
Lessons from the Hymnal

Singing in Jubilee: Lessons from the Hymnal

by Kathryn Koob

In this day of pop star mentality, where do we find a sense of balance and true role models? Where are those who have served with generosity and grace? And, in times of challenge and doubt, from which well did they draw water?

Kathryn Koob experienced a part of life that many of us will not, as a hostage in the Iran Hostage Crisis. Be inspired by the hymns that sustained her. And recommit yourself at the beginning of this new choir year to take time to teach from your hymnal! It is the greatest resource and you have the opportunity to plant those words and melodies in the minds and imaginations of young people. Kathryn's story begins here and continues on the Choristers Guild website, www.choristersguild.org.



During the Good Friday noon-time worship service this year at St. Paul's Church in Waverly, Iowa, the congregation sang one of my favorite hymns, *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*. This has long been a favorite of mine. I love the melody and I especially like the words. I find both haunting and meaningful. For me the hymn is cross-generational. I sang it as a child during the evening Lenten services at Zion Lutheran Church in the farming community of Jubilee where I grew up, often curled closely by the side of one of my parents or my Grandmother during

those dark, cold, rural Iowa evenings. I found it in the hymnal I purloined in Iran, and sang it as a devotional hymn during the Lenten days of captivity, and I still sing it, and was actually bemoaning the fact that it had not been used during our worship this season.

But there it was in all its glory: "*Two wonders I confess, the wonder of His glorious love, and my unworthiness.*" There is much in this hymn that is wonderful, and as I looked at the tilting antenna outside of one of my "cells" in the former US Embassy in Tehran, that crooked antenna became a symbol of that cross – "a sha-

dow of a mighty rock within a weary land." I would not have had that wonderful prayer, devotion, and support had I not grown up singing this and many other hymns.

KATHRYN KOOB: GUEST OF THE REVOLUTION

Kathryn Koob was one of 66 Americans held hostage by Iranian students in Tehran for the 444 days between November 4, 1979 and January 20, 1981.

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The following telephone interview with Kathryn Koob was conducted by Christopher Purdy, on Tuesday, March 13, 2007. It is used here by permission of Kathryn Koob and Christopher Purdy, a Classical music broadcaster at WOSU (Classical 101) in Columbus, OH.

**KATHRYN KOOB:
GUEST OF THE REVOLUTION**

Kathryn Koob (rhymes with 'robe') was one of 66 Americans held hostage by Iranian students in Tehran for the 444 days between November 4, 1979 and January 20, 1981.

She chronicles her captivity, and her strong religious faith, in her book *Guest of the Revolution* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1982). Nearly thirty years later, Miss Koob today is on the faculty of Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa and continues to be in demand as a public speaker.

CP: Why were you in Iran in 1979?

KK: I was in Iran as the director of the Iran American cultural center. It was a center that had an English language program, it also had a Farsi language program. We had a resource library of about 10,000 volumes; We also had the offices of the Fulbright commission in our complex, and we did all sorts of things in the area of educational and cultural exchange.

CP: You had quite a career in the foreign service before you went to Iran. Were you excited about this assignment?

KK: I was. For one thing, the revolution in Iran had been virtually bloodless. We had at that time had awful bloody revolutions in Central America. I thought it would be fascinating to see how a country was going to develop this new Islamic republic, this new form of government, which was the goal of the political people at that time. And the ancient Persian culture is one of the great cultures of the world! I knew people who had lived and worked in Iran and they had a fabulous time there in terms of culture. The Iranian people were generous and warm and intellectually curious, so I thought it would be a great move.

I grew up in a rural German-Lutheran community with a strong musical heritage. Music surrounded me.

During the 1940s and 50s music was everywhere in Jubilee. We sang at church, we sang at school, we sang on the school bus, we sang in Sunday School and at community gatherings. It was the unusual home that did not have at least a piano, and there were other musical instruments scattered throughout the community. We were very proud of the small pipe organ in our church, and music was a part of the way we lived.

It was simply not possible to grow up in this community and not learn something about music. We sang songs of all kinds – old ones, new ones, and the “big kids”, i.e. those three or four years older than I, kept notebooks of lists of the popular songs of the day. What was number one on the hit parade could be heard every Saturday night on the radio, and we would sing our way through the top ten songs on the school bus going to and from school the next week. We sang current hits and old standards.

The radio was also a source of classical music – Bell Telephone Hour, City Services Band of America, and the Firestone Hour all contributed to our cultural education. So did the barn dance programs from Chicago and Des Moines. We could sing along with the best, and we did. We knew who the local “stars” were, and called them by name when we heard those voices. I can still sing the refrain: *“Just a song at twilight, when the lights are low, and the flick’ring shadows softly come and go . . .”* That introduced a close harmony male group called “The Songfellows.”

I went to a country school, albeit one that had three classrooms of students in grades 1-8, and we had no formal music teacher. Our classroom teacher taught us some music. I always found it to be in much too high of a key,

and was always “squeaking.” There was a lot of talent in our community and I was envious of the children who could carry a tune and sing without faltering. I knew when I was off key, but I didn’t know how to correct it. I sang anyway. I loved to sing, and I still do.

My parents and my paternal grandmother who lived very close to us believed that music was important. I had my first piano lesson from my grandmother when I was about 7 years old. I am not a musician by talent; I am an intellectual musician. I know that black dot and that squiggle have a specific meaning, but the translation from my head to the keyboard often did not coincide. Alas, the same could be said for my singing ability. I loved to sing, but I was the one who was always asked to sing a little more quietly. As I had a facility for memorizing the text, I was never asked to not sing, just more quietly. My mistakes were less noticeable that way. It did not deter me, and I am always surprised so many years later when I have been singing my heart out in worship services when someone turns to me and says, “What a lovely voice you have!” I think all of those years of working the intellectual have finally paid off!

So how did I carry that hodgepodge of musical literacy to Iran and make it work for me there as a tool of survival? I’m not sure. I just know that whenever I’ve had long periods of time by myself, I have often used song lyrics to pass the time. After leaving Jubilee and heading into the big world, I worked as a teacher of speech and drama directing high school plays and community theatre, including musicals for a time. I loved musicals, and while I did not see a live professional performance of a musical comedy before I was in my twenties it was something I loved, and I knew many of the songs from the scores by heart. I would sing my way through one or the other or more as I drove the two

CP: You got more than you bargained for. What was your sense of what Iran had been like in the last days of the Shah?

KK: I was actually in Washington at that time, learning Farsi.

We were aware that things were not going well, and that there was a great deal of unrest. Students who were our captors really thought we were trying to replace the Shah and get him back on the throne as we had done in 1953 when we deposed Mossadeq.

When I asked about our elections during our captivity they said, How did you know there was an election? And I said every four years we have a revolution, but we call it an election. That was very difficult for them to understand. You could still have friends but you could accept the fact that they were no longer in power, but you could deal in a straightforward fashion with a newly elected government. There were lots of things that didn't mesh, and that's one of the important things that intercultural communication is about, to be able to listen and understand things. It was a strange understanding on both sides.

CP: You made a point in your book that you felt that a segment of Iranian society never forgave the Americans for restoring the Shah back in 1953, that this bred a lot of distrust.

Did you also find Iranians willing to learn, willing to approach Americans as potential friends?

KK: Oh, absolutely! Because so many Iranians had Americans as personal friends. And even to us, the kids would say, We're not angry at you. We love Americans. It's your government we're angry with.

CP: There was a book and a movie about fifteen years ago that caused controversy, called *Not Without My Daughter*. The film at least really depicted a savage society.

Now this was Hollywood, but I did read the book as well and it was pretty unforgiving.

Did you see the film or read this book? Did you have any thoughts?

KK: Yes, I read the book and I saw the movie. Just as in the United States, we

hours home to Jubilee from wherever I was working. *South Pacific*, *The Music Man*, and *My Fair Lady* all were in my head, and I could sing along with tapes or the radio, or by myself.

After I was incarcerated in Iran, I found myself singing, but not the musicals. The songs that came to my mind were those I had learned in Sunday School and church, in youth gatherings, and at Bible camp. They brought me comfort and hope.

One such song was a song I learned at something called Leadership Training School. It really was a retreat for high school students, and it introduced us to a variety of spiritual practices.

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One of the foundations that was laid there was what we called private meditation, and the hymn that was used to segue us into time apart was *Have Thine Own Way Lord* ("Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Thou art the Potter, I am the clay"). I didn't realize way back in the 50s that that experience would be the foundation of my time of spiritual growth so many years later in Iran. Here at the retreat center we found a quiet place, under a tree, away from the other students, and we focused very briefly on a scripture passage. Later I learned that this was very close to the Lectio Divina form of spiritual discipline, and it was the basis for my own exploration of the contemplative life. I had always wondered about the religious communities that focused on silence and prayer. My life, full of drama and speaking was quite far from that. Yet here in Iran I was given the opportunity to explore the great silence – to focus on listening for God to speak to me – and I heard the voice

in the words of the hymns I had learned as a child. "I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'Come unto me and rest. . .'" "What a friend we have in Jesus. . . in His arms He'll take and shield thee, Thou wilt find a solace there." Some of the hymns I could remember almost in their entirety because I had sung them so often. Others, such as *I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say* were only there in fragments – but the words that stuck were full of meaning and promise.

When I was loaned one of those Sunday School hymnals from so many years ago I was surprised to find that the hymns I cherished were clustered within a few pages of each other. I'm not sure that had anything to do with

the way I learned them, but there they were: *I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*, *What a Friend we Have in Jesus*, *O Savior, Precious Savior*, and one of my most favorites, *In the Secret of His Presence*.

I realized I loved hymns with refrains, and I sang them – *Onward Christian Soldiers*, *O Zion Haste*, *Thy Mission High Fulfilling*, *I Love to Tell the Story*, and one I had sung in our choir, *Living for Jesus*. Of course other old faithfuls were there, too. Who cannot enjoy singing *Beautiful Savior* or *O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*? The more I sang, the more I remembered – and each hymn took on its own value.

Have Thine Own Way, Lord had a "second" story. As I studied the scriptures, I was struck by how often the image of a clay pot appeared. Some of the letters of encouragement which reached us talked about how this trial would refine us like gold, and I just kept hoping I would be a good clay pot. I had lived in Africa during my years of work, and

have all kinds of people, so in Iran there are all kinds of people. There are people in Iran who act like this, but they are not the majority. And there is a basic tenet there, that the children belong to their father. So there was a lot of truth in that book. And I've read enough literature from the Middle East, for instance I recently read a book by a sister in law of Osama bin Laden. She was Iranian. . . when she discovered how the family was going to raise her daughters, she took them and fled. So it's not uncommon. But for every one of those there are also the absolutely charming and cultured people who care about family. It depends on the family, it depends on the situation, it depends on many things.

CP: *Of all the months you were in captivity, 444 days, how much during that time did you know fear?*

KK: You were afraid every day. There was no central command, and this is not the way you treat people who are on diplomatic missions, but of course they voided all that by saying, "You are all spies." I would laugh and say, impossible. I'm color blind and I'd pick up the wrong briefcase! But the fear was of the unknown. The fear was that somebody would flip out and do something drastic on the Iranian side, or even on the American side if the frustration got so great, so it was that kind of fear. It would have been very foolish not to be afraid.

For me personally, there was never any time when someone put a gun to my head or pulled a knife and I would think, "Oh this is it. . ." a fear of dying. But there was fear that things could go wrong.

CP: *So there was not one person in charge?*

KK: One of the tenets of Islam and of a good Muslim community is that things are done by consensus. So while there were leaders—even the young women who guarded us would say, "We have to go to a meeting" . . . there may have been a small cadre of people who were really running things, theoretically a great deal of it was done by consensus, because that's the Islamic way of doing things.

My prayer was often, "Lord, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here, but just make me a good clay pot. Amen." To this day I am attracted to functional pottery – and find beauty in its function and use. And I continue to pray to be a good clay pot.

I am very much struck by how beautiful and functional a clay pot can be. It is not a work of art, but rather a work meant to serve a family or community, and often in that service it becomes a beautiful thing. There is so much we can learn from music. "Mold me and make me. . . after thy will. . . While I am waiting, yielded and still." My prayer was often, "Lord, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here, but just make me a good clay pot. Amen." To this day I am attracted to functional pottery – and find beauty in its function and use. And I continue to pray to be a good clay pot.

I have spoken of the hymn *In the Secret of His Presence* as being one of my favorites. I could repeat the verses of that every day without tiring because the promises of being with God are in every

I could repeat the verses. . . without tiring because the promises of being with God are in every verse. . . This hymn promises that if we are vexed by earthly trials or temptations we can retreat. . . and God will direct us and teach us. I learned that part of contemplation is listening, and this hymn taught me that before my experience could.

verse. Having been given a gift of time – no phones, appointments, newspapers, meetings etc., I decided to explore the contemplative life about which I knew very little. This hymn promises that if we are vexed by earthly trials or temptations we can retreat to this secret place and that God will direct us and teach us. I learned that part of contemplation is listening, and this hymn taught me that before my experience could. The second stanza says, "When my soul is faint and thirsty, 'neath the shadow of His wing, There is cool and pleasant shelter and a fresh and crystal spring." What better words of comfort, for living in an unknown world. What was going to happen in the next day or week, or for that matter within the next 15 minutes was unknown. The constancy of the Lord was a rock, a strong place, as it says in *Beneath the Cross of Jesus*, "the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land." I needed the strength of the rock and the quiet of the secret place, and with the hymns I had a bit of both. I was so glad I had such a treasure.

In addition to the hymns I sang there was another important form of the music I learned so many years ago. How could I survive without the liturgy, which we sang at every worship service? The repetition of almost the same liturgy over so many years gave me a very specific focus for my devotions. I tried to write down what I could remember. And I was very specific. I had experienced the lovely melodies of the

CP: Another impression I had from your book was that your captors were kids.

KK: They were university students. Don't forget, I basically only knew the women, I met a few of the men.

CP: The men would not approach you, a woman, is that right? Because of their religious law?

KK: They did what was expedient, but basically that's correct. My roommate Ann Swift was told, "Well of course we would never touch you because that's against our religion, but we know people who would. . ." But they would not be in the same room with us. Later I turned that around. One of the guys said he was going to be at my physical at the end of the captivity, when the Algerian doctors came to examine us. I looked at him and I said, "No you will not." I said, "It's your religion, and your rules. You can send as many of the sisters in there as you want but you will not be there when the doctor examines me." And he backed off.

CP: Do you think some of these young men were intimidated by you?

KK: Well, this was an older man.

CP: . . . they had guns and you didn't, but do you think the fact that you were a woman – I don't know you but it strikes me that you are not someone people push around.

KK: (laughs) What can I tell you. . . I'm the oldest of six girls and a former teacher, people tell me they don't stand a chance. But they had the guns and they were very secure in their role as men in their position. This particular incident was one where I knew I could use this argument.

I tried to pick my arguments. I tried to choose what I was going to take a stand on.

CP: Your book is very clear about your very strong religious faith. Clearly this sustained you during the 444 days. Could you explain that kind of kind of faith to someone who doesn't share it?

KK: I've spent the last 27 years trying to do that! What I have learned is that faith gave me something to depend on. There were

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Orthodox church during my Romanian assignment, and I sang the *Kyrie* matching the melodies as closely as I could remember them. I also sang the *Gloria* and left over from college dorm devotions, a version of the *Lord's Prayer*.

I could imagine my family and friends and home congregations singing these same melodies, and there was a point of connection there that could not be taken away. I didn't know exactly what hymns they were singing, but I could imagine.

I think one of the most powerful examples of how strongly music plays into my life as a hostage was the first Christmas Eve. Ann Swift (the other female hostage) and I were being held in separate rooms at that time, but we were brought together for a brief worship service with Bishop Gumbleton of

the Archdiocese of Detroit. He brought us Holy Communion, prayed with us, and invited us to pray. As it was becoming clear that we were going to be taken back to our rooms, Ann said, "Let's sing." And we did. Christmas carols.

That December night in Iran was replete with sounds of *Joy to the World*, *Silent Night*, and other familiar carols. We sang as we walked, blindfolded, back to our rooms. I'm told that when the Bishop spoke to our families, he could tell them we had been singing. And I sang when I got back to my lonely room – quietly, but with great joy.

A month or so earlier, I had spied an Armed Forces Hymnal in the cupboard of the room in which I was being held and asked for it. The young woman who was on duty, said, "But it is not a book to read." I told her I knew that, but



Kathryn sits at the organ bench "I had used so many years ago when teaching the youngest Sunday School children. . . and playing the organ for them to sing 'Jesus loves me, this I know.'" She holds a treasured copy of the Green Sunday School hymnal which was given to her.

some days when you just grabbed onto the coattails "Lord help thou my unbelief" and hang on. Because I had been given this faith from the time I was a child, I used it and at one point I said that bad things really hadn't happen to our family, then I thought that's silly. Because my grandfather had died at a very young age. My mother had had problems in her family relationships. But I always saw an example of This happened, and now how are we going to deal with it? Part of that springs out of that fact. You hang on to the promises that have been given to you as a child of God. How does it work? I don't know. I do know that it does work. It worked for me.

CP: When I was re-reading your book last week I threw it against the wall. . . I got mad when you wrote that a clergyman had been allowed in to see you, a very rare occurrence, but he hadn't brought the sacraments with him.

KK: Right.

CP: And I wanted to slap the guy.

KK: Well, I think that was cultural misunderstanding. This was someone from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. And I'm not sure how the Eastern Orthodox church handles communion.

I did ask and it sort of took him aback, but for those of us raised as Lutheran Christians, the Eucharist is such a regular part of our worship service – I think again it was a cultural misunderstanding.

CP: I'm Boston Irish. I would have decked him, just so you know.

KK: Well, let me tell you. . . a month or so later I heard from the Franciscan sisters in New York. They had been praying for me, so I experienced a spiritual communion with them.

And maybe if he had brought communion, I would never have had that experience.

CP: Something I didn't know was that you studied at the HB studios in New York, and you studied acting and drama and you have a strong theater background. Was this background a help?



"My lovely country parish," Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jubilee

As I said so many years ago, I was confirmed in everything I had been taught as a child. God was there. God did give me strength, courage and joy! Praise be to God.

if she would bring me the book I would explain it to her. I showed her the various parts, how some pages held scripture, some prayers, and most of all the hymns which were praise and prayer. My explanation must have worked for she let me have the book, and it became my companion. I unabashedly admit that I did not return it as she said I must. I hung onto it. Later, at the time of our incarceration in Evin prison in November, a new edition of the *Lutheran Hymnal* came our way, and I was thrilled to see my liturgy again, and of course to have all the words of the hymns I couldn't remember.

Through all of these days, there was another important musical segment in my devotions. That was the use of the Psalms. I knew that these were among the earliest hymns of the church, and as I read and re-read them I became aware of their richness and source as music for the life of the church. I re-

called anthems I had sung later in life based on verses from the Psalms, and that brought a new richness to what I was already singing. I even made a promise I have yet to keep – to try and write five psalms. I'm not sure it will happen, but I hope that my life is a living psalm.

I might have survived singing pop and show tunes, but how great it was to wake in the morning in that peculiar situation and have the lines from the hymns *Crown Him With Many Crowns* ("Awake, my soul, and sing. . .") running through my mind. My faith did grow during this time, and I am ever grateful that I was given a wealth of material as a child to help me through the event. I made a choice, and music was a great part of it. As I said so many years ago, I was confirmed in everything I had been taught as a child. God was there. God did give me strength, courage and joy! Praise be to God.

KK: (laughs) Oh yes! One time they came in and said, "Do you have any toothpaste?" I looked at the guy square in the eye and said, "No!" And Ann said, "How could you do that?" I said, "Did you want to give up the toothpaste?" And she said, "No." So okay! At one point I looked at a guard and said, "The Shah is dead. When did he die?" He said, "How do you know?" and I said, "You just told me." That's an old acting trick. Yes, I used those things, only as you used them in every day life, I guess.

CP: What is your life today? You said people don't ask you about anything except your captivity and it was a big horrible ordeal, but what's going on with your life today? How has the hostage period pervaded your life, or has it?

KK: Ok. It's less than one sixtieth of my life at this point. I'm getting to be an old lady, which is lovely. I flunked retirement. I work as an adjunct professor at Wartburg. I get to teach great courses, like Reconciliation; Images of God in Bible and Culture; public speaking courses. In May term I'm going to be teaching a course called Intercultural Communications. I'll have a chance to do that again next winter. That's where we take a look at how do we try to open ourselves and be receptive to people of other cultures. I love to travel. This past year I went to see the total eclipse in Libya. I took a cruise around the world. I still have an insatiable curiosity about what makes the world tick, and where people live, and to see them in their homes. I keep developing new friendships.

Most recently I had a chance to know a charming Iranian-American woman, Faruzah Dumas, who wrote a great book called *Funny in Farsi*. In her book she talks about the difference before the hostage situation and after, and what it was like to grow up as an Iranian child in America. . . She would make a good interview for you! So life is good, life is full. And I enjoy very much being close to all of my sisters. We're all within about 40 miles of each other.

CP: One last question. What's the obstacle to peace in the Middle East?

KK: Openess. Dialogue. A willingness to accept the fact that things are done differently in different countries. The idea that we're not speaking to them doesn't accomplish anything. I know Iran needed the money, and that was one of the reasons why we were released.

But it wouldn't have happened without dialogue. Look what we didn't learn when we didn't speak to the Chinese for all those years. Until President Nixon, whatever else he was, he had the courage to open a dialogue with China, and it started with ping pong. It started with ping pong! It starts with understanding that there are different kinds of rice! It starts by understanding that a lifestyle because it's good for me is not necessarily good for someone else. There's nothing wrong with being different. It's not better and it's not worse. And until we're willing to accept some pretty basic stuff like that, I'm afraid we're just going to be wrong headed for a long, long time.

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