

FIRST UNITARIAN
CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY
BROOKLYN
A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION

Transforming Lives

Candice Helfand-Rogers
(First Unitarian Soprano Soloist)



For those unacquainted with the movie “Sister Act,” it’s a musical comedy featuring Whoopi Goldberg as a woman placed at a convent while under witness protection. There, she assumes direction of the convent’s choir.

While teaching the nuns to sing with conviction, she articulates the purpose of the music they make: “It’s not just quacking -- this is rejoicing.”

I was 9 years old when the movie was released, but that scene always stayed with me because it put a spotlight on the profound joy of making music with others. I would come to know that joy intimately in the many choirs I took part in.

But one thing about that quote always eluded me: the marriage of music and spirituality. Religion has always been a tricky concept for me. In my life -- on both a personal and global level -- I’ve seen it forge rifts more than I’ve seen it build bridges. So, I understood the meaning of the texts I sang on a logical level, and found something akin to spirituality in harmonizing with others. But the two ideas never truly met within me.

Then I started singing at First U, and two things happened.

First was the erosion of a set of walls I had never truly acknowledged within myself before. Much of my success as a singer had hinged upon achieving perfection, or getting as close to it as humanly possible. At First U, I found a space where I could make mistakes and still be valued as a musician and person. And, I found a place where the term “sacred music” took on new meanings, forcing me to rethink what those words meant.

The second thing was attending weekly services that turned my preconceived notion of religion on its head. For the first time in my life, I saw it as the force that connected people -- as a way of uniting them and celebrating their differences. And each choir performance served to amplify that message.

For all of the meaning music has had in my life, I was never expecting to add this exciting, spiritual dimension to my love of it.

When I’m up here singing with and before this community -- I’m not just quacking. I’m rejoicing.

June 10, 2018