprisingly, (as Bill Schulz tells us) "every survey that our denomination takes of its membership reveals that what most attracts new people to us is the freedom we offer to seek answers to life's most perplexing questions without bondage to ecclesiastical authority." Schulz recalls the time when an advertising consultant once proposed that the UUA take as its slogan, "We Curb Our Dogma" -- a suggestion which provoked a nod and a laugh, but

which was promptly rejected. However, as the UUA launched a major national ad campaign in 2007, they adopted the apt slogan: "Find Us and Ye Shall Seek."

Naturally, the UUA has had to respond to the inevitable misinterpretation about freedom of belief in our religion, so they published a pamphlet entitled, "*Can I Believe Anything I Want?*" If you're imagining this pamphlet was a very short one-word affair, consisting of Yes! (with an exclamation point), keep listening.

For as the author Elizabeth Strong put it, "Unitarian Universalism is not the freedom to believe anything or nothing. It is the freedom to reason and feel your own way to what the evidence leads you to believe." "You have the freedom to form your own beliefs," she writes, "but there are responsibilities that go with this freedom. Such as: understanding why you believe as you do (how did your composition evolve?); learning from your experiences (have some jam sessions gone bad?); using your mind to reason and find answers (more downbeat or less?); exploring the beliefs and practices of the world's religions (what is an African cross-rhythm?); and learning about UUism, past and present (what went into the melody in the first place?)."

Schulz goes on to explain that although UUs cherish individual freedom of belief, we do so not just to reject the rigidities of orthodoxy. "The reason ours is a creedless faith," (he writes), "is because we have a theory about Creation, which unlike that of most religious traditions, is that Creation is too grand, too glorious, too complex, and too mysterious to be captured in any narrow creed or reflected in a single metaphor."

Like Jazz, UUism is a syncopated and improvisational religion. Technically, syncopation is either the removal of an accent where you'd expect one or the addition of an accent where you'd least expect one. There in the midst of the melody, a new perspective emerges. We UUs riff and improvise, like savvy jazz artists, in our own unique ways on major religious ideas or metaphors such as Creation or Holiness. And, often, we place the accent between beats in unexpected ways.

For instance, our individual concepts of a Spiritual or Divine Presence. One person may hold a classic theist image of a personal Biblical God. A pagan may uphold the sacredness of rocks or trees; the humanist embraces the divine spark which is ignited by our human actions; and the Buddhist resonates with a Holy emptiness that pervades the Universe.

Of course, as with Jazz, there is a limit to what can be improvised in UUism without losing the integrity of one's religious identity. It's an evolving process, so over time we may craft some combination of these sources and ideas. Our individual sense of truth and meaning takes wing -- like notes flying like spirits in the air -- innovative, creative, personal, dynamic. And that brings us back around to Jazz and the enterprise of spinning a variety of riffs on a single musical motif or theme. Our savvy jazz trio, demonstrated this earlier - creativity, integrity, form, freedom. Fantastic!

In his reflections on a life in Jazz, the incomparable Duke Ellington wrote: "...Music began with us, began with the primitive man and woman, trying to duplicate Nature's sounds -- wind, birds, animals, water, the crescendo of fire.

And even after the great system of learning (about music) were set up, we were left only to discover that music is limitless. The more you learn, the more you want to learn. And the more you hear it, the more you want to hear."

How true this is, not only of Jazz, but of our liberal religion -- a careful balance between limit and limitlessness. It is not Easy Listening and, yet, well worth the commitment to practice this unrestrained but disciplined faith.

Let's add a final riff from the writer Annie Lamott, and consider how her observation about music applies to our free faith. She tells us that "music is about as physical as it gets: your essential rhythm is your heartbeat; your essential sound, the breath." "We're walking temples of noise," writes Lamott, "and when you add tender hearts to the mix, it somehow lets us meet in places we couldn't get to any other way."

And that's what religion can be...the cool, hot thrill of jazz; traveling with a lead sheet, but not knowing exactly where the notes will transport us. A solo here, a duet there, a jam session every Sunday morning. In our own lifelong spiritual *Jazz Fantasias*, we "drum on our drums, batter on our banjos, we sob on the long cool winding saxophones, we let our trombones ooze." We doubt and we believe, we cherish touchstones *and* we innovate.

Don't settle for merely *not believing*. Go to it! Jazzfolk...Unitarian Universalists, "walking temples of noise" -- as notes fly like free and ecstatic spirits, all around us, in the air.

Blessed be.

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