

**A Pete Seeger Singalong Celebration,
written by Susan Ruttan
and delivered by several church members at the Unitarian Church of
Edmonton,
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Opening Words: From a 2006 profile of Pete Seeger in the New Yorker magazine. In the article, author Alec Wilkinson quotes a man who was driving along a New York state highway about five years ago and saw a tall old man standing in the rain beside the road:

He's standing here all by himself and he's holding up a big piece of cardboard that clearly has something written on it. Cars and trucks are going by him. He's getting wet. He's holding the homemade sign above his head – he's very tall and his chin is raised the way he does when he sings – and he's turning the sign in a semicircle so that drivers can see it as they pass, and some people are honking and waving at him and some are giving him the finger.

He didn't call the newspapers and say, "I'm Pete Seeger and here's what I'm going to do." He's just standing out there in the cold and the sleet like a scarecrow. I go a little bit down the road so that I can turn and come back, and when I get him in view, the solitary and elderly figure, I see that what's written on the sign is "Peace."

Pete Seeger kept a monthly vigil against the war in Iraq for years, rain or snow or sunshine. To him, the point is to ask people to consider the terrible situation the human race has drifted into, one in which war and genocide appear as rational, strategic decisions.

Seeger and UUs: We gather today to celebrate the life and achievements of American folk singer and activist Pete Seeger. Many Unitarians wish to claim him as one of their own. It's a claim we mustn't push too far. Seeger has never been a churchgoer, although in recent years he's been a member of a UU church in New York. Here's what he said in an interview two years ago:

My mother was briefly a member of the Unitarian Church. I actually joined the Community Church [a Unitarian-Universalist church] on 35th Street, in New York, because I had a chorus and we needed a place to rehearse. [My wife] Toshi thinks it was very dishonest of me to join a church simply because I needed to rehearse the chorus. But I've been on good terms with them ever since. And sung for them occasionally. And if I ever sing at all now, I would do it down there.

I feel most spiritual when I'm out in the woods. I feel part of nature. Or looking up at the stars. [I used to say] I was an atheist. Now I say, it's all according to your definition of God. According to my definition of God, I'm not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes I'm looking at God. Whenever I'm listening to something I'm listening to God.

So maybe we can call Seeger a Unitarian fellow traveler. And we can see in him

many of the values and qualities we most admire – his commitment to social justice, his selflessness, his love of nature and environmental causes, his love of songs and singing, his belief in community, and the joyfulness that has infused his life.

Seeger and Children: David Dunaway, author of the Seeger biography *How Can I Keep from Singing*, says Pete Seeger, along with the great Paul Robeson, was the American most persecuted by the anti-communist blacklist. Seeger had about two years of fame and fortune with the Weavers between 1950 and 1952, but after that the witch hunt and blacklist barred him from performing in normal venues throughout much of the 1950s and 1960s.

He turned instead to performing for kids, in schools, at summer camps, and of course on college campuses. He introduced all sorts of folk songs to children. The witch hunters didn't bother him when he sang to kids, thinking Seeger had been defeated. But the children he sang to in the 1950s became the folkies and protest marchers and activists of the 1960s. Pete Seeger was one of their teachers. He has continued to sing to children throughout his life. Speaker:

Seeger as activist: Make no mistake: Pete Seeger was a radical. He was closely associated with the Communist Party USA and with the labour movement throughout the 1930s and 40s.

He wasn't a very doctrinaire communist, and didn't attend many meetings, but he believed in worker's rights and social justice and uplifting those who were poor and struggling.

Seeger was a middle-class guy, but as a young man he sought the experience of those who were down and out in America. In 1940 he and Woody Guthrie travelled across the United States by car, sleeping where they could and singing for their supper. Later that year, Seeger made a solo trip across the country, this time riding the rails and singing for his meals.

Throughout his life he has fought for a thousand causes – civil rights, Vietnam protests, farm workers' rights, union fights, cleaning up the Hudson River. In almost all cases, his contribution has been singing, playing his banjo, and leading his audience in song.

He was in Selma, Alabama for the famous march led by Dr. Martin Luther King in 1965. He was in Managua, Nicaragua in 1986 to protest U.S. government action– a young Unitarian ministerial student named Brian Kiely was there as well, and got to introduce Seeger to the crowd outside the U.S. embassy there.

His 90th birthday celebration held this April in Madison Square Garden, a huge concert with many famous performers, was a fund raiser for the organization fighting to clean up the Hudson.

In his New Yorker article, Alec Wilkinson wrote:

Seeger's politics are of the most extravagantly conservative kind. He believes ardently in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. His interpretation of them is literal. In all his years of activism, through the movements for workers' rights and civil rights, the movement against the Vietnam War, and the ecological movement, in all of which he figured prominently, there is no conceit that he has more emphatically embraced than that all human beings are created equal. In the early and middle part of the twentieth century, such a conviction made a person not a patriot but a socialist.

When Seeger moved to the country in 1949, he held a couple of meetings with a middle-aged couple, the only other Communists around, then he quit the Party. "I thought it was pointless," he said. "I realized I could sing the same songs I sang whether I belonged to the Communist Party or not, and I never liked the idea anyway of belonging to a secret organization."

Seeger as environmentalist: In the late 1960s, after decades of activism for political and social causes around the world, Pete Seeger turned his attention to his own back yard.

He and his wife Toshi had lived for 20 years in a log cabin they'd built themselves on the banks of the Hudson River, a river that was horribly polluted. Living in harmony with nature had always been important to Seeger. Now he made it a priority, forming a group that raised money to build an old-fashioned boat called a sloop, which could sail up and down the Hudson and advocate a cleanup of the river.

Some of his former activist friends were puzzled by and even critical of his move. To them at that time, environmentalism seemed so much less important than political causes like the Vietnam war. They were wrong, of course. Pete Seeger was simply ahead of the curve in recognizing the importance of the environment and of acting locally.

Seeger and participation: Participation has been a central belief of Pete Seeger throughout his life. He has lived his truth, stood up for what he believed, got involved, reached out to others. He's been the opposite of those people today who don't pay attention to public issues and increasingly don't vote in elections.

Public participation was never his whole life, of course. There's always been a part of Seeger that needed to retreat to the countryside, to walk in the woods and be quiet and be part of nature. But engagement in public issues has been central. And his engagement has always taken the form of music – he even offered to sing for the House Un-American Activities Committee when they called him to testify in 1955. And although he sang political and social protest songs, he always did so joyfully. He has been an eternal optimist, believing that good will ultimately triumph.

Participation has always been central to Pete Seeger's musical career as well. He likes singing with people, not at them. As a young man in 1939 in New York, Seeger helped form a group called the Almanac Singers that sang at union and political events. They were so reluctant to toot their own individual horns that they didn't even put their names on their record album. Later, as a solo performer, Pete Seeger always wanted the audience to sing with him. And although he wrote his own songs, he was happy to sing the songs of others.

A parable from Pete Seeger:

Imagine a big seesaw. One end is on the ground, held down by a bushel basket half full of rocks. The other end of the seesaw is up in the air with the bushel basket on it one-quarter full of sand. Some of us have teaspoons and are trying to fill it. Most people are scoffing. "It's leaking out as fast as you put it in."

But we say "No". We're watching closely, and it's a little more full than it was. And we're getting more and more people with teaspoons. One of these days that whole seesaw will go zoop! in the opposite direction. People will say, "Gee, how did it happen so suddenly?"

Us and our teaspoons over thousands of years. Keep in mind that we have to keep using our teaspoons because the basket does leak. Are you in the Teaspoon Brigade?

