

Hymnal Theology 1: *Spirit of Life*

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December 6, 2009

Reading: from the Foreward to *Singing the Journey* by William Sinkford

Something amazing has happened over the last decade. I've seen congregation after congregation singing hymns without reading from the hymnal, hymns like "Spirit of Life," "Come, Come, Whoever You Are," "We'll build a Land," and "Gather the Spirit." These and a few others have come to shape our worship and give voice to our theology as we move into this new century. All of these hymns were introduced to most of our congregations when *Singing the Living Tradition*, our current hymnal, was first printed in 1993. We want more people to sing in celebration, in shared community, in despair and in praise, for through song we worship and move the spirit. . .

Singing in community has been central to worship in our tradition for thousands of years. Some of the earliest recorded "hymns" we now know as the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible. Song allows us to name the Holy, to give thanks, to acknowledge both joys and sorrows. We praise, lament, ask for support, and commit ourselves to making justice through song. Singing helps our very "heady" faith find its loving heart. Singing in community brings us together and lets us know that we can raise a clear and unified voice. And we know that a congregation that loves to sing is almost always a vital and strong religious community.

Our music can bind our very individualistic communities together. We struggle to define our shared faith. For many of us it is hard to say simply what Unitarian Universalism is. But the elements of worship that we share help tell us who we are as a religious people despite the many spiritual paths we follow.

Much has changed since 1993, when *Singing the Living Tradition* was introduced. Our congregations have grown in numbers and in membership. Our public witness has led us in from the margins toward the center of the conversation in the public square. And music has become (or is becoming) more central to our life in community. Unitarian Universalist musicians have been composing new hymns that can nurture our spirits now and in the years to come. The publication of [*Singing the Journey*] offers a selection of these new works to our worshipping community.

In this small volume, you will find hymns that reflect our theological diversity and our respect for the variety of cultural expression. You will also find some new musical vocabularies and new rhythms. But a common thread binds these songs together. These hymns touch the heart as well as the head. They express a Unitarian Universalism that lives and ministers in this complicated world where freedom, peace, and justice are so hard to create and sustain. . .

My hope is that our congregations will find in this book music that will shape our community and give new voice to our values as we move forward, supporting our deepening faith and a more effective voice for justice. And I trust that we will come to love these hymns, and in time, to sing them passionately without looking at [the] book.

Sermon

Today's service is the first of a series, which will continue sporadically over the next couple of months, on hymnal theology. That is, we'll take a look at some of the theological ideas expressed in some of the hymns we sing as part of our Sunday morning worship services. Today we'll be looking specifically at the song *Spirit of Life*. In future installments of the series we'll look at *We'll Build a Land*, *Gather the Spirit*, *Love Will Guide Us*, and *Come, Sing a Song with Me*.

I want to make a clear distinction between music in general and hymns in particular. Music is an important aspect of worship – indeed of life – for many of us. Music generally speaks directly to our hearts. Its language is more emotional than cognitive. As such it provides a valuable corrective for some of us who have a tendency to spend too much time in our heads. I appreciate this gift from our musicians, and would like to thank Sue Haug once again for speaking to our hearts this morning through her music.

Hymns, while musical by their nature, have an extra added ingredient: words. As such, they are able to speak more easily to both head and heart. One way to think about the difference between spirituality and theology is by using that heart/head distinction. Spirituality usually refers to a kind of direct experience, unmediated by words or concepts. It's more of a heart thing than a head thing. Sort of like what you get with music. Theology is more of a head thing. It's about a conceptualization of religious ideas. So while spirituality is about experiencing religion, theology is thinking about, talking about, and explaining religious ideas. In the case of hymns, we have words set to music, thus covering both bases.

By the way, I will acknowledge that things don't fall out into such neat packages as I seem to imply. Of course music may be approached from a left-brained, analytical perspective. And words - especially through the imagery of poetry – can speak directly to the heart. Nevertheless, words do convey cognitive ideas, and that is the aspect of hymnology that I want to talk about this morning.

So the idea of this series is to explore what kind of religious ideas and perspectives we are articulating and expressing through our congregational singing. You've probably heard the one about why Unitarian Universalists are such bad singers. It's because they're reading ahead to see whether they agree with the words.

Well, I don't think we're such bad singers. In fact, I consider us one of those vital and strong congregations, mentioned in our reading this morning, that likes to sing. Perhaps that's because we stick primarily to hymns we're familiar and comfortable with. Plus, when we do sing something new to us, it's usually selected with an eye to compatibility with our common values. Even in our Unitarian Universalist hymnal, there are hymns that I would not feel theologically comfortable singing. So I simply don't select those.

I see it as one of the strengths of our hymnal that it contains a breadth and variety of hymns reflecting the breadth and variety of theological concerns and perspectives within our congregation and within the larger world of Unitarian Universalism. I don't want to suggest that I apply a rigid theological litmus test before I'll sing a particular hymn. While I'm not likely to sing a song that is diametrically opposed to values I hold dear, I am willing to stretch myself and try on an occasional perspective that doesn't quite come naturally. Especially if it has a catchy tune.

The point is: I don't think we have to be so rigid as to presume that every phrase sung in this space reflects the precise theological position of the congregation as a whole, or of the individuals who make it up. I will say, however, that over the long haul, the collection of hymns

that we sing together week after week may be one of the best indicators of where we are theologically as a community. And so I have chosen to take the opportunity to pick out a few of our “standards,” look at their messages, and see what they have to say about who we are as a religious community.

You will notice that all of the hymns I’ve chosen to explore come from the older gray hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*. None is from the new, blue supplement, *Singing the Journey*. That is primarily because we haven’t had *Singing the Journey* long enough to really figure out which of its songs are our favorites. Perhaps I’ll do a similar series in a year or two drawing from this newer resource.

Before I address our hymn of the day, *Spirit of Life*, I’d like to give a little bit of historical background on hymns and their use. The word “hymn” comes from the Greek “hymnos,” and indeed the original hymns were songs written in honor and praise of the Greek gods and heroes.

Centuries later, the Christian church adopted the structure of hymns. In the sixth century, St. Benedict, founder of the Benedictine order, looked for Latin texts to fit the structures and created plainsong hymns that have played an important role in monastic liturgy ever since. Gregorian chant developed in about that same time period.

During the Protestant Reformation, in the sixteenth century, reformers wanted the liturgy to be said in the vernacular, and they insisted on hymns that could be understood and sung by the people. Their new hymns still had a strictly scriptural basis, however. Most were simply Psalms set to music.

The next great change in hymnody occurred in England in the early eighteenth century, particularly with the many hymns of Isaac Watts, of *Joy to the World* fame. Watts started from the principle that texts should express the religious feelings of the people, and didn’t necessarily have to be directly scripturally based.

John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism, were another major influence in shaping hymns into our time. They insisted that hymns, both words *and* music, should be written to stir the congregation and reinforce its religious emotions. They made hymns the central feature of Methodist worship.

By the end of the eighteenth century there had been a virtual explosion of hymns, and numerous hymnals (anthologies of hymns) had been published. The proliferation continued through the nineteenth century, and has really never stopped. Today, if you visit various Protestant churches, you will find that each denomination has its own particular hymnal, reflecting its own distinctive theological character. There is, of course, a great deal of overlap, and many of those eighteenth and nineteenth century hymns are included in today’s hymnals.

As for the theological role of hymns, there was a recent article in *Theology Today* by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., titled “Hymns are Theology”. It is written from a Christian perspective, but many of its points are more widely applicable. For instance, it states:

The hymns of the church *are* theology. They are theological statements: the church’s lyrical, theological commentaries on Scripture, liturgy, faith, action, and hosts of other subjects. . .

The primary aim of the article is to consider how hymns can have theological integrity. Kimbrough puts forth four avenues to such integrity:

- 1) “Hymns must be acknowledged as theology.” As the lyrical, theological textbooks of the church, hymnals can not only be sung, but they can be studied and reflected upon as well. In the case of our own hymnals, that notion is reinforced by the presence of numerous non-musical readings in the back of the book that reflect our distinctive religious orientation.
- 2) “Hymns should reflect a profound sense of the mystery of the incarnation and its effect on human life.” That refers to a specifically Christian theological perspective, but can easily be generalized to a broader sense of wonder and mystery with respect to life and the world around us.
- 3) “Hymns should affirm a theology of newness.” By this he means that “a) hymns should communicate a theology of expectancy, anticipation, and openness” and that “b) Hymns should appropriate the language of the time.” So he’s talking here both about accessibility of language, and about an attitude of openness to the new.
- 4) “Hymns should be a liturgical bridge to the enactment of faith.” That is, they should point the way for putting faith into action.

Before I move on to *Spirit of Life*, let me leave you with two final statements from Kimbrough’s article:

Hymns should be the pulse beat of the church’s theology and sociology of music: it sings to live out the faith and lives to sing out the faith. . .

[and finally] The hymns of the church are perhaps its finest commentary on faith and practice. . .

So let’s take a look at *Spirit of Life*, and see what it might tell us about our faith, our practice, our theology.

Probably no other song, no other prayer, no other piece of liturgy is so well known and loved in Unitarian Universalism as “Spirit of Life” by Carolyn McDade. Incidentally, Carolyn also had a hand in two other of the hymns we’ll be looking at later in this series. She is truly a UU treasure, although she does not currently identify as a UU, and has had little involvement with the denomination in the past couple of decades. She also doesn’t consider herself a songwriter or a musician. Rather, she identifies as an activist in the “movement,” in a very broad sense of that word.

But whatever the personal circumstances or self-identity of Carolyn McDade, she has given us a real gift with this song, which she doesn’t even consider a hymn, but rather a prayer. It may be one of the few “prayers” that most UUs, theist and nontheist alike, can embrace and share. An article in the *UU World* a couple of years ago summed it up like this:

In six short lines “Spirit of Life” touches so much that is central to our faith—compassion, justice, community, freedom, reverence for nature, and the mystery of life. It finds the common ground held by humanists and theists, pagans and Christians, Buddhists and Jews, gay and straight among us.

Let’s look at what the song actually says starting with the first line:

Spirit of Life, come unto me.

This line gives the song the character of a prayer. It is addressed to the Spirit of Life, which some would use interchangeably with the term “God”. Others of us would interpret the phrase differently, non-theistically, as a spiritual quality or state of mind that is being invoked. Even if its referent is God, this is not a patriarchal or even transcendent God, “out there,” from whom we ask for gifts to be given us. It’s not “Spirit of Life, *give* unto me;” it’s “Spirit of Life, *come* unto me.” Become a part of me, of who I am. If we are speaking of the divine, it is the divine that can be or become a part of ourselves, helping to shape our lives according to our deepest values and convictions.

Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.

Whatever this spirit is, we seek to have it sing in our hearts, and to stir the compassion with which we yearn to address the world. We know that sometimes compassion slips away, or is overshadowed by baser instincts like envy or pride or selfishness. And so we intentionally seek to restore and hear its voice, to feel its stirrings, that we might live up to its ideal. Very similar to what we sang earlier this morning: “May we be filled with loving kindness.” It is good to remind ourselves regularly of those aspirations.

Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;

Here is that reverence for nature. The sense that, whatever spirit it is that animates us and guides us in our life’s longings and aspirations, is also all about us. In the wind, in the sea, indeed in every aspect of the natural world. We can look anywhere to experience its presence. Whether or not we can fully understand its nature, we can at least experience its presence, bringing to life the world all around us.

Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

One way of understanding this line is that, if there is a God, our hands are God’s hands, the only hands there are to shape our life and our world. And so, we look to whatever that guiding spirit of our life is, to move and use our hands in such a way as to create justice. If we want justice, we must make justice. I’ll talk a lot more about this in a few weeks when we sing about building a land “where justice shall roll down like waters and peace like an ever flowing stream.”

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;

I have to admit that this is the line that speaks most deeply to me. One of the first sermons I ever wrote was based on this line. It was called “Roots and Wings.” I love the image of roots and wings, so seemingly mutually exclusive, and yet so instructive for a balanced approach to life. When I sing this line, I feel my feet rooted to the earth below me. And then, at the same time I feel myself soaring as on wings through the great space of possibility beyond both myself and the earth in which I’m rooted.

This is the classic polarity between tradition and freedom. Tradition: all those ways we are connected or tied to our past, our family, our community. Freedom: those impulses toward

creativity, change, development, and achievement, pushing the envelope of our own potential as humans. Tradition and freedom. Roots and wings. These two concepts have a long history of tension, of push and pull. Their seeming mutual exclusivity sets up a continual struggle as we try and figure out whether we will be defined by our past and our environment, or by our own free will. And of course the answer comes with finding the right balance, giving each side of the polarity its due.

This tug-of-war – this balancing act – takes place not just in each of us as individuals. It's also a long-time and ongoing feature of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. While we are still connected to our religious roots through values like love, forgiveness, compassion, and justice, we have sought freedom by lopping off less worthy limbs of dogma and rigidity and exclusivity. Our liberal religious forebears did a remarkable thing to help us along in that process. They took the very notion of freedom of religious thought and incorporated it as one of the traditions of their movement. Because of that great gift, we can embrace our religious tradition (our roots), and yet exercise the freedom to evaluate, revise, and build on that tradition as we spread our wings and fly.

And finally:

Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

After enumerating several of those sublime qualities that we would have as part of our lives, we close by repeating the invitation for them to come to us and to be a part of us, giving our life the shape of compassion, justice, freedom, and wonder.

As we sing this beautiful song together, may we make it our communal theological statement – and our prayer.

So may it be.