



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Music Sunday: *The Wiz*

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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Welcome to our third annual Broadway Music Sunday. Two years ago we presented excerpts from *Pippin*, and last year *Les Mis*. We look forward to many more Broadway-themed Sundays in the years to come.

When Deb and I were discerning what musical to select for this year, Deb said that one of the musicals she particularly wanted us to do at some point was *The Wiz*. She fell in love with the music during her time as a chorus and theater teacher in a racially diverse high school in Gaithersburg, and wanted to share it here at UUCF. Part of what we hope will happen with each of these music Sundays is that some of you will be inspired to discover—or rediscover—these musicals for yourselves in greater depth.

More generally, our intention is similar to what we do each week: seek wisdom and truth from a rotating set of diverse multicultural sources. Our tradition of Unitarian Universalism is open to finding wisdom and truth not only from science or ancient scriptures, but also from contemporary works of art.

Turning to our focus for today, *The Wiz* opened in 1974 only an hour away from here in Baltimore, Maryland—before moving to Broadway the next year, where it won seven Tony Awards, including Best Musical.

- Did any of you see it on Broadway?
- How about the 1978 film version, which has become a cult classic? That's the one starring Diana Ross (as Dorothy), Michael Jackson (as the Scarecrow), Richard Pryor (as The Wiz),

Lena Horne (as Glinda the Good Witch of the South) and Mabel King as (Evilene, the Wicked Witch of the West). Looking back, although critics at the time uncharitably criticized Diana Ross for being “too old to play Dorothy,” there is a lot to commend her for in this musical role. (She’s Diana Ross after all!) Ross was in her early 30s at the time. Interestingly, Diane Ross is the only member of the film’s principal cast who is still alive today. (Who’s too young now?!)

- Or how about *The Wiz Live!* on TV two years ago?

For what it’s worth, although the 1978 film version has undeniable star power, for singing talent, my favorite is the original Broadway cast recording. But I can also see the appeal of the filmed version, since you get more of the full story and the visuals.

The original Broadway version of *The Wiz* was set like the original *Wizard of Oz*. It was the 1978 film version that changed the setting to New York City. The choice to stage the original Broadway version with an all-black cast—and then to shift to an urban setting with the film version—was part of the black-led Blaxploitation movement in the early 1970s: “Blaxploitation films were originally made specifically for an urban black audience...and were the first to regularly feature soundtracks of funk and soul music and primarily black casts.”

That first wave of Blaxploitation influenced a second wave in the late 1980s and early 1990s both in the *cinema*—with black filmmakers such as Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* and John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood*—and in *music*, especially with hip-hop culture. You can also see strong Blaxploitation influences in many of the films of Quentin Tarantino. But I’m starting to get a little far afield from *The Wiz*.

To move in the other direction, Broadway’s version of *The Wiz* was released on the 75th anniversary of Frank Baum’s classic children’s novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, originally published in 1900. Baum wrote thirteen additional Oz books, and the famous film adaptation starring Judy Garland was released in 1939.

Now, I’ll get out of the way shortly so that we can get to the music. But if you know me, you know that we can’t plan a Sunday around anything regarding *The Wizard of Oz* without me inviting you to consider some of the nerdy allegorical interpretations of that mythology. As detailed in Ranjit Dighe’s The Historian’s Wizard of Oz: Reading L. Frank Baum’s Classic as a Political and Monetary Allegory, it is interesting to note that although the original book was

published in 1900 and the first film version in 1939, the allegorical interpretation did not break into popular consciousness until 1964, when a high school history teacher named Henry Littlefield published an article titled “The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism” which invited readers to look beneath the surface story to see a symbolic allegory about U.S. economics and politics in the 1890s, when Baum was writing his book (1).

As far as scholars can tell, “Baum left behind no concrete evidence that he wrote the book as a political allegory, and...virtually nobody read it as one until more than sixty years later (x). Baum died in 1919 at age 62, more than four decades too early for anyone to ask him directly about potential monetary symbolism in his writing. Of course, even if authors are still alive, sometimes they misrepresent their intentions to critics for a variety of reasons (42). Moreover, sometimes writers *unconsciously* incorporate symbols and archetypes into their fiction without intent.

Proponents of the allegorical interpretation see *The Wizard of Oz* in all its versions as being about the plight of western farmers in the late nineteenth century, who had been economically devastated by deflation (falling prices) in the decades following the Civil War. In 1896, William Jennings Bryan was the presidential nominee for both the Democrats and the People’s (Populist) Party. At the 1896 Democratic National Convention, he delivered his famous “Cross of Gold” speech against the gold standard in which he proclaimed, “You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” Instead, on behalf of western farmers, he called for “free silver”—“that the government stamp silver bullion into coins, upon demand, to increase the money supply and end the deflation” (2).

As we proceed with the story, I’ll share some more about the allegorical interpretation, but there are many other universal themes. Indeed, our opening song is about not politics, but parenting. In the wake of an argument over Dorothy’s daydreaming and dawdling, when she is supposed to be working on the farm, Aunt Em regrets her harsh words and laments the distance that has grown between her and her niece. She remembers when Dorothy was younger and longs for ***“The Feeling We Once Had.”***

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Not long after the family conflict between Aunt Em and Dorothy, a tornado picks up Dorothy family's farmhouse—with Dorothy inside—and carries her inexplicably to the land of Oz. According to the populist allegory, Dorothy of Kansas represents the best traits of farmers from the American West ("honest, kindhearted, plucky"). And in this interpretation, it is no coincidence that Dorothy's farmhouse lands precisely on the Wicked Witch of the *East*, who is seen as representing the corrupt "Eastern financial and industrial interests," especially Wall Street (49).

As some of you may recall, although Judy Garland wore "ruby slippers," in both the original novel and in *The Wiz*, Dorothy wore what color slippers? *Silver!* And what did William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech call for? "Free *silver!*" From the populist perspective, financial elites in the East were the ones refusing to incorporate silver into the monetary standard. So here we have a Kansas farm girl, killing the Wicked Witch of the *East(ern financial elites)*, and taking her silver slippers down the yellow (gold!) brick road to the capital city (Oz / Washington, D.C.) where they could petition for permanent change (53). And the name Oz, of course, has been seen as explicitly symbolic of the abbreviation for ounce (oz.), "the unit in which gold and silver were measured" (57). Seriously, this allegorical interpretation goes deep. I am not even going into all the layers and details.

At this point, however, Dorothy is not excited about her potential journey to the capital city. She is homesick, and can only think of all the things she'll do "***Soon As I Get Home.***"

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Dorothy soon comes to accept the reality of her situation and begins her journey. "Ease on Down the Road"—probably the most well-known and popular song from the musical—is *The Wiz*'s R&B take on "Follow the Yellow Brick Road" and "We're Off to See the Wizard."

As I've been listening to and reflecting on the musical in recent days, this song in particular has been intersecting with my meditation practice. I have the most experience with concentration and mindful practices such as noting or breath counting, but recently, I've been exploring some basic aspects of what is known as Mahāmudrā meditation. Whether for Dorothy in a rural land of Oz, in *The Wiz* film's urban setting in New York City, or in our lives today, "Ease on Down the Road" may be easier said than done.

To give even a taste of ease amidst the chaos that can sometimes be our lives, there are some practices from the Mahāmudrā tradition that can help. One of the basic instructions is to imagine yourselves listening to a distant object that you will never be able to hear—such as the stars in the sky. If you are comfortable with doing so, I invite you to imagine yourself lying on the ground, looking up, and listening to the stars in the sky. The goal is to shift yourselves *from* a stressed, constricted, zoomed-in focus on everything you perceive, *to* a more expansive, zoomed-out state of awareness. As you imagine yourself lying down and listening to the stars in the sky, if something difficult passes through your awareness, practice gently repeating to yourself one word, such as “Allowing,” “Releasing,” or “Accepting”—then allow that disturbing thought to pass along down the stream of your consciousness. *[Practice that for a few breaths...then return your attention to the room]* I invite you to experiment with that sentiment as we seek to **“Ease On Down the Road.”**

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As Dorothy’s silver-shoed journey continues down the golden, yellow brick road, she begins to acquire traveling companions. First, she meets the Scarecrow, who has been told that he has “no brains” in his straw head (56). Allegorically, he is a literal “straw man,” a stereotype of a supposed dumb rural farmer (56). We come to see, however, that the Scarecrow is quite shrewd and capable (56).

Next, Dorothy meets the Tin Woodsman, symbolic of workers in the lumber industry, who have increasingly been treated less like humans than robots. The Tin Man’s rust symbolizes prolonged unemployment (60-63), inspiring his call to **“Slide Some Oil To Me.”**

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**Offertory:** “Ease On Down the Road” (Reprise)

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As Dorothy continues down the yellow brick road, she soon encounters her third and final companion for the journey—a lion. Since *lion* rhymes with *Bryan*, the lion has been seen as symbolic of William Jennings Bryan. In the play, he presents himself as mean, but soon proves to be cowardly. After a harrowing fight in the forest in which the lion again gives in to cowardice, Dorothy seeks to embolden him to embrace his true nature and **“Be a Lion.”**

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And so we have come to the end of Act I. Act II opens with the Wicked Witch of the West. She wants the silver slippers that Dorothy took from her sister, and she threatens her supporters that they better not bring her any bad news. And honestly, these days that's a perspective many of us can sympathize with. I'm not talking about self-care, seeking balance, and occasionally taken a media fast or digital fast. I'm talking about the temptation to stop paying attention altogether, and say, "***Don't Nobody Bring Me No Bad News.***"

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Whenever I feel the temptation to say, "Don't bring me any more bad news," I'm reminded of a passage from the spiritual teacher Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) that has particularly stuck with me over the year. Nouwen was a Catholic priest who was both a brilliant academic (who taught at Harvard Divinity School) and a dedicated activist who worked with people with mental and physical handicaps in the L'Arche community. When I think about the many ways that current events can feel toxic to spiritual growth, I am reminded of Nouwen's words:

Not too long ago a priest told me that he canceled his subscription to *The New York Times* because he felt that the endless stories about war, crime, power games and political manipulation only disturbed his mind and heart, and prevented him from meditation and prayer. That is a sad story because it suggests that only by denying the world can you live in it, that only by surrounding yourself by an artificial, self-induced quietude can you live a spiritual life. A real spiritual life does exactly the opposite: it makes us so alert and aware of the world around us, that all that is and happens becomes part of our contemplation and meditation and invites us to a free and fearless response (50).

That's a profound insight: the fruit of spiritual practice is not necessarily what happens on your knees or on your meditation cushion—but instead, the ways that contemplative practice changes how we are in world, such that every part of our daily life becomes “part of our contemplation and meditation and invites us to a free and fearless response.”

This insight from the *contemplative* tradition is powerful. At the same time, the *activist* tradition reminds us that it is equally important to remember that through working together we

can also change the world to be less corrupt, so that there is less bad news. Next week, my sermon will be on “Resistance and Resilience.” And it is sometimes the case that the tipping points in overthrowing authoritarians and dictators are small but highly symbolic actions. In the magical world of Oz the turning point is Dorothy throwing a bucket of water on the Wicked Witch—creating the possibility for a ***“Brand New Day”***

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Having defeated the Wicked Witch of the West, Dorothy and company think they are now home free—only to discover that the Wiz is a con man who tries to go back on his promises. The lion accidentally exposes his illusions, and it turns out the fabled, frightening, and seemingly all-powerful Wizard of Oz is actually just a balloonist from Omaha named Herman Smith, whose balloon was blown by the cyclone into Oz, similarly to how the cyclone carried Dorothy’s farmhouse there. Fortunately, Glinda, the Good Witch of the South, appears to remind Dorothy and her friends that throughout their journey they have many times shown that the traits they are seeking from the Wiz—courage, intellect, and heart—are already present within themselves. They don’t need the external validation of some alleged wizard. Each of them just needs to ***“Believe In Yourself.”***

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Courage, intelligence, and heart are what Dorothy’s companions sought. But what Dorothy wanted was to find a way back to Kansas. It turns out that Dorothy’s way home was also with her all along. As we prepare to listen to this final solo, I invite you to consider, what are the various meanings of the word “home” to you? Around the holidays each year, one of my mentors used to say, “May we be grateful for family members who are like friends—and for friends who are like family.” The invitation and challenge is discern the ways in which we can—and can’t—go ***“Home.”***

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**“Everybody Rejoice” (reprise)**

**Thank you’s & Bsows**

**Benediction**

**Postlude:** “Ease on Down the Road” (instrumental reprise)