

September 13, 2010

Dear Colleagues:

In the first chapter of Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*, the question gets raised, "What is saving your life now?" A priest friend had asked her to speak at his church in Alabama, and this was the topic he requested. Barbara said, "It was as if he had swept his arm across a dusty table and brushed all the formal china to the ground."

I did not experience her kind of shock with the question; I knew my answer immediately—music. In Barbara's eventual answer she said things like, "What is saving my life now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth. My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them."

For me music is a form of prayer. It definitely affects my body and spirit. There are always CD's in the car, I have music on when I am cooking, music is on my MP3 player when I work in the yard, walk the dog or clean house. It is music to which I exercise or dance. Music is my constant companion. It is saving me because it is feeding a deep part of my soul that hasn't been touched since our Order days. Singing in our church choir is enjoyable, but it doesn't penetrate my deeper self or instill a sense of community in the same way that our corporate singing did.

My music lately has come from the last half-century or so, beginning with the first song I memorized, word-for-word, *Don't Fence Me In* by Roy Rogers. That would have been when I was in first grade. I resonate with the tunes, although not the theology, of many gospel songs. Love songs trump big. The musicals, rock and roll, pop and country have contributed many favorites. Knowing of my present passion for music, people have been handing me CD's or sharing music that is touching them. Garage sales are a great source. Or, perhaps I remember a song or a singer and go to Youtube to listen. I often print out lyrics so I can sing along. It is not unusual for me to stay with one song or artist for several days or weeks. The music washes over me and seeps into a hole in my being. It is filling me up and nurturing me. Music rules—I don't hear the phone ringing or the doorbell most of the time. That can't be all bad!

One song that has captured my imagination in recent days is by Harry Chapin, *Remember When the Music*. Harry was a singer/songwriter who produced songs in the 60's and 70's. As a dedicated humanitarian, he fought to end world hunger and was a key player in the creation of the Presidential Commission on World Hunger in 1977. Some think this was the last song he wrote before he died in 1981. At a Harry Chapin Tribute Concert Bruce Springsteen sang this song and said that Harry's music "came from a time when music gave us a greater sense of unity, a greater sense of

shared vision and purpose.” I agree with that. The poetry in his lyrics is compelling. One of his lines reads, “We believed in things and so we’d sing.” That is exactly what we did in the Order. Harry’s spirit would have us sing about what we believe in—still today! Do you think we could ever recapture the power of our collegial singing, or am I just experiencing nostalgia?

Alice Baumbach
The Order Ecumenical and the Institute of Cultural Affairs
Chicago, 1969-1979

Remember When The Music by Harry Chapin

Remember when the music
Came from wooden boxes
Strung with silver wire
And as we sang the words
It would set our minds on fire
We believed in things
And so we’d sing

Remember when the music
Brought us all together
To stand inside the rain
And as we joined our hands
We’d meet in the refrain
We had dreams to live
And we had hopes to give

Don’t you remember when the music
Was the best of what we dreamed of
For our children’s time
And as we sang we worked
For we knew time was just a lie
A gift we say
A gift the future gave

Of all the times I listened
And all the times I heard
All the melodies are missing
And all the magic words
And all those potent voices
And all the choices we had then
How I’d love to find
We had that kind of choice again
Remember when the music

Was a glow on the horizon
Of every newborn day
And as we sang the sun came up
To chase the dark away
And life was good
For we knew we could

Remember when the music
Brought the night across the valley
As the day went down
And as we’d hum the melody
We’d be safe inside the sound
And so we’d sleep
For we had dreams to keep

And I dream that something’s coming
And it is not just in the wind
It’s more than just tomorrow
It’s more than where we’ve been
It offered me a promise
It’s telling me—Begin
I know it’s that even something
worth believing in

Remember when the music
Came from wooden boxes
Strung with silver wire
And as we sang the words
It would set our minds on fire
We believed in things
And so we’d sing
And so we’d sing.

Thanks, Alice for reminding us about the power of music. I went to a Song Circle sponsored by Transitions Rogers Park Saturday night. After a potluck of vegetarian goodies, we sang for a couple of hours. What fun it was! I didn't have adequate words to talk about the power of singing in relation to building community, but we were certainly experiencing it. Karen Troxel, Chicago

Alice, thanks for this. The lyrics to Chap[inn's] song remind me precisely of us when we sang. I'm glad music means that much to you even now. Me too!
Randy Williams

Thanks for that, Alice and Happy Birthday. Just keep on celebrating as you move through your 74th year. There are lots of September folks among us! Doris Hahn

Thank you for your words. Recently, days have become very empty even though the sun is shining, the days are cooler and the skys are a breath taking, beautiful blue. Sometimes when I think about it, I do play a cd. I shall now make a point of intentionally including music in my day. Colleen Smith, Moab, Utah

Alice, I haven't found anything to match the unity and unspoken corporate power the singing surrounded us with. David Zahrt

Thank you, Alice, for sharing this wonderful reminder of the power of our singing. I've particularly been wanting to sing in joy with the heavenly chorus in celebration for the remarkable journeys of to very special people this past week, Fred Lanphear and Bishop Jim. What spirit giants in our midst who we will miss very much but who radically informed our lives. We give thanks and sing our Journey On song in chorus with so many others as we gather virtually to mark these two lives. Lynda Cock

Thank you Alice for the great memory of our passionate singing through life with the order. I listened to the Chapin song, maybe se should get together for a songfest with one of those old songbooks sometime. We were all so connected then, to God and to each other. Kathie Gribble.