

The Singing Heart
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You're walking on the beach, the sun setting back over the sound, the sky gradually growing darker. Your eyes take in the beautiful colors above, the darkening on the horizon as the earth's shadow climbs into the sky, the ocean turning a bright metallic copper in front of you. The sight is astonishing. But the sound of the wind and the waves . . . the sound goes right inside you. When you walk away the memory of what you saw is still in your mind's eye, but what you heard feels as if it's in your body, and it stays. You still hear it when you're going to sleep hours later.

Or you're walking along a trail along a mountainside on a windy day, in love with the world, the long-needled pine trees swaying above and below you. The sighing sound they make is like your own breath, like the earth breathing. Years later, just an echo of that sound from a single tree can bring you right back to that moment on the mountain.

Or have you ever lain in bed and listened to the sound of a rainstorm outside the window, like the one we just made together, starting out softly and then growing louder and wilder? Where do you keep the memory of that sound?

Sound, and music in particular, has a special kind of power for human beings.

Last night some of us had a chance to listen to a beautiful performance here, on a collection of crystal and brass singing bowls, a kind of bell like this one that sit on their back and can be played by striking or stroking the sound from them [DEMONSTRATE]. Bright Walker, who brought the bowls and shared their sounds with us, talked about how the power of their tone to affect us comes not just from hearing with our ears, but from the fact that the vibration of the bell affects our whole body. She brought some of her bowls and bells around the room, letting us feel up close the deeply physical quality of their sound.

Sound is just moving air. A body, an object, a string, a vocal cord vibrates, and in music the vibration is shaped by a mouth or an instrument; that sets the air around it into motion, and the air travels to us. It doesn't just flow straight into the ear to set the eardrum and little bones inside vibrating; it bathes our whole body in its movement. And the vibration comes inside, because of course our bodies are mostly space, almost unimaginably tiny particles constantly moving in relationship with each other. Just like sound, just like music, we are made of vibrating bodies.

A scientist named Daniel Levitin, who studies the physiology of how music is experienced, wrote a book called "The World in Six Songs." He says that music is inextricably intertwined with the evolution of human nature. Before he was a scientist Levitin was a record producer, working with people like Stevie Wonder and k.d. lang, and a musician playing with Blue Oyster

Cult and David Byrne from the Talking Heads. He remembers a conversation he had with Sting back in the days of The Police about the difference between seeing and hearing. “When we see things,” Levitin told his rock musician friend, “it feels like they’re out there, but when we hear them it feels like they’re in here.” Sting’s reply was that “sound joins the inner world to the outer world.”

Sound joins the inner world to the outer world.

I’m eighteen years old, a college freshman and a member of the Michigan State Marching Band. It’s a Saturday afternoon, and we’re waiting in the long tunnel leading into the gigantic stadium for the pregame show. We’re all at attention; no one moves or speaks. We hear the drum major’s whistle and a fast, electrifying drum cadence roars off the echoing concrete walls, and we start a quick stutter-step in place and let out a roar of our own, as loud as our voices can go. We pour out onto the field in a wild, rhythmic, screaming run to the sound of the drum line, two hundred of us, and spread out into the opening formation. Our feet slam down, there’s a breathless silent moment, and then an enormous crashing chord opens the first fanfare, which only rises in volume and excitement from there.

Now, if you’re not a marching band person, and you were transported back to that moment in my life, I can imagine you saying to me, “Wow, David, that was really. . . . LOUD.” You might not experience what I did. But I—like every other musician on that field—am totally caught up in that moment. There’s no me in here making music out there; I can barely say I’m playing my trumpet; the music is playing us all, and we are all part of a wave of sound that’s flowing through us and reaching 70,000 people who probably thought they were coming to watch a football game, hah.

Sound joins the inner world to the outer world.

There are many ways to understand the word “spiritual.” For me, the spiritual is found when mind, body, and emotions are all unified, and completely engaged in something larger than ourselves. Mind, body, and heart, in relationship with a larger reality: That’s what spiritual means to me. And that moment, way back then, that very loud memory—that was a spiritual experience. Sound, and the organized pattern of sound and silence that is music can do that.

I think that’s why, to use Daniel Levitin’s words, “music accompanies every behavior that even remotely resembles a religious practice worldwide.” As Bright Walker pointed out last night, from the earliest humans chanting and dancing together, to indigenous shamans singing dying people into healing, to ancient Greeks charting out the nature of sound vibrations they called “the music of the spheres,” believing they revealed the very nature of existence, to contemporary composers writing hymns and musical prayers for worship—sound, music, and spirituality are intimately connected.

Music opens the way for connection with other people in a unique way. Levitin writes about recent research showing that making music together, especially singing in groups, releases

oxytocin, the chemical in the brain that facilitates bonding between human beings. People who sing together find their breathing falling into shared patterns, their feelings of goodwill growing, even their heartbeats synchronizing. Maybe that's what we were feeling when we tried Jim Scott's experiment in what he called the Power of Community, as we were strongly drawn from our individual, internal tones toward a chord that made us part of something none of us could create alone.

Rounds, like "Where Do We Come From," have a special way of inviting us out of our separateness, to experience ourselves as part of something larger. When we begin to learn how to both sing our part and hear the different parts around us, the music comes together in a new way, and it becomes much easier to sing in rhythm, to create harmony together, and to become part of a single, powerful and beautiful community voice. That's a vital experience; it has something to teach us about how to live together in a world that too often encourages us to think we're supposed to be the diva, the soloist everyone else is just here to support—or even worse, a world that encourages some of us to think our voice is not important enough or good enough to add.

The first song we sang together, the "Meditation on Breathing," is religious music created for healing. The composer Sarah Dan Jones says she wrote this song in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. When I had a chance to do some work with Sarah Dan a few years ago, she talked about wondering how she could go on in a world where such terrible things happened; she wasn't sure how to engage the world after such a hateful, violent act against innocent people. She sat down to meditate, and as she tried to find her way into a moment's peace and compassion the melody of this song came to her: "When I breathe in, I breathe in peace; when I breathe out, I breathe out love." I find her story so resonant right now, as once again we find ourselves in a moment when fear and grief seem to grip the whole world, as we try to find a way to move forward in compassion and justice rather than in anger and vengeance, rather than lashing out at refugees who are themselves victims of the very terrorists we fear. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Music has the power both to guide us and to strengthen us for the sacred work of bringing more justice and more love into a hurting world.

The jail cell is crowded with people. They cough and their eyes water in the aftermath of tear gas and mace; some of them are hurt. They have been attacked, arrested, and jailed for standing up for freedom, standing up for human dignity, standing up for justice. Out of the murmurs of anger, fear, and tears, a voice is raised, and slowly the people join in, and harmony is found, and the voices grow strong and full: Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round, turn me round, turn me round; ain't gonna let nobody turn me round, I'm gonna keep on walkin'; keep on walkin', walkin' to the freedom land.

It might be Selma or Birmingham 50 years ago. It might be a moment from the anti-war movement of the 1960s, or the farmworkers' movement of the 1970s and 80s, or the arrests after

the Phoenix demonstrations against racist anti-immigrant laws in Arizona in 2011, or after a Moral Monday demonstration in Raleigh in 2013, or after a Black Lives Matter action in Ferguson or Oakland or New York last year, or in Minneapolis the day before yesterday. In every one of those places, people have found strength, healing, courage, and solidarity in singing together. Wherever people stand against oppression, music helps us stand, and reminds us that we are not standing alone, that we are part of a long history of human beings bending the moral arc of the Universe toward justice—a history as long as the history of human civilization, a history that is not over by a long shot.

We need that strength, that courage, that healing, that reminder. We need it today, for the world we're all living in right now.

What brings you to a religious community? What brings you back each week? Perhaps you're following habit, local custom, or the traditions of your families; you might be seeking greater spiritual understanding; you might be longing for a loving community. Perhaps you're struggling with some great difficulty in your own life; or perhaps you want to be with others who share your commitment to justice and equity in human relations. Maybe you just like it here, or in another religious community that you call home.

Whatever brings each of us individually, we all share something in common: Every human being needs to touch the Wellspring, the Source of compassion, of courage, of truth, and of joy. It does not really matter what name we each give that Wellspring, that Source, that ultimate, Divine Reality. What matters is that we find ways to feel our connection with it—because nothing less can sustain us. Nothing less can prepare us to reenter and live fully in the world outside the sheltering walls of our Beloved Community.

Music is one path to the Source. With its power to unite our body, mind, and feelings, with its capacity to connect us with something larger than ourselves, music can bring our singing heart to the Wellspring and help us to drink deeply.

And that's worth singing about.