

Choir Sunday

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
June 1, 2025

Reflection on the Theme© – Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Allison asked me to address the importance of music in worship in my reflection. This is a fun assignment for me, since I can't imagine worship without music. But first I should start with what worship is in the first place.... Especially in a Unitarian Universalist congregation where there is no agreement about the existence of God, the entity which most other faiths worship. In the absence of an agreement about God – please note that I didn't say in the absence of God – in the absence of a common belief, we find agreement in Life itself. We exist. The world exists. It is a good thing, something of value, and we gather to celebrate that life each week. This celebration is a religious experience because it connects us, our lives and our living, to something larger than us individually – to the group, to our values, to God, if that's a part of your understanding.

Worship is about creating and articulating the religious experience. We come together to sing hymns and stand up and sit down and read together– we do these acts in a corporate setting to recall the religious experience into our lives and then reflect upon its meaning. Worship appeals for the wholeness to reveal the religious and make sacred the otherwise ordinary moment.

Though I am calling worship a celebration, it does not mean that we always feel like celebrating – because life comes with hardships and challenges, loss and grief, pain and sorrow. Life comes with feelings, big feelings sometimes, and words don't always touch those feelings. Music does. Sometimes music touches those feelings so well, I'm not sure the words are even necessary. I've been tempted on more than one occasion to simply close the service after the choir sings and say amen.

But as living beings, we do use words to make meaning and communicate with one another. So a worship service needs both words and music, and the experience is better when they work in tandem and together, rather than as discreet parts unrelated to one another.

I had an experience when I was a student intern leading worship, an experience I've had over and over again since then. Just before I stepped into the pulpit at Countryside (in Palatine, IL), the choir sang an anthem and during the music I found myself doing something more than just centering myself. I recognized the shortcomings in the sermon I was about to preach. I was not ashamed of the sermon; I just realized that it had its weaknesses. But I also know that worship is more than a sermon. So, as the choir sang, I prayed. I prayed for that mysterious thing to happen that happens with sermons in worship. I prayed that the shortcomings of style and form not interfere with what I knew to be an important message. I prayed that the congregation would listen through the weaknesses to the substance and that they would find a healing message for their lives and be changed. What happened, though, surprised me - the prayer I offered to the music of the choir changed *me* such that by the time I stepped in the pulpit and began reading the sermon I had, moments before, felt lukewarm about, I discovered that I *liked* it. I believed the words I said and all ambivalence had left me. I preached with conviction.

That's what music does in worship. It opens us up to the message. It provides the backdrop for a religious experience to break through our ordinary lives.

***Come Join Us in Song* by Allison King**

Song - Let Us Sing, music by Paul Winchester -

Let us sing! That piece was written by my friend and colleague, Paul Winchester. Paul is the Music Director at the UU Church of Minnetonka in Wayzata, Minnesota. Paul is a singer, instrumentalist, composer, and teacher, and if this piece is any indication, a great gift to UU choral music.

Poor St. Augustine - he really struggled with his moral dilemma about loving the music for itself rather than for the "truth which it conveys." Isn't it wonderful, that as Unitarian Universalists, we are free to love the music for itself without thinking that it makes us *sinner*s? For me, the only real sin would be if there were no music at all in a church service.

When I moved to Portland at the beginning of 1998 to go to graduate school at Portland State University, like many UUs new to the Portland area, I attended a service at First Church, or as I like to call it, the Mother Ship. At that time, I didn't know if I was going to become involved in music there, but I had this funny notion in my head that I was going to earn all my income from music. No more waitressing or latte-making for me. So it was serendipitous that on that particular Sunday, I saw a notice on a bulletin board: "Choir Director wanted at West Hills UU Fellowship." *That's my job*, I thought.

It did indeed become my job, and I was thrilled. I'd been the assistant choir director at my previous church in California, so this was a nice step up. Best of all, I didn't have to spend my time pulling shots and steaming milk.

Since I was coming from a UU background - a lot of UU music directors don't - I didn't have too much trouble finding music that was appropriate for the choir to sing. That particular fellowship had a decidedly humanist bent, and pretty much anything went except anything that mentioned God, and singing about Jesus was okay as long as it was in an African-American spiritual, but no other time.

Then, in 2001, I attended my first UU Musicians Network conference. One of the fun things we do at conferences is to read through several pieces of music to get repertoire ideas. Imagine a room full of about 150 choir directors sight reading choral scores. There was even a whole evening devoted to reading through the music of UU composers. I didn't even know there were UU composers! Mind blown!

Since then, I have made it a practice to seek out UU composers when looking for music for worship. For one thing, I KNOW that I'll find something that upholds and lifts up our values. For another, it feels good to support my colleagues in this way.

Our next piece is one that I wrote. This is actually the first choral piece that I ever composed. It was while I was at the West Hills Fellowship, which I mentioned was heavily humanistic, and I was feeling a lack of spiritual practice there. How do we pray? I asked myself. Where is our "Lord's Prayer?" - not that I ascribed to a belief in the lord's prayer, but I liked the ritual of it. So I decided to make a UU prayer, but essentially paraphrasing the main elements of the prayer but with a decidedly UU bent.

Song - Prayer to the Universe, words and music by Allison King

One of the composers I met on that night in 2001 is Clif Hardin. Clif has been the music director at the River Road UU Church in Bethesda, Maryland for 42 years. Clif is primarily a pianist, so his accompaniments tend to be shall we say, *involved*. This piece, *Seize on Today*, is set to the poem by Henry Thoreau.

Song - Seize on Today, music by Clif Hardin

Elizabeth Alexander is probably the best known of the UU composers that I know. Elizabeth's pieces are sung by high school, college, and community choirs all over the country, as well as in pretty much every UU church that I know of. Elizabeth is also a talented wordsmith, and while she has brilliantly set the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, Hafiz, Langston Hughes, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, among others, she's no slouch when it comes to writing lyrics. Our next piece, *Cherish Your Doubt*, examines how having doubts doesn't undermine your faith, it can strengthen it.

Song - Cherish Your Doubt, words and music by Elizabeth Alexander

Our final piece was written by Brian Tate, who, while not a UU, did compose this piece on commission for the UU Musicians Network, which is now called the Association for UU Music Ministries, so in my book that qualifies him as a UU composer. This was written in 2017, during the first Trump administration, and you may remember there was a lot of talk about *walls* back then. Trump was trying to build a physical wall, but I think we can recognize that the metaphorical walls that we erect are harder to demolish than the physical ones.

Song - Take Down These Walls, words and music by Brian Tate

I want to take a moment to offer my deep gratitude to our pianist, Karen, who tackles all of this intensive piano accompaniment without a complaint - or at least, she never complains within my earshot. Thank you, Karen, for all that you do not just for the choir, but for this church community during our worship services.