

**Songs That Soothe**  
*February 28, 2016*  
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church  
Worship Committee

**Introduction**

**Rick:** Hey kid. It's time for sleep. Close your eyes and I'll sing you a little song.

**Kid:** *Hmmm?*

**Rick:** What song? You know. The one with the cool ending. "When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all."

**Kid:** *Alarmed sound.*

**Rick:** Don't be scared, kid. It's just a little warning about life. It says don't get too cocky, 'cause as soon as you're up there flying high, you'll come crashing down. That's life.

**Kid:** *Sniffing sound.*

**Rick:** Stop that crying, kid! It's time for sleep. Anyway, I think I got it wrong. The song isn't a warning. It's a promise, see, a soothing promise that life is interesting. It's got its ups and downs, sure, good things and bad things, and that's what makes it interesting.

**Kid:** *Hmmm?*

**Rick:** Yes, I do know why bad things happen. Bad things happen because good things happen. You can't have one without the other. You've gotta have a mix! That's what it's all about, kid. So consider yourself soothed.

**Kid:** *Objecting sound.*

**Rick:** What are you kid, some kind of UU who always wants good things to happen?

**Kid:** *Same objecting sound, louder*

**Rick:** Don't be so sensitive. Of course being a UU is a good thing. So is going to sleep!

**Kid:** *Happy, wide awake sounds.*

**Rick:** Listen, kid. Shut your damn eyes and go to sleep, or I'm warning you, I'll soothe you with that song!

**Kid:** *Crying.*

**Rick:** Okay, okay, I promise. I won't sing the song.

**Kid:** *Crying louder.*

**Rick:** Good god, where's my wife? Hey Tirrell, my lullaby won't work. This kid won't go to sleep no matter what I do: Come sing it something else.

*(pause; Kid leaves)*

**Rick:** That was a succinct statement of what this service is about. We explore the role of soothing songs,, soothing music in our lives, and consider the unlikely fact that soothing music isn't always soothing. The lullaby has baby falling from a tree. Beethoven's Pastoral symphony includes a thunderstorm described in minor key with moments of loud discord. Soothing music does its task not by sugar-coating life but by reflecting and accepting life, with all its ups and downs, with all its bads and goods, with all its opposites, with all its mystery.

## MORNING SONG

Good morning everyone.

Most 'songs that soothe', that is, lullabies, are shared and sung in the evening, at bedtime, after what has often been a fast and knockabout day... Well, here we are on a bright Sunday morning so let's consider a peaceful and soothing song in my favorite time of day, morning.

But first, let's share some soothing thoughts about morning.

Please get comfortable, close your eyes and concentrate on a guided meditation:

*(Pause...)*

It's early, still dark, way to early to be awake but something calls you to get out of bed, put on a robe and take a walk outside...

Finding a place to sit you relax in deep thought. You look at the sky. It's black yet full of white, sparkling stars. The air is still. The crickets in the meadow are trilling their high pitched songs. You notice that the eastern sky is brightening from black to gray to pink and blue to gold. The sounds gently change from the night crickets to birds and breeze gently rustling leaves. Soon a glint of sunlight flashes on the horizon. Dawn is here. Somewhere, far away a dog barks, a screen door bangs...

The air smells of grass and last night's rain and a neighbor's morning coffee. The light breeze gently brushes your face. Thoughts go from the chill of night to the sun's warmth and anticipation of the day to come.

A fresh, new day has begun. How will you use this precious time?

(Pause...)

When you are ready, please open your eyes and return your mind to the present time....

Thank you.

Please join me in singing Hymn number 38, Morning Has Broken.

### Musical Connections by Erica

When I was growing up, I didn't think much about how soothing music can be, at least not in a general way. I knew I enjoyed listening to music, and it made me feel better, but especially as a teen I focused more on rock and alternative music that my parents would describe as anything but soothing.

Then my friend Shelly and I did a project for our psychology class about music therapy, and I was astonished at how much it could do: help reduce stress and burnout, boost self-esteem, ease depression, calm road rage, and improve overall quality of life. It can also, of course, help you sleep, whether as a child listening to lullabies or an adult struggling with insomnia.

But what, precisely, makes it soothing? This is something of a puzzle, because it's not a one-size-fits-all answer. Consider lullabies. Babies may find them soothing but probably only because they don't understand the lyrics. If they did, they might be worried about getting put in a cradle on a tree limb and being knocked down by a gust of wind.

On the other hand, the music I listened to in my adolescent years was soothing in a different way. Singing along to the sometimes angry lyrics and moving to the driving beats gave me a safe outlet for my teenage angst and, while I may not have been calm during the songs, I was able to relax more after venting some of those emotions.

These two sides of the coin don't have a lot of similarities, but it seems like they do have one commonality – connection.

It's easy enough to picture that connection when thinking of lullabies and picturing someone singing to a child in a way that makes them feel safe, protected, and cared for. Of course that would be soothing and create a bond between the singer and the child.

For my louder music, it isn't as obvious, but I still found connection there. Those songs reminded me I wasn't alone in feeling a certain way, something vitally important to me, since I often felt isolated. The music connected me not only to the musicians but to everyone else who liked their music, providing a sense of community when I most needed it.

This, then, seems to me the deeper reason why music can soothe us – not only for the quiet melody or the gentle tones, but also the way it reminds us of how we're connected to each other. And that sense of connection may be the most soothing thing of all.

“Who's There?”                      by John Howard

I've been wondering why folk music in general and lullabies in particular tend to have such gruesome lyrics. The lullaby “All the Pretty Little Horses” speaks of the poor little baby yonder in the meadow crying ‘Mama’ while birds and butterflies flutter round his eyes. The lullaby “Hush Little Baby” offers a series of gifts, all of which break or fall apart, yet “you're still the sweetest little baby in town.” What is going on here?

When thinking about newborn infants, images come flooding into my mind from all over the animal kingdom, not just humans. I recall scenes from a National Geographic video I have of a mother polar bear deep in her winter nest in the arctic snow with that tiny, blind, adorable cub moving about in her arms. I think of our Irish setter – my first objective experience of mother love – licking and nuzzling the damp and squeaking puppies. I think of a family of deer in the spring, crossing the road and bounding into the woods with the wobbly faun following behind, or the filly that our horse gave birth to when I was seven. Mammals seem to bring their young into the world at the cruelest time of the year, when winter has hardly released its hold, and everything is dangerous.

For mammals, dangers are personified. I heard this in a Bill Moyers interview with Dan Dennet, who is an appealing and articulate proponent of Atheism. According to him, when startled mammals will ask not “what's that?” but “who's there?” A winter branch sheds its load of snow suddenly with a loud ‘thump’, and the dog on the hearth jumps up, barking: “Who's there?” It's an evolutionary strategy that has worked fairly well, protecting us from those that might want to eat us for lunch.

We are creatures that relate personally to the world, seeking to identify friend or foe in all the various forces around us. How fortunate it is that the first primary relationship is with the mother.

The song the mother sings is an act of creation, taking the strands of everyday life and weaving a warm and secure corner of safety and comfort for both of them. It is not just the infant that thrives on this relationship. We never outgrow a need for comfort. The lullaby is a way of building trust and hope even when things are dark and uncertain. So it occurs to me that a mother needs to express truth in those intimate times when both are so open and trusting. Life isn't always easy. It makes sense that the words in lullabies will refer to the dangers as well as the joys of life. Joseph Campbell said that "life is glorious opera, except that it hurts", and this is never more apparent than at the start of a new life.

Babies understand so much about love and pain and delight and anger. The mother too has had her share of pain and difficulties and now she is holding this miraculous gift of life for which she feels such strong love. The song she sings will have to be true, because they come from the heart. They are a way of saying "Thank you for coming into this wonderful, scary, beautiful world to share it with me. I've been so lonely, and now I'm so glad that you're here."

### **Soothing classical sounds**

When life gets tough for me, it's classical music I turn to for soothing. Favorites include the songs of Puccini, of Verdi, and of Mozart – especially Mozart, who often seasons his musical balm with dashes of humor.

But what I want most to hear when I'm really down, when I feel most like a wreck, is requiem songs

Now that may strike you as a very bad pun, recklessly made, when my subject is serious. But it's actually a good pun that performs a useful purpose: succinctly stating the soothing role of musical response to sorrow, music in the profound and venerable form of requiem responding to the wreck of life which is death.

For centuries, of course, the requiem mass has existed as a Catholic service of musical mourning and prayer. Secular versions of the requiem appeared in the twentieth century, sharing with their religious forbears certain elements like the *pie jesu*, *sanctus*, and *agnus dei*, sharing also a tradition of soothing sound as response to grief, a soaring celebration of life even in time of death, and a wondering, a marveling approach to the mystery of both life and death, the mystery of all.

Our anthem this morning is a choral version of the pie jesu from the Requiem of Andrew Lloyd Weber, a work first performed in 1985.