

Spirituality:
New Reflections on Theory, Praxis and
Pedagogy

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Martin C. Fowler, Michael Weiss and
John L. Hochheimer

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Inter-Disciplinary Press, Priory House, 149B Wroslyn Road, Freeland,
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+44 (0)1993 882087

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Group Singing in the Oral Tradition as Source of Spiritual Opening: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Melanie Boyd

Abstract

Group singing for many individuals is a compelling activity accompanied often by physical, emotional, social, intellectual and/or spiritual benefits. However, most studies demonstrating these benefits are based on singing groups that employ all, or a combination of, written lyrics, musical notation, 'set' parts, and performance. Another study shows that some people do not like singing, or sing only alone, owing to self-consciousness, self-judgment and/or perceived judgment by others. Because of such findings, and based on my own experience with group singing, I founded and facilitate No Wrong Notes (NWN). No Wrong Notes is non-auditioned, non-performing group singing for people of all levels of experience. Singing is *a cappella*. Songs are secular - chosen for meaning, sound and ease of learning. All songs are shared orally, with no use of written words or music. Emphasis is on enjoyment and freeing the voice in a supportive, nonjudgmental atmosphere. In 2007, I began a workplace NWN group for women. Numerous participants have expressed perceived benefits from singing with the group. This chapter is an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the experience of one participant, Evelyn MacKenzie (name changed), from the perspective of her spiritual self.

Key Words: No Wrong Notes, spirituality, oral tradition, group singing, IPA women.

1. Introduction

Group singing for many individuals is a compelling activity accompanied often by physical, emotional, social, intellectual and/or spiritual benefits.¹ However, most studies demonstrating these benefits are based on singing groups that employ all, or a combination of, written lyrics, musical notation, 'set' parts, and performance.

Of interest as well is a study of singing enjoyment, where Chong found that almost 12 percent of respondents disliked singing or sang only alone. These responses were owing to self-consciousness, self-judgment and/or perceived judgment by others.² In more than two decades of group singing experience, I have encountered many people who also refrain from singing with others for similar reasons. In response, I founded and facilitate No Wrong Notes³ (NWN), which is both a practice and a philosophy.

No Wrong Notes is non-auditioned, non-performing group singing for people of all levels of experience. Singing is *a cappella*. Songs are secular - chosen for meaning, sound and ease of learning. NWN has two rules: no paper and no judgment. 'No paper' means all songs are shared orally - to deepen connections between singers, emphasise that there is no wrong way to proceed, and place on more equal footing those participants who read music and those who do not. 'No judgment' ensures that participants experience acceptance and celebration of their singing, and of themselves.

In 2007, I began a workplace NWN group for women. Though the intent of NWN is not therapeutic, numerous participants have expressed perceived benefits from singing with the group. This chapter is a case-study-in-progress of one such participant, Evelyn MacKenzie (name changed), who has sung with NWN since 2008. While the full study is interested in Evelyn's NWN experience from perspectives broader than her 'spiritual self,' this chapter will focus on that aspect in particular.

2. Background

Evelyn is a middle-aged professional woman in a stable twenty-year relationship. She is youngest of four children from a family where the passive mother was a severe alcoholic who had occasional periods of sobriety. The father, in Evelyn's words, was very smart, eccentric, belittling, a philanderer, and often not at home. So Evelyn grew up in what she describes as a 'house of neglect,' where the children essentially were left to fend for themselves. With some happy moments excepted, Evelyn's childhood was very difficult and profoundly affected by the neglect. In addition, Evelyn was physically and sexually abused by her brother and, later, sexually abused by her brother-in-law - all before the age of 15.

At age 20, Evelyn moved across the country and changed her name. Though she stayed minimally in touch with her family, Evelyn considers this period a 'split' in her life that had negative repercussions on her wellbeing, including its spiritual aspect. After moving, Evelyn worked on and off for 22 years with a trusted therapist, making some progress but not being fully able to 'heal the split.'

3. Method

In 2010, Evelyn spoke to me briefly about her NWN experience. She indicated that it had changed her life and, unprompted, offered to share her story for a case study.

I obtained ethics approval to conduct a qualitative study comprising unstructured interviews where Evelyn could tell her story in a manner most comfortable for her, and semi-structured interviews focusing on specific 'senses of self' arising from her larger narrative. The schedule for the latter interviews followed the Focused Conversation Method.⁴ The interviews were audio recorded with Evelyn's permission, and then transcribed verbatim. This chapter is based on

the first three-hour narrative interview, and one two-hour interview focusing on Evelyn's sense of spiritual self. The transcripts were read extensively and analysed according to the principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is 'especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance for people.'⁵ From the transcripts, emerging themes related to Evelyn's spiritual self were noted and eventually grouped into three superordinate categories: *self-imprisonment for safety*; *No Wrong Notes as catalyst and key to opening*; and *freedom to experience and explore spiritual self*.

Because it is a suggested practice in qualitative research, and especially because my role as founder and facilitator of NWN places me close to the subject and the phenomenon under study, I kept a self-reflective journal throughout the research and writing process.

4. Analysis

A. Self-imprisonment for Safety

To get a sense of Evelyn's experience of her spiritual self prior to participating in NWN, I asked her to describe it as a painting or piece of art.

Evelyn: I am a [pause] made up of a body ... that has these chakras and my image is ... the chakras are shut down instead of free flowing [] and there's squares where the chakras are, right, all the way down. Is there six or seven? Uhm ... It's like maybe there's a latch [laugh] there's a latch and they they can't they're not functioning as they should uhm ... because of ... my history and my inability or unwillingness to ... or circumstance uhm to let them be free flowing. And I'm not saying I'm dead but I'm saying they lack they have lacked richness. [] instead of free flowing energy coming in and moving in and out and breathing it's just a lockdown. Which is an excellent word I think actually.

Interviewer: Say more about it.

Evelyn: Safety. Uhm ... for safety. Uhm it wasn't safe as a child uhm [pause] and it was a habit... and I didn't know how to shake it ... uhm ... and just wounds maybe wounds in there too ... [].

Interviewer: What do they look like?

Evelyn: [long pause] Bruises ... Bruises underneath the latches [] the colour of ripe bananas.

Interviewer: So is there anything else in this picture of the spiritual []?

Evelyn: I think there is a river underneath that's waiting ... to connect, to create the flow, uhm ... because I've always been, I believe that my circumstances and my isolation has not been a

complete negative experience because I've learned to be resourceful and ... and to engage an inner life where the deeper thinking can occur.⁶

Elsewhere in the interview, Evelyn says she used to be a 'chameleon,' drawing upon the beliefs of others. Here, in describing her former spiritual self, she appears to revert to this practice by turning to the chakra system, which she does not fully understand. Evelyn's description suggests an imprisoned self - unable to experience or express spirituality - through terms like 'shut down,' 'latch' and 'lockdown.' Still, her reference to not being dead, and to a river waiting underneath, suggests hopefulness and inherent - if not easily tapped - strength.

While prisons are meant to keep safe from harm those outside them, Evelyn seems to have imprisoned her harmed self to stay safe. This affected her ability to connect with others:

[The] issues have to do with me running away from relationships ... and connection, because normally what I do my sch... my routine has been ... get [pause] want connection so much but then not know how to handle it and walk away.

Thus Evelyn's habit was one of advance and retreat; it was not one of never stepping forward in the first place.

B. No Wrong Notes as Catalyst and Key to Opening

Evelyn joined NWN a year after its inception. She describes her first day:

[] this is a very different group I thought to myself [laugh] and I remember that day [long pause] 'cause I remember thinking this is *sooo* fun. Not fun ... it was ... it was fun! [laugh] I've been here for 55 minutes and we had fun.

Evelyn entered a group that had a tone and culture to which she was immediately attracted. Specific elements of NWN apparently began to have an effect on her.

[] somehow my guard came down that I have had for a very long time ... and it makes sense to me that it would play a part - the fact that there was no paper to distract ... I can't hide behind a binder of lyrics, uhm that I'm just there fully present in a circle of women.

In her reference to letting down her guard, Evelyn seems to recognise herself, metaphorically, as her own long-time jailor. The absence of lyrics and musical

notation helped remove a barrier, allowing (or forcing) her to be more exposed and 'present' than had been her norm. The resulting bond with the group was significant.

[Singing] alone ... I don't experience what I experience in the circle It's the singing in the circle. It's the singing ... it's the connecting with others that's either stronger or it's it's about ... humans connecting that is the secret ... because I tried to create it ... taking singing lessons, and it doesn't do it ... you know, so ... somehow it's about connection. [long pause] Community.

The NWN 'rules' played a role in Evelyn's comfort level, as did the element of non-performance.

No judgment and no paper ... probably played a part. [] It was relaxing to have those rules or not have other rules ... and we focused on the fun, I think, rather than perfection or performance. [] 'Cause I'm sure my inner tape if we were performing [laugh] would be, okay I have to be careful of ... well whatever my internal rules are regarding ... perfection ... and uhm ... not being ... seen or heard or any of those things. Uhm ... I think it's all of those things [that] played a profound part in ... me ... letting my shield down, and some big healing occurred in my life [].

Evelyn seemed to recognise that, paradoxically, the NWN rules actually create freedom - from criticism and the possibility of making a mistake. It seems her inner guard was disarmed, perhaps because it had nothing to do.

Beyond her experience of NWN-specific elements, Evelyn was affected by the singing and music itself, particularly its vibration - a word she used repeatedly throughout the interviews. Here are four examples: 'I think it's [pause] a lot to do with vibration in the music.' 'It was ... vibration. It was colourful vibration.' 'I truly believe it has something to do with singing ... the vibration of song.' 'I think the vibration was shaking up my whole existence.'

But beneath all these experiences in NWN, something else was going on.

Evelyn: [] I wanted to leave. I tried to quit a number of times.

Interviewer: Oh, tell me more about that.

Evelyn: Oh I ahh ... I wouldn't show up sometimes for a few weeks and ahh ... and I and I it was the talk in my head ... just steer clear. Yet my body would show up, like I couldn't stop it. And I ... and I ... ahhh was so connected to that group and to

you. [The connection] was there and I couldn't and wanted to not have it there [] but it was there and I and I literally I would make the decision not to go and my body would go [laugh] every Wednesday.

Evelyn offers an interpretation of what was happening during this period:

So it was the ... my love of the group ... fighting with my ... my need to escape. And that's been my routine for as long as I can remember. [teary]

Striking here is the word 'escape' - a paradoxical reference to imprisonment, where Evelyn needed to release herself from 'love' and return to the safety (and confines) of the familiar. This inner battle - apparently catalysed by Evelyn's experience in NWN - appears to be pivotal to the change that followed. Something deeper than, or beyond, her cognition and emotions propelled her to maintain the growing connection she felt with the group. She says further:

[] I'm sure if I had walked away ... been alone and isolated and done my same old thing ... that ... I would have been able to control ... what was going on within my being.

Evelyn did not walk away; rather than retreating, she continued to be an active member of the group. In fact, she considers 'the time and the repeating element' of NWN key to her finally feeling safe there.

C. Freedom to Experience and Explore Spiritual Self

For a small portion of both interviews, Evelyn brought some pre-written material, saying, 'When I'm trying to figure something out I usually write it.' Here Evelyn reads about her current spiritual self:

[] So when I partake in singing, and listening to others at NWN, joy and harmony erupt. It is beyond the voice expression, it is connection to wholeness and what I mean is a feeling of knowing all is right with the world. It's a nonverbal connection and it is vibration. It connects mind, body, spirit and emotion in the moment. It facilitates my being one hundred percent present, and I picture tendrils of my being reaching out and connecting to others that I am singing with and even beyond, for I believe it has a ripple effect. [...My] cognitive mind is not in use. The intuitive or spiritual is fully engaged in the moment. []

The written word generally is more coherent than verbal spontaneity; still, the change in Evelyn's language and images is significant. Rather than feeling locked down and wounded, she speaks of openness and connection - not only to the group, but also beyond it. Tendrils, in a literal sense, often grow rapidly and randomly on healthy plants, so the metaphor generates a sense of fecundity and letting go of the need to control - perhaps even a sense of abandon. Evelyn seems able to reach out and touch others, and be touched, in a spiritual sense. Now, instead of being in lockdown,

[it] is freedom to fully enjoy the voices, the participation, my own voice melding with others. I think NWN brings us closer to our basic nature, and those moments of wholeness in singing are healing.

In a non-written response Evelyn offers perhaps the most illuminating description of her newfound spiritual experience.

Interviewer: Do you have more to say about [how NWN connects with your spirituality]?

Evelyn: Ya! [laughs] About wholeness ... What does wholeness mean? [] I talked about uhm The notes the no judgment etcetera and I think that creates an atmosphere of safety to a certain extent and it's not even safety it's freedom ... freedom ... to be childlike uhm ... to explore in a childlike way and [] an image of spirituality might be the innocence and playfulness of a child, you know ... of a child just in wonder, in wonderment ... and ... I have felt that at NWN when we ... those moments where we just laugh you know and there's no ... it's just such a ... hmmm ... special moments.

In this spontaneously offered image of spirituality, Evelyn appears to hear herself saying 'safety' - a term of self-protection, which she rejects and replaces with 'freedom' - an antonym of imprisonment. And while Evelyn's picture of her spiritual self before NWN 'lacked richness,' it has changed.

So when I joined NWN my past and my ... who I wanted to be or who I was becoming ... had to fight it out ... and the person that emerged is very rich. [] Can you know the light without knowing the dark? I uhm [pause] I won't say I'm grateful for it because I'm not. But I acknowledge it. And I ... when I look in the mirror ... and I can see now I can look now - before I couldn't - [sigh] I see a rich kind of tapestry you know.

5. Discussion

This study is a preliminary step in understanding the potential value of group singing based on the No Wrong Notes model, particularly from the perspective of the spiritual self. It demonstrates that for one individual, elements specific to the model - and possibly in combination - seemed to act as a catalyst for her spiritual opening and, subsequently, for a richer spiritual experience and exploration. These elements include the membership of women of all levels of singing experience gathered to sing for pleasure, combined with the absence of judgment, written lyrics, musical notation, and performance.

In their study of amateur group singing and performance for marginalised and middle-class singers, Bailey and Davidson⁷ demonstrated that owing to the singing aspect alone, participants from both groups experienced positive effects related to group process, cognitive stimulation and clinical-type benefits. Though their singing groups differ in some aspects from NWN, and effect on spirituality *per se* was not among their results, Bailey and Davidson's study provides a useful context for the current one. Also using IPA, they demonstrated 'the importance of participatory singing experiences for amateurs at many levels of musical training and ability.'⁸ Further research into the NWN model could draw upon Bailey and Davidson's broader sample study, which employs IPA across interviews with multiple subjects. The current study complements their findings by analysing the effect on spiritual experience of one individual in a non-performing singing group, where songs are shared orally.

This study does not contend that Evelyn's spiritual 'shift' owed entirely to her participation in NWN. Though in depth comment on them is beyond the scope of this chapter, other factors of much longer endurance in Evelyn's life likely played a role in her ability to seize and use the key presented by NWN. These factors include, for example, her supportive partner, her therapist, and her inherent resourcefulness - that deep flowing river waiting to connect.

Spirituality is difficult, if not impossible, to define.⁹ As Palmer asserts, 'Language complicates. The range of ideas and studies about spirituality does little to remove the ambiguities.'¹⁰ But in an attempt to define it himself, Palmer says, in part, that spirituality 'is an open invitation to extraordinary experience.'¹¹ Though the underlying intent of No Wrong Notes is not to catalyse spiritual openings, it does include an open invitation to enjoy singing with others freely and with pleasure. That an extraordinary experience might follow from this, as it did for Evelyn, may indicate a potential application for this group-singing model in other situations.

Notes

¹ Anat Anshel and David A. Kipper, 'The Influence of Group Singing on Trust and Cooperation', *Journal of Music Therapy* 25, No. 3 (1988): 145-155.; Betty A. Bailey and Jane W. Davidson, 'Amateur Group Singing as a Therapeutic Instrument', *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* 12, No. 1 (2003): 18-32.; Betty A. Bailey and Jane W. Davidson, 'Effects of Group Singing and Performance for Marginalized and Middle-Class Singers', *Psychology of Music* 33, No. 3 (2005): 269-303.; Maureen Jaymin Baird, 'Perceived Benefits of Choral Singing: Social, Intellectual, and Emotional Aspects of Group Singing' (MA thesis, McGill University, 2007).; Stephen M. Clift and Grenville Hancox, 'The Perceived Benefits of Singing: Findings from Preliminary Surveys of a University College Choral Society', *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 121, No. 4 (2001): 248-256.; and Gunter Kreutz, et al., 'Effects of Choir Singing or Listening on Secretory Immunoglobulin A, Cortisol, and Emotional State', *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 27, No. 6 (2004): 623-35.

² Hyun Ju Chong, 'Do We All Enjoy Singing? A Content Analysis of Non-Vocalists' Attitudes toward Singing', *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 37, No. 2 (2010): 120-24.

³ Cornellya Joss, my former singing partner from Saskatoon, Canada, coined the phrase: 'There are no wrong notes, just new notes.'

⁴ See: Brian R. Stanfield, *The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2000). This adaptable method orders questions according to the sequence: objective, reflective, interpretive, decisional. See Appendix 1 for the 'spiritual self' semi-structured interview schedule used in this research.

⁵ Jonathon A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: SAGE, 2009), 1.

⁶ See Appendix 2 for codes used in transcripts.

⁷ Bailey and Davidson, *Effects of Group Singing*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁹ Anthony J. Palmer, 'Spirituality in Music Education: Transcending Culture, Exploration III', *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 18, No.2 (2010): 152-170.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

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Melanie Boyd is an Associate Librarian at the University of Calgary. In addition to her No Wrong Notes facilitation and research, Melanie writes poetry, some of which has been published in Canadian literary journals.

Appendix 1

Interview Schedule (Spiritual Self)

[NOTE: In this semi-structured interview, questions based on the Focused Conversation Method were used as a guide. Not all prepared questions were needed, used or expressed exactly in the way written. Sometimes a question was asked in more than one way. Follow-up and/or clarifying questions were used as required. The participant was not cued about shifts from one stage to the next. In some cases, the participant's responses shifted to the conversation to next stage naturally.]

A. Objective (surface observations stage)

When I say 'spiritual,' what words, or phrases, or images, come to mind?

How would you define creativity?

What aspects of NWN do you connect with that definition?

If you were to paint a picture that depicted your spiritual self before joining NWN, what would it look like?

What would a picture of your spiritual self look like now?

B. Reflective (feelings stage)

What surprises you about these two pictures?

What makes you say 'Right on!?' (or Yes! or Wahoo!)

Does anything about this make you furrow your brow? (or What perplexes you?)

Is there anything in this that excites you?

What worries you? makes you curious? sad? hopeful?

C. Interpretative (making sense stage)

What do you think is going on here?

What role did/does NWN play in all this?

Why do you think this is happening? (or What's the underlying reason?)

What does mean for you? (or What's its significance? How does this affect you?)

If this were in a book about your spiritual self and NWN, what title would you give it?

D. Decisional (future resolves stage)

Reflecting on all you've shared, what things do you wish for your spiritual self?

What are two (three) things you will do in the next month (or year) that will lead to you fulfilling your wish?

How will you draw upon your NWN experience to support this?

Appendix 2

Transcript Codes

The following codes were used for accuracy in verbatim transcription:

1. Three periods ... indicate a brief hesitation.
2. 'Pause' in square brackets [pause] indicates a pause of up to three seconds.
3. 'Long pause' in square brackets [long pause] indicates a pause of more than three seconds.
4. Open square brackets [] indicate an omission of nonessential material from the transcript.
5. Notes in square brackets such as [laugh], [teary], etc. indicate nonverbal cues.