

Strong Braid

from Kindling: Small Reflections on a Limitless Faith

SATB and chamber ensemble

OR

SATB and piano



Elizabeth Alexander

Seafarer Press

Kindling: Small Reflections on a Limitless Faith

Words & Music by Elizabeth Alexander

I. First Touch

Water, kitten belly, hydrangea blossom, warm mud.
 New ears learn to decipher footsteps and music.
 While watching a fuzzy caterpillar, small hearts lean towards God.

II. Pages

On the pages of the morning paper,
 People rebuild shattered schools and restore lifeless lakes,
 Knit reconciliation out of promise and pain,
 And sing to the deathly ill and the newly born.

Constitutions are still being written,
 And slaves freed, and truces forged.
 We finish our breakfasts and roll up our own sleeves.

III. Chosen People

As children we are enchanted by the apple, the ark, the whale,
 The boy with the slingshot, the baby in the barn.

Later we grapple with forgiveness, resurrection and compassion.
 Chosen people are everywhere now – in the market, under the bridge.
 The next chapters are ours to imagine.

IV. So Much Radiance

Once we set forth in the dark empty hours of the night,
 In search of a Presence wondrous and unseen,
 Guided only by a voice still and small.

Our outstretched hands soon encountered
 The grain and brass of Cross and Menorah,
 And our fingers traced their contours with reverence and joy.

Only now, as the rising sun illuminates
 Wheel and Lotus, Yin and Yang, Star and Crescent, Eagle and Drum,
 We begin to behold the Limitless:
 So much Radiance within our reach – even more beyond.

V. Strong Braid

Aloft in the heady air of faith,
 Our senses heightened by incense and ether,
 We may from time to time become ecstatic paper kites.

We dive and keel and rocket,
 Riding each wayward gust with abandon,
 Recklessly aspiring to auroral heights –

Yet knowing all the while that we are safe,
 Tethered to the ground by a strong braid, a steady hand,
 And a mind that appraises the wind.

VI. Where Belief Begins

It comes down to this, in the end.
 And in the beginning and middle as well:

Earth, generous and visceral,
 Manifested in mountains and hidden within clouds,
 Familiar to rhizomes and young knees.

Air and Water, faithful channels of change,
 Whose currents and cycles nudge germination
 All the way through to rot and back again.

What's more, there's Fire, dazzling and improbable,
 Not only in the core of planets and stars
 But also in the hollow where belief begins.

Epilogue: The Chalice of Our Hearts

Our search for kindling takes us far beyond ourselves –
 There we gather Truth and Mystery.
 We return in joy to tend the chalice of our hearts.

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About *Strong Braid*: Despite how much I value rational thought, I've always had a wee little aversion to the word "humanism." Because it's grounded in science, reason, and rational thought, humanism can sometimes come across as dry and academic. It was clear I needed a metaphor. What if faith is an ecstatic kite, while humanism is the string that keeps it anchored to the ground? Yes! I felt like I finally understood the relationship between these two perspectives. Reason does not limit faith; it allows it to soar to great heights while remaining grounded and healthy.

Strong Braid

Movement V. from *Kindling: Small Reflections on a Limitless Faith*

SATB, chamber ensemble OR SATB, piano

N

Ecstatically (ca. $\text{♩} = 72$)

Words and Music by Elizabeth Alexander

429

f *Ped.*



* Pianist, waft and whirl to your heart's content, using the lead-foot pedal technique that your piano teacher instructed you to eschew!

433

S

A

T

B

mf

A -

437

S

A

T

B

loft in the head - y air,

mf *gliss.* Ah

mf *gliss.* Ah

grand sweeping legato wafts, simile

6 6 6 6

440

S

A

T

B

Ah

mf *gliss.* Ah

mf *gliss.* Ah

A -

6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

443

S
A
T
B

- loft in the head - y air of faith,

gliss. Ah
gliss. Ah

6 6 6 6 6 6

446

S
A
T
B

gliss. Ah
gliss. Ah

A -

6 6 6 6 6 6

449

S

A

T

B

- loft _____ in the head - y air of

6 6 6 6

451

S

A

T

B

Ah _____

Ah _____

Ah _____ Ah _____

faith, Ah _____

Ah _____

gliss. gliss. gliss. gliss.

6 6 6 6

453

S Ah *gliss.* Our *p*

A Ah *gliss.* Our *p*

T

B

6 6 6 6 3 6

1 2

O

455

S sen - - ses height - ened by in - cense and

A sen - - ses height - ened by in - cense and

T

B

lightly *p* *l.h.*

Ped. 3 3 3 3 3

458

S e - - - ther,

A e - - - ther,

T Ah

B Ah

p gliss.

p gliss.

3 3 4 6 6 6

ped.

460

S Ah

A Ah

T We may from time to

B We may from time to

mf

mf

6 6 6 3 3 3 3

ped.

463

S
A
T
B

time _____ be - come ec - sta - tic pa - per

time _____ be - come ec - sta - tic pa - per

3 3 3 3 3 3

Red.

466

S
A
T
B

mf We

mf We

mf We

mf We

kites. _____ *mf* We

kites. _____ *mf* We

mf 3 3 3 3 3 3

Opal Palmer Adisa, poet • Paul Adams, technological hero • Stephen Alexander, lyric consultant • Ginny Allen, Agile coach and friend • The great people at American Composers Forum • Yehuda Amichai, poet • A. R. Ammons, poet • Jennifer Anderson, conductor and composer advocate • Scott Bates, poet • Abbie Betinis, initiator of collaborative endeavors • Beth Norton, conductor and composer advocate • Dennis Blubaugh, more than just a music dealer • Michael deVernon Boblett, poet • Edna Busby, my first piano teacher • Ray Bradbury, writer • Augustin Cadena, translator • Norbert Capek, minister and advocate for religious freedom • Jessica Corbett, editor • David Cummings, poet • Philip Dacey, poet • Catherine Dalton, composer and scrum partner • Emily Dickinson, poet • Evelyn Dudley, poet and caregiver • Rob Eller-Isaacs, minister and composer advocate • Ralph Waldo Emerson, philosopher and poet • Louise Erdrich, writer • David Allan Evans, poet • Sophia Lyon Fahs, writer • Richard M. Fewkes, minister and writer • Sasha Gertler, poet • Jack Gallagher, composer and teacher • Paul Gerike, proofreader • Jocelyn Hagen and Michael Hagan, founders of Graphite Marketplace • Steve Harper, just about everything • Steve Harkins, web designer • Edie Hill, composer and friend • Langston Hughes, poet • Margaret and George Heald, piano technician • Karel Husa, composer and teacher • David Ignatow, poet • Kabir, mystic • Linda Kachelmeier, composer and scrum partner • Ruth Palmer, conductor and composer advocate • Joan Wolf Prefontaine, poet • Paul Rardin, conductor and composer advocate • Kalidasa, poet • Steve Kaul, recording engineer • Søren Kierkegaard, philosopher and poet • Dorothy Knost, piano teacher • Ben Krywosz, artistic director of Nautilus Music-Theater • Denise Levertov, poet • George Ella Lyon, poet • Jonathan Machen, vocalist • Dawna Markova, writer • Anne Matlack, conductor and composer advocate • Nancy Menk, composer advocate • Edna St. Vincent Millay, poet • Jane Ramseyer Miller, conductor, composer, social activist • Joe Mish, conductor and composer advocate • J. David Moore, composer • Gerald Rich, poet • Carl Sandburg, poet • friend • King Sigismund III, religious reformer • Ann Silsbee, composer, poet and friend • Simon Alexander-Adams, sounding board, fellow creative, and awesome son • Steven Stucky, composer and teacher • Rabindranath Tagore, poet • Sister Peronne Marie Thibert, teacher and writer • Oliver Alexander-Adams, unconventional thinker and light of my life • Howard Thurman, civil rights leader and writer • Everyone whose work supports the Association for Unitarian Universalist Music Ministries • Charles Varney, high school choral director • Anna Vonhuben, illustrator and graphic designer • Nancy White, poet • John Greenleaf Whittier, poet • Theodore Chickering Williams, poet • Daniel Winter, pianist and teacher • Nancy Wood, poet • Yehudi Wyner, composer and teacher

**A lot of hard work
and creativity went
into bringing this
music to you...**



**...and some of it
was even mine.**

**This page has been intentionally omitted.
(You know why.) A complete perusal score may be
purchased through any music store or dealer.**

Elizabeth Alexander
Seafarer Press
The Music of Elizabeth Alexander
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477 *p a brief moment of stillness...*

S
Rid - ing each way - ward gust with a - ban - don, _____

A
p a brief moment of stillness...
Rid - ing each way - ward gust with a - ban - don, _____

T
p a brief moment of stillness...
Rid - ing each way - ward gust with a - ban - don, _____

B
p a brief moment of stillness...
Rid - ing each way - ward gust with a - ban - don, _____

p subito

6 6 6 6

Ped.

481

S
Reck-less - ly as - pir - ing, as - pir - ing, as - pir - ing to au -

A
Reck-less - ly as - pir - ing, as - pir - ing, as - pir - ing to au -

T
As - pir - ing, as - pir - ing to au -

B
As - pir - ing, as - pir - ing to au -

6 3

Ped.

493

Ped. Ped. Ped.

497

S
A
T
B

p
Yet

Ped.

Q

503

S
A
T
B

know - ing all the while that we are

p
Ped. Ped.

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**...and some of it
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Elizabeth Alexander

Seafarer Press

The Music of Elizabeth Alexander

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515

S
A
T
B

strong braid,

6 6 6 6 6 6

Ped. Ped.

519

S
A
T
B

p
Te - thered by a stead - y, stead - y

6 6 6 6 6 6

Ped. Ped.

523

S *p*
and a

A *p*
and a

T
and a

B
hand. and a

Ped. *Ped.*

527

S
mind that ap - - prais - es the

A
mind that ap - - prais - es the

T
mind that ap - - prais - es the

B
mind that ap - - prais - es the

Ped. *Ped.*

531

S *f* wind. Ah *gliss.*

A *f* wind. Ah *gliss.*

T *f* wind. Ah *gliss.*

B *f* wind. Ah *gliss.*

535

S *ff* Ah *gliss.*

A *ff* Ah *gliss.*

T *ff* Ah *gliss.*

B *ff* Ah *gliss.*

539

S

A

T

B

With "gust-o"!

ff

6

6

6

*

The image shows a page of a choral score for 'Strong Braid'. It features four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are marked with long, sweeping melodic lines. The piano accompaniment includes sixteenth-note patterns and sixteenth-note chords, with dynamic markings like 'ff' and 'gust-o!'. The score is numbered 539 at the beginning. There are also some performance instructions like 'With "gust-o"!'. The piano part has several sixteenth-note runs marked with a '6' and some accents. The piece ends with a double bar line and a small asterisk.

Small reflections on some small reflections

by Elizabeth Alexander

When conductor Jason Oby invited me to compose a large choral work inspired by Unitarian Universalism's Six Sources, I was thrilled. Rather than prescribing what to believe, these touchstones affirm the places we turn to for inspiration, meaning, and purpose. As expressions of shared human experience, these enduring sources resonate with seekers, skeptics, and believers alike.

Summarized briefly, the Six Sources are:

- 1) Direct experience with mystery and wonder
- 2) Words and deeds of prophetic people, which challenge us to bring forth justice, compassion, and love
- 3) Wisdom from the world's religions and Indigenous traditions
- 4) Jewish and Christian teachings, which call us to love our neighbors as ourselves
- 5) Humanist teachings, reason, and science, which warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit
- 6) Earth-centered traditions, which celebrate the sacred circle of life

I recognized my own spiritual touchstones in this list – even if it didn't yet sound like the stuff of music! So I enthusiastically dove into writing lyrics, trusting the poetry would reveal itself.

But whoa, just because I was enthusiastic didn't mean it was easy! I struggled to find words that would truly sing. During long walks with my husband, I indulged in dramatic laments: "What was I thinking? There's no poetry here whatsoever! And humanism? I might as well set the tax code." But with each day I came closer to finding the rhapsodic kernel within each source. (Yes, even within humanism!)

The breakthrough came when I realized I didn't need to write a sweeping manifesto. The symbol of Unitarian Universalism is not a bonfire; it's a chalice – a small flame that kindles something deep within each of us. I began paying attention to intimate moments that gesture toward what is shared across religions and philosophies, moments that speak to our common experience of what is sacred and true. What emerged was a set of small reflections on a limitless faith: *Kindling*.



Cover: "Girl with Dandelion" by Emily Roe

Emily Roe is an artist, photographer and avid do-it-yourself interior designer. Her popular blog, "Love Emmie," focuses on her role as a military mom, bringing a sense of home to base housing wherever her family is stationed.

Emily writes: "This drawing is of my daughter. We were in a field of daisies and dandelions, while living in Alaska. She made so many selfless wishes with each dandelion, I felt it was a moment that I needed to capture."