

Witness: Susan Bull Riley, "Singing"
Old Meeting House Worship Service
August 18, 2024

First of all, it's great to have our daughter Hannah and her fiancé Alejandro Fernandez with us this morning — and my husband too, of course. Hannah and Alejandro will be here a couple days before returning to their home in Atlanta. Because this is Alejandro's first visit to Vermont, we hope the wildfire smoke lifts enough for him to see our hills, and it would be nice if the rain let up for a bit.

I've been invited to reflect about how it is that I came to sing in the OMH choir. Another way to frame the request could more likely be this: "Given my family history, not to mention that I live next door, is there any chance at all I *wouldn't* find myself here?"

On both sides of my family, I am a direct product of multiple generations of people for whom singing was the family glue and for whom sacred choral music, including hymns, was emotional bedrock. The music of this Old Meetinghouse service in particular is part of my musical heritage because I grew up in the First Congregational Church in Burlington.

The familiar church music of my growing up years became, in the following decades, augmented by participation in other choirs — Methodist, Episcopal, and most recently, Unitarian. Just prior to being here, I sang in the Unitarian Church choir downtown where my husband Dick Riley served as music director up until Covid arrived. In the absence of our involvement there, the Old Meetinghouse beckoned.

As any choral singer will tell you, it's not just the music itself that is such a joy, it's the regularity of rehearsals and services which provide the context for friendships to grow naturally and eventually spill over into relationships with other members of the congregation. Being part of a church community that is, as already mentioned, quite literally next door has also been a useful feature of my involvement here, such as when I look at the church through our big schoolhouse windows to see what cars are parked by the church —and have occasionally realized that those cars belong to choir members... which means there's a choir rehearsal I had forgotten about —or I had lost track of time— and I needed to get over there *fast*.

Both sides of my family tree are peppered with musical people who were involved with churches in one way or another: a piano-playing, mandolin playing, singing grandfather who was a congregational minister, a scholarly maternal grandmother who sang at weddings and directed Sunday school for many decades — but who never stopped arguing with stodgy church fathers about theology; multiple choir-directing cousins, and of course my parents who were members of the First Congregational Church in Burlington between 1949 and my mother's passing in 2018. They served the church in multiple ways — including how my mother accompanied the Junior choir in which my siblings and I sang, and Dad was sexton for a time. After retiring from teaching high school, they co-founded the Green Mountain Chapter of Habitat for Humanity and spent the next decade building houses in the wider Burlington area. A healthy disinterest in doctrine, with a preference for action was the thread that ran through their lives.

Their culture of singing was perfectly integrated into lives of service as they followed the ethos of love and looking out for the Common Good that they absorbed through their families and church lives. I will never be able to fill their shoes, but the legacy of music as a shared, joyful participatory source of communication is one I try to carry on.

Our family sang grace every night. We sang during car rides, we sang washing the dishes. My mother sang a goodnight prayer at my bedside til I was through elementary school. When my sister and our daughters sing together now, it's hard to distinguish one voice from another because we have all absorbed the same nuances. We also forget the words at precisely the same places.

My mother was a gifted, conservatory-trained pianist who could also play a repertory of countless songs by ear — and in any key. (We know someone here at OMH who does that, too! Thank you June!) I remember being a child and watching my mother's hands flying over the keyboard, wishing with all my heart that I knew how she did that. I focused on flute instead.

My father inherited a love of music from both his parents and even though he was never able to carry a tune, he thankfully sang anyway right up to the very end of his life. It's a tender feature of my parents' marriage that the vast gulf between their musical skills never interfered with their shared vision of music as a means to participate in meaningful ways with others. Sometimes, though, she couldn't resist a correction such as when Dad would be picking out a tune on the piano with one finger, puzzled as to why the song sounded wrong, Mom would call out from the kitchen: "F#, Bill!"

During college, I considered an art major but abstract painting, which was in vogue at that time, didn't speak to me. I considered botany but realized my interest in plants was aesthetic rather than scientific. Everything mathematic was off the table. Eventually, and I suppose inevitably, I chose a music major after having an epiphany while rehearsing a wind quintet when it became abundantly clear to me that playing music excited me in ways that none of my other coursework did. I continued with formal flute studies that had begun in fourth grade, and followed up with a graduate degree in flute —baroque flute!— performance from the New England Conservatory in Boston.

Within days of starting that masters program, I shared a music stand with a cute guy whom I married a couple years later. It has been a joy for both of us to share music with our daughters, who are both musical. A couple years ago, our daughter Hannah and I biked up to the Old West Church, which was unlocked, stood up on the pulpit, and sang family chestnuts for at least a half hour, enjoying the beautiful acoustics.

I always blamed incurable, paralyzing stage fright for my departure, after a mere five years, from the music profession; I look back and see that I perceived performances as mostly opportunity to be judged — hence the terror. Singing in a choir, however, has all the benefits of creating music with none of the perfectionism or risk of rejection. Just joy. Sharing. Companionship. And of course, the added satisfaction of being a functional part of a service. I am grateful to be part of this community!

I sang with the Hospice Choir "Hallowell" for several years when we lived in southern Vermont (Dick directed the Brattleboro Music Center). Again, the singing was in service of whatever kind of comfort music can offer. I was present when the Burlington Hospice Choir, Noyana, came and sang twice for my father at the end of his life, one of those times being moments after he died. The singers came into the house anyway and quietly sang around him and my mother, in candlelight, bearing witness to his passing.

No major life changes are caused by a single factor though. It wasn't just stage fright that led me away from a life as a performer. I should have seen the writing on the wall when, while dutifully practicing for a solo recital some forty years ago, I kept being distracted by the way a beam of sunlight illuminated a vase of daffodils on the kitchen table — and, after a bit of struggle with myself, I put my flute down and took up my paints. But that's another story.