

Making Room for Live Music in our Lives

I bet you've seen it – the white wires coming out of people's ears on the street, on the train, or on the subway. People in their own little world, soaking up their individual choice of music; music that was recorded by someone else in some other place and time.

Now don't get me wrong. I LOVE my iPod. I love that it fits into a small pocket. I love being able to take it to school, plug it into a tiny pair of speakers and play the music I've chosen for my class. I love carrying the recordings I made of my music lessons in Mali, and being able to practice by playing along with them. I love being able to choose exactly what I want to listen to. And I love what happens when the "shuffle" mode brings me a surprise juxtaposition of styles.

Music is everywhere these days, easier to find; easier to buy; easier to store; to delete; to own. Yet the vast majority of the music we listen to is recorded rather than live. And very little of the music in the average person's life is actually made by that person. Why does this matter? Or why do I think it matters?

George Richardson, a member of our choir, tells a story about attending musical evenings at my grandparents' house in Nahant when he was a little boy. These musical evenings consisted of family and friends singing together. Now maybe there would be a special performance by someone (in this case, my mother, who wanted to be a professional singer), but mostly it was people gathering around the piano and singing together. Doing this required that there was some music that everyone knew, or that they could easily learn – perhaps just the refrain, or maybe one verse, anyway.

Now this is an instant community builder – when you sing together with a group of people, it binds you together instantly. This is why live music shared across language barriers is so totally amazing. To communicate without words is the huge gift that music gives to us every day. When we are in church here at UUCGL, one of the ways we build community in worship services is by singing together. Even those who were discouraged from singing as children (shame on those teachers who said they couldn't carry a tune in a bucket) – even these non-singers are part of the music making because they are present in the moment when it's happening.

How many other places are there in your life where you engage in making music actively? How many live concerts do you attend? Have your children been to many concerts? Hopefully they sing in a chorus at school, or play in a band, as long as the arts budget hasn't been cut too drastically. Hopefully you sing songs together on long car rides with them. Please, oh please, try to do this. If you can find at least two or three songs you can share, everyone will benefit. Singing is like smiling – if you do it even when you don't feel like it, it catches up with you.

And live music making is a wonderful way to exercise another part of your brain, to sense the uniqueness of the moment (that musical phrase will never again sound exactly the way it just sounded), and to rest. Or dance. Or boogie around the house doing the vacuuming.

This next school year, we will focus on ten hymns from our two hymnals as a way of building a repertoire of hymns that everyone knows. These would be good for anyone in the congregation to know, regardless of age or bucket-handling skill. By the end of the year, we will have a common vocabulary of songs we can all sing together.