

"The Next Note"

Reverend Alison Hyder

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The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: adapted from Kaddish

In song and praise, in hymn and psalm,
Proclaim the power, strength and might,
The glory, the greatness hidden from sight.
Illumine the darkness with spirit's light;
With awe recite the wonders of heaven,
Of earth, the mystery of death, of birth,
Of time, of space, of love - of grace.
In awe, find peace.

MEDITATION: by easy-listening innovator, conductor Andre Kostelanetz

We listen too much to the telephone and we listen too little to nature. The wind is one of my sounds. A lonely sound, perhaps, but soothing. Everybody should have his personal sounds to listen for - sounds that will make him exhilarated and alive, or quiet and calm... As a matter of fact, one of the greatest sounds of them all - and to me it is a sound - is utter, complete silence." Let us sit together and listen for the silence without, and the music within.

READING: "Journey Into Jazz" by Nat Hentoff and Gunther Schuller

This is the story of Peter Parker--a boy who learned about jazz. When he was still quite small, Peter Parker had strong musical tastes. For instance, when his father sang, Peter moaned. When his mother sang, Peter howled. By the time he was five, Peter had his own toy trumpet. At six, he was given a phonograph that was as small and sturdy as he. And at seven, a transistor radio was added to help satisfy Peter's huge hunger for music.

One day Peter taped a bold sign outside the door of his room that said, MUSIC IS BEING MADE--DO NOT ENTER. The door was then closed. And from that day on, the sign appeared and remained in place from three to six every afternoon. From behind the door, Peter's parents could hear the trumpet, or the phonograph playing Prokofiev or the radio playing Rossini. And usually, all three at once. Of course, the trumpet was loudest.

Soon Peter had a real trumpet and a real teacher... [Peter practiced all the time behind his closed door, and got better and better.] ... by the time he was fourteen, he was a most accomplished and exceedingly proud trumpet player. There was no music printed that he couldn't read.

One summer afternoon, although the sign was on Peter's door and he was not disturbed, he could not concentrate. Somewhere, in some other house nearby, a small jazz band was playing. Leading all the other instruments was a tenor saxophone-player who sounded more daring and full of surprises than any musician Peter ever heard. Peter was curious--and he was disturbed.

Peter took his trumpet, left his room, followed the sound, and discovered four young men in the garage of a house on the next block. Seeing his trumpet, the young musicians asked Peter to join them. Peter looked, and looked again, but nowhere could he see any printed music.

He tried to join in with them, but something was terribly wrong. Peter could not find a place for himself. Every time he tried, the music would simply sputter to a stop. He just didn't fit. 'Look,' the tenor sax man told him, 'you know your way around that horn all right, but you don't know jazz. When you do, come back again. We'll be around.'

Peter sadly trudged home. But he had been excited by the music he heard in that garage. So he began to listen to jazz records, especially records that featured trumpet players, and soon he was having fun trying to play some of his classical pieces in jazz time. Peter also began to realize that each jazz trumpet player had his own way of playing. It was almost like people talking with growls and with slides and funny in-between notes...

[So he played along and practiced until he] felt ready. He ran to the garage in the house on the next block. But when he started to play with the other young musicians, ...[he still] didn't fit...Peter's horn stuck out as if he were all alone. ...The others seemed to be having a conversation, but when he started to blow, it was like another language. 'Look,' the tenor sax man told him. 'You know how to play jazz on the trumpet now, but you don't know how to play with people. When you do, come on back. We'll be around.'

Peter thought and thought and finally realized that on all the records he had heard, he had been listening only to the trumpet player, and not to what the other musicians were doing. So Peter began to listen to his records in a new way. He learned about blending with other instruments. He learned about improvising countermelodies, tunes that fitted in with the solos other people were playing... Up to now, Peter had been playing along with his records on top of the music; but now he tried to get inside the music, until he felt as if he were part of the conversation

Peter returned to the house on the next block. ...And this time, when he started to play with the other young jazz musicians he thought he fitted in perfectly. But after awhile, the other musicians stopped, and they stared at him mournfully. 'Look,' the tenor sax man said, 'you know everything except what to say in the music. You and that trumpet make a fine machine, but jazz isn't a machine; jazz is how you feel. What do you feel?'

...At first Peter was puzzled, but little by little he began to be angry. He ran home and looked fiercely at that sign on his door 'DO NOT ENTER--MUSIC BEING MADE HERE.' He grabbed his trumpet, and began to play. The first notes were full of rage--raw and ugly. But for some strange reason, playing them made Peter feel good. He looked at the trumpet, and he thought, 'These are my notes. This music is me.'

As the hours went by, the angry notes turned into triumphant notes, then into happy ones--all kinds of notes, filling the room. 'And all of these notes are mine,' Peter said. 'These notes are how I feel.' And that day Peter felt really ready, and he went back to the garage on the next block. And this time, when he started to play with the other jazz musicians, he knew right away that he belonged. They played together for a long time, full of the pleasure of just making music.

Now Peter was listening to the tenor sax man. He listened to the alto man--a whole other style. The bass and the drum players - each had something of their own. But all together, it worked. Peter thought, 'Hey, all this music is us! Jazz is PEOPLE!'

Late that night when Peter Parker returned home, he made a new sign and put it on his door. It said: MUSIC IS BEING MADE--COME ON IN."

SERMON: "The Next Note" - Rev. Alison Hyder

As many of you know, I love popular songs. I grew up listening to Gilbert and Sullivan and Calypso, with their clever and topical lyrics, and singing along to the Beatles. On the road, we would beg Dad for one of his numbers - and he'd sing the Pepsi Jingle, or "Chatanooga Choo-Choo" with a Chinese accent. Early on, I developed a facility for music. I couldn't read notes or play any instruments, but over time, I learned thousands of songs, from the pop and rock on the radio, to the Steve Goodman and Arlo Guthrie my friends liked, to the classic works of Cole Porter and Hoagy Carmichael and Gershwin and Loesser and Waller. I walked around with lyrics in my pockets until I'd memorized some new song. I read biographies of singers and songwriters. My parents listened to classical music as well, but it never really took with me. I loved lyrics, the clever rhymes and images and the interplay between melody and mood. They were the aids to both memory and emotion that helped me to get inside of a song, and live in it. And they helped me understand musical forms and conventions.

It's taken me longer to understand jazz. My first introduction to jazz was through the big band vocalists - Billie Holiday in particular, and Benny Goodman, with Helen Forrest and "the Liltin' Martha Tilton" singing along. But progressive jazz and bebop were harder. I didn't understand the structure, and even the rhythm seemed odd. The horns squawked. There was nothing melodic about it.

Every once in a while, though, I could discern a familiar tune running through the number. It would surface in a solo, or the traces of a familiar chord progression. I realized that I liked jazz when I knew the song they were playing. When I had something familiar to orient and ground the sounds, I got a sense of where the music would go. I began to appreciate the conversation between players, the musical puns and the allusions to other songs, and the

feelings each soloist was trying to express. My memory became the key to understanding jazz, building a foundation that helped me to move beyond my comfort level and into the strange.

Like all music, jazz involves convention and cooperation. To play it, you need to know the basics of scales and rhythm, how notes are played, and how they blend into chords. But in jazz more than any other form of music there is a combination of freedom and respect that allows the music to soar. No one talent is enough. Every instrument contributes to the sound. Still, you can't have chaos. Each musician has to be able to support his or her fellow bandmates, following the tune and providing a solid base for the soloist without ego or jealousy. Then, her turn will come, and she can express her own feelings, take risks, and bare her soul, knowing that the musicians with her have her back.

It's a very Unitarian Universalist art form. For in our faith, each person must search for the music inside themselves, the spirit of wholeness and truth that guides each individual. It's more than just learning. It takes a willingness to live in the uncertainty, trusting that others here will give you the respect and freedom you need to find your own answers and play your own song. Some of us play a steady beat, providing rhythm and consistency. Others play the melody line. And some of us come in with a surprising new sound, strange at first, and then compelling and fresh, simply because it is ours and ours alone, and it takes courage, and trust, to play it out loud.

It is exciting to have that kind of freedom, the freedom to be yourself. But it is scary too. Many people here were raised in a more restricted environment, where the answers are clear and unchanging. Truth is memorized along with the names of the Presidents. It is very reassuring. There is little to do but follow the steps to salvation.

There are an awful lot of people who like it that way. They have no authority, and no responsibility for their actions. They simply obey and believe. They are not the ones who set the rules, so it is not their fault when others disobey. It is hard enough to watch out for yourself, without having to examine the rules.

I suppose there must be average Americans - people who just naturally fit into society without doubt or discomfort. But not here. You are here, in this room, because you felt something pushing you out. You bowed your head to the mystery of space, found peace in a different kind of longing. You let yourself grow. You asked hard questions. And so you could not be content to comply with the rules. Your truth had its own sound.

But of course, there are still rules. There are always rules, standards of behavior that help us get along, that keep us from getting into trouble or causing harm. Even in jazz, you have to know how to play with other people. As Peter Parker found, in today's story by Nat Hentoff, it isn't enough to be knowledgeable, or even expert at your craft. Until he learned to listen to the other musicians, and hear what they had to say, Peter remained outside of the band. He had to open up his heart.

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Cooperation is the essence of improvisation. The same is true here. You don't have to know what you are going to do every step of the way. It is okay to make mistakes. But they have to be *your* mistakes, made in good faith. Trumpeter Miles Davis said, "When you hit a wrong note, it is the next note you hit that makes it good or bad." You can shrink in confusion, embarrassed and awkward. Or you can choose to build on a wrong note, and make something bold and daring and new. Sometimes mistakes and chaos can open the door to fresh ideas, to creativity and freedom. You have to be willing to take that risk. You have to have faith in this community, that your strengths and principles are stronger than fear.

It is important that we all get along, and treat each other with respect and dignity. Mostly, I think we succeed. Seldom, these days, do we hear voices being raised, or chairs crashing to the floor. There are no major schisms in the congregation - as far as I know. We've achieved a period of stability. But now it is time for you to take some risks, to make some noise, even if it's disturbing and odd. At our annual meeting last fall and throughout the winter, this congregation has been discussing change. I've noticed you becoming restless, searching for meaning and good work that would again bring the Meeting House into the forefront. But what, and how? A lot of you responded to my sermon on the needs of children. Is that the way to go? What can you do to manifest love?

When the board started discussing the visioning process, I knew that it had to involve the entire congregation. Our future isn't the decision of any elite group of people. Who knows what great ideas might emerge from each one of us should we start opening up to each other? We thought about organizing everyone into small groups to

brainstorm and dream. Others wanted a series of open meetings, like last night's potluck. Finally, we decided to start with a Sunday service, led by a small committee of volunteers. Together, you would measure your strengths and interests, share your dreams - however fanciful - and begin to claim some part of our mission. For yourselves, and through your own authority.

This is the essence of our ideals as Unitarian Universalism. We believe that every person has an equal claim to the truth, without hierarchy or dogma. But that truth must be exercised. Just as you write your own bylaws, choose ministers and elect your board, so you are responsible for living your faith into being through service and action. Your faith, and your future.

For many of you, this is a novel prospect. You aren't used to being in charge of a church. There was always someone else making judgments and pronouncements, and speaking for God. Your conscience and feelings, the stirrings of wonder and your sense of communion with other souls had no impact on the Church. You might serve, but you couldn't direct. That was left to the authorities. So it is natural to look to others for leadership. We all do it. We look for saviors, for stars who can inspire us and let us shine in their glow. We proclaim our famous residents, and idolize celebrities until they stumble and fall from grace.

Alcoholics Anonymous teaches, "anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our teaching, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities." That is a great lesson. It reminds us to stay true to our values. But few of us are immune from the cult of personality. The Meeting House has thrived on charismatic leaders and strong characters who attracted excitement for their ideas. They rose to meet the needs of the congregation and the town, they invested their hearts, and in the end they burned out in exhaustion and frustration. Without them, little remained. They were the structure and the glue that held things together.

But, of course, the Meeting House survived. Services continued, and the work of the Restoration Committee went on, and you looked toward the future. You - the members - kept this community alive. Each one of you believed in the value and beauty of this congregation, and you remained true. You are the Universalist Meeting House. Not me, not the staff, not any one transient and fallible person. I've said this before - repeatedly. I know you hear it. And I've seen some of you get inspired for a while, and then get discouraged or sidetracked and just fizzle out. I have to confess that I've done the same. Last night's potluck discussion raised some interesting ideas, and helped you to get organized into committees. And I will do everything I can to support and assist you in your work.

And that is why this stage is so important. If you want the Meeting House to thrive, you have got to work together. How can people get involved in a community if there is nothing to do and no models for action? Spirituality is not a spectator sport. It is a matter of hands as well as heart, of listening and learning and opening the doors. Working together, playing along. You have to take responsibility for the vision of our purpose here together and decide how to best live out your principles - in the world, and as a community. We can be a Sunday church, or we can be a lot more. The next note will tell.

There is a spirit at the Meeting House that transcends personality and time. It has something to do with faith, something to do with respect and commitment and the struggle to be whole. Like jazz, each of you brings your own style and sound - sometimes driving and bold, sometimes gentle and steady. You give and take, listen and echo, each of you playing your part.

Jazz saxophonist Sidney Bechet sets this scene in his book, *Treat It Gentle*:

[The people would all be crowding around the band] cheering the musicians, waiting to give them drinks and food. All of them feeling good about the music, how that band, it kept the music together.

And being able to play in that kind of a band, it was more than a learning kind of thing. You know, when you learn something, you can go just so far. When you've finished that, there's not much else you can do unless you know how to get hold of something inside you that isn't learned. It has to be there inside you without any need of learning. The [other] band that played what it knew, it didn't have enough. In the end, it would get confused. It just finished. And the people, they could tell.

But how they could tell, that was the music, too. It was what they had of the music inside themselves ... the music, it was the onliest thing that counted. The music, it was having a time for itself. It was moving. It was being free...

Open up to the music and play it together. The people will hear it. They will know. And they will join in your song.

CLOSING WORDS: by Louis Armstrong:

"We all go 'do, re, mi,' but you got to find the other notes for yourself."