

## The Greatest Voice

By Amy K. Genova

How many of you have heard of the reality show, *The Voice*? (Pause) If you haven't, *The Voice*, is the second highest rated network show after *Modern Family*. It's premise: to discover the greatest singing voice out of a plethora of undiscovered hopefuls.

This makes me wonder who is the greatest voice of all time? Is it Elvis Presley? Ella Fitzgerald? Or our own Judy Meyer? Elvis has hip, Ella--scat. And, Judy, well she has it.

(Read faster)

Maybe John Lennon, Barbara Streisand, Christina Aguilera, Maria Callas, Josh Groban, Edith Piaf, Aretha Franklin, Frederick Douglas, Freddy Mercury, Sharam Shiva, Dalida. Nat King Cole, Madonna, Caruso or Lady Gaga.

What about the Chairman of the Board? *Old blue eyes*. If you don't know whom I mean, you are probably a great deal younger than I. Don't worry *The Best is Yet to Come*, you can get him as a ring tone, Frank Sinatra.

My mother introduced me to Frank Sinatra. Moreover, I sang "In the Wee Small Hours" and "My Funny Valentine" as lullabies to my own daughters. For me, Sinatra is like drinking scotch, neat. You sip slowly, the warm liquid plays on your tongue, next thing you know your giddy, and probably in love. If you don't drink scotch, substitute rainwater in the desert and you'll get what I mean.

Like many of you, when I am happy, I whistle, hum or sing. During the most trying times, say a dental procedure or an MRI, I summon a Sinatra song:

*Fill my heart with song/Let me sing forever more/You are all I long for/All I worship and adore/In other words, please be true/In other words, I love you*

A wonderful trick of the mind, to hear Frank Sinatra in one's head, anytime, anywhere, especially if you have a voice like mine.

There's a name for people who hear voices in their heads, schizophrenics or mystics. Let's just say, they're probably not hearing the Sultan of Swoon and the Nelson Riddle band.

Many would say God is greatest voice of all. (Pause). I've never heard this voice. I did an Internet search of the King James Bible to see if I could find a description of God's voice. There was none. However, I did find that in the first 25-30 instances, God's voice is most often linked to either the word hearken or obey. This is the voice of the boss.

As an undergraduate student, who studied speech pathology, I learned about a speech impediment that affects primarily white, male bosses, called contact ulcers of the vocal folds. To exercise authority the boss artificially lowers his voice's natural pitch and raises his volume. For example, *Johnson, get in here*. In repeating this practice, the boss might lose his voice. Perhaps, that is why God has been quiet for so many years.

Rev. Jerry Falwell, the late televangelist, The New York Times named the father of the religious right," once said, "I feel most ministers who claim they've heard God's voice are eating too much pizza before they go to bed at night, and it's really an intestinal disorder, not a revelation."

That did not stop Falwell, however, after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 of 2001, from claiming to hear the voice of God, when he said, "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians... the ACLU... all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say, "You helped this happen." Was Falwell suffering from a bad case of indigestion? Or just harkening to a Stranger in the Night?

After Jerry Falwell's death, NPR, stated that he had spurred millions of Christians into the "center of political activism ... his (stated) goal ... to prepare young Christian "pit-bulls" to enter politics, law, the news media and other professions, and to bring their conservative Christian outlook." His legacy includes Liberty University, with an enrollment of 10,000 plus, a 6,000-seat mega church, now under the leadership of his son, the Reverend Jonathon Falwell, and a k-12 Christian academy that allows parents to heed Falwell's warning that Christian children do not belong in public schools. During the last presidential campaign, Mitt Romney, noted Falwell's legacy calling him "an American who built and led a movement based on strong

principles and strong faith.” Jerry Falwell possessed a weighty voice, and there are 1000s of more Jerry Falwells.

As for me, “Come fly with me, let's fly, let's fly away” and say that the voice represented by Jerry Falwell is not the greatest voice of all.

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Maybe nature, the interdependent web will have the last word.

As a child in Colorado, I reveled in my connection with nature. The flatirons of the Rocky Mountains were Indian chieftains. The trees, holy men, no women, after all I had grown up in the Catholic church and a Latin Mass. While the priest pontificated in an indecipherable language, I gazed at the bearded figure in the stain glass window. Began to pray to God with a single request, *Speak to me*.

While waiting for our chat, I listened to the trees. The air was thick with their silent words: peace, serenity, solemnity, some would call this God. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, as recently as 2009, survey, 23% of Christians expressed a belief in the spiritual energy of trees. Who knew? Perhaps this represents an untapped forest of future conservationists.

Beyond the forests, a congregation of other voices spoke: Cleopatra, Vincent Van Gogh, all the people biographed in my mother's collection of dead composers, volumes I and II, and the dazzling orator, Fredrick Douglas, who here metaphorically addresses the slave-ship that carried him:

*You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angel, that flies round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?*

Fredrick Douglas's heart drummed across the arc of time to me, an eleven-year-old girl. I wept. However, I took consolation in the notion that he lived on. The timbre (tamber) of his voice echoed in me.

But one day I found myself similarly alone in the universe. The trees lost their voices forever, and all the voices I listened to evaporated. This day was when my stepfather broke into my life. Bob was a man who regularly denigrated women and told me over and over that I was a misfit. Much worse, he beat my mother nearly every two weeks from the time when I was 11 until I was 15. He blackened her eyes, he broke her nose, he left a ring imprint from his fist above her lip. (Pause) This was a man that would make anyone question, the worth and dignity of every individual. Instead, I questioned my own worth and dignity. You see, I did not protect my mother. I stopped praying.

Too busy listening to a tumult of curse words and crashes, my sisters screaming and crying. I put a pillow over my ears, to not listen. Frederick Douglas no longer knew that I love him beyond the grave and Vincent Van Gogh died in unspeakable pain, never knowing his paintings would be adored. There never was and never would be any consolation. The trees were hollow. God never said a word.

Perhaps, silence is the most powerful voice of all. (Pause) Imagine UUs without coffee hour. Imagine no UU voice.

Every week I drive down Kings' Highway to church. On my way, I see a flurry of young people toting Starbucks cups into The Journey, a Baptist Church. The average age of its congregants is 30. You may know it because the church garnered national headlines when it decided to conduct Bible Lessons at Schlafly Bottle Works. While in some aspects Journey appears to be moderate, one of their tenants posted on the "What We Believe" page, in large font, states, the belief in the, "Absolute Depravity of Humanity." It's like hearing my stepfather's voice all over again. *You, are a misfit.*

Imagine hearing a different voice, if you are a homosexual, a slave, an abused woman or child: ***We Believe in the Inherent Worth and Dignity of You.*** Frederick Douglas had to discover this epiphany on his own in a sea of social and religious opposition that said otherwise. I just had to walk into the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Greeley, Colorado. You cannot imagine how profound this statement was to me.

The first time I went to a UU church, a cute boy invited me. I was 22. The church was just up slope from our university in Greeley, Colorado. When I drove, everyone was standing on the front lawn holding hands. UUs have *a smile on their faces for the whole human race*. I put my car in reverse and drove away. Obviously, returned. Even after the cute boy moved to another city, I stayed. I was the only person under 40. It didn't matter. They wanted to hear my voice, a 22 year old speaking to a room full of elders on *Death and dying from the agnostic point of view* no less. Instead of being misfit, I was applauded, encouraged, loved, invited to speak again. By the way, the cute boy returned and we were married in the fellowship's backyard, next to the organic vegetables.

Unitarian Universalists have a gorgeous, radical, tree-embracing voice. The world is ready to hear it. One, we are on the side of love, Two, we foster truth seeking. Three, we work for justice.

Sounds like small potatoes, but in truth it's Moonlight in Vermont:

We include: the gentile, Jew, Muslim, atheist and agnostic. The gay, straight, intersex, the black, white and in-between. How many religions can beat that?

We foster truth seeking: Our living traditions directs us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science: What other religion places faith in our ability to think?

We have a history of working for justice: Starting with the Edict of Religious Tolerance – Transylvania, 1568, standing against slavery in 1790, Ordaining the first woman, Olympia Brown, 1863, assisting refugees in WWII, marching for Civil Rights in Selma in 1963, advocating for the rights of gay and bisexual people in 1970 and finally, in this church, becoming a UN blue ribbon congregation and a welcoming church in 2013.

But our work is not over. In the Oct. 2012 issue of USA Torde Lee Barker, president of Meadville Lombard Theological School said, “the values of our church and the values of our culture are intersecting.” Our faith is growing, up 15.8% from 2000 to 2010. But in Frank Sinatra's language, that peanuts. UUs compose only 0.3% of the American population. If that's not silence, it may be the voice of whoville in Horton Hears a Who, we are here, we are

here. According to the Pew Research Study, the group, known as the nones, those who declare themselves as religiously unaffiliated, as of 2012 represent 32% of the population, not .3%, 32%.

This group, described by an article titled, *Losing-our-religion-the-growth-of-the-nones*,” comprises in a nutshell:

- atheists and agnostics and those who ally themselves with "nothing in particular."
- many who say they are spiritual or religious in some way
- those who overwhelmingly says they are *not* looking to find an organized religion
- and social liberals, three-quarters favoring same-sex marriage and legal abortion.

These are our people. Probably some of our own teens and college students. How can we bring them into the song? Unlike me at 22, they are not interested in organized religion. Maybe, it's time to go onto the lawn. We need to meet them where they are: maybe Schlafly's once a month, providing a contemporary or a virtual service, after brunch service, incorporating rap remixes of Sinatra tunes, and/or letting attendees tweeted questions or comments during the service. I was very pleased by George Grim Howell's music video last week. Sounds like trappings, but once the Nones get here, UUs can do what they have always done best: hold hands, love one another, work for justice, be truth seekers, hearkening to the wise words of:

Jesus, May Sarton, Buddha, Theodore Parker, Mary Oliver, Olympia Brown, and even the lyrics of Frank Sinatra. As well as our own prophetic voices: the UU voice. One snazzy vocalization, Comparable to Old Blue eyes songs:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person/I have high hopes.
- Justice Equity and Compassion/I've got you under my skin.
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning/My Way
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large/ My Kind of Town.

- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all/The Best is Yet to Come
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part/Fly me to the moon and let me dance about the stars.

Yesterday, I was an atheist. Today and tomorrow, I am a committed, passionate Unitarian Universalist who discovered God is spelled with two 'o's. Moreover, I want you to flock to church, and if you haven't already become a member, Let's face the music and dance. You can do it today. Because the greatest voice is you—squared. Hey Man this is the life, and I'm in love.

See more at:

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15588#sthash.zayjne7.dpuf>

Sources: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/10/01/unitarian-faith-growing-stronger-nationwide/1607243/>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10188427>

Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/us/01evangelical.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/us/01evangelical.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/01/14/169164840/losing-our-religion-the-growth-of-the-nones>