

**Choir Sunday**  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
June 9, 2024

***Singing as a Spiritual Practice*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

I consider singing a spiritual practice. I'm not always good at it, but it is a practice that I find spiritual in quality. I believe that spiritual practices are training exercises to help us stretch and learn to focus – whether one is focusing on coping, or making changes, or group process – it's about full attention that calls us to our best. It's about making our unconscious acts conscious acts.

Our best selves are non-judgmental and forgiving. Our best selves have a sense of humor and sense of proportion. We are at our best when we are focused and centered and engaged. We are at our best when we listen to others. We are at our best when we are singing.

Now, I know that some of you will say, “no, not me, I don't sing”, or “I'm not good at singing”.... but see, that's the big lie. Singing is not about how we sound to others, or even to ourselves, it's about self expression and group expression... if you think it's about staying on key, you've likely never attended services at a Catholic church in a small Honduran village. There were times when I couldn't even tell there was a tune to the songs being sung in Travesía, Honduras where I once lived – the singing was so unselfconsciously loud and vibrant – it was like wailing with grief one Sunday and shouting with joy the next, but rarely did it sound anything like the organ accompanied hymns of my upbringing....

or if you think it's about perfect pitch and sounding pretty, it's likely you've never attended Shabbat services in a synagogue with no accompaniment or written music – just words on the page that congregants can sing to so many different folks tunes handed down thousands of years it has to be decided which version to sing – and even after the group has decided, sometimes it's not apparent that they picked the same tune.

Both my experiences with Catholic and Jewish congregations were in very small settings, where individual voices could be heard – especially voices that didn't follow the conventional rules of music – those slightly out of tune voices that stick out. But I think I finally heard enough of those voices in such settings that now I can lead worship without accompaniment, with a limited understanding of written music on a page, and not feel embarrassed when I know what I've sung is not like what is actually written or how it is supposed to sound....which is not to say, I don't try to sound my best. I do. I use every fiber of my being to make my voice hit the pitch as best I understand it. But I also see it as my spiritual practice to not judge myself when I miss the note. When I can hear that I've not hit the note I want. I try to file that information away – congratulate myself for even hearing the distinction – and try to hit the note the next time it comes around.

I think it's a perfect spiritual practice for living our lives. Yes, we should acknowledge our mistakes, and try to improve, but no reason to be harsh with ourselves about those mistakes. Use the information – file it away as good learning – and move on to the next note. Keep trying. Sing out boldly and work together. Let those who hit the notes be teachers to those of us still learning. We get better with practice. The more we sing, the better we get at singing, and isn't that true of other life skills?

## ***Music Inspires Us All***

### ***Introduction by Allison King***

This is not a concert. This is not a performance, not in the typical sense that you may understand performance. This is an offering - an offering of love and music given by this wonderful group of singers. It's more than love and music, it's time and talent, and maybe a little bit of torment, depending on who you ask. Week in and week out, they come to rehearsal to learn the music for services, and then offer that music to you in worship. *Twice*. They come early for the first service, and stay until about mid-way through the second service, departing after singing the Musical Inspiration. This group gives a lot, and even though you haven't heard our program yet, I think a round of applause for their dedication all year is an appropriate show of appreciation at this moment. (Applause)

Everyone has a different reason for being here. Maybe one of them got started singing in elementary school and basically just couldn't stop - that's kind of my story. Maybe some of them never sang until adulthood and just wanted to give it a try. Maybe someone just wanted to get out of doing the dishes on a Thursday night, and decided to swing by here instead. Whatever the reason, I'm grateful.

What is the purpose of music in worship? Can you imagine if there was no music for services? No singing, no piano or organ, just...nothing. Early church fathers debated whether enjoying music in church amounted to sinning. Others felt that music opened the mind to Christian teachings. St. Augustine famously said "to sing is to pray twice." If that's true, I have prayed A LOT - which is weird, because I'm an atheist. But there's no question for me - music is my spiritual practice.

Today you are going to hear pieces that celebrate the role of music not just in worship, but in life. Think of all the ways that you experience music - music accompanies our celebrations, our rituals, our heartaches, our losses, our trips to the store and our commutes to work. We go to hear professionals perform it at concerts. We do it ourselves in worship or around the campfire. It accompanies our demonstrations and our triumphs, it binds together our communities in times of sorrow or of joy. Whether you are a music maker or a music partaker, music inspires all.

### ***Personal Reflection by Diana Cunningham***

My name is Diana Cunningham, and I've been singing in the UUCV choir for over 7 years. The choir here is really supportive and has helped me grow. The lovely thing about being in the UU Choir is that we have a very forgiving audience and that with many people singing the same part you generally can't hear an individual's mistakes.

I was raised in the Salem, OR UU congregation and grew up singing UU hymns and going to RE through the same love arch we have here. When I joined the choir here, my prior music experience was 4 years of band and music in middle school and singing along in the car on my way home.

I'll let you in on a little secret: I can't really read music. When I was in band, I played the drums. I learned how to read rhythm notation, but there was no need for me to ever learn notes because drums don't have them. In the middle school choir, I generally learned by listening and knew that the high notes are on the top of the scored music.

When I first came to practice here I was placed as a First Alto, but had lots of problems. I kept following the lovely gentlemen in the Baritone section. I kept slipping up and singing the Soprano notes instead of the Alto harmony. But our director, Patrick, said that every human can sing and kept working with me.

After a few years, I decided since I kept singing the Soprano notes I might as well switch parts and sing Second Soprano. It was a hard transition. All of the high notes were in the stratosphere for me. I kept having to either drop back down to the alto part or be silent for the higher notes. The choir was full of encouragement. I can always ask someone from my section and they'll help me with the correct notes or provide helpful techniques. And they were always full of praise when I got it right.

I've been here long enough that we're starting to re perform pieces I did when I first started and I can see all of my old notes. I'm staring at it and going "Why did I drop down to the Altos there? And write that the notes were too high?" Those notes that I thought were in the stratosphere are now pretty easy. It just took practice and a lot of work and support.

### ***Closing by Allison King***

Before we sing our last piece, I have a couple of appreciations that I would like to offer. One of our long-time singers retired from choir this year after literally decades of serving this congregation musically. He sang in the choir. He played the violin. He served on the music committee, and he was instrumental - pardon the pun, but there really is no other word for it - in the repair and rehabilitation of this beautiful piano. So, Rex, would you come forward so that we can offer our appreciation to you?

And appreciations wouldn't be complete without talking about this wonderful being here. Every rehearsal, every service, Karen is there to support the choir in their learning, and to support me in leading the rehearsal. She's kind of a ninja accompanist - she's there when you aren't aware, and supporting in just the right way. She plays whatever I throw at her, whether it's some funky gospel, or lush contemporary music. How lucky we are to have you, Karen.

And how lucky we are to be here, to be able to sing and to share our offerings of music with you. I said at the beginning that we all have different reasons for being here - and so we'll tell you some of them in song.