

Spirit of Life, Come Unto Us
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
UU Church of Meadville
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Spirit of Life, come unto me
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice
Roots hold me close, wings set me free
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me. – Carolyn McDade

I don't think I'm going out on much of a limb to assert that in churches, fellowships, and societies throughout the world, Unitarian Universalists like us will sing *Spirit of Life* this morning.

At First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, where I served for four years, it has become part of the weekly liturgy, a simple, elegant, heartfelt "call to meditation." It's so much more than Hymn #123. *Spirit of Life* is a lyrical touchstone, a predictable and comforting presence on Sunday morning.

Whether it is sung, standing with eyes wide open or with matching hand motions, or intoned prayerfully while sitting with eyes closed, one could confidently argue that Carolyn McDade's *Spirit of Life*, written in 1981, is about as close to a UU theme song as we have in our tradition.

Sermons like this one are written about it. An adult education curriculum is based on its lyrics. In six short lines, it touches much of what is central to our faith – compassion, justice, community, freedom, reverence of nature, and mystery.

Carolyn McDade, now 83, was raised as a Southern Baptist and does not typically call herself a UU, although she has spent time as a member in two of our congregations and was even ordained in an honorific way to our ministry. She likes us and she understands why UUs seem to "get" this song like no other.

After all, it isn't a tribute to the one eternal God or the Holy of Holies residing on a distant mountaintop. It doesn't give instructions on salvation or plead for mercy. Instead, it encourages what McDade herself calls an "inner conversation" with whatever it is we identify as the Spirit that moves us, sings within us, roots us, sets us free.

And how many times have I rattled off *that* list of "God" euphemisms? How many times have I used the phrased, "whatever it is you deem sacred and meaningful," whether it be the raw force of nature, a personal God, or a Mysterious Presence that pervades the Universe? I've lost track...but I can safely say...a lot! We're in the search here - for Spirit, for life, and for connection both with the spiritual and with the living, what we can reason and what remains a mystery.

This morning, rather than preach my usual January resolutions sermon, I'm inviting you to explore with me what it may mean for us to beckon the Spirit of Life when we gather for worship as living, breathing, seeking souls.

First, *Spirit of Life* is a particular special song to me. So much so, that I had my stole designed to represent McDade's lyrics. Let me show you...(I share the images

from my stole here).

After reading McDade's letter bemoaning "rewrites" of her lyrics, I did wonder if she would disapprove of my stole. Yet, in the final analysis, I believe she would understand how my wearing of this stole (this symbol of my commitment to ordained ministry) binds me both to my own personal spiritual search, and also to the community I serve, as we join our journeys together. Our hearts can sing together, our hands move together in co-creation along the way. And, I didn't change the lyrics on the stole, at any rate.

Spirit of Life is a "beckoning" song. We ask the *Spirit of Life* to come to us. Come out; come out, wherever you are. It reminds me of Robert Fulghum's wonderful story in which he advises us to "get found." As one wise sage suggested, "Some people talk about God as if God could get lost." I can envision that someone in the future will devise a GPS locator device for the sacred or the equivalent of "find my phone" that beep and sends off a piercing wail. Aha – found you! This hide-and-peek with the sacred reminds me of what the US Supreme Court said when asked to define pornography years ago. "We can't define it," they ruled, "but we know it when we see it."

For now, we're stuck with old-fashioned spiritual practice to "know the sacred when we see it or experience it." Through practice, we seek the spirit as we understand it, and many of us deeply desire the spirit to seek us and find us.

Spirit of Life, we sing, "come unto me." Optimally, this should be sung as an invitation, rather than as a demand. *Spirit of Life*, we sing, "my heart is open, my hands are open, come and sing within me, come and move me, hold me close, set me free, make me a justice-seeking, compassionate person."

The difference between seeking and being found recalls a piece of Buddhist dharma wisdom that my Spiritual Director shared with me once, namely, "I must let go of the life I planned in order to embrace the life awaiting me."

We grasp. Whether it's at life, or relationships, or our grudges or our opinions, or at the sacred. We grasp. In order to be found by the *Spirit of Life*, I believe we need to move from self-focused grasping to humble receptivity. *Spirit of Life*, my hands are open, my heart is open, come unto me."

That said – I realize that it can be hard for us to admit that we might learn or discover something new about the Spirit that moves us (or might move us) outside of the script we already have playing in our heads. This is especially true if our emotions about the Holy are mixed up with some hurtful memories of past religious experiences or if we think the whole notion of sacredness is sentimental hogwash.

My question is: what is it you fear? What might happen to you if you really let the *Spirit of Life* come unto you fully? Maybe you'd have to give up your script or your grudges or your opinions or your resistance to being touched, moved, held, softened, vulnerable.

I chose the Dawna Markova poem which Deb read earlier because it offered a wonderful adjunct to McDade's passionate plea to be companioned and emboldened by the *Spirit of Life*. I've met McDade and I can say without hesitation that this is a woman who has no intention of dying an unlived life. What about you? Let's hear Markova's words again. She writes:

I will not die an unlived life.

I will not live in fear

Of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
To allow my living to open me,
To make me less afraid,
More accessible,
To loosen my heart
Until it becomes a wing,
A torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance;
To live,
So that which came to me as a seed
Goes to the next as blossom
And that which came to me as blossom
Goes on as fruit.

Wow. I think any one of us could spend a lifetime contemplating what it would mean to risk our significance to live. How we might loosen our hearts so they become wings...wings that, in McDade's words, "set us free." To allow living to open and enlarge us, rather than allowing fear to shut us down and make us small. How would you re-envision your life as a spiritual adventure full of enthusiasm for growth for 2019 and beyond?

"I will not die an unlived life," Markova writes and I hear it as a challenge and I ask you to hear it that way, too. Each time we sing *Spirit of Life*, we can consider how the invitation embedded in McDade's "simple prayer" of a hymn offers us an outline for full-immersion living, full impact spirituality, and full-time compassion.

Markova mentions fruit, which reminded me of some factoid I heard once about apples. Apparently, the apple is most alive, most full of juice, most an apple at the moment just before it falls ripened from the tree. I can't speak for you, but I'd like to die like an apple, full of juice, full of Spirit, full of compassion for all living beings and myself. Singing *Spirit of Life* is encouragement to live that goal, day-by-day, moment-by-moment.

Of course, there are plenty of obstacles along the path. One of the most insidious, especially among UUs, is spiritual narcissism. Humanism can get quite mangled into the misconception that it is all about us...that humans are truly the measure of all things and that we are God (not in the positive way of viewing ourselves as sacred, but rather in the hubristic way of believing we are more special than other sacred beings.) "*Spirit of Life*...come unto me" morphs into a bratty demand -- "*Spirit of Life*, get over here, and make it snappy!"

I echo my colleague Ken Sawyer's notion that "the same spirit of life at work in all nature is at work in us, but that we're not special in the eyes of the spirit." Reverend Sawyer goes on to suggest that whatever tenacity there is in you and me is evident more abundantly still in tundra lichen, deep sea protozoa, and that darned squirrel at our bird feeders."

"I think," writes Sawyer," that whatever joy the spirit brings to us is of a sort, but smaller than, that of sliding otters. I think the *Spirit of Life* was just as alive before we humans were here to give it a name, will be just as alive long after we're gone, and all the

while be just as alive throughout the Universe, of which we are so wonderful, but trifling a part.”

Well, if that ain't a kick in the pants! Even so, I agree wholeheartedly with my colleague and mentor. A spirituality that elevates the self and serves only the self is narcissism. Emersonian self-reliance on steroids! To connect McDade's imagery of roots and wings to this point, I'd argue that spiritual narcissism occurs when our soul roots are growing deeper and growing wider, but we end up root-bound. Our spiritual wings become clipped by an overly inward, self-serving focus. One could say this represents a form of faith without works, intention, or depth.

Now that we know the origins of McDade's UU anthem as a request to be renewed for activism, it's hard to pretend that this song is all about us, about the Spirit finding us and going off with us to some private club.

Now that we know that McDade is not just a very talented songwriter, but also a passionate feminist and crusader (as our final hymn will attest), it becomes even more difficult to rewrite the lyrics in our heads to serve only ourselves.

Yes, McDade acknowledges that the song invites an “inner conversation” and personal interpretation. No problem there. But she “does not ask the Spirit of Life to sing in her heart all the stirrings of contentment, well-bring or delight. She doesn't ask it to move in her hand a winning lottery ticket, or to help her shape unrelenting beauty, order, and inner peace.”[Sawyer]

Not that McDade is against such things, its just not what this song is about. As she tells us, speaking of the images in her beloved and very intimate hymn, “For me, images more than exact statements of belief offer the deepening conversation that opens us to the common and personal waters out of which we emerge as one who live our lives with passion and understanding...”

“I realize that for others this song may not express completeness for them as it does for me. All I can do is to encourage you to find a way to lay your heart's curve in the world, a way to talk to life and give voice to what matters deeply to you – all that your heart needs by which to live. And let this creation walk into the world with a heartbeat and a measure to its step.”

So may it be for us...seeking, rooted, soaring, and found. From seed to blossom and blossom to fruit. An apple, if we are so blessed.

Spirit of Life, come unto us. We are ready and waiting.

Blessed be and Amen.

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