

First Unitarian Church of Worcester  
Order of Service, July 5, 2015

## ***America's Voice Teachers***

Service Leaders: Lee Bona and  
Jerry Bellows, Music Director

Special thank you to the Court Hill Singers and to Susan Holcomb, violin & viola

### INTRODUCTION AND ANNOUNCEMENTS Jay Lavelle

Prelude: J. Bellows

### WELCOME and CALL TO WORSHIP Lee Bona

**Today's service will be organized a little bit differently around the theme of 'America's Voice Teachers.'** I thought you might wonder a bit about that so I'm introducing the service by telling you how I came to the subject matter.

It all began this past February, when we were still looking out over 8 foot snowdrifts. I decided to get going with a little project transferring cassette tapes onto my computer then creating cd's from them. There were a few dozen tapes in an old case so I set up then reached in picking up a random tape. And, omg - it was a recording of a psychic reading I had done about 20 years ago!

Now, let me just say that, most of my adult life, I've worked 2<sup>nd</sup> jobs and when you do that you often meet very interesting night people. One job was for the Brooklyn Academy of Music in Bklyn, NY and many fond memories of the people there came back to me - including our manager, Calvin, who was the psychic doing this reading. So I was smiling as I fired up the tape.

To put things in further perspective, I'll tell you that Calvin was doing that reading for me as a going away present. I had been accepted to law school and was preparing, in middle age, to leave behind all the familiar people and all the familiar places I knew, and to use up all my money to move alone to Massachusetts and start law school. A big, nervy investment on my part.

Well, Calvin was rolling along reading many things from my cards and suddenly he drops this little 'nugget' - - and I quote from the tape, "You'll be a good lawyer, Lee, but one thing's for sure, you won't stop there because your calling isn't to be an attorney, it's to be a voice teacher." ?? *What ??* After a moment of silence, there was me saying, "Don't count on that happening, Calvin. Are you kidding? Me - a voice teacher? Ridicules!" Predictably, Calvin says on the tape, "I'm just telling you what I see, Lee." (I did remember thinking at the time, "It's a good thing I'm not paying for this reading!" )

So, fast forward 20 years, and I'm in my Worcester apartment reminiscing about how soon after that reading I was in law school... then practicing as an attorney... and doing nonprofit work... and involved

with many communities.... creating a history as time went by, as we all do. And in all that time, I had never revisited the idea of becoming a *voice teacher*. I couldn't quite let that thought go (although I knew it couldn't possibly have been about teaching someone to sing). So.... I Googled "voice teacher," and followed a good many links. Here's what I discovered you learn when you connect yourself to a skillful voice teacher:

*You learn breath control... you expand your ability to listen and hear... gain an increased ability to harmonize... your posture improves... you master well founded principles ... gain insight into a composer's intent... your confidence grows... explore different directions... you will 'find your voice'... and, in all sites, commitment to study and exercise is mandatory....*

In one sense, I recognized what voice teachers do. After all, politicians, actors and singers practice years with teachers to sound a particular way in order to promote a particular message or image. But, what did that have to do with me? With you? With us? I was taken with the questions and so explored them a bit and found an initial connection. In short, I think I have been something of a voice teacher along my life path. I can see how some I encountered may be standing up a bit straighter, maybe found their voices, have chosen different paths, grown in confidence, etc. because I travelled with them a bit. *Far* from perfect, for sure, but, all in all, I think there's something of a bell curve in there. And I would confidently bet that each one of you could say the same thing upon reflection. Now in terms of *taking* voice lessons and *learning* from them, I have a long way to go - but those stories are mostly none of your business!

Anyway, when starting to think of a July 5<sup>th</sup> sermon and service, I began to wonder who America's voice teachers are, or were, or will be. And therein begins my reflections today on two voice teachers in America. Let us begin in prayer.

Chalice Lighting Fran Nase will light the chalice.

Our house is a place where we may encounter the wholeness of the other and the Holy; where our experience might enable us to live generously, to act compassionately, and to forgive mercifully. May it ever be so.

Covenant

In the love of truth and in the spirit of Jesus, We unite for the worship of God and the service of all.

Doxology

From all that dwell below the skies, let songs of hope and faith arise. Let peace, good-will on earth be sung, through every land, by every tongue. Amen.

VOICE TEACHERS Lee Bona

**I choose as Voice Teachers: The Pastoral Team of the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC and family members of the nine church members slain on June 17<sup>th</sup>.**

We all know what happened -- On June 17<sup>th</sup>, a young man entered their sacred space and was offered fellowship. In return he sprayed their loved ones with gunfire. Why do I choose the pastoral team and family members as voice teachers? Because of what happened on June 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>.

Because in the immediate aftermath of the most horrendous day in their lives, they stood up and publically proclaimed that they would not respond in kind to the misguided hatred visited upon them. And that could not have been an intellectual exercise for them. These were people who were reeling from the senseless slaying of their moms and dads, of their grandmas and grandpas, of their best friends and spiritual soulmates.

Throughout history, it's always those who survive brutalities who must clean up the hideous bloody sanctuaries left behind. Often, survivors strike out in revenge for their trauma and it's easy to understand why. But, in this case, one of the ministers who had to step up at Emmanuel made it clear that, although they were *hurting and angry*, they were not *confused*. Their Church could either be defined by that atrocity or by their response to it and they were choosing to be remembered as a body who responded compassionately. In various statements, their pastoral team also reminded their own members, as well as the public, that they should not demonize the perpetrator. That, in fact, he had a *name* - Dylann Roof - and they should call him by name. And that Dylann was a son of God as well as a son of parents who were also shocked and in terrible pain at that moment. *Does that not blow your mind?*

And the family members - who were all lay people like us - did not seem to be reacting with pie-in-the-sky rhetoric. And while they were challenging the rest of us to look at this long and hard, they were not sounding a call to arms in the streets. Who obviously knew and were now trusting their bible lessons on forgiveness and reconciliation so very well. Who, while confronting Dylann at his bond hearing and saying things like, "You have hurt me beyond words... Every fiber of my body aches... I'm so very angry... and, You took something so really precious from me...", also offered him hope. *Hope!* They offered to forgive Dylann if he could just admit he had wronged them and repent.... that, whenever he could find it in his heart to change, he could return to right relationship with God.

*What was I hearing??* Through a spokesman, they stated that their loved ones had been on a path of unity, of justice and of peace; that forgiveness was a necessary part of that path; and that they would not now stray from it. *Could you say that mere days after a piece of your heart had been shattered?*

These very human beings reminded me that we are all called to be in unity with our Creator. As a unity, I believe we are called to be who God is - 'one who can make good things happen from nothing'; 'one who could be compassionate toward both the victim and the victimizer'; 'one who demands an accounting but can also forgive anything as long as there's a conversion moment.' Whether or not Dylann Roof ever responds in kind, the people most hurting there extended a hand to him. I think maybe the most I've ever done in response to a grievous hurt was to decide to walk away from vengeance!

So for causing me to listen and hear, to revisit my principles, to reexamine my own history, to gain insight, to explore a different direction, amongst other things, I call the Pastoral Team of the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, and family members of the nine church members slain - America's Voice Teachers. May we be open to the lessons they are teaching.

Hymn: #323, Grey Hymnal "*Break Not the Circle*"

YADDO

Common Prayer adapted from Guerillas of Grace, Ted Loder.  
(unison)

Forgiveness is an unlocked door  
 to walk through  
 into a wide-open world.  
 Forgiveness is a seed  
 to water with new dreams and wild risks  
 until it bears unexpected fruit.  
 Forgiveness is an enemy-friend  
 one can be born out of.  
 It is becoming 'We'  
 becoming 'Yours.'  
 O Lord, unlock the door of my heart.

### Silent Meditation

The Lord's Prayer (Here's a simple truth, for me -- Prayer is essential. Prayer, in some form, is an indispensable response to the voice of the Universal Architect in my life. And it's all about call *and* response. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we are told that the following words are a perfect response to the call of our Creator - so now we say them together....)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever. AMEN.

### Offering

Anthem: *"The House I Live In"*

Soloist: Ellen O'Neill-Waite

Music by Earl Robeson

Words by Lewis Allan

VOICE TEACHERS Lee Bona

### **On this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, I choose as Voice Teachers: Our Founding Fathers.**

Who were the founding fathers? From my perspective, those men and women who led the American Revolution and established the United States of America; who either signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or who drafted the 1787 Constitution of the United States; male and female, black and white - those who stood as leaders, guides and prophets during our first 100 years or so of existence as a nation. (*I should* have said "Our Founders.")

I'm no expert in American History and I don't know a whole lot about all those founders individually. But a few things I do know make me sit up and take notice.

For instance, with regard to the Declaration of Independence. 56 delegates from the 13 colonies met in Philadelphia in 1776, a year after the fighting with England began because they realized that war was inevitable. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, the delegates were meeting, "...to set down an

expression of the American mind...." to put pen to paper in an attempt to create a *center point* around which the American colonists might rally and to announce to the world why they were declaring independence from Great Britain.

So who were those Congressional delegates? 4 of the 56 were in their 20's, 16 were in their 30's, 18 in their 40's, 11 in their 50's, 5 in their 60's and Ben Franklin who was 70. Mostly a bunch of young turks who thought they could change the world - and then set about doing just that. They were all men of means who had everything to lose if the war was lost and they knew it. Yet they came together and at the start of deliberations, they mutually pledged to each other, "...our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor," in the pursuit of all that was right and just.

Our Declaration of Independence is not now nor ever was a set of laws. It has no legal authority in the United States. It was simply meant as a basic statement of the principles upon which our new American form of government was intended to be structured.

It was also an indictment of Great Britain for things like limiting immigration, naturalization and geographic expansion of the population; for suspending trial by jury; for locating seats of government and services outside the range of convenient travel; for disbanding state legislatures which disagreed with the kings laws; for making judges dependent on him for appointment and payment of salary; for making the military independent of civil review, and quartering the military in private homes without permission, etc. The founders were saying that those things being denied them were of immense value to the nation. Some of those grievances sound familiar today?

However, the most quoted passage in the Declaration is always: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that *all* men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain *unalienable* rights; that *among* these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government shall become destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, & to institute new government, ...." Those words became the rallying cry of the colonists. The Declaration of Independence was a statement of their heartfelt beliefs and intent - laid down for all the world to see, come what may.

In adopting the Declaration of Independence, members of the Continental Congress were choosing a moral standard, a new norm, by which we should live as a nation, by which to frame future laws, and by which to judge the people who would govern us. Their hope was that the standard would live on after them. And the vast majority of colonial Americans were willing to fight and die for that standard.

Now, sometimes I get crazy when I hear things like - we don't teach civics in high school anymore because it's not tested on the MCAS. Or that the voter turnout rate for 18-35 year olds is 21%. But really, we also need to recognize the thousands of young men and women who stand up and voluntarily take an oath that thousands before them also took to serve their country. And I have personally met hundreds of our college students in Worcester who say they would gladly sign up for a year or two of national service in another form, if only we had those programs available for them. Undoubtedly, theres more we must do.

Historian Joseph Ellis has written major works on the Founding Fathers. He says, in summary: Our Founding Fathers won a war for independence against the most powerful military and economic power in the world. They established the first large scale republic in the world. They invented political parties that institutionalized the concept of legitimate opposition. They established the principle of the legal separation of church and state. And they did all that without the violent purges that accompanied other revolutions in France, Russia, and China. Undoubtedly, we also have much to be proud of.

So why are the Founders my voice teachers? Because of what I think they are saying to me *today*. I think they're saying, "We were the authors of American government, you are the revisers and editors. It's up to you to create a more perfect Union."

I'm hearing, "Change happens - Take our ideas and make them better. If a new direction is needed now, take it!"

I hear, " We have empowered you to alter your form of government. Use that power to hold your elected officials to the standards we wanted to hold true or get rid of them."

They are saying to me, "Hey, we set you on a path of unalienable rights for all people and we were willing to die for those rights. Now it's you who must protect those rights *for all*."

Based on what historians have found in the personal writings which our founders left behind, they (almost to a person) are saying to me: "We failed miserably in our half hearted attempts to end slavery and we all went to our graves knowing that the ruin caused by that failure would be a massive stain on our legacies... We failed to insure just treatment for Native Americans for purely economic reasons and thereby caused their near extinction. We acknowledge and we are sorry for those sins. Now we only have you to make that right for us. It's all about *you* now."

In ending, I'd say that the founders would gladly join us this July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday in celebrating the best calling out the best in us. And even in acknowledging that sometimes, through the years, it has taken the worst to call out the best in us. They'd join us in acknowledging our faults while still celebrating how far we've come. They'd join us in acknowledging that we need both each other and the grace of our Creator - as we freely choose to define that Creator - to continue the arduous and demanding journey this great nation of ours is on -- toward E Pluribus Unum.

Hymn: *"God On The Mountain"*

by Tracy Dartt (Used with permission.)

BENEDICTION Lee Bona

We are called to live "wild, amazing lives with passion" ('Guerrillas of Grace' by Ted Loder). The kind of lives which might startle others and cause them to take notice, to think, to feel, to change direction. To lay down the book with its predictable ending and create history from this point of beginning. May the voice teachers who speak to us from the past and in the now, help us all to believe in beginnings, to make beginnings, and to be beginnings. Amen. Blessed be.

**Postlude:** *"Stars and Stripes Forever"*

by John Philip Sousa

Jerry Bellows, recorder; Sue Holcomb, violin