



Heart, Soul, Mind, AND Song

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF SINGING

REBECCA LAIRD

ON SUNDAY MORNINGS as we gather to worship, some who enter the doors hope that the music will be energetic enough to recharge their sputtering spiritual batteries. Others pray that at least one of the hymns will harken back to the days when they first learned the great stories of the faith while singing “Day by day and with each passing moment, strength I find to meet my trials here.”

Despite our differing musical tastes, we know that our souls are stirred when ours heart, mind, body, and voice join together in song. So what is really going on when we sing? Are we lifting our voices because we like the music? Do we sing because we want to or because we must? Do we have a choice to stand mute when a song is chosen or an instrument played that we just don't prefer?

Pay attention next time during that

youngest disciples: the teacher sings a line and the little ones repeat it back. This call-and-response form of music is one of the oldest form of chanting.

The word chant comes from the Latin word that means simply “to sing” and usually refers to simple, repeatedly sung prayers. When the church sings, “Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,” as it has for centuries, it joins many millennia of Christians and Jews who chanted this same Hebrew word in worship in Gothic stone cathedrals, Roman catacombs, hidden house churches, or Middle Eastern synagogues.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, gave his eighteenth-century followers directions for singing to encourage the spiritually beneficial aspects of singing (see sidebar).

“Above all sing spiritually,” Wesley wrote. “Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him

yell on a snow-packed mountain can cause an avalanche. A high-pitched aria can break glass. Likewise, music can and will unpack and break down hardened places inside of us. Singing creates physical changes in us. As we sing, our breathing deepens and slows. Muscles often relax and skin temperatures change and our emotions are unleashed. Our scattered attentions become focused. When we sing, we become centered—life-giving air moves into the center of our bodies and returns as praise.

The Reemergence of Chant

In recent years, Gregorian chants, which take their name from Pope Gregory, a sixth-century pontiff who commanded that the psalms, hymns, and prayers sung by Benedictine monks be preserved, have been recorded by the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domin-

When we sing as if our lives depended on it, we begin to sense that the words of our mouths have the power to bring us into the presence of God.

long set of praise songs or when your favorite hymn is sung. Be mindful of your own response. Even if your mind wanders while you sing “Thou Art Worthy” again and again, you may sense after a while that you are more focused on God. Music provides one of the most potent spiritual practices that we have to attune mind, body, and heart in prayer.

Chant: A Spiritual Practice

In many religious traditions, songs or chants are used as spiritual practices, a way of focusing us on the divine. Buddhists chant, as do Hindus, Jews do it, and Roman Catholics in Europe. But we North American Evangelical Protestants certainly do not chant—or do we?

We certainly sing—for Protestants singing is as natural as breathing. Singing is one of our primary devotional practices, a beloved way of praying. Through song we praise God, we invoke God's presence and blessing, and we sing love songs to the God of our hearts. Listen to how we teach our

more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually.”

The power of sung prayers comes from their wholeheartedness. When we sing as if our lives depended on it, we begin to sense that the words of our mouths have the power to bring us into the presence of God (who, of course, is ever-present even when we remain deaf to the divine activity around us).

But chanting is not just about staying on tune or following words or quarter notes on a page. It's about taking in air and using it to give voice to our deeper yearnings—often by repeating ancient words that others with similar yearnings have expressed in earlier times.

Christians rarely pay attention to the purely physical side of singing. Those vibrations of energy that thrum through our vocal chords and make sound, produce visceral physical sensations. A loud

go de Silos, Spain. (Their 1994 recording, *Chant*, was a worldwide bestseller.) Sometimes a lone voice soars, often a choir sings Scripture together or a cantor leads and the choir responds.

Celtic chants are well-stocked in the world music section of music superstores. Simple songs from the lands of Ireland and Scotland are paired with the lilting sounds of harp and pipes that make one want to tread with joy and care on the earth.

Over the past several decades hundreds of thousands of young people have flocked each year to the village of Taizé, France. There, an ecumenical Christian community lives a life of simplicity and orders their days around daily chants—sung prayers that are prayed, often sitting on the floor or while kneeling.

The chants are also used in services in other countries. Jeffrey Markay,

Rebecca Laird is an ordained minister, a spiritual director, and the editor of *Sacred Journey: The Journal of Fellowship in Prayer*. She lives in New Jersey with her family.

senior pastor of the United Methodist Church in Caldwell, New Jersey, regularly leads Taizé services. “Singing Taizé chants is growing in popularity,” he says, “because it honors the mystical part of our humanity and reminds us that Christian faith and worship is much deeper than just our thoughts.”

A Personal Story

I was in my early twenties when I, an evangelical pastor’s kid and graduate of a Christian college, first slipped in unknown and unnoticed to a Friday night Taizé prayer service in Burlingame, California. I sat on the floor of a serene convent chapel with a few dozen others and gazed at a large wooden cross laid on the floor and outlined by the tiny

while, I went to my own church on Sundays and sang hymns and choruses, too.

Then recently, a full decade later, I attended a chanting session led by a yoga teacher, whom I was asked to interview for a story. This time I was old enough to be the parent of many who sat on the floor of this small carpeted room. I squirmed from physical discomfort and listened to the unfamiliar sounds, “*Om namah shivaya*,” (salutations to the great heart of being). Soon the leader told us to sing a mantra in our hearts. She suggested one, but told us to use our own if we wished. What was my mantra or the deepest prayer of my heart? I certainly didn’t want to sing what she suggested as it had no meaning for me. As a Christian, I have a favorite Scripture

When we sing, we become centered—life-giving air moves into the center of our bodies and returns as praise.

flames of votive candles. In the shadowed light, a soprano voice began to chant, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” A flute and violin joined in. Over and over the words were repeated. I squirmed as my back began to hurt from sitting in an unfamiliar position. I was used to doing my worship in high-backed pews.

Then there was silence. I breathed deeply with relief and began to wonder what would come next. The voice returned, this time singing in Latin, “*Ubi, charitas, et amour, Deus ebi est.*” (Where charity and love are, there God is found.) The sound took me in and I began to repeat the unfamiliar words until they began to sink down. For an hour, I sang, listened to Scripture read slowly, not once but twice with long silences in between. My mind wandered, and I called it back. I left a bit bewildered but the next month, I returned with friends.

For five years I regularly traveled from my city apartment to the suburban convent. The crowd grew by word of mouth until several hundred, many of us young adults, packed the place. With practice, I stopped fidgeting so much. The very sound of the leaders voice would bring me into the presence of God. Mean-

verse, Psalm 121, and snippets of choruses that I sing when alone in the car. But what was my heart’s prayer? I sat without voice and swayed slowly to the sounds of others. Then in the dimly lit but burning center of my heart, I heard it: “Jesus, what a friend for sinners! Jesus, lover of my soul! Friends may fail me, foes assail me, he, my Savior, makes me whole” (*The Covenant Hymnal*, #350).

Of course. Even among those who sing differently than I might and who sing words I don’t understand or much like, I am who I am, a Protestant Christian woman who loves Jesus and who knows who resides in the center of my soul. This lesson I learned when the music was unfamiliar, the beat odd, and the words not mine.

So perhaps instead of standing silent next time we hear a hymn or a chorus we do not like, or a musical style that simply does not sound like home, we should simply let our desires, our opinions, our preferences, descend into that place where Jesus said, “I stand at the door and knock.” There in the company of our great Savior, we can sing the songs that do reconnect us with the powerful stream of God’s presence. After all, isn’t that why we sing? □

DIRECTIONS ON SINGING

John Wesley, 1703-1791
(from *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook*, following hymn #319)

Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find a blessing.

Sing lustily, and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you are half dead or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.

Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation—that you may not destroy the harmony—but strive to unite your voices together so as to make one clear melodious sound.

Sing in tune. Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep up with it. Do not run before or stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals in on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it from among us, and sing all our tunes as quick as we did at first.

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here and reward you when he comes in the clouds of heaven. □