



Dr. Dennis Perman ::

## Message of The Week



### America's Tuning Fork

February 3, 2014

Dear Doctor:

I started piano lessons at five years old, but by nine I preferred the guitar, emulating Peter, Paul and Mary's "If I Had A Hammer" and "Where Have All The Flowers Gone," and The Byrds' "Turn, Turn, Turn," without realizing that these songs were written by one of the greatest folksingers of all time – Pete Seeger, who left us last week at age 94.

Seeger was more than a songwriter – he was a determined and resourceful agent of social change. Most troubadours merely chronicle the world around them, but Seeger's rapier commentary was designed to reframe, not just report.

Seeger had hit songs in the forties and fifties, notably Lead Belly's "Goodnight Irene" with The Weavers that topped the charts for thirteen weeks and sold over two million records. But his influence burgeoned in the sixties, as he became a significant spokesperson for civil rights, world peace and environmental conservation.

His rabble-rousing landed him before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, where instead of invoking the Fifth Amendment to avoid incriminating himself, he chose to apply the First Amendment, that he was exercising his right to free speech and to associate with whom he pleased, a foundational stone upon which America was built. In fact, Seeger's own banjo sported the legend, "This Machine Surrounds Hate and Forces It to Surrender."

His parents were classical musicians, intellectuals and conscientious objectors during World War I, so Seeger was bred to seek justice through music. He attended Harvard for a couple of years, but dropped out to work full time at promoting his ideals.

In addition to his success as a composer and performer, he became the world's expert on the five string banjo, writing the definitive textbook that has inspired pickers for sixty years. He even re-invented the banjo, designing a longer, deeper instrument for greater range and versatility.

He was pivotal in launching Bob Dylan's career, personally encouraging John Hammond to produce Dylan. His music spanned over seven decades, tracking social issues across wars, shifts in human rights and finally, a series of personal stories called "The Storm King" for which he received a nomination at this year's Grammys, relevant to the very end. No wonder he is often referred to as "America's tuning fork."

"I call them all love songs," Seeger remarked. "They tell of love of man and woman, and parents and children, love of country, freedom, beauty, mankind, the world, love of searching for truth and other unknowns. But, of course, love alone is not enough."

He married Toshi-Aline Ota in 1943, and she died just six months ago -- after seventy years together, it seems he couldn't be without her. That was the kind of commitment to be expected from this extraordinary example of character and integrity. You may or may not agree with his politics, but there's one thing that cannot be denied about Pete Seeger – he spoke his truth, lived by it, and helped millions because of it, a model of congruency and service consciousness we can learn from.

Dennis Perman DC,  
for The Masters Circle

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