

*My Heroes Have Always Been Divas*  
Rev. Durrell Watkins (Lent 1, 2008)  
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#### THE GOOD NEWS PROCLAIMED

I am of an age where I can remember record albums. I am even of an age where I can remember being able to check out record albums at the public library.

Now, in Southwest Arkansas where I spent my early childhood, one could go from village to dell without ever finding a record store that sold Broadway cast albums. Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn – that coal miner’s daughter, Glen Campbell (a native of Delight, AR)...those artists had albums that seemed to grow on trees; but a tough as nails, larger than life Broadway diva...seemed to be a mythological creature like Sasquatch or the Loch Ness Monster. We heard about them, but no one you knew had ever actually seen them.

But even tiny towns had libraries, and by some strange miracle, the musical theatre cast albums were ALWAYS available...no one ever checked them out...except for one atypical little boy who for multiple years made his father take him to the public library to check out over and over again the Ethel Merman/Jack Klugman cast album of *Gypsy*. “How do you like those egg rolls Mr. Goldstone?”

Not the 1973 London cast album with Angela Lansbury, though it was fabulous. Not the 1962 film soundtrack with Rosalind Russell and Karl Malden and Natalie Wood. But the 1959, 7 years before my birth, 1959 cast album with the incomparable Ethel Merman. I couldn’t find a store that sold it back then, but trust me I own it today (as a compact disc, of course).

That sounds a little silly, and a little fey (yes, JUST a little). But it was important to me. I couldn’t have told you why at the time, but it was.

I was playing Judd Fry my junior year in high school in our school’s production of Roger and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* And during rehearsals for that show, Ethel Merman died. (How can a goddess die?) The cast was shocked when I showed up for rehearsal...they all thought I would be too devastated to rehearse. I’m 17 years old and the whole school knows that the death of a Broadway legend will probably incapacitate me...I’m surprised I wasn’t beat up more.

In any case, I DID show up for rehearsal. After all, it was Ethel Merman who belted out in *Annie Get Your Gun*, “You get word before the show has started that your favorite uncle died at dawn; top of that, your ma and pa have parted - you’re broken-hearted, but you go on...” I would have cast a show on the night of Merman’s death if I had to just to honor her memory.

Now I said that I couldn’t tell you when I was 10 or 12 or 17 or even 20 or 30 why Ethel Merman and Tyne Dally and Patti LuPone and Angela Lansbury and Barbra Streisand and Betty Buckley and Bette Midler and Jennifer Holiday and other members of the diva pantheon somehow resided in my soul. But I can tell you now.

These figures...on stage, in film, on cast albums...they were heroic. I’m talking about what they represented when they performed their characters. These women were smarter than the sexist system in which they operated. They were stronger than the men who seemed to be running the world. They were wiser, more interesting, more compassionate or more vicious (depending on the role), they were just MORE. They “chose” to be beautiful, even if they didn’t meet society’s standards of beauty. They “chose” to envision possibilities and to pursue them, and to seize them and to celebrate them.

They seemed to say, “You can be more than you’ve been told you can be; you can be more than you’ve allowed yourself to be so far.” They seemed to say, “Look at me...I’m creating a world

where who I am is valuable and important and wonderful.” They seemed to invite and encourage me to follow their example.

Be more. If they knock you down, rise again. If they judge you, claim your own authority. If they want to make you sad, insist on being joyous. If they laugh at you, laugh with them and celebrate how your very essence can call forth joy in others. Be stronger, be smarter, be wiser, be more interesting...be YOU and let that be as magical and as wonderful as it is supposed to be.

The characters these women played were heroes that stormed in from the margins and took control of their own lives and their own destinies. These heroes with every larger than life gesture and every belted out lyric were looking me in the eye and saying, “follow my example...believe in yourself.”

I was 19 when the North Carolina Repertory came to my hometown to perform *A Chorus Line*. About that same time, the film version was released. I saw the North Carolina Rep and then I saw the movie half a dozen times. And I remember sitting in the theatre and then in the cinema feeling at home. Just as I was, these characters were peering into my soul and expressing my hopes and showing me that I could thrive no matter what my situation happened to be.

Those characters were telling their stories on that stage and on the screen, but they were also telling my story. They were looking for meaning and sharing their journeys, and inviting me to come along.

It felt like worship. It felt sacred. It felt inviting. It felt surprisingly real. And I remember thinking, “This is what religion should do. Religion shouldn’t tell me who I ought to be; it should reflect back to me what I am so that I can see not only what needs improving but also what is already very good. Religion should make me feel welcome and invited, just as I am. Religion should help me express hope. Religion should tell a story that I believe is my story.”

And not long after that, I decided that I would do what I could to help people experience in church what I experienced listening to the *Gypsy* cast album or watching a performance of *A Chorus Line*.

Jesus was walking along, and he saw a man named Matthew. Matthew had a job that others didn’t particularly view as noble. Matthew had friends who were routinely judged harshly by members of the community. In fact, some of his friends were just called “sinners” by those who felt qualified to make such judgments. Matthew had a questionable job and questionable friends. And Jesus looks at him and sees his sacred value...not the judgments of others, but the reality of his sacred value and he says very simply and authentically, “Follow me.” An invitation. No strings attached, no judgments, just an invitation...Come with me. Follow me. Go with me. And Matthew did.

The final line of our gospel reading today says, “I’m here to call sinners, not the righteous.” In light of how the rest of the passage reads, let me tell you how I hear that...“I’m here to affirm the people you call sinners, not those who are self-righteous.”

Now, not everyone agreed with this kind of “come as you are” hospitality. And when the religious segregationists challenged Jesus on his choice to see the good in everyone, he quoted the prophet Hosea. Hosea thought that God desired mercy rather than sacrifice. Whenever Jesus quotes scripture, it is usually to make a progressive, inclusive, liberating point. Jesus didn’t need to sacrifice people who were different. He didn’t need to hurt anyone or anything to please God; what God wants is love. Jesus saw the divine spark in all people and he fanned that sacred flame as he said, “Follow me!” No wonder they often did.

Our Lenten journeys can lead us to Easter joy. The Divine Voice is calling us on that journey...calling toward promise and potential and possibility. That voice comes to us in many

ways. *My heroes have always been divas.* Maybe your heroes were athletes, or instrumentalists, or drag queens, or teachers, or preachers. But maybe what we saw in those heroes was possibility, and maybe we intuitively felt that they were inviting us to follow our dreams and to believe in ourselves. And maybe that's how God speaks sometimes...maybe our heroes were really the voice of God saying, "Come with me...yes, you, just as you are. Come with me." Others may not have seen our potential, but our heroes helped us see it for ourselves. God was saying through them, as Jesus said, "I'm here for you; follow me." And we can. This is the good news. Amen.

#### THE GOOD NEWS AFFIRMED

I follow Christ to liberation.

I follow Christ to empowerment.

I follow Christ to peace.

I follow Christ to happiness.

I follow Christ to my highest good.

And so it is!

#### THE GOOD NEWS REPEATED

Psychologist Robert Holden writes, "Self-acceptance transforms your perception of yourself. The more you commit to self-acceptance, the more you will begin to see that there is nothing about the real you that is wrong, bad, not okay or not enough. Self-acceptance inspires all sorts of personal alchemy and self-realization."