

Onward, Forward, Singing Hymns
The History in our Hymnody
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The whole notion of a hymnal was new to me when I came to Unitarian Universalism in 1988. In Judaism (the religion of my birth), the songs are an integral part of the liturgy itself, not separate events. Growing up, I learned the conservative melodies of the prayer service from singing them as part of the congregation at Beth Shalom; the order of tunes were memorable, the segments easily sung and easily learned. Call and reponse or delivered in unison, either sung or chanted, led by the Cantor (not the Rabbi) "Davaning" (repetitive bowing) optional. To this day, the melodies remain familiar, even though I never proficient enough in Hebrew to fully grasp what I was singing (but I can say, for sure, that there were a lot of "Baruch Atah Adonai's.")

Congregational singing may be common to Judeo-Christian practice, but as the lack of a separate hymnal in Judaism shows us, the concept of congregational song is not. In fact, the modern Western church practice of singing discrete hymns like we do turns out to be grounded in the same reforms which led, ultimately, to the founding of our own free church tradition.

The Rev. Roger Fritts provides a good history here:

"The music in our worship service," he writes, "has its roots in the changes that Martin Luther made in the Roman Catholic liturgy more than five hundred years ago during the Protestant Reformation. Luther said: I have no use for cranks who despise music, because it is a gift of God. . . . My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music, which has so often refreshed me and delivered me from dire plagues." (some of you may agree with Martin)

Luther also encouraged the development of trained church choirs, writing: "one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music, where one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four or five other voices, leaping springing round about, marvelously gracing the simple part, like a square dance in heaven . . . (that's certainly the transcendence we experience with our own choir here, too)

Luther's greatest musical reform, though, was congregational song. In the Middle Ages, the liturgy was almost entirely restricted to the priest and the choir. Then, in 1524, Luther published a hymn book. His congregations learned to sing and all people sang. Practices were set during the week for the entire congregation. A Jesuit testified (with the taste of sour grapes in his mouth, no doubt,) that "the hymns of Luther killed more souls than his sermons."

English hymn singing became popular because of Isaac Watts who first published his book *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* in 1705. After Watts, John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism, firmly established hymn singing in congregations in England and America.

In 1761 John Wesley wrote his "Rules for Hymn Singing," which still appear at the beginning of the Methodist Hymnal and include such instructions and encouragements as Sing all, sing lustily and with good courage, sing modestly, sing in time, and above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing." Not unlike the Methodists, Jews, and even the Jesuits, the roots of our evolving Unitarian Universalist sources and current practices

hum from every page of our series of hymnals (including the two we are using today).

Our current hymnals, *Singing the Living Tradition* and *Singing the Journey*, reveal our “theology” of social justice, of compassion, of ecological awareness. These two books and other supplemental UU Hymnals including the newer Spanish language version, hold the collection of thoughts, words and music used in most of our UU congregations around the world at almost every worship service. They are what tie us together as a faith tradition. They were not compiled lightly or outside of our historical or theological lineage. Have you ever read the grey hymnal from cover to cover? This book, the only permanent sacred texts in the room, is a rich compendium of folk songs and gospel spirituals, poetry and psalms set to classical melodies, Southern Harmony standbys, chants and Hebrew dance tunes; an eclectic and postmodern blend of where we’ve been, where we are, and where we are going.

In an article for *UU World Magazine* from 2008, Donald E. Skinner notes that, “In the early 1800s, Unitarian congregations had little in the way of music. If they sang at all they sang biblical psalms that had been put to music by their Puritan ancestors. On the other side of our heritage, the Universalists were more musical, said the Rev. David Johnson, who is writing a book on the history of Unitarian and Universalist hymnody.

‘The Universalists were very enthusiastic singers from the beginning,’ said Johnson. ‘The Universalists sang about God’s love for everyone, very pointed evangelical hymns. When the Unitarians began writing and singing hymns, theirs were more graciously theological, celebrating nature and the bond between God and humankind.’ Neither faith had choirs in the beginning. “The Universalists all sang, and they didn’t see any need for a separate choir.”

[In the article Rev. Johnson goes on to say,] “By a certain point the Unitarians were trying desperately to sing well, too. They had several periods of prolific hymn writing. The introduction to *The Unitarian Faith in Unitarian Hymns*, a collection published around 1915 by the American Unitarian Association, reflects one of these periods: “It is a significant fact that every period of spiritual awakening in the Christian church should have been marked by a fresh outburst of hymnody. . . . For the most part the older hymns no longer truly represent the mood of the new day.”

The music of the Unitarians and the Universalists evolved as our theology evolved from roots in puritan Christianity, through the liberalization of our theology towards the bond between nature and people and the virtue of Universal love.

[The Rev. Roger Fritts offers more clues to the history of our hymnody in his sermon on the topic. He explains that:]

“The first Unitarian Universalist hymnal was *Hymns of the Spirit*. Although the Unitarian and the Universalists did not merge into one association until 1961, this 1937 “red hymnal” was a joint project between them. It took five years to complete. It is heavily theistic, with frequent references to God, the Lord, and Jesus. The focus is more on the music than on the lyrics. The names of the hymns refer to the tunes and not to the words.

Twenty-seven years later *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, what came to be known as the “blue hymnal” was published. This 1964 hymnal was a radical departure from the past, the

first humanist Unitarian Universalist hymnal. The Lord's Prayer, for example, which appeared several times in the red hymnal was nowhere to be found in the blue hymnal. It had no section at all called prayer.

Instead the 1964 hymnal reflected the desire of many Unitarian Universalists to experiment with new forms of worship. For the first time our blue hymnal also included passages from Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish sources. The hymnal was carefully constructed so that it would serve us for many years into the future.

Alas, (best laid plans of mice and men gone astray), within ten years the Blue hymnal was hopelessly out-of-date. In the late 1960s our nation was shaken by the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, Earth Day and the environmental movement, and other cultural revolutions. Hymn names like "Man is the Earth Upright and Proud" did not fit with our desire to live in harmony with the earth. Almost every reading, every hymn in the blue hymnal was written by a white male. Many hymns, and many readings included the words: man, men, he, him, the Lord, the King, Fathers or brotherhood.

There is a popular joke that the reason UUs have a hard time singing in unison is because they are reading ahead to see if they agree with the lyrics. Well, back in the 60's, some congregations supplied their members with hymnals and pencils to change the sexist words in the blue hymnal.

Some congregations took to printing revised words to the hymns in the order of service. In response to complaints, in 1979 the Unitarian Universalist Association published a small pamphlet called *25 Familiar Hymns* in new form, hymns with the male language removed. But what was really needed was a completely new hymnal.

Finally, in the late 1980s the UUA Board of Trustees established a new hymnal commission. As part of its work the commission did a study to discover what were our most popular hymns, and what was missing that people wanted included. *Morning Has Broken* was the most popular, number 38 in the gray hymnal, a song of praise for the morning, although they had to tinker with leftover God language.

The hymn that was not in the red or the blue hymnal that many Unitarian Universalists wanted added was *Amazing Grace*, numbers 205 and 206. The commission struggled with this hymn, too. About half the Unitarian Universalists consulted, objected to the word "wretch" in the second verse. They claimed that this was a reference to original sin, which most Unitarian Universalists do not believe in. "I am not a wretch," they harumphed. Others pointed out that John Newton was talking about himself, referring to the fact that he was a slave trader and that "Amazing Grace" was the moment that he realized that what he was doing was evil. As a compromise, the commission suggested that those who were offended by the word "wretch" could replace it with the word "soul." (comment about silent night – "sleep in heavenly peace for every verse and folks sing the original words anyway, even words like Savior)

I invite you to really think about the words to one of the most popular songs in our hymnal - In number #108, My life flows on in Endless Song. Here are the traditional words to the song,.

“No storm can shake my inmost calm, While to that rock I’m clinging. Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth, How can I keep from singing?”

Now we sing: Since Love prevails in heaven and earth, How can I keep from singing?”

This subtle and simple change lifts up of our evolving philosophical framework of inclusivity and the theological evolution that began with the Universalist’s belief that God was love. These changes aren’t accidental, they are a result of hundreds of years of movement within our faith tradition, a tradition that continues to question and expand.

This process helped open the door to musical variety with *Singing the Living Tradition*, published in 1993. *Singing the Journey*, a hymnbook supplement, followed in 2005. The former book was inspired not only by the need to remove sexist language from UU music, but also 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 (what we call the teal hymnal) was designed to supplement *Singing the Living Tradition* with more contemporary music, including jazz, folk, pop, spirituals, gospel, praise songs, chants, rounds, and traditional hymns, reflecting the growing direction of music in UU congregations.” Whether it will endure is hard to say.

Still, if the intent of a hymn book is

“to set up an environment for a hallowed ceremony, To bring forth an experience of the religious realm, To function as a device for the communication of thought, To soothe the heart from pressing concerns, To suggest new opportunities and fresh possibilities, To bring order and harmony to our worship, To share in the delight of religious community,” then our UU hymnody from red to blue to grey to teal to purple may not be a perfect harmonious blend that has succeeded beyond measure, but I’d argue that it certainly satisfies measure to measure.

So, I ask: how *can* we keep from singing? Amen, amen, amen, amen, amen (sung)