

“Being Carried Away”

I have been singing all my life. I've sung in church choirs, school choruses, gospel choirs, chamber ensembles, and done solo performances. I also sing for myself: many times a day, I'll spit out a spontaneous ditty to diffuse tension, express my joy, or illicit a chuckle from my partner. I sing in the car, the bath and the shower. I sing what I know, and improvise to suit my mood and the meanderings of my curious ear.

Since I've lived in Burlington, I've sung with Social Band, a group that has performed as guest musicians here a number of times. About a year ago I got an email from one of my singing buddies. He wrote, “Let me know if you want to come to a workshop about singing for people who are dying.”

Singing with Social Band, I've grown in my appreciation of singing for *song's* sake, rather than just for performance. Social Band's core repertoire is *shape note* music. Rooted in New England, it is a church-based, a capella tradition, which was written for worship, not for performance.

To me, death and life are inextricable, and I've always grappled with the meaning of existence.

So, would I attend a workshop that brought singing together with hospice? My response was instinctive and immediate: Yes!

The workshop was led by the members of a Brattleboro-based group, called *Hallowell Singers*, which collaborates with its local hospice organization by offering “bedside sings” to people who are terminally ill.

From that workshop last January, the Burlington-area *Noyana Singers* was born. We are named for a South African song, meaning, “Are you going there.” We are now about 30 voices in all, but when invited to sing at a bedside, we come in groups of no more than six. We rehearse every other week, and are building a repertoire of a capella songs, any of which we can bring to life depending on a client's religious persuasion, mood, energy level, or nearness to death. All our sings are gifts of service. It is a deeply humbling privilege to be granted a place in the presence of one exiting this mystery we know as human life... and entering an even deeper mystery: death.

Hospice singing is truly a *growing movement*. New groups are forming all across the country and Noyana Singers is one of four groups birthed in Vermont just in the last year. This rapid growth speaks to the gift it creates for both the singer and the patient. It is flesh giving sound to the soul and sharing that sound with another soul, preparing to fly free.

Singing for the dying was taken seriously and developed artfully centuries ago. It goes back over 800 years to Benedictine monastic life. This history has been researched, revived, and developed by a contemporary leader in this movement, Therese Schroeder-Sheker. Her work brings together music, medicine, and spirituality. She delivers prescriptive music to those who are terminally ill. Using voice and harp, she is a blend of nurse and minister, working to “cure the soul and care for the body.”

For those who are actively dying, Schroeder-Sheker speaks of “self-emptying and unbinding.” She describes it this way: “The dying person, whether aware of it or not, is *unbinding* from biological rhythms, from layers of identity and cultural conditioning, consciously and unconsciously, by choice, default and grace. If [this] process is resisted, the struggle is intensified. If it’s *supported*, then freedom to unbind from the body in one’s own time is granted.” She teaches that prescribing and delivering live music to the dying helps them to unbind.

Early in her career, Schroeder-Sheker worked in a nursing home. Whenever a resident died, she was to quickly remove the body, sanitize the room, and prepare it for the next person within a *maximum* of half a day. Eventually, when this pressure to rush things in the wake of a death began to trouble her, she confided in a priest friend who advised her: “Don’t leave [your patients.]. Protect them.” Though it felt risky, her instinct to follow his advice grew.

One day, when she arrived to begin her shift, she was informed that one of the residents, a grumpy and often abusive curmudgeon, was likely to die on her watch. He had emphysema and his lungs were simply disintegrating. When she entered his room, she heard the death rattle she knew so well from experience. She described it as “a kind of *sound ocean* saying, ‘*anxiety – anguish.*’” He was in agony and gripped with fear. Gasping for breath, he cried out again and again.

She closed his door, approached him, spoke his name, and took his hand. Instead of ignoring her, as was his tendency, he met her with his terrified eyes. The next moment, she found she had climbed in his bed and was cradling him from behind, the way a partner will support a woman in labor. And then she was singing to him. She sang several long, beautiful songs, songs that were simply part of her. They were prayerful songs and the time was a vigil.

She sang for perhaps 45 minutes before the man she was holding passed on. And in that time, his breathing quieted and his anxiety settled. As she experienced his death, she understood it as much more of a *birth*. The experience was bountiful and sacred, especially the gift of silence following his final breath, which for her was like receiving a holy blessing.

I’m calling this sermon, “Being Carried Away.” That’s because, as this subject grew in my mind, with it grew the image of song as a river... of music as a flowing, buoying force with the gentle - *and powerful* - ability to lift and carry us from where we are, here and now, to some other place we’re called to. That other place can be the great mystery beyond the grave, but it can also be a life-filled place of ecstasy, or emotional release. We can be lifted to a place of happy giddiness, or embraced sweetly by calm and peace.

When I was in college, my grandmother was living in a nursing home, and I would visit her when I was home on breaks. She suffered from severe dementia, and long after she forgot my name, one reliable conversation we could have, would begin when I reminded her that I went to Mount Holyoke College. “Oh,” she’d recall, “I once visited a friend at Mount Holyoke.”

One day, the nurse overheard this conversation and mentioned to me that one of the residents was a Mount Holyoke alumna. She asked if I'd like to meet her. I agreed and we went down the hall to where she sat in her chair outside her room. This resident was familiar to me, since we passed her room every time we came to visit my grandmother. In fact, my sisters and I had a nick name for her: "Glug Glug." This was because she typically sat in her chair, holding on to the tray in front of her, rocking forward and back slightly, muttering "glug-glug-glug..." She seemed stuck in a meaningless loop of existence, and in our immaturity we made fun of her muttering. But here I had just learned that Glug-Glug and I had something in common. So I came up to her and introduced myself and told her I went to Mount Holyoke too. She just stared through me, rocking and muttering her "glug-glug" sound. And then, I'm not sure why... perhaps to clarify what I meant, I started to sing the Mount Holyoke Alma Mater, "Oh, Mount Holyoke, we pay thee devotion... in the fervor of youth that is strong..." and by the time I'd gotten that far, her voice was silent and her body had stilled. I sang, "The courage of right is thy garland, our lives alma mater, thy song..." and she began to tap along in rhythm on the tray in front of her.... And I began to get choked up.... But I kept singing. Somehow I made it to the end of the song, choking back tears. Glug Glug was still staring into someplace I couldn't see, but the song I sang had carried us together, to a formative, beloved place of pride, memory, and meaning. From one stranger to another, the song on my voice had reached through decades of time, rolled right through thick clouds of mental fuzziness and made a place for clarity, healing, and love.

Several years later, I was a seminary student in New York City. Union Theological Seminary is located on the upper West Side of Manhattan, a 15-minute walk from the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine.

St. John's is the largest gothic cathedral in the world. Construction, begun in 1892, is still ongoing. The rough hewn stones which support its weight are exposed to the worshiper's eye. Its massive columns reach so high to its vaulted ceiling that you almost can't see to the heights of that darkness. It is an awe-inspiring place, especially when you factor in the breadth of progressive urban ministries this Episcopal Church is known for.

Early in my first year in New York, I discovered the Sunday evening vespers services at the cathedral. The crowd that attended was so small that the service itself was held up in the choir area. We sat, each snuggled into our own tiny sanctuary – a wood-walled stall of a seat, on a red velvet cushion, able to touch, with our fingers, the figures of saints finely carved into the wood on either side of each seat.

I would settle in and then hear the service hint at its beginning: the voices of the choir beginning to echo about the sanctuary as eight men, chanting in perfect, clear harmony, began their slow procession from the rear of the sanctuary. We could see them approach, from that great darkened distance, by the light of their candles, until eventually they joined us. A few more candles would be lit and our space would glow gently against the dark stone cavern. In typical "high-church" Anglican style, nearly all elements of the service were either sung by us or chanted by the choir. I could just settle anonymously into my private cocoon within this great, holy cave, and let the wisdom and spirit of the service carry me along.

It was a short service, lasting perhaps 45 minutes, and my favorite part came at the end. It always concluded with an organ meditation and we sat directly underneath the massive stand of organ pipes. The meditation began simply, soft and gentle... and then, gradually, it would build to a thundering glory of sound! That organ was so grand that the rumble of the biggest pipes physically shook our bodies and buzzed our souls. The thundering rocked us, briefly, free of daily worries and preoccupations. And then it would ebb and return, ultimately, to sacred silence. I received the organ meditation as a sea of sound and let my spirit surf and float on its waves of music.

The way my body received the rumbles of those bellowing, throbbing organ pipes was awesome! But I want to come back to singing. Song is music we generate inside our own bodies: it's borne on the winds of our breath in a vessel of wet, living flesh. For that very reason it's utterly personal. There's a naked human truth that can come from and by singing. For many, the prospect of *producing* that vocal truth – especially singing solo, with the vulnerability that brings -- elicits full-blown fear. For a listener, however, *hearing* a lone, solo voice in performance can arouse goose bumps and deeply touch the soul.

Last spring, Social Band spent a day with a singer and workshop leader who guided us in vocal and body-awareness exercises to help us connect with and refine the resonant ways of our own flesh. *Hum*, he told us, and imagine sending that hum out to the surface of your skin. That's how to project your voice. Don't pump it out your mouth, but let it out your skin. Try to ignore what you hear and instead, tune into the physical sensation of singing. Feel it in your body. Wander up and down in your range and notice where and how you feel it.

Then he instructed us to hum vibrations to *each other*. Obediently, but self-consciously at first, we wandered around the room, and like polite dogs making each others' acquaintance for the first time, we brought our faces close to each other and hummed, listened, and felt the vibes.

For a bunch of down-to-earth Vermonters, this was fairly "Woo Hoo" at first, but we've since put the giggles aside and now use this exercise fairly regularly to listen, to tune into each other as a group of singers, and to feel the vibrations. When we spend a few minutes greeting each other in a buzz of shifting, sliding dissonances and harmonies, it gives the group members a little soul-tingle. It brings about smiles of contentment and surprise, and helps make us ready to work on music together. Paradoxically, this collective lifting and carrying of the group's sound and spirit *grounds* us as singers.

It's like the words we sing in Spirit of Life: "Roots hold me close, wings set me free... spirit of life come to me, come to me." I believe, as these words suggest, that in the presence of the ultimate mystery of death, *spirit is so alive!*

Once, for a patient at Vermont Respite House, we were singing a lilting round I love, "I've been waiting all the day long to see the stars in your eyes..." As we sang it, I looked around, into the eyes of each singer, and into the eyes of the patient in her bed. If our eyes are the windows of our souls, well, those windows were wide open and the spirit was soaring brightly! Our gazes were clear, direct, simple, plain, and full of clear love... and *I could see the stars in our eyes!* We shared with our patient this simple wonder: the passing of that sparkling spirit. We were all buoyed by the swing, the

dancing lilt of the tune, like summer sunshine on a lake with a slight breeze... sparkles
glinting and twinkling... winking and splashing... we sang:

I've been waiting all the day long to see the stars in your eyes!
My love come dance with me now, see how the evening flies!
And as you sleep my dear, know that I'll be near
To hold you when you arise!

And as you sleep my dear...
know that I'll be near...
To hold you when you arise!