

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
May 26, 2019

Singing the Same Song

Memorial Day gives us a lot to think about. It's the beginning of summer – time to get outside, put in the vegetable garden, fire up the grill, make rhubarb pie. It's parades, flags, marching bands, patriotism. And it's death – honoring and grieving fallen soldiers.

Dating from the Civil War, Memorial Day lifts up the hundreds of thousands of US soldiers who have died in active military service. On this weekend, veterans come together at war memorials. Families visit the graves of loved ones. They trim the grass around the stone, plant fresh flowers, leave bouquets.

Memorial Day also commemorates an often overlooked gesture. Did you know that it was originally called “Decoration Day”? After the Civil War, people living near battlegrounds “decorated” or placed flowers on the graves not only of their loved ones but of all fallen soldiers—soldiers of both sides. A subtle act of coming together, which has become an honored national tradition.

What better time to lift up a person known for loving this country, who wanted more than anything else for people to come together? Pete Seeger did this in many ways. He had a knack for getting everyone in the room singing their common values. In song, he championed progressive causes: the labor movement during the depression, civil rights, ending the Viet Nam war, cleaning up the Hudson River.

Some credit Seeger with uniting America musically with its past. He was devoted to songs that had been passed on through generations of country people, determined to get them sung again, lest they disappear. Even his choice of instrument can be seen as a symbol of bringing parts of the country together – when he took it up as a teenager, virtually no one in the north played the banjo, an instrument brought here by African slaves....

Pete Seeger is more than the grizzly-bearded peace guy we might remember from the 60s folk music scene. Did you know that he came from musical parents, his father a pianist and musicologist and his mother a concert violinist?

Did you know that they took the family on tour in a big homemade van, planning to give classical concerts in rural areas, but instead ending up camping out down south and listening more than playing? A life-changing trip for him....

Did you know that Pete's big brothers chipped in so he could go to college? Harvard. And that the pacifists, the socialists and the Communists so interested him that he couldn't decide whom to join?

Did you know that, because the Communists were pro labor and against racism, he became a member? (A membership he dropped after the war, in 1949.)

Did you know that, when his grades slipped and he lost his scholarship, Pete Seeger went out into the world playing that banjo and had such talent that he was invited to intern with John Lomax, renowned collector of America's oldest songs, who was recording them in the Library of Congress?

Did you know that he met Woody Guthrie there and that they hopped freight trains together in the depression, writing "Hard-Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People"? Their group, the Almanacs, wanted to create a national organization of socially responsible people singing labor songs. For Seeger, it was always about singing in times of struggle.

An auspicious start to a young musician's life, but did you know what happened to Pete Seeger's meteoric rise after he served in WWII? Did you know that he lived under a cloud for years, banned from TV and radio?

Maybe the most forgotten part of Pete Seeger's life are those seventeen years, at the height of his vigor and promise. After the war, he and three others had formed a fresh-faced, wholesome group called The Weavers. Their folk songs became hits. In 1950, DJ's happened to flip over one of their hit records and discover the song "Goodnight, Irene." The Weavers flew to the top of the charts into a world of fame. Recording contracts and bookings in clubs and concerts all over the country came their way. They'd hit the big time.

But it was to be short-lived. The McCarthy era was in full swing, and because of his past affiliations Seeger was brought before the HUAC – House Un-American Activities Committee. Mild-mannered and polite, declining to discuss his beliefs, saying they were private, his own, and refusing to name names of people who might be Communist sympathizers, he was found in contempt of Congress and blacklisted. At the height of their success, he and his group were banned from radio and TV.

Imagine being stopped from your dream with no idea for how long. Seventeen years is a long time – from Seeger's mid-30s through his late 40s. Another person might have sunk into despair or found a more conventional way to make a living. What sustained him? What has sustained you during your rough patches?

During this time, an amazing thing happened. Seeger found an audience far from the grasp of the corporate media giants: children. He spent much of those years with young people. And what did he do with them? What he always did. He sang.

The movie "The Power of Song" shows a memorable scene of what looks like a big city classroom of six and seven year olds – kids with black faces, brown faces, Asian faces, some whites. Shy and fidgety, probably uncomfortable with being filmed, they start out silent, their eyes on the skinny guy with the beard and the funny-looking instrument.

His singing looks more like an invitation than a performance. It's gentle. He's smiling and making eye contact with them as he calls out the words, then gestures for them to sing, too. Their faces captivated me and, funny, I can't recall which song they sang. "This Little Light"? "This Land is Your Land"? It doesn't matter because that day was all about transformation.

At first the children's faces don't move, the kids just watch. And then their lips start moving, just barely, as they listen, rapt, and the song becomes more familiar. Meanwhile the guy beckons with his long arms, showing them the way. Within minutes, he's done it again – the whole room, the whole rainbow race, is singing the same song, faces lit up and eyes bright.

This became Pete Seeger's life those seventeen years. Away from the bright lights of show biz, he went from school to school, summer camp to summer camp. And as the years passed and the kids grew up, he stayed *with* them, traveling, as he liked to say, "from college to college to college," singing in folk festivals and protests all around the country. Despite, or perhaps thanks to the powers that be – and instead of living a glamorous, lucrative life in nightclubs and recording studios – Seeger stayed close to the ground, close to young people, close to the causes that enlivened him...and the folk music movement took off.

In dozens of concert clips, at the end of the song, Seeger will slip away, perhaps his way of underlining that the concert was not just him, but all of us. But he wasn't perfect. Who is? Pursuing his dreams came at a cost. His grown daughter remembers a father who was away much of the time. She says her mother carried the full responsibility of raising three children and managing the immense physicality of living in a rugged cabin down a long dirt road, which she plowed all winter, isolated, way out in the country – not good, the daughter said, for the kids or for their mother – as was often the case in the 20th century, all in service to the career of the man in the house. (Happily the times they are a changin'.)

Banned from TV and radio in the 50s into 60s, Seeger sang throughout the civil rights movement, folk music at its height. Early on, he met Martin Luther King Jr. and was asked to sing a few songs before Dr. King spoke. He chose a little known song at the time, the African American spiritual "We Shall Overcome." Seeger sang it slowly. He added a verse – "We'll walk hand in hand" – and he changed the word "will" to "shall." As the story goes, Dr. King later commented in the car, on the way to his next stop, "That song really sticks to you, doesn't it?" And so it is Seeger to whom we owe "We Shall Overcome," symbol of the civil rights movement and after that the end-Vietnam movement, and after that "Occupy," and so it goes.

In 1967, with civil rights and Viet Nam protests powerful and picking up momentum, Cambodia on the horizon, the Smothers Brothers took a stand and invited Seeger onto their show. It happened! He sang the controversial anti-war song, "Waist-Deep in the Big Muddy," and CBS censored it. But in this moment, the world was ready to listen, and the song was finally aired with a lot of publicity. Seeger was 48 years old, halfway through his good long life.

He used the years well, deeply engaged in world affairs. He thought of himself as a planter of seeds. "Music helps distract you from your troubles," he said. "But some music helps you understand your troubles...and some music helps you do something about your troubles."

Well into the Viet Nam War years, Seeger sang his heart out. One night, a young man waited in line to see him. Seeger's wife Toshi advised him to do more than shake his hand, to spend some time with him. It turns out that the young man, a war veteran, had come to the concert enraged by Seeger's anti-war activism and intending to kill him. But during the concert something had

happened, Seeger inviting everyone, as always, to join in the singing of the old songs, to come together once more.

What did you talk about with that young man, people later asked him. “Oh, we mostly just sang ‘Where Have All the Flowers Gone’ with each other.” He said the veteran had come in filled with hate but came out of the concert now feeling clean.

Pete Seeger went on to receive honor upon honor, including the National Medal of Arts from the US government. He sang at President Obama’s inauguration and later that year celebrated his 90th birthday at Madison Square Garden.

His songs have become part of us, part of our children, and part of our children’s children. And so we sing the songs Pete Seeger sang. Knowing his story, may we now sing them with fuller hearts.

So may it be.