

## **Bowie Sermon- Steve Wilson**

Before I begin I would like to say to Kathryn Lee that moving forward, when I think about Bowie, I will think about writing this sermon

So, thank you. This exercise was enlightening, maybe even healing.

If I were to try to put words to the wordless sensibility of the way I viewed Bowie as a teen were that Bowie seemed needy, un-necessarily fanciful. There was something forced about his eccentricity.

I got that he was a Rock God, but I don't think I knew why. Honestly, ...almost embarrassingly, almost until I became a UU, I didn't really, really get that people would need a presence like his, and if they did, that I wanted them to have it.

Although, as I confessed in the intro I was a little too conservative to be a Bowie fan, and lack sacred memories of listening to him etched into my history, I may have overstated it.

I never thought Bowie was too weird not to sing along to "Ch, Ch, Ch, Changes," or the beautifully haunting "Ground control to Major Tom,"

I always loved the simplistic rhythm of "Under-Pressure, "dun, dun, dun, duttle don;" always thought the little drummer boy song he did with Bing Crosby was touching; and would have

loved to have been a fly in the room when he co-wrote “Fame” with John Lennon.

I liked Bowie enough...

but to stand here and not confess that Bowie was a little weird and un-necessary to my teenage self would be to deceitful.

I don't feel that way any-more. I get it now. But, Bowie didn't make me a Bowie fan, becoming a UU did. Becoming a UU changed my values, made me “Turn to face the strange” as Bowie sung.

I'm not alarmed that Kathryn choose Bowie as the topic of a sermon.

And she made her choice with a clarity and quickness, that I found charming.

Bowie has an embodied gospel of values that are fundamentally spiritual.

I may not have always seen that, but I do now.

Writing this sermon has won me over.

Bowie died Jan 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at 69 years of age from Liver cancer.

He was born in un-bowie like obscurity on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1947 to a middle-class British couple in London.

His Dad worked for a charity, his Mom was a waitress in a theatre.

As a child he was described as precocious, single minded, talented, artistic. He liked to brawl, and it was a fight that permanently damaged one of his eyes, which you can almost pick up if you look at him long enough.

Like most of the young Brits of his generation who grew into rock stars hearing American Rhythm and Blues, essentially “black music” was revelatory to him. When our young hero heard Little Richard’s Tutti-Frutti, he exclaimed that he had heard God. In short order he began mimicking the moves of Elvis Presley-with whom he celebrates a birthday and began to really play music. His first instrument was a recorder.

By the time he graduated from high school he could play the ukulele, the bass, and the piano. Bowie passed on college, probably fearing it would interfere with his already sharp learning curve. On his own initiative he started exploring Jazz and began playing the alto saxophone.

Like nearly everyone who ever became a Rock God, before he transcended into music and movie stardom in his early 20’s our Saint of personal transformation played in a lot of bands.

Unlike hardly any other Rockstar he studied mime, took dance lessons, and was trained in Avant-garde theatre. I would say he paid attention. He learned relentlessly, digested new music and art almost manically his whole life. I hadn’t known that.

For all his flamboyance, Bowie was determined and talented. Hindsight aside it is impossible to think of Bowie as not becoming a star. However, circumstance always has a vote in how we turn out, and we are likely sitting here and listening to his story because five days before the Apollo 11 rocket launched, (On 11 July 1969), Bowie released his space-oriented single “Space Oddity.” The mix of Bowie’s imagination, talent, and a public excited about the stars pushed Bowie’s album into the UK pop top ten.

Bowie followed up “Space Oddity” with perhaps the most famous of his characters, “Ziggy Stardust.” Like so many kids who wander around the lunchroom wondering where they fit, Ziggy came to earth with his fellow band of Spiders from Mars to find himself. His characters, and he is a metaphor.

Especially early in his career, Bowie captured the zeitgeist of a population growing a little tired of hippies and tapped the nerve of a generation of people both earnest and angst-full about their identity.

However, as curious and as enduring as Ziggy was, Bowie reminded the surprised NPR host Terry Gross, that Bowie was Ziggy for only about 18 months of his roughly 50-year career. Right. I had lost that.

As one critic suggested, Bowie took the earthy elements of rock and roll that threatened to become mundane, and with a flair of the mythic Bowie sought the cosmic. As Rev. Lissa Anne Gundlach the UU minister said in the World two years ago Bowie’s lyrics soared with his ambition for transformation.

The thing that differentiated Bowie, from other successful musicians who find their niche and master it, is that DB never stopped iterating. In truth, he muted faster and more impatiently, than we were ready for. He did so because he never cared about fame enough to really let us catch up to his creative journey. He was relentless even reckless in his personal evolution as an artist.

In rough order, Bowie famously dropped in and then out of the following styles of music “Rock” “glam,” “plastic soul,” “British jungle,” “industrial,” “Kraut-rock” “pop,” and “electronic.”. His last album, Blackstar, released two days

before he died used jazz musicians and is as weird as anything he did in his twenties.

I never would have guessed this, but Bowie was always saw himself as more creator than performer. He said, “never really liked touring,” ... (because and I paraphrase) he was “more interested in the creative phase of developing an album or musical style, than reproducing it night after night.

Truth is, Bowie had a little stage fright. This his natural fear and insecurity were a major reason in why he so often presented himself “in character.”

Although Bowie was first and perhaps always a singer-songwriter musician. “Rolling Stone” did after all describe him as “the best Rock Star of all time,” Bowie parleyed his music into a nearly equally long acting career. Bowie was performed in stage productions of "The Elephant Man" and just recently on "Lazarus," an off-Broadway musical that's a sequel to his 1976 role in the film "The Man Who Fell to Earth." Off stage, but on screen has also convincingly played a Goblin King, the inventor Nikola Tesla, for whom the car is named. Those of us who gathered here a couple months ago saw him play a convincing Pontius Pilot in The Last Temptation of Christ.”

Bowie had range. Across his chosen disciplines, and likewise within them.

Ready for some accolades

First off, Bowie is one of an elite class of artists like Elvis, Sinatra, Madonna, and Prince who became culturally significant enough to have become identifiable by a single word.

Half-way, ...only “half-way” through his career Bowie was both enshrined in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and achieved a star on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame.

Having never penned a novel, he’s in the Science Fiction Hall of Fame for stretching all our imaginations.

He recently received a lifetime Achievement award from the Grammy’s.

He is the obvious subject of a “David Bowie Is...” exhibit that has toured many museums.

The guy whose music and persona who I have said were “really not my thing” was offered the opportunity to become a British knight.

He turned it down as not -and I quote- “his kinda thing.”

He presently ranks 29<sup>th</sup> on the esteemed list of “The greatest Brits of all time.”

Although I’m more a Jerry Garcia guy than a Bowie one, the guy’s a legend.

The LA transgender chorus annually performs “The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars” album in full. Bowie has recently had both an asteroid belt, and a newly discovered species of spider named after him, I’m not kidding.

Six of “Rolling Stone’s” top 500 albums of all time come from Bowie, and he was named by that Magazine as the most important Rock Star ever. Ever!

The British Paper “The Guardian” called him the most important musician since the Beatles.

His song, Heroes, was credited by Germany’s government as an influence in what finally brought down the Berlin wall.

I am certainly not the most deserving person to stand here telling you this, but Bowie mattered! Matters.

Given his driving almost compulsive penchant for evolution it is probably appropriate that he didn't even start out as David Bowie. Bowie's given name was David Jones, and for all his instinct to innovate, even mutate, he had every intention to stick with his given name, until the Monkeys and their baby-faced lead singer named Davey Jones got famous before he did.

Famously saying, "Nobody was going to make a monkey out of him," the real Davey Jones proceeded then to formally change his name to Tom Jones, until Tom Jones (not even his real name) released the hit "It's Not Unusual" and stole that option away.

Our David ended up settling on his original first name and the famous Texas pioneer Jim Bowie's last name. In perhaps the greatest irony of all, before David forever made "Bowie" mean a poignant, flamboyant bi-sexual musician, "Bowie" was a hunting knife.

No longer.

Interestingly, the man identifiable by a primitively two syllable names was the same person who transformed himself so many times that he joked that even he has nearly forgotten that he originally began his career an overweight Korean woman.

However, for all his characters, and creations, for all his music and movies, to this unworthy officiant one thing stands out—"mention his name to anyone between the ages of 40 and 80, and they know who Bowie is/and what he meant. Bowie's gospel and his followers are about spreading innovation, exploration, creativity, and transformation."

Bowie means freak chic. I wouldn't have ever as a young person either desired to or been courageous enough to put on a dress or paint a lightning bolt across my head. That's not the point. For some he was an angel. He gave an entire generation of thoughtful outsiders, the kids who so frequently would sit alone in the school lunchroom, an icon of cool to hold onto.

Listening to the man describe himself, or simply viewing his career arc from any distance it becomes clear that by the time he had created a persona or a piece of music, often both linked, he was on to something new. Does that sound familiar to Unitarian Universalism? To you, perhaps. What made the man we honor today, so fit to essentially eulogize in a UU church is that Bowie had the same impatience with his craft, as we have for the stuffy redundancies of religion. He really could be our tiny "denomination's" Patron Saint

Austen Petersen's who is the RE director at the UU church in Williamsburg Virginia said

*"The first time I saw Bowie in a movie I was 12 or 13, in the grips of major family illness and had little sense of how to deal with — let's face it, existence itself. Bowie's performance as Thomas Jerome Newton in the man who fell to earth absolutely blew my mind. How could a man who won my heart as Ziggy Stardust also be this naked alien hopping around reminding me of Dorian Gray?"*

*"David Bowie made me feel so much less alone and so much happier than I ever would have been without his existing. I miss knowing he's on the planet. He was my minister of strange, my*



*muse of alienation and made looking like an androgynous alien look classy, fun and ever so attainable. Bowie has made my life richer and deeper.”*

Don't believe me? Listen to Elaine McCardle in the spring 2017 UU world article titled Bowie, Prince, and Cohen, Saints of Freedom.

McCardle said, ... “Like an alien suffocating on a hostile planet, I was alone and achingly lonely. Then someone said, “Are you into Bowie?” and in figuring out what that and he meant I was tossed a glittering lifeline that’s illuminated my entire life.”

To many his early albums and personas were not rock albums as much as they were as \_\_\_ describes them communiqué from a fellow alien who’d fallen to earth seeking kindness and acceptance but instead encountered hostility and fear.”  
“Forever, after I was not alone.”

Since Bowie’s career has paralleled our exploration of space, so it is completely fitting that on the [maiden flight](#) of Elon Musk’s recent [SpaceX rocket](#) in the driver’s seat of Musk’s very own Tesla that strapped onto his rocket and send up into space was a mannequin he affectionately named “[Starman,](#)” playing on loop in the car stereo as the convertible hurled into space. Yup.  
“Ground Control to Major Tom, commencing countdown, engines on.”

He was essential. He saved lives. He provided hope an anchor, validity to about a generation of people who thought they were weird. And Bowie told them that they were, and that they were not alone. And in being part of that unfolding and de-

constructing of “normal” liberated us to now be a culture that doesn’t formally allow for shaming.

Without Bowie, we wouldn’t be the same culture. We would be more boxed in, more “Leave it to Beaver.”

Bowie was not built for me. I didn’t need him or didn’t think I needed the likes of him until I was an adult and realized that for me to be a fully morally evolved human being. I did need him. Thanks Sir David for being the most weirdly dressed knight at the table. We needed you, even for those of us who didn’t originally know it.

We needed you. You drew the circle a little wider.

Thanks, and Amen