

Muriel Lipp: Hymns that have Moved Me

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Muriel Lipp

Hymns that have Moved Me

The Word, or Words, I bring you today are the words and tunes of hymns, and I am asking you to sing them with me. We come here each Sunday to worship God, and some of that worship takes place in hymns. We are all indebted to Glen and Liz, who accompany us every Sunday. What a gift. In addition, Glen provides us with the monthly Singalongs that incorporate some of these very hymns and spirituals.

Having been brought up in the Reformed Church in a small town in PA, I have hymns inside me that are always rising to the surface. One of these spirituals I heard for the first time from my maternal grandfather, who was spending his last days in one of our upstairs bedrooms. He had colon cancer, and as a child, I was always afraid he would die and I would find him because we had to go through his room to get to the bathroom. He was not a religious man, as was my other grandfather, so I was surprised to hear him sing this song in his deep bass voice, "When the Roll Is Called up Yonder." Was he saying he was ready to go? [Sing #98 in Rise up Singing.]

The words of the hymn, "Abide with Me" come back occasionally—mostly because the word "abide" is such a comfort. As a child, I did not know what it meant, but when I learned that it meant "be with," I knew I needed it. We often think children have a worry-free life, but there are sometimes deep problems that children deal with during their growing-up

years. In my childhood, there was a bullying relationship, and later in my teens, it was epilepsy and seizures. In church, I learned about God's love, and I learned how to pray. My parents tried to help me, but this one hymn in particular brought me comfort. [Sing "Abide with Me," page 99 in the New Century hymnal] Let us sing the first and third verses. Try to feel the comfort in that third verse.

The next one is related to the death of my mother. She was not a person to let death sneak up on her. She had notes everywhere, had her memorial service planned, the dress she would wear in her coffin, and she told me many times that she wanted us to sing "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go." After years of telling me this was her favorite hymn, when it came time to sing it at the funeral, I couldn't sing a word, but my cousin, who was sitting behind me and had a beautiful voice, sang it for me—and, it seemed, through me. [Sing from Page 485 in the New Century hymnal.]

Most of these songs involve death. At my age, I have of course experienced a lot of death. Moreover, because of my age, I think about death. This next one, because of its lively tune, does not seem to be about death. However, the first time I heard it was at a memorial service. Some of you who attended the church of the Saviour years ago may remember little Robbie McIntyre, who, at age 5, ran from his mother's side into the street and was killed instantly by a truck. The whole church was in mourning for this lively little boy and his family. At the memorial service, we sang "Lord of the Dance." At the time, I thought it was most inappropriate, but thinking of that little boy who liked to dance—perhaps he was dancing with Jesus in heaven. Let us sing "Lord of the Dance" for little Robbie and his family. [Sing from Page 44 in Rise Up Singing.]

That song, "Lord of the Dance," was adapted from the Shaker hymn, "'Tis a Gift to be Simple," which later the composer Aaron Copland improvised in "Appalachian Spring." Our son Eddie, who played a bassoon, had the good fortune to play

under Aaron Copland with the Virginia All-State High School Band. Then for Ed and me, when this dear young man took his own life, there was the African-American spiritual we sang at his memorial service. This song not only uplifted the slaves in their bondage, but for me, it temporarily (very temporarily) raised me out of a lost hopelessness. Here was our son, a young man with much promise, gone from this earth by his own hand. I felt like Jeremiah in Chapter 8: "Is there no balm in Gilead, no physician there?" This song says there **is** such a balm. [Sing from Page 553, New Century hymnal.]

This next spiritual is not about death, but about grace. Written by John Newton, captain of a slave-ship, he had a religious conversion on the way to America, turned the ship around and freed his human cargo. On our recent silent retreat, I had the wondrous experience of awakening with the words, "When we've been there 10,000 years" from the last verse of this spiritual in my consciousness. [Sing "Amazing Grace," in Rise up Singing, page 92.]

Thank you for singing with me. These are only a few of the hymns that mean so much to me. Another one that brings tears to my eyes is sung by Christians all over the world on Easter morning, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." Just the thought of that worldwide union through a hymn is powerful. Then there are the Christmas carols, which we will share in just a couple of months. It is the mystery in hymns and spirituals that moves me; it is the marriage of words and music. Amen.