

“Just Gotta Sing the Blues
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Story for All Ages:

“Kinda Blue” by Ann Grifalconi

There I was, setting’ all by myself
Scrooched down in the front yard
Of our Georgia farm,
Pokin’ holes in the dirt for no good reason.
Me and my bent-over shadow – blue

Now it didn’t matter to me
That Mama and Gran’ma was up to the house,
And it didn’t matter
That I was just short of seven.
It didn’t matter to me:
I was seized by that fit of lonely,
And I didn’t care who knew!

I guess it all got started
‘cause I got to missin’ my papa.
(He had died back when I was a baby girl.)
It didn’t seem fair.
“Other kids got papas!” I sniffed.
I was feeling awful sorry for myself.

I looked around, all grumpy-like.
“Nobody ever be there when you need ‘em!”
Brother, sister – always playin’ somewhere else.
Mama, Gran’ma – always busy, busy.
Gran’pa always setting on his porch.
Uncle Dan always in his ol’ cornfields.

“What you doin’ over there, Sissy Honey?”
This-here cheerful voice called out.
“Scratching in the ground like an ol’ wet hen?”

I knowed it was just Uncle Dan,
So I kept diggin’, mumblin’,
“I’m gonna dig me a hole s-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o deep....”

“What’s that you say”
Uncle said, comin’ closer.

I said it louder:
“I said I’m gonna dig me a hole so-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o deep,
I can climb right in and hide!”

'Course, it came out real grumpy-like,
N' Uncle Dan was having none of that!

So he bent his big tall frame
And scooped me right up!
He knowed I loved to be carried
Up on his shoulders, so high.
'How 'bout takin' a ride with me, Sissy?
I'm goin' to visit my corn children!

I shook my head, my mouth tight shut,
Still holdin' on to my grumpy.
'Cat got your tongue?"
Uncle smiled, catchin' on.
But he kept walkin'.
Holdin' me steady with his strong right arm,
He went right ' cross the road to his fields of corn,
Growin' straight and shy and bright
'Neath the shade of Ol' Sadie Mountain.

"See them fling they leafy arms?"
Uncle said. "They wavin' hello!"

The tall cornstalks did look
Like rows of dancers,
Silky white heads tossin' in the sunlight.

And Uncle Dan commenced to wave
Right back at 'em!
(Looked so silly – it made me giggle.)

Then Uncle Dan played right back to me.
'Don't laugh! They talks to me!"

"Oh, Uncle, hush! No such thing!
Just cornstalks, rustlin' in the breeze!"

Uncle laughed.
'Cat don't got your tongue no more!"

Then he pointed proudly back to his corn children.
'I raised 'em from seed, I did.
Watched over 'em.
Why, I bet I knows every one of 'em!"

"Every one?
Oh, Uncle, that couldn't be.
They all 'xactly the same!"

Uncle Dan slid a sly look at me.

“So you thinks they all be the same?
Let’s play us a game n’ find out.”

Settin’ me down on the old fence rail
That snaked around his field,
Uncle Dan, in one long, swingin’ stride,
Reached one of the tall cornstalks,
Pulled off an ear of corn,
And handed it back to me,
Still wrapped in its green husk,
Sayin’, “Peel it open!”:
Which be what I did,
‘Til the little rows of golden corn shone free.

“What you see?” Uncle Dan said.

I pointed. “Corn! Yellow corn.
That’s what I knowed I would see!”

Uncle put his hands upon his hips.
“Now, Sissy, ‘bout the rest –
Think that all the corn in this field
Be jus’ about the same?”

“Well, Uncle,” I said, careful-like,
“Let’s stick to the ears of corn.”
Uncle nodded. (He saw I was sharp!)
I took my time. “Maybe not all the ears
Be the same size...
Or just as ripe...
But one thing for sure,
They all be yellow!”
(I knowed what color corn was –
I ate it all the time!)

Uncle Dan bared his teeth in a foxy grin.
“That so?” he said.
Then he pointed.
“Now, see that pretty one over there?
Just go on over
‘N’ pick yourself one sweet little corn ear, Sissy!”
And he lifted me down to the ground.
“Hurry on, now!”

“But ‘cause I was still
Kinda blue around the edges
I didn’t hurry, not me!
I walked over lazy-like
To pull one off, re-al easy –
To show that I was cool.

(But with my hands
half the size of Uncle's,
It was tough to break one from the stalk!)

But I got me an ear
And held it high to show it off!

Uncle told me, "Open it!"
And then he said, "Look again!"

And then I saw something very strange.

Some of the kernels was red
And some, blue!

I still had my mouth open when Uncle said,
"Now you think they all be the same?"

I shook my head.
"Not me, Uncle!"

Uncle Dan smiled. "See now?
Every one's different."

"Just the way we be?" I asked.

Uncle nodded and took me by the hand.
"Let's take a little get-acquainted walk."
We walked between the gangly cornstalks,
Their leafy arms patting us, friendly-like,
As if to say hello.

Made me feel a little better, somehow.

"Uncle," I said then, "do plants feel?
Could they feel sad
The way we does?"

"Kinda blue?" Uncle smiled and squeezed my hand.
"Why, sure, Sissy, sure they does!"

How you tell?" I joked.
"They talks to you?"

Uncle laughed. "Well, they shows me. They really does!
They gives me signs."
He pointed to a nearby stalk.
"See? This one be drooping.
You touch a leaf –
Gone be limp, sure!"

Now I laughed – didn't he know?
"It just needs water, Uncle! Cain't you see?"

Uncle laughed and touched the top of my head.
"You're right. But now, ain't that jus' like us?
Sometimes we needs waterin', too!
We needs somebody to pay 'tention to us –
Water us when we be sad!"

He crouched down to look at me.
"Now, if you knows someone really well
And you looks very close,
You can always tell if they be happy or sad!"

"So, even when you thinks nobody cares,
Even when you wishes you had your own papa
To watch over you and take care of you..."

I looked up at him. How did he know?
He shook his head.
"Never you mind!
We be there, takin' care!"

"For why? Why would you care?" I asked.

"Cause we loves you – for always –
No matter what. We all be family here."
I reached up and hugged him tight.

And that's when I let go some big tears
I had bottled up inside me.
And that bottle was tilting
And pouring out all my bad feelings
'Til I felt good all over.

Then Uncle Dan hugged me back
And carried me all the way home.
And I knew
There was no way
I would ever get the blues
As long I had so many people around
Who were willin' to water me
When I start to scrooch down.

Meditation:

(This meditation comes from the Rev. Kenneth Reeves from an interview he did with a woman who is a member of a UU congregation in Ohio. It is his writing, spoken from her voice).

"I grew up in the rural south. My parents gave me piano lessons, and I learned the classics. I loved Beethoven's, "Moonlight Sonata."

But in my town of Hopewell, Mississippi, I would hear bits and snatches of the blues. When no one was in the house I tried playing what I heard. I picked out chord changes, and improvised. Pretty soon I was inventing my own white girl blues. I sang and played my sadness. I had my little white girl sadness because my Uncle Bert was doing to me awful things, and "Moonlight Sonata" seemed too nice for my life. So I practiced a throaty moan, while I played and sang my own blues.

I played the blues in secret until my Mama caught me and told me that the music was ugly and only to play pretty music, like, "Moonlight Sonata." Daddy hated the blues and turned red when he heard I'd been playing them. So I obliged. But when I was alone, I played the blues. And when Mama and Papa were home, I tried to sneak the blues into, "Moonlight Sonata."

One night when Mama was out playing bridge and Daddy out getting drunk, I was wailing, my "Own Personal Blues," when Daddy burst in. He grabbed his pistol, and shot the piano. My ears rang for days. I stopped playing all together. Eventually Daddy pushed the piano out onto the back porch where storms beat on it. From then on, I became quiet, as if to become invisible.

I took to walking across town to the train station, just to stand on the platform and look up and down the tracks. Down led to New Orleans and up led to Memphis, which seemed like the other side of the universe, and freedom.

I'd stand on the "whites only" side of the platform quite alone. On the colored side folks lined up with belongings in paper bags and children in hand, heading north, out of the cotton fields, to Memphis. Maybe even Chicago. I envied them. They had each other, a ticket to freedom, and a way to feel better: playing the blues. I had nobody, no freedom, and no blues.

I got a job at the local five and ten, and after a couple years of being invisible, had saved up enough for an escape. I stuffed dollar bills in my mattress, until one day, when I was seventeen, I packed a suitcase, walked myself to the station, and bought me a ticket north.

I thought I was free, but I was so naive. I took my Mama and Daddy and Hopewell, Mississippi, and my Uncle Bert along with me. What I had thought was freedom was only an escape, and when all you do is escape, your shout of freedom is never quite the blues - just a rattling of chains. The most unfree souls I know spend their (whole) lives escaping.

Sermon:

By the time I was seven, I knew something of the blues, even if I wouldn't be able to sing 'em till much later. I knew what Sissy meant when she talked about settin' all by herself, being scrooched down on the ground pokin' holes in the dirt for no good reason. Missing something you can't have. Seized with a powerful fit of lonely. Wanting to dig a hole in the ground sooooo deep you can just crawl in and hide.

By the time I was seven I knew what it was to see people on a rail road platform and feel envy. The thought of gettin' on board, headin' out and movin' on. My brother and I had something close to those blues. So much fussin' and fightin' in our house made it so bad that once we made a plan to pack up our things and head out on our own. We began making a sign that was going to read, "Two kids, free to a good home." We planned on standing out in front of the house until we got an offer. But we were discovered and our escape was foiled. So we kept our blues to ourselves.

But by seven, we were already Unitarian Universalist. Which meant that we wouldn't be singing the blues. Not in church anyway. It wasn't our way. We did a lot of Bach and Brahms in my home church. Good church music. But like Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata – it didn't seem to fit my life. I never figured that UUs didn't understand the blues. That we didn't have hurts and heartbreaks to deal with. I just figured that we had a different approach to dealing with them. We didn't try to sing the blues so much as we tried to out think them.

I always knew UUs were smart. Thoughtful. But thinking didn't seem to help me get over the blues. My thoughts were what had me dig a hole sooooo deep to crawl up inside myself. And it was my blues that just crawled right in after me. Mostly no one noticed. It seemed like one of the biggest parts of me was virtually invisible to the people around me. After a while I sorta realized that thinking wasn't leading to the escape I had wanted or the freedom I was hoping for. I know what it means when you say, "The most unfree souls... (always spend) their (whole) lives escaping."

Like a lot of people, I grew up with the notion that the church, and religion in general, should help. Provide a way to transcend the physical and emotional trials of this life and begin living out of higher spiritual ideals. A way to leave behind the blues and find hope. But it took a very long time for the church to help me do this – years later when they finally got me to SING the blues.

The dilemma of trying to out think the blues is not a new one. The ancient Gnostics used this approach; as did the Greek philosophers including Plato. Plato lived in the 5th century BCE when Greece was in a war they would eventually lose to Sparta. When the newly restored Athenian democracy put his hero, Socrates to death, Plato withdrew from the harsh, imperfect world of reality and chose to deal more with a world of perfect ideas. He didn't get sad or morose. He didn't get the blues. He simply escaped – out of a physical world of pain and uncertainty and into a cerebral world of thoughts and ideas.

UU minister Linda Hansen poses an interesting question around this illustration in the latest version of the UU World. She writes:

"Unitarian Universalists are sometimes dismissive of those who seek refuge in a world beyond this one. But wouldn't it be more honest to admit that (we too do this. That) there is something of Plato in each of us - a desire to transcend our finite condition, to rise above (grief), to escape from fragility and death, to insulate ourselves from the pain of relationships (by retreating to our minds) to become self-sufficient...? Put another way, the question we face is the question of where to find hope. Is it found in transcending this world or in embracing it? Is hope found in (thoughtful) self-sufficiency (from pain) or (by being) in relationship (with it)?"

In other words, Dr. Hansen may be asking this question: 'does all this thinking help Unitarian Universalists escape the blues?' Or might it be time we learned a bit about how to sing the blues? Learn to sing from our own pain so that we are freed from it?

But, of course, that would be hard. Unitarian Universalists are sometimes referred to as "God's frozen people." Which does not bode well if our highest value, as we so often cite, is freedom. How can we be truly free if we can't open up enough to release our pain, every now and then, with a little blues. If you ask me, everyone, everywhere, even Unitarian Universalists, should sing the blues at least once before they die.

Everyone has some blues that they could be singing. I have learned how to sing the 'middle-child-in-a-divorced-household' blues; or the 'I-thought-I-was-getting-married-but-my-baby-had-different-ideas' blues. What is it for you? Have you got your own blues song? Maybe your blues comes from having

recently let go of a good friend. Or maybe a good friend having recently let go of you. Maybe your blues comes from work getting in the way of loving your children; or some catastrophe in your financial situation. Maybe you have been waking up alone when for years you've been wanting to wake up next to someone else. Or maybe you've been waking up next to some one else, when for years you've been wanting to wake up alone. There isn't anybody who doesn't have the goods somewhere in their life, to sing some down home honest, hard boiled blues now and again. And if you really looked at your whole life and can't find something – anything - worth singing the blues for, well, then that's an even better reason to sing the blues. 'Cause, if that's the case, chances are you haven't learned to care about anything enough to give it the power to break your heart. A sure fire sign that you spent your life thinking too much.

Or maybe, just maybe, you have HAD the blues, and just aren't sure how to SING the blues. Let me take a few minutes, then, to stop all of this heavy thinking, and offer something of a blues primer for Unitarian Universalists.

First, if you're getting ready to sing the blues, it's important to understand what is – and ISN'T – the blues.

The blues is something you feel, not something you intellectualize. You don't read ahead and make sure you agree with the words. The blues is something that comes from the heart, passes through your soul and takes hold of your body so that when you hear the blues, you know you gotta DO SOMETHING! Even if that means just snapping your fingers or tapping your feet. And if it's a serious blues song you might just shake your head and grunt.

The blues, at their best will have you laughing one minute, and crying the next. The blues is a public call of a private pain. A call for others to participate in one's personal heartbreak. From their origin with the blacks and poor whites during the period of American reconstruction, they were often called, 'holler backs.' Which meant that you holler back at life for what it is giving you and then wait for the life to holler back at you saying that it understands (because it does – there is very little that anyone of us has felt individually that the world hasn't experienced collectively). That's the blues.

[This part adapted from an anonymous source]

If you're listening to something and can't tell if it's the blues, how do you check? If the guitar is out of tune – on purpose – it's probably the blues. If the singer sounds like he has an old car parked on his chest – it's probably the blues. If the first words you hear are "I woke up this morning..." it's probably the blues.

If the song starts out saying "I got a good woman" it's not the blues - unless - the next line is something nasty, like "I got a good woman-- with the meanest dog in town." That's the blues.

Blues lyrics are usually not terribly intellectual. After you have the first line right, repeat it. Then find something that rhymes. Sort of.

“Got a good woman-- with the meanest dog in town,
Got a good woman-- with the meanest dog in town,
Got teeth like an alligator-- and weighs 'bout 500 pounds.”
And when the last line describes your woman – not the dog – it's the blues.

There are a few rules about the blues that you have to remember. But they're easy to learn. If you're going to sing the blues about your car, it's better if it's a Chevy and Cadillac. It's hard to sing the blues

about Audis or SUVs. Other acceptable blues transportation is a Greyhound bus or a southbound train. Walkin' is always popular with the blues. Not catching a chartered plane – unless it happens to be on fire.

And where you choose to have the blues is important. You can't have the blues in an office park or a shopping mall. The lighting is wrong. Other bad places include Ashrams, Gallery openings or long weekends in the Hamptons. The blues is made for basements and back porches, unnamed highways and county jails. Empty beds and empty houses make for good blues.

It's always easier to sing the blues about being blind; or having shot a man in Memphis; or getting the news that you're gonna die

It's much harder to sing the blues about how you were once blind, but now can see; about having stolen the last piece of pound cake or getting the news that you're going to be taxed on the income from your trust fund.

If you ask for water and your baby gives you gasoline, it's the blues. But don't try and sing the blues about any drink that has an umbrella in it; or bottled Perrier or a Starbucks Caramel Frappuccino. That's not the blues.

And when it comes to dying, if it occurs in a cheap motel or a shotgun shack, it's the blues. Stabbed in the back by a jealous lover is a blues way to die. So is the electric chair, substance abuse, or being denied treatment in an emergency room. If you die during a liposuction treatment, it's not the blues. Don't even try to go there.

One of the important things to remember about any good blues song is that, somewhere in it, the blues always has something to do with dying. Whether it be a friend, a lover, a dream or your dignity, something is lost that you didn't think you could ever live without. And the pain is everywhere you turn. You can't out run it, you can't out hide it, and you can't out think it. You can't crawl into a hole without it crawling in after you. The pain is there to stay until you find a way to spend some time with it. That's the blues.

The great black writer Ralph Ellison understood this. Ellison, as you may know, was famous for writing the American classic, 'The Invisible Man.' But what you may not know was that his book was not intended to be the late night horror movie we've turned it into. It was really about how he felt as a black man in white America. It was a commentary about color, his social standing, and how it made him feel invisible. If someone used racial slurs they weren't seeing who he really was. If they apologized after bumping into him, they did so in sterile politeness without ever looking him in the face. Feeling invisible was Ellison's blues and he sang it in one of the most thoughtful books published in the last century. But in all that good thinking, Ellison realized he couldn't out think his blues. Not until he learned to share his thoughts with others.

Ellison also happened to be a huge fan of the blues. In one of his essays he put together one of the most cogent statements on the purpose of the blues. He writes:

“The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness. To finger one's jagged grain. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of a personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”

In other words, Ellison is saying to us that we need to keep the painful details of our past alive because we are not ready to let go. Not until we can '... finger one's jagged grain' make smooth the rough edges of

our hard times with familiarity and compassion. We are not ready to let our pain go until our soul receives some care and attention. And as much as we think we can do this by our thoughts alone we are wrong. When we have a physical wound, we let a doctor examine it so our body can heal. Singing the blues is the way we let the world see our inner wounds so our soul can heal.

But there's another reason, as well, that we sing the blues – and that is healing. Not only our own, but the healing of others around us. We can never tell just how many people might be changed for hearing our blues. People who, for years, had been trying to outsmart their blues on their own. People who long ago crawled into a hole sooooo deep - and had their blues crawl in behind them. Spending years trying to think their way through their pain. Sometimes hearing our blues, helps them get in touch with their own.

Kind of like Sissy. It's when Uncle Dan shows her he understands her blues, that the book explains, 'that's when I let go some big tears I had bottled up inside me. And that bottle was tilting.' It is those tears that sometimes help to water the things that are drooping around it. Sometimes we all need a little watering. Something we can only get from other people.

My own experience of finding my way out of the blues didn't come until I finally gave up thinking I could outsmart them. Give up avoiding all the things that reminded me of my old blues. I had done this for years and had managed to live a pretty safe life. But a pretty invisible one too. And just as I was beginning to come to grips with the idea that I had actually outsmarted myself out of living fully, I happened to be in church one Sunday. We sang the hymn, 'Precious Lord' and I began to cry. "Take my hand, lead me on, let me stand. I am tired. I am weak. I am worn." This was the blues. It may have been in a church. But it was the blues. And it was my blues. And I was singing them. I realized then that, many years ago, when I dug a hole soooo deep and proceeded to get in and pull my blues in behind me and think my way out, I hadn't dealt with the blues. I had only delayed them.

And then the next lines came. "Through the storm, through the night, lead me on, to the light. Take my hand, Precious Lord, lead me home." I knew from there I had to go back and deal with some hurts I had carried with me for a long while. Learn how to sing them till I could really be free. I had been stupid. Sometimes thinking I was free when I had been dragging my old blues right behind me all the while. Singing that day helped me realize it was about time I let go. But to do that I needed some help. Some people who would listen. Hold my hand. Lead me home.

Tommy Dorsey didn't know he would help me with my blues when he wrote that hymn. He wrote it in 1932 as a way 'to keep the painful details of his own brutal experience alive in his consciousness.' It came several months after he reluctantly left his pregnant wife behind in Chicago to be the featured soloist for a revival in St. Louis. During an encore, with the crowd going wild, a courier came on stage to hand him a telegram. It informed him that his wife had died in labor giving birth to his son. The next day he got another telegram telling him that his son died.

Dorsey railed at the unfairness. He said that for a long while he couldn't do anything. Couldn't play, couldn't write. All he wanted to do was to hide. Crawl in a hole sooooo deep. But a friend encouraged him to try and find his way back to the other things he loved. He wrote this hymn. And in so doing, helped me – and so many more, find their way back as well.

It works that way sometimes. One person getting in touch with her pain helps another find a way through his. Isn't that what the church is all about? A place where we can learn to deal with the pain that we've carried? That others have carried? That the world carries?

The church needs to be in touch with the pain of the world or it simply isn't doing its job. And you can hardly get in touch with the pain of the world if you can't sing the blues a little. Sometimes when we are tired and weak and worn, singing the blues is the only thing that will take us home.

To the Glory of Life.

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