

2005-2-6 How (and Why) To Sing

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Opening Words

We are here
to harmonize the song of our own lives
to the greater song of all that lives;
to claim our whole selves with joy,
as we take strength from the power of music.

Let us begin our worship with clear intent
as we speak our lives in word and then song:

**Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the
beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon
it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge,
deeper compassion and hope of peace.**

Readings:

The First Reading comes from the pen of choral composer William Byrd, from the 16th century.

In order to make this intelligible to modern minds, I had to change the spelling and simplify the baroque grammar from the era, but this is substantially what he wrote in English so many hundreds of years ago.

Since singing is so good a thing
I wish that all would learn to sing.

Reasons briefly set down by the author
to persuade everyone to learn to sing:

First, it is a knowledge easily taught and quickly learned.

Second, the exercise of singing is delightful to Nature and good to preserve health.

Third, it doth strengthen all the parts of the breast, and doth open the pipes.

Fourth, it is a means to procure perfect pronunciation and to make a good orator.

Fifth, it is the only way for Art to express Nature.

Sixth, there is not any music of instruments comparable that which is made by the voice.

The Second Reading is a translation of the lyric of the song Gracias a la Vida Que Me Dado Tanto by Violetta Parra, one of the great South American songwriters and singers of the twentieth century. This is her most famous song.

Thanks to life, which has given me so much.
It gave me two morning stars, which, when I open them I clearly distinguish between bright light and black night high in the sky where I can make out star-filled depths; and thus I can also distinguish from the crowds the one I love.

Thanks to life, which has given me so much.
It has given me laughter and it has given me tears, so that I can distinguish between joy and loss, the two parts of my song, and your song, which are one and the same with everyone's song, and yet which still make up my own song.

Sermon

While I was growing up on Spring Garden Ave on Detroit's far east side, there was no music in my house. No record player. No stereo. (They hadn't been invented yet.) On the radio: lots of words only. Early versions of local talk shows, some comedy by Jack Benny, and *Gunsmoke* with James Arness.

I don't recall anyone ever singing in the shower in my house. The only song I ever recall being sung in my house was *Happy Birthday*, and even that was rare..." And, no need for singing" one of my grandfathers used to say.

My grandfather Nazzareno, however, used to sing snippets of old Italian songs:

Vide 'o mare quant'è bello.

Spira tantu sentimento...

Just first lines mostly, as far as I could figure out. I don't think that he grew up with these songs. They were all Neapolitan songs, and my grandfather grew up way before radio and easy travel many hundreds of kilometers north of Naples, speaking a dialect utterly incomprehensible to Neapolitans. (And vice versa.) But he and my grandmother *did* travel across the Atlantic on a boat with two Neapolitan brothers they seemed quite fond of, and I suspect that on the trip he heard these two singing some of these great songs, but later could only remember the first lines.

My other grandfather did not sing that I know of, but he *did* take me to the opera when I was a child. And clearly he had opinions about how things should be sung. And I knew that certain songs by Puccini or Verdi could literally make him fall into a swoon.

I did not sing at home, but I sure did sing at the church. We attended daily mass at the parochial school I went to. In Latin and Greek. We sang hundreds of complex pieces, every day. And we sang special songs to the Virgin on Candlemas Day, (February 2nd) a day which the ancient Northern Europeans used to call Imbolc. (And I hear from some Pagan friends that there are now a few Imbolc songs making the rounds. I especially loved it when we sang special and mysterious Greek chants at Easter and on Good Friday. And, we sang this:

Parce Domine, parce populo tuo. Ne in aeternum, iracaris nobis.

That is one of the songs that we would have sung on this coming Wednesday, so called Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Lent itself is merely an old English word for “spring” which has given its name over to a season of fasting that precedes Easter in many Christian traditions.

The melody of *Parce Domine* is nothing spectacular. The words in Latin or English, are not great religious poetry by any means. But I do remember vividly how this song effected me, physically. I mean literally, in my body.

You see, we would chant *Parce* three times. But each time we sang it, we would start on a higher sound. *Parce Domine. Parce Domine. Parce Domine!*

The effect of this leap from lower to higher, this modulation, actually made something deep within me leap from lower to higher too. I used to look forward to singing this song, not because of the theology or my fondness for Lent, but for the notable pleasure and sense of well being it brought me.

Later, when the music of my ancestral church changed in the space of a single year, due to Vatican II, from thousand year old chant to

day old guitars, I enjoyed a different bodily sensation. I enjoyed the rhythm which pounded through my body. Take this song by the Seekers, for example, which we frequently sang during Mass.

*I know that one day soon a song shall rise;
You'll hear it with the sleep still in your eyes,
You'll waken to a brand new day,
Can you hear bells ringin',
Voices singin', Far away?*

*The trumpets of war will cease to blow
The sound I hope that we may never know
We're waiting for the day,
Can you hear bells ringin',
Voices singin', Far away?*

But it wasn't just church music in my mouth. There was also popular music which fused its own sensibility to the church music. So remember, I was living in Motown. And Motown music was popular in Detroit long before it was popular anywhere else in the country. I would leave church, get into my car, and join in chorus with Aretha Franklin singing on the car radio:

*There is a rose in Spanish Harlem
A red rose up in Spanish Harlem
It is a special one,
It's never seen the sun
It only comes out
When the moon is on the run
And all the stars are gleaming*

And as I sang, my hips would move, even though I was sitting down, my body would sway, and I would realize exactly what singer Holly Near once realized: that my voice is not in my throat,

but in my whole body, feet, neck, lower back, chest...a voice revealed by the spotlight of a beguiling rhythm.

In college, I joined a Pan Slavic Choir that toured the mid-west. I joined the choir not because I wanted to sing in Russian, but mostly because everyone always did exactly what our Russian professor, Yelena Kovach, told us to do, (or else.)

There I learned Russian folks songs and Slavonic Orthodox chant, very different from what I had grown up with. *Kol slaven nosh gospod v'si ony*...we would sing at concerts and everyone over 50 would burst into tears. I am not even sure what the Slavonic means, but that the tune really grabbed people.

At the Universalist church I attended as a young adult, I learned about hymnody, something I never heard much about in the church of my youth. I never grew up singing *Amazing Grace* or *Onward Christian Soldiers* like lots of folks did, and at first I found such melodies, even with changed Universalist style words, strange. But after a time I found many of the hymns to be fun to sing, even stirring. I'd like us to sing one of those hymns from the Blue Hymnbook right now. Even though now, as the poor become even poorer, and access to healthcare diminishes every day, the optimism of the hymn text seems a bit premature: (*#139 Wonders Still the World Shall Witness v. 2-3 alone*)

Still, just singing such a joyous, bouncing melody brought a sense of well-being to my heart.

In Seminary, many women were finding their own voice as women...that is, discovering that they were competent and capable human beings despite the suppressing and continuous drone of patriarchal culture. They began to sing new songs in a whole field of "women's music."

*Can we be as drops of water, falling on the stone, dancing,
breaking, dispersing in air,
weaker by far than the stone, but be aware
that as time goes on, the rock will wear away.*

This new music convinced me that when women, or any group strengthening their identity, find their own voices, they create new music. But I also came to realize that many of the women claimed that singing this new music also helped them *claim* their own voice. Certainly Motown singing is also a case in point when we are talking about African American identity, and rap, and originally jazz singing. Singing actually has power to shape and strengthen and even transform identities for the good. Of course, as a student of history, and since all good things can be perverted into awful things, I can point out the negative side of music's power to shape and mould a spirit. The easiest example? Since the end of the Second World War, anyone singing even just the first line of the anthem *Deutchesland, Deutchesland Uber Alles* can still strike fear and loathing into many a heart, Jewish, Roma ("gypsy"), or otherwise. And this, despite the fact that Franz Josef Haydn, when he wrote the tune, never intended it to be a political piece, just a fitting ending for his wonderful string quartet.

When I was chosen to chair the Hymnbook Resources Commission, I assure you, I did not feel up to it. I said no several times until they really twisted my arm, telling me they wanted me for my verbal ability, not my music skills. For, despite my history with singing, I never ever learned to read music. I have always learned songs, as they say, "by ear," that is, by sheer memory.

As the group of us who were fortunate enough to work on this committee sat around the table on the very first day, I asked each member of the team to share some sense of their musical taste, and what they really liked to sing.

By the time we got around the table, I was in a state of budding despair. Each of the eight of us had diametrically opposed tastes in music and song. Some of us liked X, others hated X. Some of us liked Y, others simply hated Y. I wondered aloud if we could really make a go of it at all.

But you know, we obviously did make a go of it, as the silver hymnbook in your hands confirms. How did we do it? We sang together. We sang everything together. Tens of thousands of pieces. We sang every hymn in the old 1937 Red Hymnbook, and every song in the 1963 Blue Hymnbook, and every song in the Los Angeles Hymnbook or the new British Unitarian Hymnbook as well as songs and hymns from a thousand other sources. And as we sang, we talked about why we liked or didn't like something. And as we explained to each other our likes and dislikes, we slowly, but surely, began to give up our dislikes. We began to see how music is music no matter what form it takes, or what era produces it. We found beauty in chant and folksong and anthem and jazz and rock and children's singsong. We found power in slow *and* fast; in lyrical *and* rhythmic. We found joy in minor and major, profundity in major and minor keys. Dissonant music began to sound stunningly beautiful. African chants with murderous syncopation began to delight. We began to grow less parochial, and more broad in our love and respect for music. Some of us had great voices, and some of us could barely carry a tune in a bucket, but we realized that such distinctions are nutty when you are dealing with the sheer *power* of singing. Sing one, sing all, that's what we used to say. And after my experience on the committee, I would suggest that coming to like music beyond your easier taste is a great and exciting opportunity for spiritual growth.

I have always encouraged everyone to sing, even people with really flat voices. Or monotone voices. Or hesitant people. No matter that a well-meaning friend or some well-meaning teacher

told you not to sing, or that singing was not your gift and you should keep your day job. No matter that people used to wince when you sang out in glee club, or scowl at you after you flubbed a chorus of *Happy Birthday to You*. No matter any of that.

I'm telling you right now, ignore all those controlling gestures, however well meant. Oh, sure, if one or two of us have trouble with keys a little discouragement might be necessary, but ONLY and I mean ONLY if we are foolish enough to apply to join some super choir that's going to sing the Missa Luba with the New York Philharmonic. But that's the only exception I can think of, as far as I am concerned.

For singing *is* life, folks. It is a source of health and welfare. This is hardly news; William Byrd knew this four hundred years ago. "*The exercise of singing... is good to preserve health,*" he wrote with simple clarity. Modern health science heartily supports Byrd's intuition. Many such supportive studies have recently been conducted in Europe (especially Frankfurt) and the Americas. After singing, they insist, immune systems improve, asthma knows relief, even your posture improves. The brain churns out some of its happiest chemicals when we are singing. The sense of well being I felt singing *Parce Domine* as a child was *not* an illusion on my part. I really *did* feel better. And at least some of us, at least, are aware that people suffering from advanced Alzheimer's, who have no sense of speech or self-identity at all, can often sing like the dickens when the piano strikes up a tune. Sung music goes even deeper than the spoken word, apparently.

And people marching at Selma *did* feel more solidarity while singing *We Shall Overcome*. And people marching on Washington with MLK Jr. did feel more power when they sang *We're Gonna Sit At the Welcome Table* at the base of the Washington Monument.

And people singing Violetta Parra's great song down in Chile gained strength to resist Pinochet's henchmen, since they knew that all loss is a partner to joy, and that "the two parts: my song and your song are one and the same with everyone's song. And yet it is still my own song." In other words, suffering is very particular but in many ways it also universal as well. Thus, by using song to identify with the rest of the human race, singing can keep local people from losing themselves in self-pity, or spending too much time looking at themselves in the mirror, and wringing their hands in resignation.

And just how do you sing?

First, just let go. Cross the boundary that is keeping you from singing...an old tape running in your brain from grade-school, or fear of sounding silly. Look, I say we are all pretty silly to begin with, so get over it.

Second, remember what William Byrd says: Singing "doth strengthen all the parts of the breast, and doth open the pipes." That means it's a physical thing. And because it involves the breath moving through the breast and all those pipes, it is a spiritual thing just as much, for breath in Latin, as I said in the story this morning, is *spiritus*, *spirit*. I say that anything that gets us to breathe in a different pattern than we usually do is a spiritual exercise, be it meditation or singing. When we are stressed, we often sub-ventilate, that is, breath more shallowly than makes sense. When you sing, you cannot breath shallowly. You take in sufficient oxygen and are breathing aright.

Third, stop worrying if you can't read music. I don't, and I chaired the fool Hymnbook Commission. So don't panic. Learn at your own pace. If you make mistakes, big deal. If anyone shames you after you have sung, talk to me, and believe me, I will have a little conversation with the person who is shaming you.

But please, do not, in my presence, use the word “singable.” Someone will ask me “Is it a singable tune?” Why yes, darlin’, it is a singable tune, because everything is singable. *If*, you take the time to learn it. You don’t expect to learn Italian after one lesson, do you? So you can hardly expect to sing some new song fluently after singing it for the first time. And yet many expect to do just that and resist singing because they are not singing perfectly. So I say again, “Let go, let go! Lose your taste for control and constant confidence. Feel *the joy of your insecurity* slowly coming to terms with a new song, as you master it at your own pace.

Now for those who cannot sing for a real physical reason, I will tell you that even humming is healing, studies have shown. Humming anything that feels good. Doesn’t have to be a song. Doesn’t have to make melodic sense. But that vibration in the throat, even if it cannot be heard, can be a source of joy and spiritual grounding. Furthermore, I am always aware that most of my deaf friends dance better than I do, their whole bodies turning into song. Even music that cannot be conventionally heard can be felt through and through.

In the end, I have to agree with Rabbi Heschel that music, and thus singing, not only feels good, bringing health and pleasure, but it also has the power to shatter our complacency about ultimate issues: life, death, divinity, truth and justice. And, no matter what our personal history is with such things, it challenges us to live in harmony and beauty all of our days.