

Carolyn McDade's spirit of life

Unitarian Universalism's most beloved song, the woman who wrote it, and the communities that sustain her spirit.

By Kimberly French

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 being field-tested this fall 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. Little has been written about Carolyn McDade. 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. Here is her story.

Carolyn McDade does not call herself a Unitarian Universalist. “I never huffed,” she laughs, blowing out a puff of air, “and left. 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.”

Neither does she identify herself as a songwriter or musician—though she has written hundreds of songs and released fifteen CDs. Her most recent, *My Heart Is Moved*, due out this fall, is a collaboration by ten women’s choruses she works with across North America and is based on the United Nations Earth Charter. “Activist, yes, but not a musician,” she says.

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: She has actively opposed wars, South African apartheid, U.S. foreign policy, and nuclear power. She has worked for economic justice, environmental protection, and the rights of women migrant workers, prisoners, refugees, and lesbians.

“I’m boringly consistent,” she says, with a streak of self-deprecation, sitting on the sun-dappled deck of her modest Cape Cod home, lined with three birdfeeders and a birdbath. “I’m still basically at the same work.”

Consistent, yes, but not boring. McDade’s life has reached pinnacles of political victory and spiritual insight as well as troughs of personal disappointment and despair with the world. Running through it all has been a strong thread of women’s spirituality, which she has woven with Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Canada women, as well as radical Catholic nuns.

McDade still dresses in her signature layers, a dark turtleneck or T-shirt under a white collared shirt, jeans, and squiggly silver earrings. But she now wears her soft gray hair in a short cap of curls. The powerful, deep singing voice on her recordings hardly seems like it could come from this slight, soft-spoken, warm grandmother of eight. As she speaks of her life, her voice carries the lilt of a Canadian accent, perhaps picked up from the place where she now does most of her work.

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, and no one was shielding the children from the raw horror of every newsreel and war movie. "I never forgot Hiroshima and Nagasaki," she says. "No God I had learned about would ever want or allow such behavior, such suffering, such brutality."

In many ways she went on to follow the script for young women of her generation: Trained as a teacher. Married. Had three daughters. While living with her husband, Jim, in Austin, Texas, at the time of the Freedom Riders, she again butted up against her church upbringing. "Our churches were silent," she recalls. "Yet if I took the theology of my childhood, I had to be active."

A friend handed her a brochure for the First UU Church of Austin. There, she found political mentors and marched in her first demonstration, from the State Capitol to the Air Force Base.

She stops her story for a moment. "Can you hear that sound?" she points out. "There's a little chickadee cleaning its beak on that branch. They're so dear."

When Jim got a job at Boston University in the mid-1960s, the McDades joined the Arlington Street Church and enjoyed inviting folks over on weekends to sing. The church offered her a job as secretary when Jim was out with a bad back. The student minister, Marni Harmony, invited Carolyn to put together music for one of the first women's services. But when she went looking for songs written by women, she was appalled to find so little available.

So late one night she sat at her piano and sang what she wanted to say to her three daughters asleep upstairs, which became the song "Come, Daughter." It was a turning point, the first time she had sung from her own experience, and a searing recognition of what she was meant to do.

"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. I wouldn't have known what to call it. 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.

In the 1980s McDade became a leader in the movement to oppose U.S. policies in Central America, particularly Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The UU Community Church of Boston invited her to chair its Sanctuary Committee, challenging U.S. government policy by offering illegal shelter to political refugees. She traveled to Nicaragua and helped clear stones from land the revolutionary Sandinista government had given peasants, under constant threat of attack by the U.S.-backed contras. She traveled around the United States, sometimes on speaking tours, sometimes moving with refugees among safe houses or churches. Her life was intense with demonstrations, arrests, threats of legal action and violence, infiltration, and endless meetings.

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, the openly gay San Francisco city supervisor who was assassinated in 1978—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.

What she remembers most clearly was the feeling she had. "When I got to Pat's house, I told her, 'I feel like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years. Just open wide the door, and I'll be dust.' I was tired, not with my community but with the world. She just sat with me, and I loved her for sitting with me."

McDade then drove to her own home in Newtonville. "I walked through my house in the dark, found my piano, and that was my prayer: May I not drop out. It was not written, but prayed. I knew more than anything that I wanted to continue in faith with the movement."

She shared the song with the community of women she organized and sang with, as she still does with all her songs. A handwritten version, with just a melody line, appeared in the songbook she used for years.

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.”

McDade was not even aware of how widely or for how long UUs had been singing the song in their churches, copying it from gathering to gathering, without getting permission or paying the songwriter. They loved it.

“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.

“Rising Green,” written in 1980, was resurrected for the 2005 *Singing the Journey* supplement in an arrangement by Jim Scott (hymn 1068). And the 1976 “Come, Sing a Song with Me” (hymn 346) hadn’t been included in her own groups’ songbooks for years. “It’s so, so sweet,” she says. “And I don’t like sweet songs. So I left it beside the side of the road to languish. I didn’t even leave it a pot of water. ‘There you go, out the window.’ Years later, what did I see coming down the road toward me but this sweet little song? Other people had found it, loved it, cared for it, and it had a life.”

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.” One of the first women to take the microphone was her friend, Barbara Zanotti, at the Riverside Church Disarmament Conference in 1979, who crafted her speech around the words of the prophets Isaiah and Amos. McDade adapted lyrics from that speech and has always taken care to credit Zanotti.

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. (A couple years ago one anonymous UU blogger, calling her songs overly sincere, drippy, and maudlin, launched an online conversation among anti-fans.) 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. Water, grass, birds, and breath recur as themes. If her songs seem to some earnest, strident, and at times to have an almost translated quality, it’s not by mistake.

“I write love songs to social movements,” she says. She writes to feed the circle of women activists she moves among, the hundreds of women mostly in their fifties and older who sing in her choruses. 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.

“Younger women grew up with Title IX and believing they could be doctors and lawyers if they wanted to be. I did not,” observes Nancy Richardson, retired associate dean for ministry at Harvard Divinity School, who first met McDade when she volunteered a benefit concert to support Richardson’s affirmative action lawsuit against Boston University in 1981.

“The whole push that came from the women’s movement—access, equality—has enabled younger women to experience those things as normal rather than a special achievement,” she continues. “That’s a good thing. I mean, that was the point.

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."

For those women who get it, McDade's music goes far beyond compelling. Nancy Nordlie, choir director of the Paint Creek UU Congregation in Rochester, Michigan, and one of the songwriters on *My Heart Is Moved*, first met McDade and her music in 1988. "Carolyn's music is purely and simply the deepest music I have ever, ever encountered," she says. "The melodies and words are a meeting between singer and song that's very intimate."

Few UUs know McDade's greatest hits—the ones most requested and sung by her women's choruses, such as "Serpent Song," "Woman to Woman," and "This Ancient Love"—or her own personal favorites, "Ntsiki's Testimony," "Song of Hands," and "Sorrow and Healing."

But within Unitarian Universalism, McDade's songs are likely to be sung for generations to come. "All three of her songs in the hymnal are very, very popular, and people love 'Rising Green' in the new supplement," says Deborah Weiner, who served as the UUA staff liaison to the task force that assembled *Singing the Journey*. "It's hard for me to think of another song in its own time that has had the kind of influence as 'Spirit of Life.'"

The path McDade has walked has brought her fame in certain circles but not much fortune. She knows how to live on very little. She now lives in a wooded neighborhood sandwiched between two state highways on Cape Cod, with her 17-year-old, green-streaked-haired granddaughter, Anna, whom she's raised for the past ten years. A Boston grand piano and Anna's cello take center stage in the comfortably cluttered living room, whose bookshelves are filled with Rilke, Marge Piercy, and the two Berrys—Wendell and Thomas. Standing on her front step behind a broken storm door missing its top glass, McDade jokes, "This would be a good place to feed a horse. Or wave at a parade, like the queen!"

Simplicity has been a way of life, especially since the mid-1970s, when she suddenly had to figure out how to support her family. "Jim left, and I had these three kids," she recalls. She first found work as a crew chief picking apples and later as an administrator at Boston University and at the alternative Palfrey Street School in Watertown, Massachusetts.

Then in 1983 McDade and Sister Chris Loughlin, a Kentucky Dominican nun, founded Womancenter at the Crystal Spring retreat center, a former apple orchard in Plainville, Massachusetts, which was bequeathed to the Catholic sisters. The nuns teach the new cosmology of the universe story, promote ecological living, and support economic and social justice projects. Here McDade found her strongest affinity and political education, she says, from women of faith who looked to liberation theology, the natural world, women poets, and the very lives of women as their scripture.

For eight years McDade and Loughlin lived and worked on little money, organizing retreats and programs for fellow activists on women's spirituality, politics, and art. Singing together was always a part of any event. "All of those women and that land are part of the ground of everything I am," McDade says.

Crystal Spring still handles McDade's U.S. music sales, promoting mainly inside its own network. Surtsey Music is the name she uses for her copyrights—named after a volcanic island that rose up off Iceland in the 1960s, which has been a powerful metaphor for her of how women have risen up and blossomed in her lifetime.

But grant money for Womancenter's agenda became increasingly scarce, and it closed in 1991. So McDade found a cottage she could rent cheaply for the winter on the Cape Cod National Seashore, a couple hours away, not knowing how she'd support herself or where she'd go when summer came.

"Happiness was not a word I used much," she remembers. "I had a very good life [at Womancenter]. Chris and I worked so hard. Every now and then we would drive down to the Cape and walk the dogs, eat fish and chips, then drive home. We never had money to stay over. And I thought, I feel so happy here. That's what really drew me to this place."

Then calls started coming from Canadian women's groups asking McDade to present retreat programs of social action and music there. "They kept asking me to come back every year," she says. "I'd think, I was just there." McDade still does an annual program at Crystal Spring each January, as well as other programs around the United States. But for many years now her principal work has been in Canada.

Carolyn McDade takes her place behind a tiny electric piano. She cannot stop smiling at the thirty women crowded before her in the farmhouse of the Crystal Spring Center for Earth Learning.

The women have come from as far as Maine and Pennsylvania, where they work on causes ranging from opposing the Iraq

war to keeping land out of development to helping the homeless. They've come to rehearse for *My Heart Is Moved*. The Atlantic New England group is one of the ten women's choruses McDade travels among across the United States and Canada, who come together mainly to rejuvenate through singing, and every few years to record.

This project has been an unusual and challenging one. The lyrics are drawn from the Earth Charter, sixteen principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society, developed by a United Nations commission and now awaiting ratification. The document is inspiring, but reads like, well, a charter more than a song.

The group runs through "Peril and Promise," a song McDade calls "encapsulating" of the project. Set in close harmony, the words are direct in their stark simplicity, gravity, and hopefulness:

*This is a time when humanity must choose its future,
A future that holds both peril and promise. . . .
To focus not on having, but being.
Having or being? The choice is ours.*

The notes fade. McDade nods. Her smile grows wider. "Whew!"

A voice calls out, "Do it again?"

"Yes! Gorgeous!" she replies.

As each song ends, the singers smile and laugh. Yet their focus never strays far from the work of rehearsing. They speak with authority, one at a time, about a lyric's meaning or vowel production. Compliments are abundant. Ego is not.

"I love when the sopranos go 'mo-ment,'" a bass comments after singing "Love, Be Our Guide," a bluesy number that showcases the deepest women's voices. "It's like an umbrella opening up. Sopranos, we couldn't do it without you holding us up!"

When a section flubs up, the error is dismissed with more laughter and attributed to "getting a little too excited."

The overwhelming goodwill inside the room easily competes with the strong draw to be outdoors on this sunny day amidst the verdant farmland around Crystal Spring.

These women know one another very well. Some have been singing with McDade for more than thirty years. Some are strong singers. Some aren't.

Doris Duarte, a hospital psychologist and a member of the Atlantic New England chorus for more than a decade, still doesn't think of herself as a singer. She remembers first attending a Crystal Spring program, at the suggestion of a woman friend at the Westminster Unitarian Church in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. A quiet woman came up and greeted her so warmly; not till later did she realize it was McDade herself. "I left the singing, and I felt like a tuning fork," Duarte says. "I was vibrating with music." She wrote McDade a note and was surprised to get one right back. "She's like that, always making connections, fostering community and relationships."

All of McDade's recordings have been born out of years of close collaboration among scores of women in her groups. At the beginning of the *My Heart Is Moved* project, each of the ten groups began by reading the preamble of the Earth Charter, performing a ritual with candles, then singing improvisational phrases from the charter, followed by silent reflection. McDade, along with Nancy Nordlie and Norma Luccock, helped form these "snippets" into songs. Then they were brought back to the groups, who further formed them.

"We're watching creativity," says Katie Berglund, a member of the Atlantic New England group, as well as the UU church in Barnstable, Massachusetts. "It's not all in stone. Carolyn is always asking, 'What do you think?'"

But the real point is neither the collaborative musical experience, nor the production of a CD. "We need to ask," McDade says, "what action is going to come out of our lives because of these experiences? The power of the project is in activating the energy of the more than 350 women in it—moving the Earth Charter principles into their localities."

In Prince Edward Island a group of women signed up for a time slot at a forestry hearing, presented scientific information and personal accounts, and sang. A few years ago the Great Lakes Basin chorus did a benefit concert—songbooks are always provided for the audience to sing along—to protect the Ojibwe Nature Preserve near Windsor, Ontario.

In addition to doing change work in their communities, the women speak of being changed themselves, often soon after joining the choruses.

Susanne Norman, who arranges McDade's music for the Barnstable UU choir, describes her first time singing with McDade: "In a few minutes, all these feelings were coming up from the bottom of my toes that I didn't know were there before—pain, anger, sadness about injustice on a personal level, and also a global level. I had a feeling of wanting to take action, and also of hope and joy." Norman has since left a food-service job to manage a shelter for the homeless, disabled, and mentally ill in Hyannis, Massachusetts.

Even when McDade is not with them, the choruses meet regularly, some monthly. They design their own programming out of one another's skills and interests—learning about straw bale building techniques, recycling, organic gardening, or U.S.-Canadian relations. "Every single woman in the group is a great leader in her own sphere," Norman observes.

McDade also sees change on another level: Today's activists in North America, including her choral groups, are passionately at work on environmental, food-security, social and economic justice, and many other issues, but in ways almost invisible to the popular media and mainstream political sphere. "Many of us are beginning to create the alternative we'd like to see, rather than hammering at the doors of the system and asking it to change. It may look like things are quieter, but the activists I've worked with have all moved deeper. They've not given up."

To sit among one of McDade's choruses, to sing with them, feels like entering a sacred place. A place of women who put the best of themselves into being in community together, nurturing one another as they seek to make the world more like the community they've formed, working out their differences, creating and discarding, and always laughing a lot.

This is Carolyn McDade's place. This is her community, her work. This is where her songs live. And happiness is a word that describes it.