

A Holy Discomfort: The Spiritual Work of Singing Welcome

Amanda Udis-Kessler, June 24, 2021 (originally presented as a sectional for the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada as part of its 2021 conference)

I'd like to start with one of my favorite jokes about Unitarian Universalists, a joke I feel comfortable telling because I spent 30 years with the UUs and still maintain a connection with them. The joke goes like this: Why are Unitarian Universalists such bad hymn singers? Because they are always reading ahead to see whether they agree with the words.

This joke, of course, has a seed of truth in it and not just for UUs. When many of us encounter a new hymn or worship song, we scan ahead to see what we make of the text. And this makes sense. If worship music does not have integrity for us, if we don't assent to or agree with the claims or assumptions or language of the text, we may not be able to sing it comfortably. And when we sing during worship, we yearn to sing texts that we can sing with energy, passion, and commitment, which generally means texts that we can bring our whole selves to because we are comfortable enough with them. And there's nothing wrong with wanting our worship music to be comfortable – right?

Well, like all complicated situations, the answer is sometimes right, sometimes wrong. Today, I'd like to explore the idea that singing welcome is often uncomfortable and that our ability to sing welcome with the same energy, passion and commitment that we bring to those old beloved hymns and worship songs depends on us doing various kinds of spiritual work to get comfortable with discomfort. I'll share three pieces of worship music that I've written, and after the talk we'll have time for a Q&A. I should note up front that I'm focusing on texts, not on music, though we could have a related conversation about the music of hymns and worship songs.

Before we think about the discomfort of singing welcome to others, we need to start with the comfort of singing for ourselves. Comfort in the context of worship music tends to come from familiarity. If we already know the hymn text and find it meaningful and moving, we will be comfortable singing it. To go back to that UU joke, we don't need to read ahead when we know what lies ahead and we know that it works for us. If we don't know the hymn text but are able to give it a quick scan, we are likely to be comfortable with it if it tells stories, makes claims, and gives us images of humanity and the sacred that align with what we already believe and perceive. And again, there's a place for comfort in our worship singing, a holy place. But there's also a place for holy discomfort.

Brian Hehn gave a Hymn Society presentation some time ago called "Breaking through the Traditional/Contemporary Divide," in which he differentiated between what he called pastoral and prophetic worship music. Pastoral church song, Brian said, pulls from the tradition and speaks to our common identity, whereas prophetic church song speaks to the future and shares a vision of who God is calling us to be. I mention this distinction because I believe that to some extent, it maps onto our comfort levels with singing church music and it offers a way to think about why singing welcome can be uncomfortable and what we might do about that. Pastoral church song is often comfortable, whereas prophetic church song may be less comfortable. So, let's consider a prophetic critique of pastoral comfort.

If the familiar is comfortable, for whom is it comfortable? Insiders. Those who have long sung these hymns and worship songs, those who are deeply steeped in the tradition. Those who have, to quote Brian again, a common religious identity. Singing traditional music is, in a sense, welcoming ourselves back,

reminding those of us who are already in the worship space that we belong there. Of course, this is comfortable, and often comforting. The tradition and the common identity from which pastoral church music pulls are beautiful, meaningful, and, profound. But they are also exclusive. Pastoral church song leaves certain people out.

There are two different ways in which pastoral church song excludes people, and we need to draw a distinction between them because only one of those ways is likely to be worrisome to us. There are people who have no draw to our specific tradition, who do not assent to the creeds or values we find meaningful, and who may hold beliefs that we find problematic at a basic level. They are not looking for us, and while we will do our best to welcome them if they appear, we are not necessarily looking for them. We have different traditions, different common identities. Our pastoral church song may not be their pastoral church song, and that may be just fine. Speaking as someone who belongs to a progressive UCC congregation in heavily Evangelical Colorado Springs, I am very familiar with different church communities being meaningful and valuable to different people. I suspect that a prophetic critique of pastoral comfort is not really focused on people whose faith lives simply do not intersect with ours.

Where the prophetic critique of pastoral comfort becomes important, indeed urgent, is when our comfort turns out to exclude people who might find a home with us, outsiders who might become insiders. I think these outsiders tend to fall into two categories.

First, pastoral church song leaves out the outsider who has never been part of our religious community, who does not already share our common identity, and who might find meaning and hope among us but for whom our tradition is alien. I think of this person as the newcomer. I joined a UCC church after 30 years as a Unitarian Universalist and without any prior experience in Christian churches, I walked in the door as a newcomer, very aware that the traditions that were so comforting and comfortable to those in the room would be new and strange to me. Fortunately, I was able to bridge the strangeness and translate the language into words that made sense to me. And yet some of the hymns that most deeply moved the longest-time members made me very uncomfortable. Had I not been comfortable with that discomfort, I might not have stayed. This congregation's commitment to singing welcome helped me not only to stay but to be in relationship with the tradition in a way that has integrity for me. Singing welcome to newcomers means choosing at least some music that aims to reach the broadest possible audience with the gentlest and most hospitable understanding of what is beautiful and grace-filled and gratitude-invoking within the tradition. Light on the claims and creeds, heavy on the love and hope.

Pastoral church song can also leave out the type of person I would call the outsider within, someone who has grown up in the tradition or has a history in it, but has become alienated from it because they learned that it is not really for them or doesn't really value them. Women who grow up in patriarchal church traditions can be outsiders within, as can LGBTQ+ individuals who grow up in heterosexist, homophobic church traditions, though there are also other examples. Singing welcome to outsiders within means wrestling with exclusive or judgmental strands or practices within one's tradition, including within the pastoral church song. This wrestling can be very painful. Deeply beloved and profoundly comforting hymns that members have sung for decades may be among the worst offenders in signaling to outsiders within that they don't really belong.

Both newcomers and outsiders within can belong to socially and politically devalued groups in our society, and singing welcome sometimes means addressing directly the ways in which our church traditions have contributed to their devaluation. Here's an example of how our traditions can fail newcomers, focusing on race. Dr. King once called worship "the most segregated hour of Christian

America,” and indeed many white congregations wish to be more inclusive of people of color or, to use alternative terminology, people from BIPOC communities. There are many reasons, sometimes complex ones, why liberal, progressive, or inclusive congregations remain so white, but I’m pretty sure about one thing. When our confessional music speaks to our individual sins or failings but not to systematic inequality and our need to work against it, our ability to welcome oppressed groups of people to our communities and to demonstrate our commitment to their well-being is limited.

Church song can also fail outsiders within, and historically has often done so. When images of the sacred are exclusively male, those of us who are female may experience the tradition as implying that we were not made in the image of God in quite the same way that men were. When our worship songs are neutral on matters of sexuality and do not explicitly celebrate and cherish LGBTQ+ people, such people, of whom I am one, may well be suspicious of whether we are really celebrated and cherished exactly as we are. If we don’t find ourselves and our experiences in the liturgy, if we hear other people singing their realities while we do not get to do the same, how will we know that we are truly welcome?

None of this is to say that the pastoral tradition of church music is inherently wrongheaded or that it should be jettisoned. It is only to say that the pastoral church music tradition poses challenges to singing welcome when it is the only church music tradition in use. Fortunately, we can always choose to incorporate prophetic church music, music that calls us forward into the Beloved Community that Jesus envisioned, a community where absolutely everyone is welcome to join in the feast of loving the holy, ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies, and of living out that love on a daily basis through acts of justice, kindness, and humility.

Where the pastoral music tradition comforts insiders, the prophetic music tradition reminds us that there is, to misquote John Robinson, yet more welcome to break forth. That reminder can be uncomfortable, disorienting, and awkward for insiders. It can disrupt the smoothness and ease of our worship experience. Particularly when we sing welcome to people who are not yet in the room but who we aspire to invite, the whole exercise can seem strange, as though we were play-acting or virtue-signaling.

I recently saw a tweet by Marcus Harrison Green that read, “There is a significant difference between ‘all are welcome here’ and ‘this was created with you in mind.’” Part of singing welcome is showing newcomers and outsiders within that their experience and perspectives are already valued in our worship lives, that we are engaging with those experiences and perspectives even if there are no newcomers or outsiders in the room with us yet. This too can feel strange. Can an entirely white congregation sing welcome to members of communities of color as a kind of preparation, as part of its outreach, as the worship side of its justice work? Can an entirely heterosexual, cisgender congregation, if such a thing actually exists, sing welcome to the queer and gender-bent, honoring both the now and not yet of the congregation it yearns to become, the witness it seeks to offer?

In the spirit of answering those two questions with a resounding “yes,” I’d like to share three pieces of my music before I turn more directly to the issue of our discomfort with singing prophetic welcome. In different ways, these pieces either address or incite discomfort with the ultimate goal of preparing us to welcome newcomers and outsiders within. These are pieces that can be sung by insiders alone as spiritual work, or they can be part of a larger mix of insiders and outsiders. I’m going to share each piece with minimal comment, but we can discuss them during the Q&A.

The first piece, Oh, My Shepherd, is a confessional psalm for white people seeking to work against racism. It riffs off and troubles the 23rd Psalm, imagining it not as a prayer of oppressed people but as a

prayer of privileged people who benefit from a form of systematic inequality that has destroyed and continues to destroy lives and communities. I've used it for spiritual formation in groups of white people of faith seeking to work against racism. The piece, which would normally be sung by a white soloist during a time of reflection or confession, does not directly welcome outsiders in but prophetically calls insiders to work for welcome by working for justice. Here is Oh, My Shepherd. [YouTube video]

The second piece, God, the Soaring Eagle, uses a wide range of Biblical images of the holy to remind us that in fact we don't only think of God as male or majestic or even personal; those are simply the images that have received the most attention and focus within church tradition. The hymn intersperses various Biblical images of the sacred with words of praise and gratitude, reminding us of what the spirit moving in and among us does to enrich our lives. The final line is explicit about who can be in joyful relationship with the sacred, which is to say, everyone. And anyone, regardless of their gender identity or lack thereof, can sing this text as long as they are able to navigate the music. Here is God, the Soaring Eagle. [YouTube video]

The final piece, Queerly Beloved, is published in the Hymn Society's collection *Songs for the Holy Other*, one of two pieces of mine that are included there. The title, of course, is a play on the phrase "Dearly Beloved" but juxtaposing queerness and belovedness makes the familiar strange, or as a queer theorist might say, queers our expectations. The hymn pushes against centuries of Christian homophobia, heterosexism, biphobia, and transphobia by assuming that queer people are already in the room and are already and always fiercely loved by God, exactly as we are. The hymn celebrates our experience of that love and our understanding of its radical implications. When you hear the use of the term "we" in the hymn, you might wonder whether I wrote it only for LGBTQ+ people to sing or whether heterosexual, cisgender people should sing along. I promise, it is for everyone to sing. Even if it makes you uncomfortable to sing it. Perhaps especially then. Here is Queerly Beloved. [YouTube video]

I hope these hymns made you think, made you smile, and, if appropriate, made you uncomfortable. Because confessing that we white people benefit from white supremacy and need to work against it is uncomfortable. Imaging God as female may be uncomfortable for people who have never sung a hymn to God the mother hen or God the midwife. And singing the line, "We of every gender say amen" is a reminder that there are lots of genders out there, not only the two mentioned in Genesis 1:27, and a reminder that people of every and any gender configuration have a piece of that sacred spark in them. That reminder might be uncomfortable for people of more traditional gender identities and values. Singing the words, "queerly beloved...we" might be uncomfortable and alienating for heterosexual, cisgender people because the text centers the experiences of LGBTQ+ people while still inviting others to join in the singing.

My pieces highlight certain kinds of discomfort related to singing welcome, but there are many ways in which singing welcome might be uncomfortable. If we come from very theologically liberal white traditions, singing Gospel music texts might feel awkward. If we grew up singing the traditional words of certain hymns, singing newly inclusive versions might feel wrong. If we've been immersed in justice-focused church music for years, singing welcome that invites our political opponents to join us by tempering the way justice language is used might feel strange; it might even feel like we are selling out our core values.

What, then, is the spiritual work of singing welcome? How do we learn to value discomfort as a sign of our humility and willingness to grow, our desire to be hospitable even at the cost of ease? How do we prepare ourselves for the prophetic invitation to imagine, sing about, and live into a world we've never

seen and can barely imagine? How can we get ready to be the voice of the holy in the welcome we sing? I'd like to use the rest of my time before the Q&A to suggest some things we can do, alone and in community, to build up our understanding and resilience so that we sing welcome not just with our voices but with our whole selves. I'm focusing here on singing welcome to members of socially and politically devalued communities, but we could imagine similar work to prepare us for singing welcome to our political opponents.

First, though, there's one final distinction to make before I get to the spiritual practices that help us sing welcome. Toward the beginning, I mentioned that there are people who are not part of our communities because they believe or belong or behave differently. We have not excluded them; we simply are not them. Our core claims and values are different from their core claims and values. We would be uncomfortable singing their pastoral songs and they would be uncomfortable singing ours. In what follows, I am not worried about those people, and I am not focusing on the discomfort of singing faith music that makes claims we simply cannot accept. As I said earlier, Unitarian Universalists are not the only churchgoers who need to agree with the text to sing it comfortably. In what follows, I'm focusing on three other types of discomfort. The first type is discomfort with the specific language or linguistic style of a hymn or worship song, language that does not come down to basic faith claims but that states or explores them or their implications in challenging ways. The second type is discomfort related to the group the text aims to welcome. The third type is the discomfort of facing up to the inequality that has made that group unwelcome, especially if it is a form of inequality from which we benefit.

My confessional psalm Oh, My Shepherd speaks to the last of these kinds of discomfort. It addresses directly the harm we white people have caused and continue to cause people of color and asks for strength that we might do better. As with all confessions, it is intentionally uncomfortable.

My hymn God, the Soaring Eagle may cause the first kind of discomfort by using female language for God and may cause the second type of discomfort by reminding singers of the variety of different genders in the world and possibly in the room.

And Queerly Beloved might evoke all three kinds of discomfort, by its use of the word "queer," by its focus on the perspectives of LGBTQ+ people, and by its reminder that LGBTQ+ people have been treated badly by heterosexual and cisgender people. I should add that singing Queerly Beloved might also be uncomfortable to LGBTQ+ people who have been taught their whole lives that insofar as they are queer, they are not beloved and insofar as they are beloved, it is either because or if they are not queer. Being systematically devalued is traumatizing, and church music that challenges that devaluation can trigger pain and grief. There's a reason a lot of LGBTQ+ people who find themselves in a truly welcoming congregation may sit there and cry for a long time. I should also add that the use of the term "queer" in this context can itself cause pain to older lesbians and gay men, for whom the term was likely used as a hostile attack when they were younger. It is definitely a term with generational comfort differences, and a congregation that uses this hymn should be aware of that.

Much of the spiritual work that will help us sing welcome, especially when doing so is uncomfortable, begins with changing our relationship to discomfort. Specifically, we can practice sitting with discomfort without needing to either address or avoid it. We can do this through spiritual practices of silence, meditation, and prayer, alone and collectively. We can do it through psychological healing work, such as therapy and the individual exercises that we do in support of that therapy. We can get familiar with what discomfort feels like in our bodies, how our minds fight with it or flee it or freeze at its arrival. We can parse our discomfort to find out what exactly we are afraid of and why. Engaging

with discomfort in general will help us learn how to sing welcome when the words are uncomfortable and will help us learn how to be a silent presence of love when we simply cannot sing the words.

As I mentioned before, I attend a church that sometimes incorporates worship music that makes me uncomfortable. I cannot assent to the claims of those texts, which seem to me to lift up a vision of the world and the holy that I find troubling. But because I see how meaningful those hymns are to other members of the congregation, I'm glad we sing them. I am grateful to be part of a congregation that makes different members uncomfortable at different times but makes all of us comfortable at least some of the time. Being willing to be uncomfortable at times so that others can be comfortable is, for me, part of the work of co-creating Beloved Community. We won't always be happy, but we will always be loved and we will always love one another to the best of our abilities.

When we confront our discomfort as it lives in our thoughts and energy and bodies, we will become deeply familiar with the difference between good and bad discomfort. Years ago, my massage therapist taught me how to distinguish between good physical pain and bad physical pain during a massage. More recently, writings by the brilliant trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem have taught me the difference between clean and dirty emotional pain. In the same way, discomfort can be productive or unproductive, healing or harmful, holy or unholy.

Unproductive discomfort, harmful discomfort, unholy discomfort is caused by poverty and prejudice, violence and cruelty, judgmentalism and exclusion, self-hatred and self-destructive behavior, devaluation and dehumanization: all the many ways that we can damage ourselves and others. Unproductive discomfort is, essentially, avoidable suffering. We cause unproductive discomfort when our culture and institutions and individual behaviors and interactions lead us to treat ourselves and others, individually or systematically, as anything other than beloved and beautiful. We experience unproductive discomfort when others treat us as expendable, inherently evil, or otherwise problematic based on who they perceive us to be. The people Jesus chose to bring his good news to were largely those suffering from the unholy, harmful discomfort that comes from being colonized, exploited, devalued, and disinherited.

Productive discomfort, healing discomfort, holy discomfort is any discomfort we invite ourselves to experience in the service of co-creating Love's Domain on earth, particularly where that means healing those who suffer from harmful discomfort. It is profoundly uncomfortable to acknowledge fully how much we who are white benefit from white supremacy and to commit to work against it even at our own expense. But this is productive discomfort. It is profoundly uncomfortable to realize that God's welcome table is a lot larger and messier than we thought and it has people we don't like or approve of right there with us. But this is holy discomfort. Healing discomfort comes from stretching ourselves, from risking ourselves, from doing the right thing or the best thing no matter how difficult, again, especially in service of the crazy vision that this guy had thousands of years ago, that we are still trying to put into practice.

Because of the ways in which inequality and religious exclusion work, healing and harmful discomfort exist in a very specific relationship to one another. Members of socially valued groups are given the benefit of the doubt and are treated in good faith, which makes their lives easier. Members of socially devalued groups are not given the benefit of the doubt and are treated in bad faith, which makes their lives harder and sometimes leads to their deaths. It is precisely the bad-faith treatment of members of devalued groups, including religious exclusion and mistreatment, that causes them to experience unproductive, harmful, unholy discomfort. If we, as members of valued groups, want to sing welcome

and show welcome to members of devalued groups, we need to be ready to experience productive, healing, holy discomfort ourselves as we push beyond our familiar, comforting pastoral church song traditions and do something new, something prophetic, something hospitable, something just. Our willingness to take on discomfort in order to welcome the newcomer and the outsider within can play a role in easing their discomfort.

Once we have a good understanding of discomfort in its many forms and some capacity to engage with it peacefully, there will be other things we can do to help us sing welcome boldly and joyfully. My concluding thoughts represent only the briefest introduction to some of these possibilities.

We can practice repentance. I mean that less in the sense of being contrite and sorry for our failures, and more in the sense of turning around and getting a new perspective. This may mean educating ourselves about a form of inequality for which we are not penalized and understanding deeply the harm it does. This work will ultimately help us sing welcome to anyone who suffers from this form of inequality. Alternately, repentance may mean doing the hard emotional work of realizing that we ourselves are not defective, immoral, inadequate, or less than human – we simply belong to a devalued group of people and were taught untrue, harmful things about ourselves. This work will help us sing welcome to ourselves and it will allow us the grace to receive the gift of others singing welcome to us.

If the people we wish to welcome are not yet among us in worship, we can learn about them – about their history, gifts, values, power, and suffering. This education, which we can pursue alone and with each other, will help us be ready for the presence of newcomers not yet among us by enabling us to begin acknowledging and honoring their experiences and perspectives. I asked earlier whether an all-white congregation could sing welcome to members of communities of color. This is one way we can begin to do exactly that. It is also a way to let outsiders within who have not yet revealed their outsider status know that they are wholeheartedly welcome.

We can shape our worship and our adult faith formation around extravagant hospitality. We can situate singing welcome as part of a larger project of making welcome manifest in the many aspects of our church life and our lives outside of church. Cornel West famously said that justice is what love looks like in public; we can assume that extravagant hospitality is another aspect of what love looks like in public and prioritize it accordingly.

Finally, we can put our gifts and our lives at the service of the people we are seeking to welcome. This may mean offering our financial resources, skills, time, and energy to justice organizations. It may mean showing up at protests and demonstrations, putting our bodies between the least of these and those who would hurt them. It may mean seeking out and listening to people whose stories and perspectives we are not already obliged to hear because they don't count as much as us, people who our social and political institutions treat with bad faith, people who are not routinely granted the benefit of the doubt. When we give such people our attention and follow their lead about how to support their work for justice, we are not merely singing welcome, we are living it, cultivating hospitality through humility. Any work we do along these lines will not only be useful for co-creating Love's Domain of human well-being, it will resound through our voices once we are back at worship, singing in joy and wonder and gratitude.

I would be delighted to hear your thoughts, questions, objections, and other responses. Please contact me at amanda@amandaudiskessler.com.