Song: Essays by readers

Readers Write in the October 28, 2015 issue

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In response to our request for essays on song, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next topics for reader submissions are **mistake** *and* **feast**—read more.

I had no expectations for the choir's Lenten evensong performance. The service was meant to mark the season and bring our community into a deeper appreciation of its mysteries. But we choir members have seen it primarily as one more service to prepare for, one that requires particular diligence. As we practiced, our focus was on notes and syllables, not theology.

And then, days before evensong, a longtime parishioner died suddenly. He had made it clear that he did not want a funeral. This put his parents, also parishioners, in a difficult position. They are both so deeply rooted in the rites and rhythms of the church that it was a painful prospect not to be able to mourn their son's death in worship.

So our rector proposed an idea. She asked if we could dedicate the evensong performance to their son's memory.

As parishioners and visitors gathered that night, few knew they were also gathering alongside a man's family in mourning. Intellectual abstraction and liturgical habit faded away. We couldn't help seeing the death of our friend as part of the Lenten story of Jesus' march toward his own.

In singing the ancient words of Psalm 23 and the Nunc Dimittis, we praised the Lord who will both lead us through the valley of the shadow of death and let us depart in peace. With the Magnificat we rejoiced that God will always remember his mercy, in life and in death. And with James Hopkins's "Thy Name Is Love," we saw what our brother sees now, that the God who is Love will address us when the struggle is over.

God allowed us to serve as the means through which he breathed peace into the souls of a family in pain. God stored up words in our music for that night, words more powerful and necessary than we could know. The family said that there were no words to express the power of what happened that night. I agree; there are no words to express the full glory of encountering God in such moments. But sometimes, when we least expect it, we're given the words to come close.

Matt Ely
Tacoma, Washington

Every Sunday it was the same song. No, really—every Sunday. We began the service with what black Baptists call "devotions," during which people are invited to offer a hymn or a prayer, a scripture or a testimony. I noticed that most people chose the exact same hymn each time.

I was an eight-year-old church musician who'd pretty much conquered the hymnal and liked every hymn. A favorite pastime was to sit at Grandma Sue's piano and play through the book, from "Holy, Holy, Holy" to the chants in the back that we hardly ever used at our church. How could these people—my elders, many of them my relatives—choose the same song every Sunday?

But then I grew up and got married, and Herbie and I began to raise our four children. Then they became teenagers, and life began to throw curves at us. And I sang in the happy times, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and "Oh Happy Day." I sang in the turbulent times, "The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow." I groaned in the

excruciating times, “Remember Me.”

I grew to realize that the songs freely emerged from my saved repertoire as tide and times demanded—and that each brought the joy or relief I needed. And I began to understand the time of devotions we used to have at church. I began to understand the elders and their one song.

It couldn’t be just any old song. It had to be the one that you’d serenely hummed in the night while your child was desperately ill, or the one that calmed the savage breast while racists lobbed life-threatening expletives. It had to be the one that propelled you down the aisle as you gave your hand to the preacher and your life to the Lord. It had to be the one that kept you company when you were all alone in a brand-new job, on a train to a new city, on a path to a new and challenging exploit.

It had to be that one.

And when the saints went home to be with the Lord, at the service of triumph, the ones who were left behind knew exactly which song to choose for them. It was the same song, sung with new understanding as it saluted the life that had been well lived, the life that had been a testament to the goodness and mercy of God, the life that had been a sign of the kingdom and had enticed many a soul to get on board. It was that same song that gave the final salute as the gates of heaven opened up to receive the victorious saint, whose song had saved a generation.

Dorothy S. Boulware
Baltimore, Maryland

Before I knew about God or church, I sang songs. Since my family did not celebrate Christmas in church, I lustily proclaimed carols from a small book, alone in my room. I sat in a child’s rocking chair and sang, “The First Noel, the angels did say.” I did not know what a Noel was, but I had a keen interest in angels.

Around age ten, I starting sneaking into my brother Bill’s room after he left the house. In the back of his closet was a guitar someone had given him, packed in a musty, flimsy case. I found a chord book behind the old flip-flops, and I taught myself three chords, which opened the door to hundreds of folk songs. A year later, my dad discovered my clandestine activity and bought me my own guitar. I took it to

Girl Scout meetings, where I learned the joy of leading songs.

Several “Kumbaya” camping trips later, I went to high school and joined the a cappella choir. I learned about harmony and, from the sacred literature we sang, about the lovely dwelling place where God reigns. I felt that God held even me, a nonchurchgoer. Now the angels I imagined as a child had a voice, and that voice was called a choir.

Guitar in hand, I headed over the hill to college, where Dylan and Collins and Baez became my closest companions. But singing by yourself can get lonely, so when a friend invited me to church, I packed the guitar away and followed. As I thumbed through the hymnal, the congregation stood to sing together. I expected to be lost and confused, yet I seemed to know what note would come next. The many confident voices of the congregation lifted my wavering voice into their midst, just as if I had belonged all along.

When I had my first child, I sang lullabies and “Silent Night” to her. When she was four, I grabbed a book called *Advent* at a used-book sale. My daughter and I would sing and light candles, even though we did not go to church.

I took my second daughter around the corner to the local preschool, which shared a campus with a Presbyterian church. Word got out that I played guitar, and the principal asked me to lead songs for a Christmas sing-along. By then many of the sacred songs had been let go, but I found I missed them, so I put them back in. The parents and children would sing “Silent Night” with tears in their eyes.

Eventually I found my way down the hall to the church, where I was soon asked to lead the children’s choir. By that point, the language of the church had seeped its way into my being, my ears filled with the wonderful works of God. When my daughters went to college, I went to seminary and on to ordained ministry.

“Music comes before religion,” says Alfred North Whitehead. Without music, religion is “too abstract.” Sound came before sense for me, and the words and music stuck to me like honey on the rock. Song cosseted my emotions until I could express them with words, and the Word became flesh for me in the life of Jesus.

Barbra Hardy
Washington, D.C.

When my daughter and her husband decided to walk the Migrant Trail between Nogales, Mexico, and Tucson, Arizona, my husband and I agreed to provide care for their two sons. We took a two-day drive to go stay with them for 11 long days apart from their parents.

We knew that the 75-mile walk across the desert might make electronic communication impossible. This inspired us and the boys to express our blessings and longings in original song lyrics. Levi, almost ten, sat down and wrote his song privately, carefully printing it by hand:

> I hope you
> Play well
> Walk well
> Sleep well
> Eat well
> And understand
> Our neighbors.

Peter's imaginative, eight-year-old mind spun out this one a few minutes later, with only a little help from Grandpa and Grandma on the last two lines:

> If you have thirst
> Our love will
> Quench it.
> If you are lonely
> Our hope will
> Be your company.
> If you are hungry
> God's peace and joy will
> Fill you and feed you.

Our grandsons' unabashed songs brought tears to our eyes and joy to our hearts. They knew that their parents loved them, and that we are all loved by the God who is mother and father to us all, including the immigrants who lose their lives in the desert.

Inspired by their childlike faith, my husband and I penned our own blessing songs on the back of the yellow sheet of paper on which the boys laboriously copied their songs for Mom and Dad, who assured us this folded bit of paper would go with them on their walk.

Delores Friesen
Goshen, Indiana

My husband is a retired Episcopal bishop. Years ago, my cousin invited him to speak at the retirement home where she lives. First we had lunch in a private dining room with the other Episcopalians on campus, where my cousin asked us each to introduce ourselves to the rest. Around the long tables we went, people standing to share their names and a sentence or so about themselves.

All moved smoothly until we came to an older man in a wheelchair. “I have taught music composition at several New York universities,” he said. “But I have had a stroke, and now I am not good for anything.” He was visibly depressed.

When it was my turn, I said my name and then said to this man, “I have written a poem about Ash Wednesday and have been told it should be put to music. If you are interested, I would love to talk to you about it.” He gave no response then or later that day.

My husband’s talk was received with laughter and appreciation. As we packed up to go home, a friend said, “Send that poem to me. He is a friend of mine, and I will try to get him interested.”

I found the poem and put it in the mail. Three weeks later, my friend wrote back—and included the man’s music! It was a high, difficult tune, not really what I had heard in my head. But what did it matter? According to my friend, the composer was a changed person, full of enthusiasm after writing a setting of my poem.

I called him and thanked him. He was most pleasant, and he told me he planned to return to his life’s work by writing more music. He asked me to send him anything else I thought he should put to music. I thanked him again, put down the phone, and thanked the Lord for leading me to this man, who needed something that I could supply.

Our church doesn't use music on Ash Wednesday. But I was able to use the song at a women's retreat I led. It may never be heard again; it's hard to sing. But I am convinced that it has already done its work. It brought life to someone who felt he had no purpose.

Nancy R. Duvall
Columbia, South Carolina

It took me 45 years to catch on to the value of a faith community. Then one Sunday, halfway through the first verse of the opening song, I got it.

I had completed my first year as a pastor and was standing behind the pulpit singing no. 133 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*: "What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms." I knew the people well enough to have learned some of their personal histories. I knew the hymn well enough to look out over the congregation as I sang.

Ruth and Roger both lost spouses to cancer and then found each other. Bernie's first husband killed himself with a shotgun. Ben and Gloria buried a two-year-old child. Bob's wife and two grandchildren were killed in an accident with a semi. Jim's son was in prison. J. C. lost his arm in a mishap with a corn picker. Sandy recently joined a support group for incest survivors.

Then it hit me: they were all singing. How could they sing? How could they experience such tragedies, yet come to worship every Sunday and sing?

I realized that these people had stories to tell, and not just stories of tragedies. They had experiences of faith that transcended their suffering. They might never tell these stories, but by attending worship and singing they were witnessing to their faith in the Christian story of love that overcomes death.

I learned to ask people what their favorite hymn or song was. If I asked why, I heard a story of grace moving in the midst of despair.

Today, my own favorite song in the hymnal is no. 133. On that Sunday 30 years ago, I don't know who started it, but folks began swaying back and forth, gently leaning against the shoulders of the people next to them as we sang. To gather in worship is to witness to the central story of our faith—and to count on the everlasting arms in

our faith community.

Nancy Bauer-King
Racine, Wisconsin

By the time I heard *Messiah* performed live, it had already wound its way deep into my bones. One of my earliest memories involves my father's reel-to-reel tape recorder, a heavy box from which Handel's solos and choruses soared in our small house. I was like the reel that filled while the one with the music on it emptied itself.

I misunderstood some of the texts at first. I thought "All we like sheep" meant we were fond of sheep. This made sense; of course we liked sheep. Jesus the good shepherd loved his sheep. Besides, anything that sounded so beautiful had to be true.

In the steady, inscrutable way that children learn and layer what they're learning, the libretto's words and Handel's music united in my mind. Years later, a grief came into my life, and for many weeks the only consolation I could take in were the words of the tenor recitative: "Comfort ye my people, speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished." To this day, when I read the scriptures upon which *Messiah* is based, I hear them as song.

Messiah did eventually become so familiar to me that it approached cliché. We had a tradition in our congregation of singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" on Christmas Eve. I dreaded it: the untrained voices shrieking around me, the giggles as we mostly failed to pull it off. We finally realized this circus wasn't the worship we wished to accomplish, and we let the tradition die.

But Handel's oratorio keeps breaking into my long acquaintance, giving fresh witness to its power. Seven years ago my husband, my daughter, and I spent an early December weekend in Las Vegas. It was every bit as crowded, frantic, and fabulous as Vegas promises to be. There wasn't much that nourished our spirits, but we didn't expect that.

We enjoyed the dancing fountains at the Bellagio. We watched the choreographed music, water, and light perform to love songs, an aria, and a jazz tune. Then one evening, to our astonishment, the fountains played to the "Hallelujah Chorus."

The next minutes were among the most inspiring of my life. Here was the truth I had been introduced to as a child, truth that followed me through a lifetime of God's faithfulness. Now it was rising above the glitz and gold of Vegas, "King of kings and Lord of lords" sounding into the night air while the waters bowed and surged and then shot into the sky on the Hallelujahs, as if they could hardly contain themselves for the joy of it.

Late last year, *Messiah* was being performed by our city's symphony orchestra and chorus, and I managed to get a rush ticket for a perfect seat. For several hours I felt myself caught up like Handel, who reportedly said he saw "all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself." I heard the texts as if new.

And how had I never noticed, in all these decades, that "he will lead his flock like a shepherd" is juxtaposed with "his yoke is easy, his burden is light"? We like sheep, I remembered, because the shepherd likes his sheep. Once again, I knew myself loved.

Dora Dueck
Winnipeg, Manitoba

The hospice social worker pages me and asks me to come meet a new patient. Her message informs me that Ofelia is Latin American, in her late eighties, and not religious. She speaks only Spanish. Her family is upset; she has not communicated with them in three days. She stares off into space and speaks to people who are not present.

I wonder what I could possibly offer them. I've often found that a song can reach into the heart and soul when nothing else can. But I'm not fluent in Spanish, and while I know some Spanish songs, most of them are Christian songs.

Ofelia's daughter Juana welcomes me into the room. Ofelia is staring, a look of horror on her face. She frequently bursts into loud, staccato phrases, as if warding off demons. Ofelia is so terrified that she is unreachable by gentle physical touch or the soothing voice of loved ones. She does not acknowledge Juana or Arturo, Ofelia's grandson. They sit beside her in the room watching, aghast, as the drama of the matriarch's last days plays itself out.

My routine spiritual assessment includes a musical-cultural assessment. Juana tells me that her mother is from Cuba. I know one Cuban song, but it seems absurd for this situation. I fear that I may be laughed out of the room—or worse, that I will only add to Juana and Arturo's suffering.

For the next half hour, I sit quietly at the bedside with Juana and Arturo. Ofelia continues to exclaim loudly, oblivious of the presence of her loved ones. It is excruciating to watch. In such a moment of chaos and despair, it seems right to be willing to take a risk.

I ask Juana, "Would you mind if I sing?" She nods her assent. I begin softly, tentatively, ready to stop at the slightest sign of any additional agitation from Ofelia. *Yo soy un hombre sincero, / De donde crece la palma*.

Ofelia continues to stare blankly across the room. But when I reach the chorus, she begins singing along: *Guantanamera, guajira Guantanamera*.

Tears cascade down Juana's face. Arturo's jaw drops through the floor. When we reach the second chorus, all four of us belt it out together. After the final chorus, Ofelia says something in Spanish, with great gusto. The three of them erupt into uproarious laughter.

Once the room settles down, I take Juana aside and ask what Ofelia said. She hesitates to say; she looks a little embarrassed. Finally she tells me, "Mother said, 'Why does he have to sing it so slow and melancholy like an Anglo—why can't he pep it up and put some soul into it?'"

We all laugh. Whatever spell of abject terror Ofelia has been under has been broken by this song from her native land, from her hometown—who knew?—of Guantánamo.

Jesse Palidofsky
Silver Spring, Maryland

I remember the darkness and the cold. There is a particular kind of darkness that settles over northwest Alaska in the heart of winter. The cold there seems at times to be a living thing, finding a way past doors and windows, attacking you through layers of sweaters and parkas. On Christmas Eve, candles lit the church. I remember

how it seemed that we were all refugees from the darkness and the cold.

There had been a surprising amount of darkness in my world. My biological father died on the mission field in Africa when I was three and my mother was pregnant with my

brother Eric. We returned to Indiana, wrecked by that darkness. My mother remarried a few years later, and her husband adopted Eric and me. On his fourth birthday, Eric was killed in a car accident. A few years later we were back in Africa, caught in a civil war, and walked away from our home with only what we could carry in our hands.

So I was not unfamiliar with darkness. And I remember the darkness and the cold of that late-night gathering in December. I was sitting in the first row of the balcony, looking down at the nativity scene forming in the chancel. Two high school students were wrapped in period clothing as Mary and Joseph. My three-month-old brother Stephen was in Mary's arms.

Elva Balluff began to sing. In a corner of the world where life was often harsh, it surprised me that something as beautiful as Elva's voice could endure. She sang a song I had never heard before, about a rose that bloomed from a tender stem: "It came, a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night."

I rested my chin on the wooden edge of the balcony, amazed. I may have stopped breathing. The only thing that mattered was Elva's voice, that song, and the promise of a God who works when the winter is cold and dark.

There have been other songs, but I remember that moment, that song. I remember how the darkness and the cold seemed less fearsome, seemed to recede like the tide. I remember the song and the beauty and the promise. I remember the two teenagers standing there, looking down at Stephen as the girl cradled him in her arms, all of them just kids. I remember how the lights above the chancel created this circle of light around them.

Six months later Stephen was gone, a victim of sudden infant death syndrome. My mother found him at noon, just as I walked in the door for lunch.

There are moments when the shadows lengthen, when my wrecked heart and the brokenness of the world cause the hope that is in me to stagger. But the cold and

the darkness don’t have me. Moments of beauty have pushed them back; words and stories have reminded me of a light the darkness cannot overcome. And the song lingers. I carry it, or it carries me. I continue to believe the rose shows us “God’s love aright” that comes to us “amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night.”

Mark Owen Fenstermacher
Bloomington, Indiana

It might have been rock or metal or techno, but it wasn’t. Instead, a Broadway megamusical captured our hearts. The elements of our Friday night communion were pizza and a cast recording of *Les Misérables*. It was a quirky ritual for a group of quirky youth.

More than school dances, parties, or officially sanctioned youth group gatherings, these evenings of song shaped us into a community. None of us was destined for the theater world—some were too timid to consider singing a solo onstage—but on Friday nights we were the perfect ensemble. We channeled our teenage angst into tight harmonies and expressions of emotion. We sang boldly and bawdily. We knew and were known: who had to drop out on the lowest notes, who would jump octaves with defiant glee so they could keep singing, who could reshape her voice in the space of an hour to sound like a young child or a dying woman.

Well-written counterpoint demanded that we rewind so singers could switch parts. Fiercely scrabbling for something true, we found and belted our own note in the triumphant ending chord.

When *Les Mis* came to the performing arts center, I purchased my nosebleed seat with the worshiping throng. The soaring production was worth the price of admission, but it couldn’t hold a candle to the Friday night sacrament. The heart song of a community is seldom revealed in the third balcony. Better to seek it on the living room floor amid discarded shoes and empty pizza boxes.

Kerri Parker
McFarland, Wisconsin

I didn’t expect to be converted all over again by their singing. After decades as a house church, the small Mennonite congregation purchased a vacant lot a few blocks down our street and nestled a new building there. My husband and I, Presbyterian ministers of some 40 years, walked through their doors one bright Sunday morning to check it out.

We encountered an entirely genuine welcome, even when they—a congregation that eschews a called pastorate in favor of intentionally shared leadership—learned who we are. The singing helped magnify the hospitality: songs from around the world, different eras, diverse traditions; soaring four-part harmony, often unaccompanied and as unselfconscious as the tangible sense of community among the singers. After our years in churches with practiced choirs and magnificent music programs, this was new for us: the whole congregation *itself* a choir. “They sing like angels!” I remarked to myself that first Sunday.

My husband had just retired, and my own work had shifted to seminary teaching. “On the weeks I’m not preaching elsewhere,” I had said, “I might occasionally take a leisurely Sunday morning off.” But 20 minutes into our visit with the Mennonites, a wry inner voice whispered, “There go my Sundays.” My heart had been reached—“like a bell” that “was lifted and struck,” as Annie Dillard says—and I knew that I could not stay away from this fellowship or its songs. We sang ourselves into fresh faith.

Song is a metaphor for this congregation’s life together. It is church in the best sense: a strong core with permeable boundaries, not only reaching out but gladly gathering in anyone who happens to show up. Each voice supports the song line of the others. A rotation of volunteer song-leaders draws out our best: one week a personable young truck driver who happens to have perfect pitch leads in an energetic style, while the next might find us under the more meditative direction of a newly minted Ph.D. in musicology, her two-year-old son hugging her leg. With each service stitched together in song, we pray, proclaim, protest—and are changed.

My initially shaky alto has been gradually bolstered and strengthened by the other voices, as I discover that I’m a better, more faithful person for being among them. By being a singing, serving community, they are converting me again and again.

Gail A. Ricciuti
Rochester, New York

Of all my childhood Sundays in the pews, a few glorious moments stood out above the rest. I could hardly wait for Sunday to come around—because of this one thing that occasionally happened, though it might not happen for weeks. On an otherwise ordinary Sunday, without warning, the whole sanctuary would fill with the urgent, ear-shattering sirens of God.

The volunteer fire department sat mere yards from our church. The two buildings were made of the same paprika-red brick, but instead of a steeple the firehouse had a tower with a four-horned clarion. In the middle of a prayer or sermon or four-part chorale, a rumbling call would begin to gather power. As our ears were assaulted, the soles of our feet began to tingle—igniting young men all around us, who leapt from their pews and flung themselves into a world crying out for their help.

“Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,” goes the old hymn. Our boys were living out the text, getting a head start on every other denomination, and it was thrilling to watch.

This trumpet call became for me the pulse of the sacred liturgy, the most vital part. I have never quite gotten over the splendor of watching the church’s young men fall out into the world to save it from itself. I wanted to run with them—to put on a disciple’s uniform of hip boots, heavy coat, and helmet. I longed to carry the music of God’s mercy, to join in mending the suddenly broken Sunday-morning world.

These disruptive moments deeply stirred me, and years later this wild siren song still hummed through me. It helped shape my understanding of the very nature of God. Here was a world in terrible need of tending. And here was my Creator, calling out to people just like me to lead the rescue and shoulder the healing.

Rodolph Rowe
Seattle, Washington