

Music is a Friend of Mine

Sermon by Robbie Kohn – July 22, 2018

We all know how bad the traffic is around here, right? Well, I was stuck in traffic one day I thought about how much worse it would be if I didn't have music to listen to. I carry my MP3 player with about 3000 songs on it almost everywhere I go. While listening to music that day, I thought about how I relate music and songs to emotions. Some songs trigger memories. Similar to how smells trigger memories – your grandmother's cakes and cookies, your mom's meatloaf, or your favorite pizza.

When I hear an old and familiar song, I am instantly transported back in time...

Listening to The Beatles reminds me of the dance routines my best friend Mary and I created. We thought we were good enough to win Star Search, if ever we had the opportunity. Beach Boys songs take me back to hanging out at the town pool in summer. At that time, I was timid and awkwardly shy, but my opinion of pesky boys was just beginning to change.

My older brother, Pete, and I bonded over Pink Floyd. Previously we were sworn enemies. He took me to my first concert and watched over me so that I didn't get into trouble. I was 16 and it was my first, live, rock concert. I remember the thrill of seeing and hearing a band perform live, up close, and in person.

Now, I am dancing barefoot on the beach in the still-warm sand to Santana songs at my impromptu high school graduation party. I'm with a boy I dated off and on through high school, and we laughed and talked about where our future would take us. We didn't know then, and I barely know now.

When I hear a Led Zeppelin song, I am in my friend Harold's red 1969 Camaro. We are singing along as we listen to music, cruising aimlessly around town. (If you've seen *Wayne's World*, it was very much like that.) This was our attempt to ease the boredom of living in a small town with nothing else to do on a Saturday night.

Music reminds me of love and relationships. I think of weddings I've attended where the newlyweds danced their first dance to a special song that meant something to them.

I remember my mom and dad laughing and dancing to Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, or Hank Williams. Sadly, this is the only memory I have of them being happy together.

Music from the mid-80s reminds me of one of the best times in my life – as well as one of the saddest. I had friends who became a family to me after losing first my father, and then too soon afterwards, my mother. We shared almost every Saturday night together on the beach, enjoying ocean sounds intermingled with music and conversations. We were bound together by friendship as well as sadness when one of our friends, Tim, committed suicide. Sometimes music from that time period brings tears to my eyes. But most of all, I remember how close we were and how music helped heal our losses.

Maya Angelou said,

“Music was my refuge. I could crawl into a space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.”

Oh yes... I can certainly relate to that.

Music has brought me joy and happiness, and even laugh-out-loud funny. Like my husband, Brian, “jumping” the car in time to Barenaked Ladies' *If I Had a Million Dollars*. Or on road trips when we both sing loudly, and sometimes very badly, to old and familiar songs.

I usually wake up with a song in my head that stays with me all day long. Some people call this an annoying “ear bug”, but I don't mind it. I sometimes play a new song I like over and over so that it's fully integrated into my collection of song friends, because songs truly have been friends during my life.

Music has consoled me when a love relationship failed ... a friend said goodbye... and when I lost loved ones. Listening to music is comforting – every note and lyric a replication of the pain -- eventually pulling me away from the darkness and into the light. That pain, of course, has

long since faded into experience. I can listen to these songs again and remember them without feeling sad -- ever thankful that I survived.

For thousands of years people have sung and created music together. Music is found in every known culture, past and present. In 2009, a 35,000-year-old flute was discovered in a cave in Germany! Isn't that amazing? Although it's the oldest musical instrument ever found, thousands of other instruments have been found in **all** cultures of our world.

Songs are a way of repeating important things we want to remember. In times when most people could not read, hymns were used to teach scriptures from the Bible. Singing hymns helped people remember the lessons they were taught.

Music is used to ease work burdens. Slaves sang songs while picking cotton and performing other work for their masters. The military uses music and songs to keep soldiers' spirits high. Oh, yes, and studies show that if you listen to music while exercising, you exercise longer and harder. So, if you hate exercising or house cleaning, you may want to give it a try.

Dr. John Diamond, an author and physician of holistic medicine, says that the function of music since its beginning, is the spiritual uplifting of the listener so that his or her life energy is enhanced by the experience.

Dr. Diamond contends that music is primarily a property of the right hemisphere of the brain. When an individual becomes stressed, an imbalance occurs between the two hemispheres of the brain. Listening to music rebalances the left and right hemispheres.

Music contains mathematical ratios that make up the whole cosmos. There are numerous studies on the connection between music and learning math. This is called the "Mozart effect". The claim is that exposure to certain types of music very early in life can lead to improved test scores on math. Many of my software programmer colleagues swear that listening to music while they code improves their concentration. They are excellent programmers, so I'll not question that.

But, music is a lot more than notes conforming to mathematical patterns and formulas. Music is exhilarating because of the intricacies of the patterns that occur. Whether or not these patterns resemble math has no significance to many musicians. More often than not, musicians are inclined to practice music because of the wonders and awe that they feel for music, even if they are not aware of the math that is in music.

T. S. Eliot, speaking about a peak experience in his book, The Four Quartets, says,

“... music heard so deeply that it isn’t heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts.”

You are the music. That means you vibrate with that music, and even though you might just be thinking of some flute music or piano music that you’re listening to, it’s the music of the universe that you are vibrating to. It’s the music to which this whole cosmic dance dances, and that flows through you – and that’s your religious moment. And in that moment, you know that you are one with all. You are the music while the music lasts.

Music can take us away from ourselves; it is a power beyond ourselves. Musicians know this and experience this frequently while performing. May I suggest that you close your eyes while listening to music? Let the music transport you to a peaceful place beyond yourself.

<Interlude: Alex plays a beautiful piece of music >

Music is used in healing. Music therapy began in 20th century America when musicians played for World War I and World War II veterans as they recovered from war and emotional wounds in hospitals. There is scientific research to back up the idea that music has healing properties. One study conducted at McGill University in Montreal in 2013 shows that music has anti-anxiety properties. Another study found music was associated with higher levels of an antibody linked to immunity. Our very own Ellen Meadows is a music therapist, as well as my niece Rachel. Both of them find rewards in seeing their patients be more responsive while they are hearing or playing music.

The brain’s reward center responds to music. It releases the chemical dopamine, which is associated with pleasure. Music can also help with the development of language skills, and the

identification and expression of emotions, which are challenges in autism. Music is used in elderly care settings to calm or to stimulate residents. Alzheimer's patients may still recognize songs of their youth or respond emotionally to music. My Uncle Wallace, who recently passed away, often responded to music in the later stages of his Alzheimer's. Where he was withdrawn and quiet, he seemed to perk up and actually try to participate in conversation when music was being played.

Music creates a bond -- a feeling of connectedness. Listening to music puts us in harmony with creation. Music can make us feel happy or sad. It can soothe or energize us. It unquestionably affects our emotions. We tend to listen to music that reflects our mood. When we're happy, we listen to upbeat music. And when we are sad, we listen to slower, moving songs. When we're angry or frustrated, we listen to darker music with heavy guitar, drums and vocals that reflect our level of anger.

Youth poet, Kacey Storm writes in her poem, *Music of My Life*:

The music takes my soul

Takes it through the wind, and around the trees

As the earth turns slowly

Each song makes me wonder what really goes on while I'm asleep.

As a disco ball shines through my dreams

I wish I was awake, as the music plays

And wish instead of school, I'd get to party and dance all day.

As one song makes you move, and happy

The other makes you cry, and sappy.

Each song with its own act,

Life reacts back

It's hard to believe a song, is more than just a song

You could lose your soul, regain it again

Each feeling fills you full

As each tune tells you what to do

Music is certainly spiritual. It reaches out and touches everyone – aware or not. Music brings dark to light, pain to joy. It varies in style and genre, but music brings a message to all those who listen. That message is: believe. Believe that it's okay... Believe that the pain will pass... Believe the rain will go away... Believe that you can be whoever you want to be... Believe that being different is a blessing... Believe that you are who you are, and that there is no one better...

Blessed be.