

HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth Greene
Magic Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
March 13, 2016

Hymn #1, "May Nothing Evil"

Hymn #108, "How Can I Keep From Singing?"

Hymn # 346, "Come, Sing a Song With Me"

Opening Words

You create a path of your own by looking within yourself and listening to your soul, cultivating your own ways of experiencing the sacred and then practicing it. Practicing until you make it a song that sings to you. (Sue Monk Kidd)

Sermon

Several years ago, I was at a seminar on church size transitions, and the well-known consultant in charge threw us something we didn't expect.

She didn't ask us, "What is your church's mission/vision statement?" Instead she asked, "What is your congregation's song, the tune, melody, lyrics that most people would resonate with?"

It can be entertaining to think of song titles. For a lot of us, a lot of the time, it could be "How Can I Keep From Singing?" as we reflect on the embrace of our Fellowship, the fortunes of our lives. Others might quite seriously choose, "I Am Weary, Let Me Rest." How about "Respect": "R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what that means to me."

Our social action people, tirelessly trying to get more and more of us involved, could choose “We Shall Overcome,” or they might bring in the old camp song, “Here We Sit Like Birds in the Wilderness.”

Most of us have known “You Are My Sunshine” moments, and also “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrows” ones.

[Anybody got any, about your life or about this congregation? Just stand up and shout, and let’s hear a few.]

This morning, I want to talk about the songs of our individual spiritual lives, and also the melody(ies) of our congregation’s life. You might say I am focusing on two of our Unitarian Universalist principles: the first, which affirms the worth and dignity of every individual—one of the jobs of a religious community is to support and challenge us individuals on our journey. What songs do we sing, on our solo path? And the seventh principle, which celebrates the interdependent web of all existence—church is here to give us bonds with each other, and to make our own and the larger community stronger, more loving, more just. What do our community songs sound like?

Once again, reflecting on our individual paths, I had a pretty good time looking up lists of song titles. “Oh Yes, I’m the Great Pretender.” “Stayin’ Alive.” “I Can See Clearly Now.” “Running On Empty.” “Just As Long As I Have Breath.”

I asked my favorite person in the world what his song might be, and the first thing that came to him was “Lean On Me,” something that feels very right. (I was a little afraid he might come up with “My Funny Valentine”!)

I might pick “Amazing Grace,” for myself, with “Just As Long As I Have Breath” a close second. Like most people my age, I have had a huge number of ups and downs in my life. But even through some very hard years—like the three or four following my sister’s death—I have never lost faith that things will be well, if I pay attention and put one foot in front of another, a day at a time.

Recently, I had an experience that reminded me so forcefully of how my faith can bring me the grace to rise above my worst self. (Some of you may have read this story in yesterday’s *Times-News*.)

At my local YMCA, I heard a man say that he knew where his deceased mother was. “She is in hell, with her brother. They are sitting by the lake of eternal fire.”

I was shocked and horrified. More significantly, I hardened my heart immediately to that man, thinking thoughts of absolute judgment: “How awful. How arrogant that he knows what happens after death. What kind of a terrible, theologically-benighted person would matter-of-factly consign his mother and uncle to eternal

torture?" There was a certain comfort in my superior, Universalist position. I might have been singing, "You Don't Know What Love Is."

Then some things happened. First was my daily meditational practice. (Although I can't make a direct connection here, I know it helps center me and make me a better person.)

Second, I attended a gospel worship service at the Monterey Jazz Bash By the Bay, and the leader—an African American, Christian, jazz pianist—led us through stories of how life is forever putting obstacles in our paths. After each one, we sang, "This Little Light of Mine." I began to feel that my superior judgmentalism arose from something way less than my best self, and that I was bringing little or no light to my soul. A person of another faith had nudged me toward the best of my Unitarian Universalism.

And then there was the Osher Institute class on the 13th-century mystic Sufi, Rumi. Rumi is a joyful, open, loving poet, who gets it that the doctrine of love knows no religious boundaries. He writes a long poem in which Moses preaches judgment to a shepherd who praises his God in an intimate, almost childlike way. God steps in and preaches even more sternly to Moses, telling him that his arrogant lecturing has created a barrier between God and one of God's beloved. God declares that it is all the light of the spirit and asks Moses, "Did you come to sever or to unite?"

Being a Unitarian Universalist, receiving from many traditions, I was moved by both the 21st-century jazz musician and by Rumi. I was blown away by the question, “Did you come to sever or to unite?” since I long to be a uniting force. I realized that the man speaking so harshly had undoubtedly been hurt terribly. Even though I still find his pronouncement sad and difficult, I can open my heart better now, moving toward acceptance. “Amazing Grace” returns. Along, maybe with some Beatles’ songs: “All Together Now,” “Come Together,” “All You Need Is Love.”

I hope that your faith and participation in this Fellowship, in Unitarian Universalism, helps you through the spiritual hard places, where we learn and grow. I note that Michael Johnson is helping mentor some of you in your spiritual practices—what a fabulous thing to be happening in the community. If there is time in our service, we will ask how you have done this week, if you chose to meditate. If not, I hope you will talk to Michael right afterward.

What about this Fellowship’s songs? Certainly, our history as a dedicated band of brothers and sisters, holding up liberal religion in the Magic Valley all these years might evoke “The Long and Winding Road.” Or, during those confusing times, ever feel like the ‘50s nonsense rock and roll songs? “A bop bop a lula, a bop bam boom, tutti frutti, all rutti.”

But seriously. I asked our Board president, Michelle, for her assessment of how we are as a UU congregation. In part, she said,

...in the past few years, we have developed more enthusiasm, people seem more engaged, we're having fun, and worship services are more consistently meaningful and fulfilling. Of course, membership has gone up to 42 members now versus 20+ members prior. And attendance is regularly higher. We enjoy each other and we are an important community for one another in Magic Valley, which can feel isolated, politically and spiritually at times.

Taking titles from our hymnal, it sounds to me like a combination of "Come, Sing a Song With Me," and "We Shall Overcome."

Michelle also pointed out a couple of stumbling blocks. We are not serving our children and old people as well as we are the majority of people—the Board is addressing this, and you might see Michelle or any other Board member if you have ideas or can help. We need and cherish the energy and commitment you put into this wonderful place. The other stumbling block is this: with only a few pledges still to come in, we are woefully short of the money we need, to continue our good work within and outside our walls. Look at the thermometer: we are not even up to this year's budget.

Fear not! This isn't the "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" part of our song repertoire. The Board and I just want to underscore what Board member Tricia Bredesen shared with us, about how truly cool

this place is: a great place to gather, lots of kids, ministerial leadership, a Cares and Concerns Committee, community outreach. We are a very important presence in the Magic Valley, within and outside our walls. Our material contributions are a reflection of our spiritual commitment.

My husband Gary and I have increased our pledge by 50%. We can do that. I know that many of you have promised as much as you can, and for that we are all immensely grateful; we are not a wealthy congregation. All we ask is that you look with open heart at your pledge and see if that amount truly reflects the enthusiasm, energy and saving message that is so apparent here in our Fellowship.

Quoting the Beatles again, I say, "We Can Work It Out." As we have so many times in past years. It will take all of us, joining in joy and commitment.

Today, I want to close by affirming all the great things we are, within our walls and as a beacon in our Valley.

Providing our time, talent and treasure, day after day, we provide a beacon of liberal religion—this little light of ours. We encourage each other in our individual paths, bring the spirit of life to what we do and who we are. We do our best to live a religion that calls us each to be our best selves, even when we have descended into judgmentalism and separateness—amazing grace. Here, we can be a

bridge over troubled water. Here, we do what we can to help the world study war no more. Here, at our best, we join Bob Marley in singing, "One love, One heart, Let's get together and feel all right."

Sometimes, yes, we feel like a motherless child. But we are held and supported by those who know the meaning and mutuality of "Lean On Me." We are here body and soul. Let us count our blessings, name them one by one.

Closing Words

All deep things are song. It seems somehow the very central essence of us, song; as if all the rest were but wrappages and hulls! ~Thomas Carlyle