HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING
(Fellowship Sermon)
Rev. Amy Carol Webb

[sung]
My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation.
I hear the real, though far off hymn
That hails the new creation
Above the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing;
It sounds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?

I stand with you today awash in the pungent and poignant intermingling of faith - and fear. That most mysterious of alchemies that seizes the hearts of men and women to make of us - ministers. Faith that leads us to the edge of all we know - and then calls us one step farther. Fear of what comes after that next step -- or of falling over it. It’s not fear of this moment or of this process or of failure in the common sense -- but fear of not bearing up under … the gift. The gift of this faith. The gift of the history and hope handed down to us in this most remarkable Unitarian Universalist movement. The gift that called each of us into this room at this moment and for this purpose -- for no other reason than we love this faith and give our lives to it. Not in spite of our doubts but because of them -- and not in spite of our fears, but because of them. Because a world without a growing and thriving UU movement would be a fearsome world indeed -- and people without Unitarian Universalist faith could wander the spiritual desert all their lives never tasting the cool waters of a liberating faith in the bond of covenanted fellowship.

Today is one more step for me into, with, through and because of our movement. One more step for me beyond all I thought I knew. I stand here with you on the threshold that is this day grateful and joyful. Knowing both too much - and not
enough. But as a culmination of finally, *finally* answering the deepest yearnings of my soul. Yearnings that led me to seminary, and virtually anywhere I’m called from the tiniest outpost UU fellowships of rural Florida to historic Boston parishes and dozens of our communities in between. Because my life flows on in endless song above earth’s lamentation - I *heard* the real and far off hymn that hails the new creation, and could not keep from joining in!

I stand here because I *must*. Like Jonah, uncertain what comes next, but sure it’s been too damp and too dark and too lonely for *way* too long in the belly of the whale.

But, this is not about me. And it’s not about you. And it’s not even about our Association. We are here for even more.

We are here for -- Michael Servetus and Katherine Vogel who faced the ultimate test of faith in fire.

We are here for Faustus Socinus and Francis David who dared to declare we need not think alike to love alike.

We are here for George de Benneville and John Murray who braved wilds of a new land to give us hope, not hell.

We are here for Hosea Ballou who yet bids us to “speak solely from the fire in [our] souls, ordained of passion for truth without regard to rank or class or station in life!”

We are here for Olympia Brown and Celia Burleigh, who pushed opened the doors for women. And we are here for Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon and the Iowa Sisterhood who took on the American frontier and made of church life a hearth and home.
We are here for Channing and Emerson, who yet invite us to embrace that inexplicable but irresistible spirit both within and without -- and for Parker, within whose arc of the moral universe we yet labor – and Margaret Fuller whose new world manifest of a priesthood of fully equal men and women paved the path beneath my own feet.

We are here for Egbert Ethelred Brown and Lewis McGee who dared us look race in the face.

We are here for the men and women and young people of twentieth century Unitarianism and Universalism who wrestled the ancient notions of liberty and justice, of intellect and inspiration, in new ways as two branches of the prophetic liberal religious tree of life joined as one in the work of faith - 50 years ago now.

We are here because their vision of who we can and must be in this world faces a steeper mountain than we have faced in some time – a mountain of profound change in what our world seeks in religious life -- a mountain we must learn to climb with new ropes and fresh resolve.

We are here for the thousands of us who come together each Sunday to hash out what our faith means and how we can more powerfully live it in this broken and baffled world.

We are here that those thousands may become hundreds of thousands for our children’s children to the seventh generation.

We are here for all Unitarian Universalism has been and is – but more for what it can make of the future we share with our neighbors next door and a world away.

I am here for what Unitarian Universalism is making of me. I am here for those,
who like me, once believed there is no place for them in religious life.

I am here for those who believe they are too much of this or not enough of that to know acceptance and love in religious community.

I am here for those who fled a former religious life bruised and bleeding, and those who never had a spiritual community but are so weary of walking alone.

I am here in the grip of the irrepressible grace and mercy of the Mystery that called my pure child’s heart – and then faithfully waited half a life to heal its brokenness through this faith.

I am here that there not be within my reach any more like me, who knew NOTHING of Unitarian Universalism until I was 43 and asked to bring my music to a UU Summer Camp.

And so today I come to stand with you to contend for the holiness and happiness of humankind. To press my shoulder with yours, and with Hosea Ballou that none should starve, that none should live poor, in this most needful time in human history. With people the world round rising up for liberty and justice – those two very bedrocks of our faith – let us no longer we a well-kept secret!

I come in the spirit of our ancient grandfather Arius, the 4th century theologian who, when he was banned from preaching his faith in one unified God, went down to the docks and into the streets with the common people and sang his theology, whereupon, it spread like fire -- and in the spirit of John Steinbeck who said songs are the one statement that can’t be destroyed because you can confiscate books and pamphlets, but you cannot keep folks from singing!

I say to you, whether the hope we declare comes in a melody sung or the mystic music of words spoken from the heart of conviction, we must ring the rafters with
it! For though inheriting this faith is a gift, keeping this faith - is - work.

And so let us rise up to bear witness to those who brought us here and rally those who will carry us forward. Let us bid old Jonah’s whale spit us out into the broad light of a new day with the courage to proclaim the truth we have found! Pray let us bear up under the awesome gift of this faith.

Our past is built on it.

Our future depends on it.

Let us join our voices anew in that far-off hymn that hails the new creation!

Above the tumult and the strife, we hear the music ringing;
It sounds an echo in our souls -- how can we keep from singing?!

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