

Creating community: Healing Through Singing Together

“Singing is an ancient art form. People living in less technological societies than our own in many parts of the globe still sing as a central way of being together. There are no distinctions between audience and performers, no-one watches on passively. It is assumed that we are all artists, and dancers, and singers.”

In an age of rapid technological development we now more than ever have the ability to interact with people 50, 500, or even 5,000 miles away, but then why are so many people suffering from feelings of loneliness and emptiness? What are we missing? Perhaps our souls are yearning for authentic connection with others, yearning to be heard and to hear others. Singing with others is one way that this connection can be developed. According to an article in Greater Good magazine, “some research reveals that group singing not only helps forge social bonds, it also does so particularly quickly, acting as an excellent icebreaker.”

Singing connects us to ourselves and each other and allows us to express in ways at words sometimes cannot. I myself have experienced this on many occasions. One such occasion is though a ceremony I was called to be a part of called moon dance. It is a Mexica prayer ceremony that centers around connection to the moon, connection to spirit and to all the other women in the dance. The ceremony is four nights long and each night is started and ended with a cleansing sweat, the night consists of many forms of prayer- singing, dancing and smoking of obsidian prayer pipes. In the center of the dance arbor is an alter in the shape of ovaries and in the center of that is a heart drum. According to a talk by psychologist Annett Schirmer at the Society for Neuroscience. Rhythmic sound “not only coordinates the behavior of people in a

group, it also coordinates their thinking—the mental processes of individuals in the group become synchronized.” This is something that most all indigenous and native peoples from around the world have known for eons and is something that I believe all people have felt and know intuitively. During the dance the drum is our heartbeat, throughout the night we sing many different songs, the energy ebbs and flows, but the drum remains constant. The feeling of connection when we are all singing and dancing together is so soul filling that I feel like my heart expands with love to a universal level, the feeling of oneness allows for moments of complete peace. This is a feeling that often gets lost in the routine of everyday life.

So what is so powerful about singing anyway? In an article by Cassandra Sheppard, *The Neuroscience of Singing*, she quotes “The neuroscience of signing shows that when we sing our neurotransmitters connect in new and different ways. It fires up the right temporal lobe of our brain, releasing endorphins that make us smarter, healthier, happier, and more creative. When we sing with other people this effect is amplified.” For me singing has always been the way I can express my authentic self. Singing helps me to be present in a way that little else does. Whether that is through singing with other women at the moon dance and other ceremonies, or singing with a band. Singing allows me to connect to myself and in a way bypass my thinking brain and connect directly to the deeper levels of myself. For me this has been invaluable in my healing process. And I have witnessed this happen in others as well, especially in people I have played in bands with for years, but also with people I have only known for days or hours, like during this summer sound healing certification intensive, and with people I have sung with in ceremony. There is a deep bond that grows between people when you make music together. Sheppard also shares that “singing in groups triggers the communal release of serotonin and oxytocin, the bonding hormone, and even synchronizes our heart beats.”

One of the ceremonies that has provided me with one of the moments of complete present-ness and unity with earth, spirit and my fellows is the sweat lodge. The sweat lodge is a prayer ceremony and is for many native people of turtle island used as a way to purify and connect to spirit. Singing together is a main component of the lodge. Songs are shared and sung together. When I poured my first lodge I was so humbled. I prayed to each direction and to the great mystery and mother earth to be a vessel for healing before others entered the lodge. In that lodge I asked several women to share songs, I also shared a song, and I asked for a woman who had always wanted to share a song in lodge and had never had the opportunity. After the lodge the women who had sung for the first time came up to me and shared with me how powerful getting to sing her song was for her, not only was it powerful for her but it was very powerful for me and all the women in the lodge. Getting to be a witness to another person stepping into their own power and sharing their voice is a magical experience. Inside the lodge is dark with only the light comes from the hot stones in the center. For me there is a sense that in the lodge my “self” dissolves, and I am connected to those in the lodge with me, and in some moments connected to the great mystery, spirit and mother earth, and even the universe. This sense is usually greatest for me when we are all singing together. In the lodge before we exit we call together with one heart and one mind, “puerta”, which means door, and exit. When we exit we give thanks for the opportunity to come together and sing and pray, for the earth mother for holding us so gently, for the grandmother and grandfather stones, to spirit for allowing us to walk this path. I also like to give thanks for my voice, for the gift of song.

The wonderful thing about singing is that everyone can do it. You don't have to buy expensive musical equipment, we all carry everything we need to create within us. Many people when asked say they can't sing, they are tone deaf, or told by someone that they weren't good

enough and to be quiet, according to UK singer, singing teacher and choir leader, Sophia Efthimiou “singing is very personal, an expression of sound coming from within us, so we cannot help but take this criticism very personally and it sticks. Yet, people who claim they cannot sing because they are tone deaf are more likely to be very unfamiliar with finding and using their singing voice.” How do we find that voice? And how do those who have found that voice help others to find their own. I believe we can do this through singing more together, by creating more opportunities for people to come together and sing, encouraging each other, and breaking down the belief that you must be great singer to sing. Singing together is a way for us to be inclusive and to nurture each other. In the article *The New Science of Singing Together*, Launay and Pearce state “singing provides an inclusive and cost-effective means of combating the disintegration of communities that is becoming endemic in many societies today.” In my own community, as in many communities throughout the US and the world, there are many problems we are facing. Including everything from drug epidemics and mental health crisis to climate change, poverty, food justice to deep the wounds of colonialization, genocide and war.

Can singing together solve all these problems by itself? Probably not, but what it can do is help create unity and dissolve the illusion of separateness that is pervasive throughout the human species. It can help us to break down the walls that isolate us and help cultivate bonds of connection between us. “Singing increases self-awareness, self-confidence and our ability to communicate with others. It decreases stress, comforts us and helps us to forge our identity and influence our world,” says US opera singer Katie Kat. This is not a new concept but a return to ancient ways of communicating and connecting that our ancestors knew all too well. Singing together can open the door to remembering what our souls have never forgotten, that we are all connected. Singing together can help create shared experience between people from all walks of

life. Through shared experience and greater connection we can heal deep wounds and foster greater understanding of each other. Singing together also means listening to those you are singing with, singing and listening, sound and silence, giving and receiving, all two sides of the same coin. It is from inner stillness that we can truly hear, and is a very good place to start any journey.

“Inner silence and listening awareness form a kind of mystical marriage or union. We hear best in conditions of complete inner silence... We have to sing our own songs, give of ourselves, make our own “joyful noise,” not so that the Creator can hear us, but so that we can hear the Creator... Here is where we are needed to exercise, here is where we can help harmony come more to life. We could not do these things on the moon or on the sun; we have to do them on earth, as people.” -David Hykes