

Tapping Inner Freedom

By Raimonda Mikatavage

“Rugged the breast that music cannot tame.”
—John Codrington Bampfylde, *Sonnet in Praise of Delia*

“Music exalts each joy, allays each grief,
Expels diseases, softens every pain,
Subdues the rage of poison, and the plague.”
—John Armstrong, *Art of Preserving Health*
(bk. IV, l. 512)

Instead of traveling to the Middle East with a posse—okay, delegation—of hundreds of political thinkers and staff, the president of the United States would accomplish more if he were accompanied by Native Deen, a Muslim hip-hop band.

In most significant human experiences, music plays a role. Think of a wedding, a time when two different people, sometimes complete opposites of one another, come together to form a union. In virtually every culture, in every nation, there is music at the event. In Hindu weddings, for example, the groom even says something like, “I am the words and you are the melody; I am the melody and you are the words.”

Thus, every meeting to promote peace and the road map between Israel and the Palestinians—although a separation of sorts, but a union in mind—should also be accompanied by music.

On June 12, 2003, at a plenary conference on “U.S. Communications with Muslim Communities,” organized by the Center for the Study of the Presidency and sponsored by the McCormick Tribune Foundation, pollster John Zogby, president and CEO of Zogby International, stressed several times that the “globalization of music” is a key component to reaching out to Muslims, in the United States and the Middle East. He also stressed that the “Palestinian issue” ranks first and foremost in the minds of Muslims. “This is not even a political issue,” he said. “It’s in the bloodstream.”

At the same conference, Shamil Idriss, Chief Operating Officer for Search for Common Ground, stated that “sustained dialogue is insufficient...there needs to be an openness...credibility of the message depends on where the message comes from....Perception is as important as facts and is

based on emotion, gut instinct, insecurities and fears.”

Gregory Lagana, associate director for Global Communications in the Office of Global Communities for the White House, readily admitted that “government does not do emotion very well.” And Geoffrey Cowan, dean of Annenberg School for Communications and former director of the International Broadcasting Bureau, praised music-based efforts from Radio Sawa.

These highly respected experts in their field were on the same page. One must accept the fact that the *new* Middle Eastern bloodstream—with the priorities of freedom of expression, acceptance of moderation, and rejection of extremism, positive action, and an overall focus on mental health—cannot be tapped by bread or speech alone.

I gather that the youth are more apt to listen to blonde-haired Jewel piping out “Follow your heart, your intuition,” rather than a cleric saying, “Follow the Qur’an.” Of course, there are those who do listen to clerics, but even then, if there’s a catchy song about moderate religious practices, younger audiences are more apt to tune in and pay attention. Fortunately and unfortunately, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Al-Qaeda are not known for their musical talents. (If they were, they would probably select something like Pearl Jam’s “Garden [of Stone]” or Blue Öyster Cult’s “Don’t Fear the Reaper” as their theme song.)

The field is wide open for moderate interpretations of crossover scripture set to rhythm and rhyme, in Arabic and Hebrew. The Virginia-based band Native Deen is one such example, mixing Islamic scripture with inspirational lyrics. Any variety of artists, lyricists, popular themes, and musical genres could work well to reach out to Muslim and Jewish youth. They are also likely to appeal to Christian audiences. Similarities will become more obvious as the messages across the board are about God, worship, and a spiritual life.

I believe that we’ll first have to sing a new song together, before we walk the road to peace.

Sar Amiel, who was raised in Israel and founded the Washington-based independent label Positive Music Works, says, “We live in a time where music needs to play a more medicinal role....Songs that have been written throughout the ages, songs to inspire people to think the right thoughts, do the right things, songs that motivate and inspire them

in helping their families escalate to more peaceful lives and more wholesome lives" (from the video *The Pioneer Living*[®] Series, PBS).

The commonalities among our American youth and the youth in the Middle East are numerous and thus the "battle of ideas" can be predictable. A kid's world is largely comprised of friends, music, television, books, teachers, and parents—often in that order of influence. So it seems reasonable to deduce that we look to these as sources and methods for learning.

More learning should thus take place in small groups and smaller classrooms, basically among friends. Music, arts, and the humanities should be utilized to inspire, motivate, and explain with creativity and passion. Starting in middle school, more lessons should pertain to future work opportunities around the world so kids can associate learning about diverse cultures with achievement, income, and personal fulfillment.

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, reflects on the power of music as presented in our myths:

As Ulysses neared the island of the Sirens, he had himself strapped to the ship's mast after his sailors stuffed their ears with wax to try to avoid the enticement of the Sirens' music. Orpheus was able to ignore the Sirens' songs by playing his own beautiful music that rendered them unalluring. Over \$1.4 billion per year of new juvenile detention facilities and prisons are not stanching the growing alienation and violence among our young,

who lack a purposeful, joyful song to sing in life—a song that is learned first in the home and reinforced in school and in other community institutions and by the religious and political values and climate in our society.

(Source: www.pta.org/commonsense/1_welcome/14_meet.html, quoting from *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours*, Beacon Press, 1992)

We need to impress young people here and in the Middle East at their deepest core—not necessarily to believe in America, but rather, to believe in themselves and in what *could be possible* for their often confusing and tumultuous lives.

If we fail American youth, we will fail Middle Eastern youth. To date, it cannot be said that we are winning to a large extent with either. This is not a good time to stake our future on more of the same. Rather, it is high time to be "bothered with the nonsense" of what "manly" men too often ignore—stuff like the arts and the humanities, stuff with emotion and passion, stuff that unleashes disciplined inner freedom. 📖

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