Preston Wilson

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Insert # 5: Opening Words : Sir Ian McKellen reads The first lines of The Odyssey by Homer, translated by Robert Fagles

Sermon: The Voices in My Life

(This is the second sermon I have delivered at First Unitarian on the subjects of listening and audiobooks, the first being in 1991 when Jack Taylor, the minister here for 25 years, allowed me to deliver a "Matters of Our Lives" address in the sanctuary during a sparsely attended cold winter service. As some of you might know, I miss him very much. Hundreds of hours of his sermons are neatly catalogued and stored on cassette tapes and CDs upstairs in a closet: "Sermons on tape," if you like. We can still listen to him if the spirit so moves us..... He had a way. I loved listening to him and learning from him.)

I have always been drawn to the voices of special people in my life not only for what they said, but how they said it – the tones, the inflections, the rhythms, the [TAMber], the unconscious melodies they made with their words. While I often have trouble remembering the faces of people in my life, I can almost always remember their voices, especially how they made me feel when I was listening to or talking with them. They don't necessarily need pretty or mellifluous voices for me to be drawn to them. I believe that my attraction has much more to do with sincerity, an inherent thoughtfulness, and an interest in me as a listener. I'm sure that I am not unusual in this respect, but this observation about myself provides me with the substance of my sermon on voices, from day-to-day vocal interactions in the present, into the past (now as echoes only), and from those granted to me through recordings, especially audiobooks of dramatic, and mostly classic, fiction. Let me start with my mother, who greatly influenced me in my chosen profession of teaching English and in my reading and listening habits. Her voice was full of energy and bounce, especially when she had a good story to tell. She was a very sweet and lovely lady. I cannot remember her with an angry voice, and I attribute a good deal of my optimism and sense of humor to her. Here she is lap-reading nursery rhymes in 1986 to our two children - Paul, age two, and Emily, age five.

Insert #2: Ruth Wilson reading to her grandchildren

After graduating from Hobart College in 1967, I went to Ohio State to pursue a master's degree in English Literature. It was a terrible time politically with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr, riots in the inner cities, and disaffection among young people centering

around the Vietnam War which continued to chew up hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians. Having lost my graduate school deferment, I was on the verge of being drafted myself. But one night around January of 1968, I watched Walter Cronkite on the CBS evening television news. Listening to his sincere, troubled, and honest voice that evening conveyed the truth that we could not win that horrible war in Vietnam. President Lydon Johnson was also listening to Walter Cronkite that night, and is reported to have said, "If we have lost Cronkite, we have lost America." I shall never forget that moment when the voice of Walter Cronkite over the television told me personally – if only between the lines - what to do. Get out!

Insert #8: Walter Cronkite

But at almost the same moment, and with the stroke of the greatest of fortune , the Peace Corps offered me the opportunity to serve two years in Ecuador in the area of civil rights for the indigenous Andean population in their struggle for land reform. In Ecuador I listened to a lot of Spanish and to Kichwa, the native language of the highland campesinos I was working with. Their cause was righteous, and since most of the campesinos were not at all - or only semi - literate, they spoke with intensity and sincerity about their struggles against white supremacy and racism such that what they said carried all the marks of truth. Here an indigenous leader, Jose Antonio Quinde, speaks in Spanish, his second language, of the need to recognize and honor Pachamama, the Kichwa word for Mother Nature, and to cherish the land that sustains all life. Not hampered with the self-correcting and editing process of writers, he speaks from the heart in the smooth flow of words he had been hearing from his people and elders all his life.

Insert #11: Jose Antonio Quinde on Pachamama

Returning to my hometown of Auburn, NY, I soon got a job teaching English at the new comprehensive high school which had been built to replace the three high school system which had been based on de facto racial segregation. I stayed there nearly forty years, except for a year's sabbatical to England, where I learned to love the voices of the people of Great Britain and, of course, the world jewel of public broadcasting, the BBC. I taught the children of my hometown how to appreciate the literary voices of the great writers of our culture, and how to find their own voices through creative writing . And, of course, all along I was teaching myself. Which brings me to the next and most enduring stage of my love of voices: my discovery and embracing of oral storytelling through professionally performed audiobooks.

The oral tradition of storytelling is as old as human beings have had language. We are familiar with the iconic image of pre-historic age people sitting around the fire at night

recounting tales of the hunt (and, no doubt, spreading the latest gossip). Then perhaps we have been told of the probably mythical blind rhapsode Homer from around the eighth century BCE who gave us the Iliad and the Odyssey which, when eventually written down, became two of the foundational works of Western civilization. The source material for these Greek poetic epics and others' tribal tales, such as the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, and the Babylonian Gilgamesh, were ballads, rhapsodies, and the like, memorized by traveling bards whose narrative incantations delighted and instructed the listeners. Group identities and values coalesced around the spoken word. Even after movable type in the fifteenth century, limited literacy, poverty and preference caused people to seek out others to read aloud the exciting stories of their day. Charles Dickens was especially enjoyed in this manner. Until relatively recently in public education, rhetoric, memorization and recitation of poetry and speeches were the bases of liberal learning. And before the intrusive and ubiquitous television industry, the internet, and the streaming companies that depend upon it, conversation and storytelling were considered two of the best ways to pass the time. People listened to each other's voices for their entertainment. But while modern technology has had its bad sides, bombarding us with inane commercial messages and empty talking heads, it has produced a medium that allows us to listen to the most dynamic and creative writing interpreted by the most accomplished of mesmerizing voices.

In the mid 1980s, some of you might remember that there appeared advertisements for "books on tape" or as they were also called "recorded books." Granted, books for the blind were a known quantity, but this was different – a mass marketing to the general public of, at first, famous works of literature, long out of copyright, and then of popular fiction read by audio voice artists and recorded on cassettes which made them especially suitable for commuters with cassette decks in their cars.

On a frigid and snowy morning in 1985 at around seven A.M, during one of my 22-mile commutes to Auburn High School, I was driving my iced-over Subaru. Not seeing very well for all the frost on the windshield, I eventually had to pull over into the parking lot of the Scipio town garage on Route 34, not just to scrape the windshield, but to change the tape on the cassette player through which I was listening to a narrator named Frank Muller read from John Le Carre's novel *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*, an apt title considering my situation. It was then that I experienced an epiphany so powerful that it changed the direction of my intellectual and teaching life. As I sat there trying to warm my feet and hands just listening to the story, it hit me full force: I realized that serious dramatic literature, and not just short poetry, could be performed by sensitive voice artists in a smooth, linear, unhurried, and evocative manner. I realized in a burst that reading literature in school should not a forced, pressurized experience in response to test-crazed pedagogues. I remembered how at college I had tried with my bloodshot eyes to keep up

with the demanding reading lists and schedules for the world's great works of literature, attempting to gulp them down half-digested, thinking, I guess, that if I passed my eyes over the print, I was somehow reading the book. If I didn't "get" the themes, the intricate plots, the symbolism, the complicated interplay of characters – in other words, all that the professor thought was teachable and thus testable, it was my fault. I was told to read a Dickens a novel a week to be ready for the seminars, and *Ulysses* was assigned, no doubt aspirationally, as suggested extra reading. DH Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, not to mention Shakespeare – all those beautiful magnificent writers – were no more than fodder for the grading machine. Harvesting content and analysis was the name of the game. The experiential and emotional sides of reading were considered not to be relevant for the classroom. But I saw that literature should offer us both intellectual ***and*** emotional experience. It should be an exercise in empathy, and a communion with actual narrative voices one could listen to in either one's head or, in my opinion, better still, have it channeled to us through the interpretive abilities of special narrators who advance the story in a steady pace with no jumpy pre or re-reading that forces us to take the beautifully crafted language in large gulps before extracting what we judge to be essential meanings. Just as we would not normally read a play and say we have experienced that play as we might with real actors in real time on a stage or a movie, quiet narrative text on a page can be looked on as potential for grand performances…if only we could hear it as the writer wanted us to hear it.

It is crucial to note here that this ability to perform especially unabridged literary fiction well is rare. Those that can do it need to be able to understand on a both intellectual and emotional level the intents and meanings of the author as well as have the natural reading abilities, vocal flexibilities and perhaps most importantly, the imaginations to bring the literature into the interior spaces of the listeners. To name a few: Mark Hammer's performance of William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, Lynn Thigpen's performance of Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (which you will hear in a minute*)*, Grover Gardner's performance of John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*, Frank Muller's performance of *Moby Dick* (which you will also hear*)*, David Rintoul's performance of Thomas Mann's T*he Magic Mountain*. Recently I have immersed myself in the massive novels (averaging thirty hours each) of Charles Dickens: *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and have recently finished Dickens' delightful 900 page (35 hour!) *The Pickwick Papers*. I regret not one moment of my listening to these transporting performances. More than anything, I am grateful to have had the privilege.

But allow me to show you what I mean. Here is the first superstar of audiobook narration, Frank Muller, reading the opening lines to Herman Melville's Moby Dick. Insert # 9 .

And here is Lynn Thigpen reading a small section of Ernest J. Gaines' underappreciated novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* which in my opinion would be an excellent replacement for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* which suffers from an equivocal depiction of Jim. Insert #10

And finally let's listen to Simon Vance performing a small but lively section of Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* in which the volatile but big-hearted North Yorkshireman, John Bowdrie, pays tribute to life and the joys of eating. (Directly from Audible, Chapter 42 of Nicholas Nickleby) .

In spite of all those numberless scholarly papers, treatises, lectures, and colloquia studying these writers, I claim that they would be hard pressed to acknowledge and appreciate the scope and range of the voices of these writers as well as do these gifted oral interpreters. Just as I think that no one understands Shakespeare better on a visceral and emotional level than the skilled actors who fit their roles into the web of his amazing stories by giving clear meaning to his spoken language. For with Shakespeare, as with all good drama and narrative fiction , the creative magic resides in the voices coming alive.

A necessary but fortuitous enhancement to my listening to mainly literary fiction in unabridged form is that since I am no longer driving a car on my commute, which was the natural incentive to my not dying by falling asleep when being read to, I now follow along with the book on my lap. A hybrid approach. The ancillary benefits of this are that one can see the literary performance occurring in the text as well as hear it which anchors the comprehension even more completely on the art of the written words dancing and singing in front of one's eyes. The lulling nature of being read to and dropping off into sleep is greatly diminished.. Not much has moved me more than listening to Sean Barrett interpret the passages on the death of poor Tom in Dickens' *Bleak House* or Wendell Berry interpreting a chapter from *The Hamlet* called "Spotted Horses." A side benefit is one's spelling and punctuation are always getting a good review. Listening, or, if you excuse the coinage, " lap listening," is now my favorite way of experiencing literature. I go back to my mother reading nursery rhymes to me, my reading stories to my own children, back to those pre-television days when people enjoyed reading stories to each other for entertainment, relaxation, and enlightenment, back to those early homo sapiens mouthing and inventing words for the utility and sheer joy of sharing the spoken word!

Whether listening to the actual or remembered voices of important people in my own past, or communing with the beautiful language of writers long dead or far away through audiobooks, I am grateful for the talented voices that have made, and continue to make, my world even more worthy of moving through. Storytelling with the magical words of great artists casts a kind of spell on us as surely as our parents or guardians might have done

when we sat on their laps at bedtime and were invited into a wonderland of sights, sound and meaning. Yes, we know that we can read silently, that we ***can*** hear most of the words through either conscious subvocalizations or the direct absorption of content and meaning which bypasses sound altogether. **But what's the hurry**? We don't usually gulp fine wine or run through a museum as fast as we can. Literature invites us, for goodness sakes, to take our time, to enjoy the journey.

I will end this encomium to performance literature with an appreciation of, again, the interpretive genius of Frank Muller as he invites us to sit with him on the laps of the gods of literature to listen to the first famous paragraph of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Closing Words: Insert # 6: First paragraph of *A Tale of Two Cities*

Thank you for listening!