We all have those songs that, when we heard them at a certain point in our life, cemented a feeling or a memory so strongly that that same feeling or memory floods back every time we hear that music. When I was a child, my father had an inexplicable liking for the Kingston Trio and the Hootenanny TV show. There were a lot of catchy tunes like Tom Dooley and Scotch and Soda, but also songs that, although presented in the precise harmonies and clean-appeal of the Trio, had lyrics whose truth came right through the cardigans and pressed chinos. The Trio took on Guthrie’s *Hard Travelin’, This Land is Your Land* and *Pastures of Plenty*, plus *Charlie and the MTA, Worried Man Blues*, and of course, Seeger’s *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, his early protest against the Vietnam War, or maybe any war. At eight years old, I didn’t know why those songs struck me, they just did, the interplay of the guitar strings and the voices, the words saying something yeah, but more the way the music filled out those words, carried their story even if you didn’t listen to, or couldn’t understand Woody’s and Pete’s deeper meanings until years later. Soon after that for me came the Carter Family, Leadbelly, Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan, the Beatles of course, and interplay between commercial AM radio and songwriters with urgent and sometimes tragic messages. Those songs entered my forming brain, bone and muscle cells, and grew right along with me.

Not content just to listen, I picked up a guitar and tried out some of those songs in my own voice. By 6th grade, I was crooning out Beatles, Dylan, and unavoidably, the Monkees. I was in love yeah, I was a Believer, I couldn’t leave her, if I tried.

Folk music added a big window to my personal living situation and worldview. Later on, Tito Puente, Miles Davis, Thelonius Monk, el son de Cuba, salsa, Peruvian folklorico, BB King, Buddy Guy, Bruce Cockburn and others gave me windows into other cultures, rhythms, melodies, and truths. It was humbling, painful and joyful to see many different kinds of people express their truths. Although their message was different, I could recognize their passion as something I felt as well, through this common pathway. I can’t trade my truth for theirs, or even grasp the complete content of all their messages, but better than any news story, through music I can feel the heart and soul of experiences not my own.

Fast forward a bunch of years through vinyl, 8-tracks, cassettes, CDs and digital online music, through hours and hours of practice, jamming, concert going and listening, quite a few guitar upgrades and songwriting, and the growth and joy that comes with playing music with others, I find out that truth is not just one thing. It’s there to be found in music over and over again, in the hymns we sing here, in the excellent offerings by all the musicians here, in the good old eternal favorites that we sing together, or in the shower or car, and in new
music that comes though the miraculous access we have now for new and old artists. I hope you have some fall-back music that always holds truth for you. And I hope you have room for some new truths as musicians constantly and infinitely arrange the same notes and rhythms into compelling new melodies and stories. Let the music play on.

Foolish Beauty
©
by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

I was conducting a worship service on the Alzheimer’s and dementia wing of a nursing home in Chicago. The support staff didn’t want to move the residents into the place where we usually held worship, and I was new enough to chaplaincy to defer to their desires. Rather than insisting that we carry on in the usual manner, I said it would be fine to hold worship in the room they were sitting in, watching TV and eating. We did turn off the TV, but there was not much more ritual than that to begin the service. I spoke loudly, aware that many of the residents couldn’t hear well, and that others were talking through the service to imagined and real friends in the room. One woman was quietly sobbing, as she often did. It was my one and only time that I was to conduct a service alone in that setting usually I had a fellow chaplain with me, someone to help with the music. But this time, I found myself on my own, with support staff that was tired and uninterested in helping.

I was a little bit nervous, for you never know what will happen on a floor of residents suffering from dementia, and I am not entirely comfortable in spontaneous settings, especially when I am in charge. I felt foolish. I felt foolish leading worship with words that could barely be heard, and I wasn’t sure could be understood even if heard. I felt foolish trying to lead song, without a guitar, without a musician who could give me a decent note to start with. However, I knew from experience, having lead worship with others in the other room with the same residents, that when it came to the hymns, the residents would actually participate. They would sing. They would find the songs from deep in their memories, from deep within their bodies, and quit talking to ghosts and focus on the music. And indeed it happened. But not like before. Not just most of them. This time, they were all there. I somehow found a note to begin Amazing Grace, and they all joined me. Not just the residents who were awake, but those who had been asleep looked up, and the sobbing woman quit sobbing for a moment, and they all sang, those who could talk, and the others listened intently. There were tears in their eyes. And they were all with me for a brief moment. It was something that couldn’t be done with words alone, but the music spoke, as it always does, to a place deeper than any word can articulate. And it was beautiful.