

Spirit of Life

Each June thousands of Unitarian Universalists from across North America, and increasingly from around the world, gather together for an annual convocation called General Assembly. Each General Assembly opens festively with a banner parade, where representatives from each congregation, society and fellowship – large and small – march through the aisles of vast convention halls carrying individual handmade banners portraying their home churches. It is a very boisterous, colorful and celebratory affair.

(Choir begins humming Spirit of Life)

In 2002 our General Assembly was held in Quebec City. As marchers for the banner parade assembled in a very crowded room adjacent to that vast convention hall, a man in their midst began to suffer the severe chest pains of a heart attack. Now let me assure you that he ultimately survived, but that was not apparent at that moment. Between the time of the onset of his heart attack and the arrival of paramedics, others in the room were at a loss as to what to do for this man, a fellow Unitarian Universalist, *in extremis*; but also in the midst of his spiritual community. Suddenly someone in the room began softly singing Spirit of Life. Soon everyone else joined in singing and then humming Spirit of Life. They formed a circle around the man, and the paramedics who were saving his life, praying in the only way that they all knew how “roots hold me close; wings set me free; Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.”

(Choir sings spirit of Life)

Now for our guests this morning, and for others not familiar with Unitarian Universalism, this spontaneous coming together in prayer and song

might not seem like a big deal – but it really was. We are a faith community of diverse believers and non-believers. We do not share a common creed. We are Christians, Jews, Buddhists, pagans, Humanists, theists, atheists, agnostics and none of the above. We cultivate and cherish vibrant theological diversity in our midst. We recognize that the ultimate spiritual authority rests within the soul and conscience of each individual.

When we come together in work and worship we strive to speak in broad and inclusive terms that encompass believers and non-believers alike. Perhaps because of this, or as a consequence of it, we are not conversant in a common language of prayer or reverence. It's not just a matter of political correctness or spiritual meekness that leads us away from this language; it is our commitment and intention to include everyone here gathered on the spiritual journey, that drives us to choose our words – or absence of words – so very carefully.

The importance of this became so clear to me a couple of years ago, at my home in Oakland, California, when I participated in an Oakland Coalition of Congregations Interfaith gospel-singing event. During the rehearsal the choir director – a very open and loving person – began invoking the name of Jesus to bring us singers to a place where we could be fully present to properly sing praise songs. There were some whispers in the front rows and soon she stopped the singing, looked towards the back of the room – to no one in particular - and apologized for invoking the name of Jesus, saying “I know that's offensive to some people.”

I was struck by her wording - it's not that someone there would become offended at the mention of Jesus – we were in a Baptist church singing gospel music, after all – but that some of us there gathered could not be transported to a place of praise by the imagery or idea of Jesus. We were either unfamiliar with

Jesus or had perhaps been a victim of maltreatment or abuse at the hands of someone using the name of Jesus. The point was to speak in terms that would transport everyone, together, to the place of singing praise songs.

What each of us believes is important but the individual shadings of our beliefs may not be as significant as that which brings us together in collective understanding. In the words Dag Hammarskjöld “God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.”¹

We know this as Unitarian Universalists. There is something beyond our individual human reasoning – be it God or human potential or just plain mystery. It is that which brings us together in work and worship. This is why Unitarian Universalism is a most precious and rare gem. It is the big tent under which we all can come together, in our vast diversity of belief and non-belief, practice and questioning, and seeking and sharing, to build and fortify and deepen that ‘steady radiance and wonder.’ The source of which is beyond all reason and therefore - almost always - beyond words.

And that is why Spirit of Life is such a remarkable liturgical gift. As noted by Kimberly French, editor of the *UU World* magazine, “no other song, no other prayer, no other piece of liturgy is so well known and loved in Unitarian Universalism. It is our Doxology, or perhaps our Amazing Grace.”² It is an anthem that speaks to our openness, love, service and justice-making. It holds

¹ *Markings: The Spiritual Diary of Dag Hammarskjöld*. Dag Hammarskjöld. NYC: Knopf, 1965.

² Carolyn McDade’s Spirit of Life, Kimberly French. *UU World*, vol. XXI, no. 3, Fall 2007.

our dreams and aspirations and it encompasses even more; two of the major underpinnings that we do all share.

One is our recognition of nature, our birthplace, lifesource and home - Mother Earth – and the vital interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. Our spirits and our truth rise in the sea and they blow in the wind and we are incomplete without this recognition and presence in our spiritual lives. For some this is the divine. For others it is a manifestation of the divine and for yet others it is the cathedral of the divine or an irreplaceable gift entrusted to our care and stewardship. Whatever it is, it is part of the sticky stuff that holds us all together.

The thing that Spirit of Life speaks to most directly and most powerfully though, is the conflicting demands that we put on ourselves and on this faith – to hold us, embrace us, make us feel safe secure and grounded – and at the self same time - to embolden us, challenge us, to hold our feet to the fire and make us grow. And not just to grow a little bit at a time, or only at a certain stage in our lives, but always and in all ways, with wings to soar and to set us free – from the very moment of our births to the last and final breaths of our lives. That is a pretty tall order – from any religion, any song or any prayer.

And interestingly that is how Carolyn McDade, the author of Spirit of Life characterizes the song – not as a hymn or an anthem but as a prayer. McDade, one of the co-creators of the merging of the waters ritual, by which so many Unitarian Universalists open their church years each September, attended Arlington Street Church while she lived here in the early 1980s. That was when she composed Spirit of Life. She tells the story of being spiritually and existentially drained and fatigued. She was a wife and a mother and felt torn in a million directions from that and all of the activism and social justice work in

which she was engaged, “I was tired, not with my community but with the world.”³

One night she told a friend “I feel like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years. Just open wide the doors and I’ll be dust.”⁴ Her friend just sat with her, in silence and solidarity, as she experienced all that was needed from her and that she was called to do - exhausted from the stresses and strains of a world in need of so much justice and so much repair. Later that evening, when her friend dropped her off at her front door, she just moved through the darkness of her home to find her piano. As her heart and soul cried, “may I not drop out,” the words and the music just poured forth; “it was not written, but prayed. I knew more than anything that I wanted to continue in faith with the movement.”⁵

And this is how it can so often be with us. Called to live and love and honor the staggering diversity of belief and practice with which we choose to engage. Such aliveness can overwhelm and exhaust. Yet we return, yet we return.

In the words of Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed,

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.⁶

The call of our religious community does inspire and encourage but it also demands and exhausts. Carolyn McDade has given us a prayer and a beacon to

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Singing the Living Tradition*. UUA. Boston: Beacon Press 1993. #580.

light our ways in and through that community and to replenish our souls both within and without of its walls.

That is my definition of grace.

Let's face it, it takes something a lot bigger than just our individual selves to accomplish those conflicting needs. Which brings us right back to our starting point - the mystery and the quest for truth. It is no wonder that we possess and cherish such theological diversity – there can be no singular path to achieve our lofty aspirations for this life and this world. Let us hold tight to all that binds us together and let us let go and reach and stretch to make room for every traveler along the way. That's what we Unitarian Universalists do.

Please remain seated and open your hymnals to hymn number 123 and let us join together in song and in prayer to the Spirit of Life.

So be it and amen.