

THE GRACE TO UNLEARN

Unlearn it as soon as you can.--Jn.Wesley, 1761

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS 2976
309 L.Elliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 9.5.99
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In our hymnsing before worship in the Craigville Tabernacle this morning, we sang a great American Protestant favorite, "This is my Father's world...all nature sings...rocks & trees, skies & seas...the birds their carols raise...the morning light...declare their maker's praise...my Father shines in all that's fair...the rustling grass...though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. This is my Father's world: why should my heart be sad? The Lord is King; let the heavens ring! God reigns; let the earth be glad!" No sentimental evasion of the fact that the wrong is "oft" strong, & no morose forgetting that "God is the ruler yet." Quiet trust & triumph. Nonviolent. A model of Christian meditation....

....but not in our new United Church of Christ hymnal. Why not? Because it's central God-title is the six-letter dirty-word "Father," which was also Jesus' favorite God-title (but is offensive to the radical feminists, female & male, who controlled the production of that shameful hymnic aberration called THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL)....The hymnist, Maltbie D. Babcock (d.'01, the year the hymn was published), was a heaven-&-earth lover (both mentioned in the Bible's first verse). He believed & practiced what has come (in ecumenese) to be known as "the integrity of creation," the integrality of God/nature/humanity--as in this quatrain of his: "Back of the loaf is the snowy flour, / And back of the flour the mill; / And back of the mill is the wheat, and the shower, / And the sun, and the Father's will." No need to flee to the Amerinds to learn respect for nature: it's in the Christian faith, & now--in our multiform eco-crisis--more in need of emphasis than ever before....Need: To heal the present fragmentation of God/nature/humanity. How would you complete the sentence if I were to say "The world is alive with...."? Probably "the sound of music." That Julie-Andrews musical, at a number of levels, has a healing quality. The great Catholic poet, G.M.Hopkins, would finish the generic stem with "the grandeur of God" (as in his great poem of that title). Something (music?) or someone (God?) good is **omnipresent** (&, as if reverse paranoia, something wonderful is always sneaking up on you). Immediately after his death, Babcock's wife chose 6 of 16 stanzas of his just-written poem, "Thoughts for Everyday Living," & submitted them for publication as the hymn we know as "This is my Father's world." Of the unpublished stanzas, one is based on Moses' burning bush: "This is my Father's world. / I walk a desert lone. / In a bush ablaze to my wondering gaze / God makes his glory known." And here's one based on Jacob's ladder: "This is my Father's world. / Dreaming, I see his face. / I ope my eyes and in glad surprise / Cry, 'The Lord is in this place.'" And here's one that uses the incarnation as a nature-affirmation: "This is my Father's world. / Now closer to Heaven bound, / For dear to God is the earth Christ trod / No place but is holy ground." Be patient for just one more, this one expanding the domestic metaphor from Father: "This is my Father's world. / A wanderer I may roam, / What'er my lot, it matters not, / My heart is still at home."....Where did I find most of this info on "This is my Father's world"? In H.Augustine Smith's hymnological classic, LYRIC RELIGION: The Romance of Immortal Hymns (D.Appleton-Century/31). It's 150 great hymns were the basis of a hymnology course I had six years later. The hymnal I chose in 1950 for the church I pastored 10½ years had all but 16 of these immortals: the new UCC hymnal lacks 63 of them, many censored out by radfem (radical feminist) protest.... Radfems said it's time to unlearn much God-language & taboo the God-pronouns (he, his, him, himself). I & a rising chorus of others are now saying it's time to unlearn fem-speak, the severely crippled feministic language for God.

Well, what hymnal did we use in worship this morning? The best for balancing old & new, with "Craigville Tabernacle" stamped on the cover under "THE HYMNAL." It's the new UM (United Methodist) hymnal. So many people today we had to open two new boxes. And during the two months of our use of it, we've heard no objections at all, only favorable remarks.

Now we've arrived at this Thinksheet's primary purpose: to state & comment on "Directions for Singing" by Methodism's primary founder, Jn.Wesley (p.vii of our new hymnal):

1 *Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.* Not many hymntunes are truly great, & congregations should learn those as basics.

2 Sing them exactly as they are printed here [in his SELECT HYMNS, 1761], without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can [underlining, mine]. NOW you know why those earliest Methodists were called, when they were Oxford students, "method(ical)ists." It helps, too, to know that Jn. Wesley became an Ox. prof. of Greek, a precise language best learned methodically and requiring, in the learning, some considerable unlearning of English!....But how could this passionate preacher be so insistent on precision in hymnsinging? He knew that rigor, a friend of unity, is not an enemy of passion. EXAMPLE: For years, Loree & I had season tickets to the NY Philharmonic under two conductors, a Parsi (Zubin Mehta), then a German (Kurt Mazur). Mazur has not less passion than Mehta had, but more precision-- & the effect of the superior precision is to increase the hearers' passionate feelings. MORAL: Slovenly, shallow-breathing singing lacks both precision & passion & has a depressing effect on worship.....Wesley was a loving Christian, but you got no sympathy from him by appealing to "the way it's always been done." He saw the way it's always been done as only a hindrance to how it should be done. Though an Anglican (Church of England) priest, he was forbidden to preach in the-way-it's-always-been-done official state churches. (Two church-founding priests neither of whom intended to leave the church of his ordination: Luther the Catholic, Wesley the Anglican.)

3 Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing. A recent study evidenced that regular churchgoers live longer (to 82 instead of to 75): my guess is that those churchgoers who exert themselves in singing live longer than those who don't (even if only because more lung-heart exercise). Anyway, J.W. says just don't sing, strain yourself, exert yourself till it feels like a crucifixion! "And you will find it a blessing." The congregation is the primary choir, & the primary task of "the [secondary] choir" is to aid & encourage the congregation in singing. Sometimes in our church the minister of music rehearses the primary choir, the congregation, on some new song or chant before worship begins. An old hymn instructs us (in worship, & all of life) to "Give of your best to the Master."....Wesley was, as I said, a loving Christian, but he didn't coddle "weak" & "weary" saints. He would have scoffed at the note recently added, in some churches' service bulletins, "Stand if able." Another hymn-phrase: "Must Jesus bear the cross alone?" Stand up! Suffer! Sing. If you can't sing, you can at least stand and suffer (trying to sing). And if you can't stand, you can at least suffer sitting down & (trying to) sing. Flaccid hymnsinging correlates with a flaccid church: vigorous singing correlates with a vigorous, active church.

4 Sing lustily with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung [now, "sang"] the songs of Satan. Besides reinforcing the second point in the immediately previous "direction," this one adds an analogy: sing as full-voiced & hearty-spirited as before your conversion you sang those bawdy songs in the pubs (taverns)! A great admirer of Luther, Wesley (my guess is) picked up this comparison from that great lusty German reformer before him (in the German meaning of "lustig": pleasurable, full-feeling-full).

5 Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound. No uninvited solos, please: you are part of the choir, the primary choir, the congregation. Blend in (which is good advice for all of church life, not just singing!). The show-off stand-out's obtrusive ego is cacophonous: great, outstanding voices undriven by great big egos aim to blend in so as to enrich the people's whole sound-- which then, J.W. says, is "clear" & "melodious." A just-published book, READING FOR LIFE, says that good reading is a beauty-hunt resulting in an increase in generosity of spirit. What a wondrous image for hymnsinging: a beauty-hunt in praise of God & in prayer for a more abundant generosity of spirit!

6 Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first. Have you noticed how directly, how down-to earth, this ex-Greek-professor speaks to the people?....As he's already condemned the (ego-displaying) obtruding voices, by "leading voices" here he means something else, viz., the tempo-setters who know to set the correct tempo. Every hymn has a right (i.e., optimal tempo) tempo; failure to observe it (both senses) contributes to the dismal tempo-monotony tempo-unaware congregations fall into --a monotony that bores people into lackadaisical singing & inattention to the meaning of the words they are singing. The tempo-monotony also causes tempo to slump, so "take care not to sing too slow [English-language sensitives will note he didn't say "-ly": dropping that adverbial ending is no modern innovation but has an honorable history in the common speech J.W.'s "Directions" exhibit; notice, too, no "-ly" on "quick"]." Finally, note the stern vigor: "drive out" the "drawling" of those he hopes to insult into a brisker pace by calling them "lazy."

7 Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven. Wesley's life was theocentric, God-centered--not just his worship. Here he preaches God-centered hymnsinging as continuous (by implication) with the whole of the Christian life.