

Water Service
UUFR-VA
Jane Elkin
Sept 5, 2010

Since the first Water Service in 1980, which was conceived during the feminist and environmental movements, we Unitarian Universalist have used a day in early September to celebrate our Seventh Principle. The Seventh Principle, for those who are new to UU, is "*The respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*" Many UU churches and fellowships everywhere now hold a water service after folks have returned from their summer vacations and travels. I am pleased that we will be among those churches and fellowships this morning.

My boys and I have just returned from a family conference at Star Island, a rocky island 10 miles off the coast of New Hampshire of about 40 acres. It is one of a group of 9 or 10 islands, depending on the tide, called The Isle of Shoals. Star Island has been a Unitarian Universalist Association and United Church of Christ conference center for over 100 years.

The theme of the Star Island conference was "Musical Connections." From this conference theme, I was motivated to attempt to connect the music of Carolyn McDade with the UU water service. When I discovered that one of the conceivers of the water service, Carolyn McDade, was also the writer of some of our most famous UU hymns, I knew that I wanted to explore her story further. I have included some information on the life of Carolyn McDade as an insert in your order of service. We will be singing and listening to the choral music of Carolyn McDade today.

The three pieces I have chosen for the three musical interludes during this service are all mantras, which are snippets from "The Earth Charter."

A mantra moves us in one thought. The voices of the women's chorus play with the melody and the windings of the harmonic paths. The liner note on the CD states, "We seek in the variances of repetition to open our lives to deeper understandings."

The Water Ritual worship service was created by Lucile Schuck Longview and Carolyn McDade for the "*Women and Religion Convocation on Feminist Theology*," held in East Lansing, Michigan, in November of 1980. Since that time, the Water Service, or Water Communion, has become a common ingathering ceremony at many UU congregations. The water may be from an ocean, a river, a garden hose, a camping outing, a trip of a lifetime, a glacier, or the kitchen sink.

As the UUA website puts it, "Combining the waters is symbolic of our shared faith coming from many different sources."

The *Women and Religion* Resolution was passed by the UUA General Assembly in June of 1977. In 1978, UUA president Paul Carnes appointed the Reverend Leslie Westbrook to be the Minister to Women and Religion and an eight-member Continental Women and Religion Committee was appointed to work with her. The committee and the Reverend Leslie Westbrook worked with the UUA staff in Education, Ministry, and Extension to develop material, programs, and policies to implement the intent of the resolution. One of the things that came out of this process was the seventh principle, in 1985. In 1993, the new hymnbook, *Singing the Living Tradition*, was published incorporating language with attributions of both genders.

When I was researching the water service, I came across the idea that some UU churches have modified their water service because some people feel that there is an element of "classism" inherent to the water service. Being able to travel or take a vacation is something that is not available to everyone. So I would like to note this issue here. It is definitely an issue with me, that's for sure. I love to travel, and I would love to do more of it, but we have a budget. I loved seeing the photos from the Weekley's trip to

China, and I read every word of Dave Rowden's blog about the South American Extravaganza. I like the idea of combining water from near and far in one vessel, right here. So please speak to a member of the the program committee if you think that we should modify the program next time because of the classism issue.

WATER SERVICE

I would like to start by adding some water from Star Island. At the conference, I participated in a daily writing workshop, a book group, the cocktail hour, of course, and I didn't have to cook all week. My boys were in their youth groups, and there was no x boxes, TV, or computer games anywhere on the island. We weathered a fantastic nor'easter in the middle of the week.

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I know there were a lot of layers to this service today. The music and the story of the activist Carolyn McDade; the role of the UUA in the feminist and environmentalist movements; my passion for Star Island; and my passion that we should have a water service annually in this fellowship. The most important layer, of course, was the water and the stories which all of you all provided today.

Today in our water communion, we have shared words and stories. In this year together, may our words, thoughts and deeds become more like this water from many sources that we have combined into the one vessel.

This following piece on the life of Carolyn McDade appeared as an insert in the Sept. 5, 2010 order of service.

Carolyn McDade's Spirit of Life, by Kimberly French (*Excerpted from UU World Fall 2007 8.18.07*)

No other song, no other prayer, no other piece of liturgy is so well known and loved in Unitarian Universalism as “Spirit of Life” by Carolyn McDade. It is our Doxology, or perhaps our “Amazing Grace.” Many congregations sing it every Sunday, or at least enough to know the words by heart. Sermons have been devoted to this one song. A new adult religious education curriculum is based on the song. It is sung at weddings and memorial services, around campfires and at demonstrations, at cradles and hospital bedsides. In six short lines “Spirit of Life” touches so much that is central to our faith—compassion, justice, community, freedom, reverence for nature, and the mystery of life. It finds the common ground held by humanists and theists, pagans and Christians, Buddhists and Jews, gay and straight among us.

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.

As close as this piece of music is to the hearts of so many UUs, its songwriter is something of an enigma....We think of her as ours and often identify her as a UU songwriter, but for the past two decades she has had little formal contact with the denomination. And the tellings of the story behind “Spirit of Life” have not always agreed on the facts.

Carolyn McDade does not call herself a Unitarian Universalist. But when someone asks where am I being spiritually formed and where am I participating in spiritual formation with others, it’s not ever been connected with churches. My community is a loose community of women. I call myself a woman of faith seeking with others to touch what matters.”

Her most recent (CD)...*My Heart Is Moved*, is a collaboration by ten women's choruses she works with across North America and is based on the United Nations Earth Charter.

McDade, now 72, has given her life to what she calls the movement. By that she certainly means the feminist movement that dramatically changed what was possible for women since she was a girl. But she also means a chain of linked, politically progressive causes...

McDade grew up Southern Baptist in a series of small rural Louisiana towns. When she was just six, the United States entered World War II. That's when she became a peace activist, she says. The men were gone, the women were doing everything on the home front. In many ways she went on to follow the script for young women of her generation: Trained as a teacher. Married. Had three daughters.

"Writing my own song really was the beginning of finding of my own way," she says. "I was a young woman activist, my children were young, and I had totally lost myself. Social movement was my healing, seeing my life as part of other lives."

She quickly immersed herself in the groups of women activists rising up in Boston and across the country in the mid-1970s. Early on she joined with the Women and Religion groups within the UUA, demanding a place for women's spirituality. McDade and one of that movement's leaders, Lucile Schuck Longview, in 1980 conceived the water ceremony as a way for women who lived far apart to connect the work each was doing locally to the whole. Each woman brought a jar of water from the place she lived, and during the ceremony poured it into a bowl, naming what made it precious to her. Then, dipping her hands into the water they'd combined, each blessed the woman next to her, imparting strength to continue her work.

Like much of McDade's music, the genesis of "Spirit of Life" was a very personal one. Late one night in the early 1980s, she was driving her close friend Pat Simon home from one of those meetings. In UU tellings of the story, it has been called a church social-justice meeting, an antinuclear-power demonstration, and a remembrance of Harvey Milk...versions that may work well to make a sermon point...but McDade says it was a meeting for Central American solidarity, probably at a college.

Then in the early 1990s the UUA hymnbook commission approached McDade about including her song in *Singing the Living Tradition*. She was reluctant. "I thought of it as a living prayer, not a hymn," she says. "I don't feel like a hymn writer."

"Among ourselves," recalls the Rev. Mark Belletini, who chaired the commission, "we thought, if we don't put 'Spirit of Life' in the book, we'll all be killed. We took her hesitation very seriously and wanted to address it." They agreed to place the song (hymn 123) under the "Love and Compassion" heading rather than "Worship."

A few years back, some friction heated up between McDade and "Spirit of Life" enthusiasts. UU members had written several additional verses to sing in their churches.

McDade asked them to stop. “My feeling was, you need to find your own melody. Don’t lose what you want to sing, but find a way to make it yours.”

That was the one time, McDade says, when she felt she had to step in on behalf of one of her songs. In general, she believes it’s important to let songs, once written, go out and have their own lives. And all of her songs that UUs have chosen for hymnals have done just that.

McDade speaks of her songs as her teachers. But “Come, Sing a Song” had kind of a time-delayed teaching for her. In the 1980s, the chaplain of the women’s state prison in Framingham, Massachusetts, asked her to come do a music program. She brought the song mainly because it was easy to learn. But the prisoners sang it in a way she’d never heard. She had to stop singing and listen. “That song needs context—‘I’ll give you hope when hope is hard to find’—and they had context to bring to it,” she says. “It went from sweet to profound.”

“We’ll Build a Land” (which is the UU title for hymn 121; McDade’s is “Creation of Peace”) is rooted both in the Hebrew Bible and antiwar activism. “Very early on, we all were working our heads off,” she recalls. “The guys were the spokespeople. Women did a lot of work, but were seldom given a lead in speaking.”

Carolyn McDade is the first to say her songs are not for everybody. She doesn’t expect them to appeal to men, mixed groups, or even younger women....Her music is slow and flowing, often pitched for lower women’s voices. The lyrics are heavy in metaphor, thick with poetry, and you won’t find a male pronoun anywhere.

Her audience is a generation of women who grew up with church as a vital part of their lives, who raised one another’s consciousness in the 1970s, and who came out ready to change the world....But women’s music of that era, like Carolyn McDade, Cris Williamson, and Holly Near’s, is grounded in women’s struggle for equality, and anyone who has not experienced that struggle would likely not find her music compelling.”

Music by Carolyn McDade can be ordered at www.carolynmcdademusic.com