

## Singing Our Prayers

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Best things I learned from John Wimber, a founder of Vineyard churches (with Lonnie Frisbee a gay man—also interesting story): notice the movements of the Spirit...in line with an older tradition taught by the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola.

Gist: Spirit moves like the wind does—comes/goes, and there's ways to sense this movement (like you notice breeze by rustling of leaves). Wimber taught people to be sensitive to certain physical sensations: tingling, the shiver you get like when a cat rubs against the back of your legs. A folk-wisdom of the Spirit from practitioners.

Jesus often **“moved with compassion”** but Gk. Is more physical—“stirred in the gut” (root of our “spleen”) and Jesus took this as Spirit moving in him to act, to connect with a person in need.

We each may have different things that signal the Spirit moving—for me, reliable stand-bys: face-arm tingling, getting a catch in throat like it would be easy to cry, a feeling of social-warmth and connectedness with others. If I notice these things, I open my heart to God more intentionally, like you stop to feel the breeze on your face...and it improves my conscious contact with God.

For me **Spirit-sensations** happen most when I hear some-one's story (recounting significant events in their life) when Emily gets in her prophet-preacher mode, and when we're singing together.

**LadySmith Black Mambazo** at the Ark on Tuesday night (a cappella group from S. Africa). Less a performance than an open door on a culture that sings-dances communally for strength, comfort, inspiration, and pleasure. I was getting my Spirit sensations. Just noticing those sensations and accepting them as Spirit sensations gave me a sense of conscious contact with God.

It's like Jacob waking up from his dream the night he had to run for his life. He said to himself, **“God was in this place and I didn't know it!”** Having the sensation is one thing, but connecting it in your mind to a God who breathes-blows on us like the wind is another. That's what improves our conscious contact.

What I'm describing only sounds odd in a mostly anglo-Western European, or North American cultural setting that is slightly embarrassed or dubious about human beings being spiritual beings. Every other culture would be like, *Duh, of course!*

**Suggest we could all improve our conscious contact with God if we were more attentive to subtle Spirit sensations in our singing.**

Singing is not worship warm-up or filler. It's a main course.

By far most used (vs. simply revered or read) book of the Bible is book of Psalms. All we have in written text is words, and musical notations that don't mean much to us (Selah, pause, etc.) Book of psalms is an artifact of a living tradition of communal singing as a form of prayer, inspiration, comfort, consolation, lament, etc.

Prominence of Psalms in Bible and in Abrahamic traditions (Jesus quotes Psalms more than any other book) is evidence: **song** is a **primary means** of improving conscious contact with God.

The term "meta-talk" means talking about the thing you're doing. We use meta-talk to enhance our experience of the beautiful—looking at Grand Canyon you want comment on it to someone, sex therapists encourage lovers to talk about sex, before, during, after, having it. Psalms are like that about singing.

Psalms sing about singing: *Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, all the whole earth! I will sing of your love forever!* A favorite singing-about-singing line: **"he leads out the prisoners with singing"** (Ps. 68). In Acts, Paul in jail might have been singing this song when an earthquake opened the doors. Typical Paul, he refused to leave, insisting mayor come to apologize for false arrest and he didn't want to be cause of jailer's execution.

**Here last Sunday?** I had singing Spirit sensations when we sang, "All the poor and powerless and all the lost and lonely..." chorus goes "We will sing out Hallelujah, and we will cry out Hallelujah" (tune has a Leonard Cohen ring to it)

Might recall Jimbo told his story of being released from a kind of religious bondage. When his adult son came out, Jim had to fight through his religiously-mediated prejudice against LGBTQ people...his beloved "great if you're straight" church surrounded him with disapproval for his support of his son...until Jim and Madelyn, actually that's not OK and left. Painful loss, but painful loss is often the cost of a freedom struggle.

A story I could identify with: I had been under same bondage as a pastor—overriding the intuitions of my heart in deference the constraints of my tradition and its enforcement mechanisms.

Until I saw the tradition as a form of what Jesus condemned when said, ***“You disregard the command of God*** [like love your neighbor as yourself, this is the Law and the Prophets] ***in order to uphold the traditions of men. In fact you are quite adept at setting aside God’s command so that you may keep your own tradition!”***

Most freedom movements are a struggle against the traditions of men that **pervert moral conscience**, making slavery OK, child marriage OK, ownership of women OK...leaving, protesting or insisting on change involves intense struggle.

Singing *All the poor and powerless*, was evoking that struggle for me, and singing it together with you reminded me I wasn’t alone in the struggle. That we have company out in the wilderness! And you bet I was feeling some Spirit sensations.

Next song was *“We come alive in the river”*—playing on same theme because freedom in the Bible is often likened to coming to the edge of a dangerous looking river, sometimes being chased there by malevolent forces, mustering your nerve (or survival instinct) to cross that sucker...and finding God in the river with you, ensuring safe passage. Water baptism is a sign of this.

If you know what it means plunge into a river like that in a quest for freedom from bondage, well, baptism is a way to mark that.

## SINGING TO IMPROVE CONSCIOUS CONTACT PRACTICALS

### **1. Prime power of singing as a spiritual practice is with others.**

Deep history ancestors sang together to form group-bonds beyond the smaller group size of other primates (so humans could form group bonds with 50-150 instead of a mere 8-12). This gave humans a survival advantage.

When we sing with others, heart-beats synchronize and we sense a deeper connection. Connection-feeling is spiritual.

### **2. In our impoverished modern anglo-dominant culture, we’re out of practice.**

We don't sing much together (ever listen to a football team sing their fight song together?) So it takes some intention to join in, takes some getting used to, takes a little practice.

### **3. Many of us have to struggle thru culturally-induced self consciousness to participate in group singing.**

Theory; it's a little harder for men to join in, because most males go thru an awkward voice change in early adolescence—vocal range goes down an octave...and during that period, many males drop out of group singing or develop self-consciousness.

Unless you grew up in the Jackson family, most of us have culturally-induced singing-with-others resistance due to the **professionalization of singing**: so much singing we hear is professional recorded, and now it's digitally enhanced so it's literally pitch perfect. Same way that digitally enhanced photos of female models (achieving impossible proportions) make an impossible/distorted standard that oppresses women makes them critical of their bodies...same thing affects us singing in groups

### **The manipulated ideal is the enemy of the real.**

#### COMMUNAL SINGING RECOVER TIPS:

Gently ignore your musical critic—we all have one (I'd love more black gospel music, and more majestic hymns) but if I amplify my inner critic, the critic turns on me and my singing and ruins my worship experience. So gently ignore your inner critic. If I'm being too critical I console myself with an old Rolling Stones tune: **“You can't always get what you want, but if try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need.”**

When there are lyrics you don't like—just pay 'em no mind, they will quickly pass, a beautiful thing about lyrics, they move on.

**Don't be self-critical about your singing.** Beauty of group singing, especially with a band: our vocal imperfections get absorbed by the group. We sound better together.

As you are re-acclimating yourself to group singing, fine to participate by sympathetic listening. I love to step back from singing to listen to everyone singing—quite moving. Sometimes I stop bothering with the lyrics and just scat along with the song. I declare that totally legitimate.

Remind yourself: worship involves us but isn't about us or for us.

It's for God. In relation to God, we are preschoolers, doing art projects—construction paper, crayons, Elmer's glue & glitter. We're making our pictures and taking them home to show mom and dad, or mom and mom, or mom, or dad or dad and dad. Or Auntie Ethel or grandma or whoever will appreciate them.

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That's worship...so yes, it's America we can criticize our worship *ad nauseum* (and yes, at a staff level we compare notes, fuss about the sound, or lyrics in a particular song, or whether a certain prayer is helpful, blah-blah-blah, but those things are the just containers—the worship is always the worship and engaging the worship with our little inner critic taking the lead is a little like telling the preschoolers their art work is lame.

In worship, we celebrate our smallness in the vast universe...we're little fishies swimming in an ocean of love. Smallness doesn't mean insignificance, it just means smallness.

To engage worship we gotta dial down our expertise and dial up our creatureliness...

REFLECTION

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