

THE ROOM WHERE IT HAPPENS
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Lay Sunday, January 27, 2019
All Souls Church, New York City

If you think you might have detected a theme running through today's music, you are not incorrect. I extend my most profound thanks to the members of the incomparable All Souls Music Department, who enrich, challenge, and enlighten us every week, and who have the depth of talent so that it was no issue whatsoever to indulge me when I asked to coordinate the music today with something very dear to my heart, the Broadway musical.

The last time I delivered a sermon here was 18 years ago, and, at the time, was reading aloud J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series to my three young daughters. My sermon that time was entitled, "Harry Potter and the Church of All Souls," and I explored the relationship between a pensieve, a time-turner, and the Mirror of Erised to our experience here at All Souls. It is amazing now for me to realize that at that point, only the first four books had been written – how much of the story was still unknown to us! More recently, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, a play first on London's West End and now on Broadway, has further developed this saga. It's a very satisfying drama in which Harry and his friends are now adults and parents to children about the age they were as the book series began. I contemplated preaching this time about that play, but while becoming the person who always preaches about *Harry Potter* is not a bad thing (at least to me), I realized that my love for that specific work is only a small part of my true passion, Broadway theatre.

Anyone who knows me is aware of how much our city's spectacular access to the arts matters to me, and especially Broadway theatre. Many people enjoy plays but find musicals frivolous or confusing, since rarely in real life does a person suddenly burst into song. But to me, adding music to a theatrical piece makes it more real, not less so. It is a reality that taps into a person's truest thoughts and deepest motivations.

The celebrated director and choreographer Bob Fosse explained musicals in this way: "The time to sing is when your emotional level is just too high to speak anymore, and the time to dance is when your emotions are just too strong to only sing about how you feel." Science tends to support Fosse's observation. While words and music are both processed in many different brain regions, music is more likely to involve the limbic system, which processes emotion.

Perhaps this deeper limbic level is what gives musical theatre the ability to reveal the true nature of someone, not the external trappings on which our prefrontal cortex fixates. In Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, I can identify with Alexander Hamilton, then see myself in his frenemy Aaron Burr, and understand the dangers of being too much of either – not throwing away my shot must be tempered with "wait for it." In *The Color Purple*, I can feel Celie's revelation of her own strength, despite the differences in our circumstances, and in turn give myself strength. In perhaps my favorite musical, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, despite few surface similarities between us, I completely relate to Hedwig's longing to understand who she is, and to be seen and loved as she is. All those emotions and more can be entirely true and revelatory for me, and for others like or unlike me who experience the musical, without being distracted by superficial differences.

We don't have to be the fairy tale characters in *Into the Woods* to feel the truth in the warning, "Careful the wish you make/ Wishes are children." We don't need to be fighting AIDS in the East

Village in the late 80's to be reminded of the importance of measuring the value of our time here on earth in love rather than in all the material ways society tells us to assess our worth. And we don't need to be counterculture youths facing the draft in the 60's to think while "facing a dying nation" that "somewhere inside something there is a rush of greatness" and for us to decide to "let the sun shine in." Reading all these lyrics as poems would be powerful – putting them to music triggers our limbic system and places them inside us, makes them a part of us.

It's one thing to understand how live performances came to be when they were the only way to experience a dramatic or comedic work. But why do we still go to live performances now that we can attend a movie, watch at home on our TV or laptop, or even on the subway on our phone? Why, for that matter, do we gather together here on Sundays when, as Unitarians, we are freed from the requirement to rack up brownie points and earn a place in heaven? The Broadway entertainment lawyer and producer John Breglio, in his book, *I Wanna Be a Producer*, tells that his parents initially worried he was destined for the priesthood because as a six year old they would find him playing in the living room, ringing a bell with a blanket around his shoulders, muttering chants from Mass. It turned out that what he was doing was expressing a natural theatrical flair through the only dramatic event he knew – a church service.

He describes finally going to his first Broadway musical, and recalls, "I sensed that I was entering a sanctuary not unlike a church, but definitely more fun... The theatre was dimly lit and seemed mystical, the red plush seats were a lot more comfortable than pews." His most vivid memory, though, was of hearing 1200 people burst into spontaneous, loud laughter at the same time, a sound unlike any he had ever heard. There is something transformative about experiencing words and music in a shared space with others, and I think that special experience is a driving force behind why we come here on Sundays.

In *Hamilton*, Aaron Burr sings about wanting to be in "the room where it happens" – that room being a hidden back room where the political deals are made. I would argue that for All Souls, this is the room where it happens – this sanctuary that we are about to restore in celebration of our Bicentennial, as well as to provide a place for us to meet for years to come – and "it" is that shared transcendent experience with each other.

And we get to do "it" here, in the heart of the Upper East Side in Manhattan! Another thing my friends know about me is how deeply and truly I love New York City. It is a love affair that began long before I moved here, once I realized it existed as a place I knew I had to figure out how to get to. Of course it's not perfect – no one person, not even the people we love the most, can be perfect so we could never expect perfection of a place made up of so many imperfect people. But in my opinion this city comes as close to perfection as any city I have been to, read about, or imagined.

The writer E.B White suggested:

There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter – the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something.

...Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it passion.

I am a settler, so of course I think he gives us the best part of that quote, but I do think White was onto something. In my opinion, this city, and in fact this country – and this church – are great in large part because they aren't trapped in the past; they have the capacity and even the drive to change. And that change is fueled by the constant influx of new people streaming in with their individual backgrounds, cultures, and talents. To crib another line from *Hamilton*, said by Hamilton and Lafayette, "Immigrants, we get the job done."

In *Hamilton*, the three Schuyler sisters are introduced to us early in the musical in a time of great turmoil, just before the American Revolution. We know how it all turned out, but they didn't and, in fact, most would have believed the Revolution to be a hopeless cause. We live now in a time of great turmoil, and none of us can predict the future or know how our country will turn out. But we live here, in New York City, and we have each other, and we have this place to gather and work together for good. And so, today I invite you to join with me in my settler passion for this great city and this great church, welcoming all and shining a light toward progress. Instead of fear of these times and our unknowable future, let's turn to gratitude for what we have here together in our room where "it" happens, and be inspired to take action to make our lives, this church, and our city and country live up to the infinite promise they possess. As the Schuyler sisters sang, "How lucky we are to be alive right now . . . in the greatest city in the world."