

Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation
"Singing the Journey -- Together"
John A. Sonquist, August 10, 2008

Introduction:

Today I'm going to discuss our UU hymns, their origins, the words, the tunes, the musical styles, and how music and singing fits into our Sunday Morning Worship Service. However, let me say before I start, that, for me, though it's wonderful to play music for an appreciative audience of listeners at a concert, it's a far more rewarding experience for me to play music that's truly an integral part of something of far greater worth than a mere concert --- a Live Oak Worship Service.

Where did our UU Hymns Come From?

Most of the hymns used in western churches are ultimately traceable back to the early Greek chants of praise and thanksgiving to their gods. The adoption of Christianity by the Romans around 300 AD brought widespread use of plainsong chants. Then, around 900 AD, came the use of hymns based on Christian Biblical texts from the Psalms and sung by a choir. Up until the Middle Ages participation in the service was almost entirely restricted to the priest and the choir.

In the early 1500's the Reformation and Martin Luther's influences resulted in the replacement of these biblical Latin texts with hymns sung by the whole congregation --- in their own native language, and containing poetical expressions of the religious feelings of the people. This was a total turn-around from the previous view that hymns should always be based on scripture.

Luther's arguably greatest musical reform was congregational song --- everyone singing. Music was the point at which his doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" received its most concrete realization. His congregations all learned to sing. Practices were set during the week for the entire congregation. In 1524 Luther published a hymn book.

In the 19th Century came major developments of Evangelistic and Spiritual musical literature both in Europe and in America. These included the ideas that hymns, both words and music, should also be written to stir the congregation, to reinforce its religious emotions. Singing together should help people to feel their role in being a part of a religious community.

At this time, the Unitarians and Universalists simply adapted various contemporary Christian hymns. For the most part, they did this just by taking out or recasting references to hell and hell-fire. And --- they also took out references to the Trinity. The Universalists were very enthusiastic singers from their very beginning, with songs about God's love for everyone and very evangelical hymns. Unitarian songs were more theological, celebrating nature, God, and human beings. Neither group had choirs then.

The Hymns We Sing Today

Since then, UU writers of lyrics for hymns have continued to move away even further from doctrinal references. They have increasingly avoided words quoted verbatim from the Christian bible. For instance, although our hymnal, "Singing in the Living Tradition", still uses the word "God" to refer to the Divine far more frequently than any other word or phrase, it also uses quite a large number of different terms. These include words like "Nature", "Spirit", "Power", "Grace", "Light", "Mysterious Presence", "Giver of All", and "Mother Spirit/Father Spirit". Two of the hymns in this 1993 hymnal explicitly reflect this experimentation with terminology; "Bring Many Names" (#23) and "Name Unnamed" (#31). References to the Divine have become more poetic than doctrinal. Live Oak's use of "Spirit of Life" in our service reflects this.

Earlier UU hymn books, "Hymns of the Spirit" (1937) and "Hymns for the Celebration of Life" (1964) had collected songs and words from many different cultures. The newer hymn book, "Singing the Living Tradition" (1993) continued and expanded these traditions by including jazz pieces, south African chants, spirituals, Jewish melodies, and commissions from contemporary composers.

"Singing the Living Tradition" was also inspired by the need to remove sexist language from UU music and by the desire to reflect the UUA's work in antiracism, multiculturalism, bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender issues, humanism, and a growing interest in spirituality.

"Singing the Journey" was published in 2005. It was designed to supplement "Singing the Living Tradition" with more contemporary music, including jazz, folk, pop, spirituals, gospel, praise songs, chants, rounds, and, of course, traditional hymns, reflecting the proliferating directions of music in UU congregations. The musical cultures from which our music has recently been drawn are more varied and world-wide than those previously used.

Today, diversity is a part of our Sunday worship services. There are many different kinds of us here today, with different theological perspectives and vocabularies. UU music is like that, too. UU congregations have many options when it comes to music. Just as we have multiple theological paths, ministries of music can be created anew each Sunday in a variety of styles and tempos. Some congregations thrive on contemporary forms of music, but there are others that are no less enthusiastic about music, but who prefer more traditional forms of classical music.

Here at Live Oak, we use both books. Music is central in our traditions and integral to our worship life. Music can bring a level of emotional resonance unattainable by any other form of worship. Our music changes and grows as our congregation grows and changes.

Lyrics of Hymns and theological implications.

The UUA committee that produced "Singing the Living Tradition" started with an assumption, "... a living faith must have both roots and wings"; that is, they sought out music from not only historical, but also contemporary traditions. As guidelines for choosing candidates for inclusion in the book, they used the relevance of the words in the hymn to the UUA's covenants, "Seven Principles", and its "Five Sources of Our Living Tradition". These are listed in the preface of the hymnal. I will not repeat them here, but I encourage you to look at them. Think of the Seven Principles as answers to the question "What do UU's believe?"

Seven Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Five Sources of the Living Tradition:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.
- These sources formed the criteria used by the committee to include both traditional and contemporary hymns in "Singing the Living Tradition".

"Singing The Journey, the later supplement, used these, too, but added another source,

- "Earth-Centered Traditions"

Music in our worship service today: Transitions, Events, Hymns.

Music in Live Oak's Service is used for several purposes, in several kinds of situations. These include transitions, accompaniment for events which are more or less permanent parts of the service, and direct worship via song:

1. The beginning and ending transitions are from mundane daily life into the beginning of the Worship Service --- the Prelude; and from the ending of the Service back into daily life --- the Postlude. The Musical Interlude provides a break after the Sermon. It allows time for people simply to sit and meditate about what has been said in the sermon and provides a transition to the Sharing in Stewardship event, the acceptance of gifts. The transition music is generally chosen by and played by the pianist, rather than consisting of hymns chosen by the minister and sung by the entire congregation. Sometimes the Live Oak Choir sings the Musical Interlude.

2. The more or less permanent events of the Service which use music include the Centering Hymn: ("Spirit of Life"), the Food Offering: ("From You I Receive"), the Sung Meditation: ("Voice Still and Small", "Comfort Me", "Lone Wild Bird", etc.) and the final Response to Benediction: ("Go Now in Peace"). For these events the congregation sings hymns chosen by the minister, which mark and emphasize these parts of the Service.

3. The changing parts of the Service, include religious worship expressed by the congregation specifically in song, including the Opening Hymn, and the Closing Hymn. Here the congregation sings hymns, chosen by the minister, with texts which are related to the current sermon topic or to special seasonal events.

Our hymns are well indexed by Composers, Arrangers, Authors, Translators, and Sources. There is an Alphabetical Index of the Original Name of Each Tune, a Metrical Index of the Tunes, a Topical Index, and an Index of First Lines and Titles.

Hymns and the Sacred/Profane.

Our Sunday Service is sacred, in that it is related to people's beliefs and their values, to right and wrong, to ethics, and in that it deals with the good life for people and for society. But it is also concerned with the unity of our Congregation, with the sharing of group interests. Our music helps to shape our group identity. It helps us to know who we are. Singing helps to build the solidarity and cohesion of our congregation. Singing as part of our Service can evoke both positive and negative emotions, but especially, as music so often does, it simply facilitates happiness. Hymn texts express our general cultural values as set forth in our Mission.

The combination of different and repeated parts of the Sunday Worship Service functions to define its sacredness and separate it from the profane and mundane issues of everyday life. This separation is what the Prelude and Postlude accomplish. Participation in the Service by the congregation singing hymns helps to invest the sacred with emotional meaning as well as intellectual understanding. That's why music is a universal feature of all religious groups.

Music is also, simply, a means of communication in a public gathering. The forms and patterns of music we use are kept mostly the same, but options are creatively taken to enhance our memories of what's being celebrated or commemorated. Music performs a symbolic role in this. Music stimulates, expresses, and helps to share emotional catharsis and release, and also provides aesthetic enjoyment. Hymns are symbols of solidarity.

Our music has two kinds of effects. One kind is on each of the participants individually. The other is on the group as a whole. Music fosters the creation of a kind of "community of memory", one which confirms our individual identities. Our memories of singing hymns at Live Oak Services help to remind each of us of who we are.

To sum up: music contributes to the continuity and stability of Live Oak's organizational culture by:

1. emotional expression
2. aesthetic pleasure
3. entertainment
4. communication
5. elicitation of physical responses
6. enhancing conformity to the way we do things
7. validation of social institutions and religious rituals.

The components of music that contribute are: Lyrics, melody, rhythm, timing, harmony

The singing of hymns does the following things:

1. It focuses participants' attention on specific religious topics.
2. It binds people together.
3. It calls up memories of previous times when that particular hymn was sung
4. It builds unity around our community covenant, with special attention to attitudes and sensitivities.
5. It can also help to teach ideas and ways of doing things..

[Keeping these ideas in mind, please rise as you are able, and let us sing one verse of Hymn #311, "Let It Be A Dance". By the way, the rhythm is a tango.]

A few more thoughts about hymns: Disagreements about Lyrics, Melodies, and Musical Styles:

There are theological and doctrinal implications of the choice of words in a hymn. That's the source of the omission of references in UU hymns to Hell and to the Trinity. Sometimes a well-known hymn has been "Unitarianized" by word changes.

Editors may actually change the words in a hymn for a number of reasons: (1) to make them theologically acceptable, (2) make them easier to sing, (3) to improve the poetry, (4) to make the meanings easier to understand, (5) to make the language more inclusive, and (6) to make them fit the music better. But sometimes word changes aren't very satisfactory. For seasons such as Christmas and Easter, editors are sometimes faced either with jettisoning well-known and loved hymns from other traditions, or, instead, modifying the words so the hymn is barely recognizable. Perhaps a third alternative might be better -- writing completely fresh words to accompany a tune associated with the season in question.

For some time now there have been serious controversies in both Protestant and Catholic churches over music. These have been going on for years and evidently still divide churches more than any other issue. UU's share in these disagreements to some extent, despite our official stance of mutual toleration of differences. There have been not only disagreements about melodies, and texts, but also about musical styles. The debate is partly one of taste and partly theological. At one time the hymns that some now embrace were considered heretical by those who thought monastic chants in Latin were the only pious music.

Differences in melodies and musical styles:

Why the current ongoing, sometimes heated, arguments? For one thing, it's a disagreement over the familiar versus the unfamiliar. For some, there is a sense of nostalgia about the old hymns. They were the vehicles that helped introduce people to worship. When we don't sing the old songs, we're not reminded of that great experience. There is a sense of security with the familiar. It's like going through the same routine during the holidays.

But, there can be more serious issues underlying likes and dislikes of music. Sometimes a piece of music has really bad or unpleasant associations for some members of the congregation. It may have been played at the funeral of a loved one years ago, or associated with memories some other terrible event. People's memories of the event and its association with the music can carry strongly negative emotional connotations that may make even hearing the music a very unpleasant experience. For example, for various reasons, I have very negative associations with the Doxology ("Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow"), which accompanied the collection plate's rounds in the church I attended as a child.

Let me give you another even more dramatic example of negative associations. I have served for a number of years on the advisory boards of several summer chamber music workshops. One time at an institute workshop, some participant "campers" came to the board and proposed a kind of "camp song" for people to sing at the dinner table, hoping to promote a kind of community spirit. However, another group of participants, who were Jewish, then came forward. They objected strongly, calling attention to the fact that the proposed melody, a theme from a Haydn string quartet, had been chosen by the German Nazi Party in the 1930's as their national anthem, "Deutschland Über Alles", and was associated in people's minds with the Holocaust and with concentration camp deaths!

I was able to find for them an alternative tune to be used; but, thankfully, the "camp song" proposal was withdrawn. As a footnote to this incident, it is worth noting that in our UU Hymnal, "Singing the Living Tradition", that same melody appears as Hymn #190! However, the UU Hymnbook Resources Commission thoughtfully also provided an alternative and far less controversial tune for the words, supplied by the poet Longfellow. That tune appears, next to the first one, as Hymn #189!

Disagreements can also involve a controversy over the beat of the music. Most 19th century hymns had a certain, rather staid, rhythm to them that one identified with church. Most contemporary music has a rhythm that we identify with secular music. It just doesn't sound sacred! Now, if it doesn't sound sacred to the participant, should it be a part of a sacred religious service? Jazz? Rock and Roll rhythms? A Samba? A Tango? Some conservative Christian fundamentalists view these rhythms as stimulating evil sexual impulses in young people, and thus are obviously inappropriate for inclusion in a religious ceremony.

Martin Luther had this same type of problem. He set his poem, "A Mighty Fortress" to a tune from a saloon. Yet today people say, "I love those stately hymns like A Mighty Fortress". To Luther's disturbed contemporaries, however, it was like our generation setting a worship text to the tune of "Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall."

Other aspects of the music can be controversial. It can be a controversy over volume -- In some churches the music is so amplified it's seen as distracting. Or, the controversy can be over instruments used. Each culture and generation associates certain instruments with the sacred and others with the secular. Since the piano was originally used in bars, some churches had difficulty with it and chose to be non-instrumental. People may also have differing opinions about the use of a guitar in a worship service. It may just not seem appropriate to them. Some may be disturbed to hear drums. Others hate the synthesizer or can't believe that a saxophone — that sultry sound — could ever be worshipful. Is the organ a sacred instrument? Maybe it is too clearly identified with other religious denominations. The Live Oak UU Congregation has had several offers of gifts of electronic organs, but turned them all down

Postlude

We have taken a look at where our UU hymns came from, and discussed the hymns we sing today. We have examined the ways in which we use music in our Sunday Worship Service, and sung a hymn, #311, "Let It Be A Dance". We have taken a look at some of the controversies over lyrics, melodies, and musical styles. Here are a few closing thoughts.

Suggestions for thinking about Live Oak's music:

1. Remember that people differ in their preferences. Just as there are different tastes in food, there are very different tastes in music.
2. Don't insist that the entire worship service be for you. Maybe someone else is being reached by this particular music.
3. Please don't spread discontent to others.
4. Seek and find musical fulfillment in other ways and at other times than at a Worship Service.
5. Sing with happiness and enthusiasm even if the musical style isn't your favorite. If visitors see a united group singing with joy and enthusiasm, they are impressed and convinced.

Suggestions for listening to the music in the Service:

1. Be aware not only of lyrics, but also of melody, rhythm, timing, and harmony.
2. Pay attention to the beauty of both the words and the music. Temporarily forget your daily activities at work and at home.
3. Be sure to look around you, to see and hear others sharing the music with you.
4. Know that the music will touch your heart as well as your head. A tear in your eye is quite as appropriate for a big strong adult male as it is for everyone else.
5. And, finally, remember that the music in the Service expresses a Unitarian Universalism that lives and ministers to all in this complicated world where freedom, peace, and justice are so hard to create and sustain.

Let it be so.
