

# Steal Away Home: The Spirituals as Voice of Hope

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## Abstract

In melodies of simple yet profound beauty, in lyrics of vivid images, and in rhythms drawn from their homeland, the songs that came to be known as spirituals give voice to the suffering and hope of an enslaved people. This music expresses a suffering of body, mind, and spirit, a protest against injustice, a hope for freedom, and a conviction of worth despite all afflictions. At the same time, it embodies the beauty of the human soul beneath and beyond all cruelty. Often sung in secret gatherings, the spirituals enabled those enslaved to express an interior soul space that the harshness of slave owners and slave drivers could not reach. These songs ultimately became a source of inspiration and courage as that inner spirit of freedom became outwardly realized in the movement known as the Underground Railroad.

This paper will explore themes of word, melody, and rhythm within the spirituals as they bear witness then and now to the capacity of music to express and sustain the depth, beauty, and power of the human spirit. If we listen carefully, we may hear in the spirituals a voice of universal significance; a voice that reaches beyond all culture, race, gender – beyond all differences – to the core of our shared humanity.

## Steal Away Home: The Spirituals as Voice of Hope

Steal Away. Steal Away. Steal Away to Jesus.  
Steal Away. Steal Away home.  
I ain't got long to stay here.

My Lord calls me.  
He calls me by the thunder.  
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul.  
I ain't got long to stay here.

Green trees are bending.  
Poor sinners stand a-tremblin.  
The trumpet sounds within-a my soul.  
I ain't got long to stay here.

Steal Away. Steal Away. Steal Away to Jesus.  
Steal Away. Steal Away home.  
I ain't got long to stay here. (*Steal Away*)

In melodies of simple yet profound beauty, in lyrics of vivid images, and in rhythms drawn from their homeland, the songs that came to be known as spirituals give voice to the suffering and hope of an enslaved people. The spirituals are a unique window to the depth of the human spirit. They express a suffering of body, mind, and spirit, a protest against injustice, a longing for freedom, and a conviction of worth despite all affliction. At the same time, they embody the beauty of the human soul beneath and beyond all cruelty, to which, ironically, such sorrow can sometimes be a path. In their words and melodies, the spirituals convey the beauty of the human soul that is deeper than all hurt or sorrow and from which flows a hope that can never be extinguished. In this paper we wish to illustrate something of that hope out of suffering at the heart of the spirituals, and a model of hope for today's world. *Steal Away* vividly illustrates both the suffering and the hope *out of* and *beyond* that suffering.

Often sung in secret gatherings, the spirituals enabled those enslaved to discover, express, and experience an interior soul space, "a home," that the harshness of slave owners and slave drivers could not reach. People were stolen away from their homeland in West Africa, torn away from family, tribe, culture, religion, and language, and forced to endure terrible physical conditions in slave ships that carried them across the ocean. Upon arriving as captives in an alien land, they were sold as mere property to slave owners who neither saw nor respected them as persons. Back-breaking and soul-destroying labour was accompanied by physical and psychological torture. New names, language, religion, social structure, and values were ruthlessly imposed.

Despite these conditions, those enslaved managed to "steal away" clandestinely to densely wooded areas where, hidden from their oppressors, they could sing, dance, pray, and keep alive the distinctly African form of worship known as the ring shout. Here too, they could steal away in imagination from the harsh reality of everyday life into the shared experience of music and the soul space it provided. Thurman (1975) says:

The other-worldly hope is always available when groups of people find themselves completely frustrated in the present. When all hope for release in this world seems unrealistic and groundless, the heart turns to a way of escape beyond the present order (p. 25).

Songs like, *Gonna Shout All over God's Heaven*, with references to having robes, crowns, and shoes, express the hope for what was lacking in the here and now. The ability to shout and sing was a stark reversal to being silenced and having no voice. Singing, which came *from* and spoke *to* the heart, was a communal expression of deep feeling and simple beauty and provided an experience of what was longed for.

Although a Euro-American version of Christianity was imposed upon them, the enslaved developed an interpretation of Christianity that was rooted in an African context. While the slave owners preached a Christianity of submission, we believe those enslaved discovered a more authentic Christianity of freedom. They identified with the oppressed Israelites whose sufferings were divinely acknowledged, and who were called, not to remain and submit, but to escape to freedom. The song, *Go Down Moses*, with its insistent refrain, "Let my people go," sent a message so obvious to white authorities that it was banned in many circles. The songs that

grew out of the ring shout tradition with hand clapping, foot stomping, shouting, and other improvisations, were given fullness of expression in these moments of “stealing away.”

Following the British Emancipation Act of 1830, and with the support of the abolitionist movement, the hope of stealing away found expression in the real flight north to Canada by means of the Underground Railroad. Steal Away Home and other spirituals became code songs to let those who were plotting to run away know when it was possible to take flight, to “steal away.”

In addition to stealing away *from*, those enslaved sought also to steal away *to*, to “steal away to Jesus” and to “steal away home.” Jesus was seen as someone who understood and shared their condition of suffering; who bore his own unjust persecution with a silence of inner strength. *I Want Jesus to Walk with Me* expresses an image of Jesus as fellow traveller who walks alongside them in times of heartbreaking troubles, trials, and sorrows. Another spiritual observes that, although Jesus was whipped, crowned with thorns, nailed to a cross, and pierced in the side, “he never said a mumblin’ word.” Nolan (2001) suggests that silence may be transformed into a free choice that is an affirmation of one’s dignity in the face of suffering, a protest against injustice, and a challenge to the conscience of those who oppress. (pp. 160-162) The question, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” may suggest that those enslaved were present to and could identify with someone who shared these sorrows.

In contrast, *Ride on, King Jesus*, presents an image of Jesus as ruler who rights wrongs and protects his people. Such an image empowered the enslaved and enabled them to say: “No man can a-hinder me.” In Jesus, those enslaved found someone who not only shared their sufferings, but by transcending them, gave them a sense of hope that no one could hinder or take away. Thurman (1975) writes “Daring to believe that God cared for them despite the cruel vicissitudes of life meant the giving of wings to life that nothing could destroy (p.15).”

In stealing away to Jesus, those enslaved were able to “steal away home.” Home was the concrete symbol of all they hoped for. In its most immediate sense, home was the transcending of pain and sorrow, initially seen as possible only beyond death. The spiritual, *Going Home*, used by Dvorak in the *New World Symphony*, conveys, in its haunting melody, the immense longing born of suffering. The lyrics speak of an end to work, care, and fear, tell of a reunion with parents and friends, and stress that, despite the closed doors of their present situation, home is nearby, “through an open door.”

In contrast, *Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child*, speaks of being a *long* way from home, far distant from those who truly know and love the afflicted person. This spiritual conveys a feeling of overwhelming emptiness, a sense of isolation and not belonging, a feeling of being a forlorn, desolate child. Another verse speaks of sometimes feeling “almost gone,” that is, near death, but adds that, for the “true believer” it is the transition to “a heavenly land.” Newman (1998) notes that such a song turns the articulation of this wrenching loneliness into “a sign of endurance, dignity, and hope (p. 213).”

Temporal images of “long time” and “soon” are used similarly. *I’ve Been in the Storm So Long* ponders the seemingly interminable hard race the enslaved person was running, while *Soon I Will Be Done with the Troubles of the World* conveys the hope that soon the weeping and wailing will be done, and one will “go home to live with God.” *Steal Away* also underlines the conviction that “I ain’t got long to stay here.”

In the spiritual *A City Called Heaven*, the poor pilgrim of sorrow informs us, "I'm starting to make heaven my home." These words suggest an interior place, to which one may escape even in the midst of sorrows. Family and friends, freedom of movement and association, the opportunity to sing and shout, to have a voice, to have sufficient food, clothing, and land on which to work for oneself – these are the imagined alternatives to what was denied. As possibilities of escape during one's life, and not simply through death began to emerge, and the inward hope of home pushed toward a more tangibly concrete expression, the many layers of meaning in these songs become evident. These songs ultimately were a source of inspiration and courage as that inner spirit of freedom became outwardly realized in the movement known as the Underground Railroad.

The "sweet chariot" that would carry one home and the "band of angels" that would come to help, refer not only to a heavenly home and an angelic choir, but now to a northern land and the assistance of those who provided safe houses along this perilous journey north. The "Gospel train" now travels not only to heaven but provides an escape from slavery. This train is available to rich and poor, has no second class, and has always "room for plenty more."

To reach this new "home," one must "wade in the water;" both the water of baptism and the water entered on the journey north to prevent slave owners' dogs detecting fugitives' scent. In each case, the waters, no matter how troubled, are ultimately troubled by God, that is, affected by a divine presence leading them ultimately to their heavenly home but, more immediately, to an earthly home where freedom rather than slavery prevails. Similarly, *Deep River* tells us that "my home is over Jordan" and "I want to cross over into campground." Though the arduous crossing of the river is a transition from a present to a future life on a distant heavenly shore, it also represents the northern shore called Canada. The chariot that requires a difficult passage over Jordan carries one, not only to a heavenly home, but also to a new earthly home.

Whether the crossing was to Canada or to heaven, a struggle was involved in this transition. To reach a new physical place, a place of freedom – a heaven on earth – there were obstacles to confront: fear of detection and capture and the cold water that "chills the body but not the soul." The journey to heaven also implies the more inner struggle with all that may wound the soul and would require the healing "balm in Gilead."

*Steal Away* also reflects this inner struggle on both the earthly and heavenly journey. The words, "My Lord calls me...calls me by the thunder," amplified by a later reference to green trees bending that cause sinners to tremble, suggest the experience of fearsome storms, very common in the slave states, and indicate a force stronger than human design which challenges persons to examine their lives. The similarly loud trumpet "sounds within-a my soul." It is especially in this "inner home" that the divine voice is heard. This is a realm deeper than all oppression, enslavement, and sorrow. It is the place of heaven on earth, into which the very music and words of the spirituals lead us. They are a call to freedom, freedom of soul and freedom of person.

The spirituals may not have survived had it not been for the Jubilee Singers of Fisk, University in Nashville, Tennessee, formed by a blacksmith's son named George L. White. Though facing discrimination, they gave public concerts in the United States and Europe from 1871 to 1875, and brought the spirituals' message of hope in the face of suffering and death. Dubois (1903) wrote,

The world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world's heart that it can never wholly forget them again...And so by fateful chance...the rhythmic cry of the slave stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas (pp. 241-242).

Patricia Richardson-Williams, a Detroit, Michigan vocalist and teacher, says that the hope of freedom that echoes through all of these songs comes to its fullness when they are sung in that same spirit of freedom. She feels that an *anointing* takes place when this music is sung and heard in community, an energy and spirit that carries this music to new heights. It may be that significant differences from other types of songs are to be found more in their actual singing than in their notation. Various embellishments make this music not only unique, but difficult to transcribe in usual musical terms. The printed page cannot contain all that the music has to offer. Freedom of spirit, rhythm, repetition, and pulse, are essential for this music truly to live, and to make its living presence felt within us. Thus, one quickly realizes that, as in the ring shout, no two singings will be alike. Hurston (2007) says that the spirituals "ornament both the song and the mechanics," and adds that "any new and original elaboration is welcomed (p. 474)."

The words, breath, wind, and spirit all come from the same Latin root, *spiritus*. For the spirit of these songs to be really sung, heard, and felt, they must be carried freely on a singer's breath and in a player's fingers. This is to say, these songs must be given time and space to breathe. Each phrase must be gathered up at its conclusion in a moment of what seems like suspended space, a "non-metronomed" unit of sweet silence where all that has been sung, played, and felt can be gently savoured by performer and listener alike – a gentle reminder that, although these were the songs of a silenced people, their voices may well have been freer than those who enslaved them.

The subtle irony is, therefore, that those enslaved found liberty and freedom in their music. They created a free expression and an environment for that expression beyond the bonds of slavery that no harshness or hatred could touch. We may honour the hopes and longings voiced in this music by facilitating the public expression originally it was denied. In doing so, we may also find that these songs reach behind defences, fears, and longings to the inner realm of feelings that are shared by *all* of us. We too may be reminded of *our* inner home. It is possible for all of us, if only for a moment, to be transported and even transformed by such singing – to "steal away home."

We may then ask: Why should we share these songs? What message lies in them that we may not be hearing in our daily experience? What resources for living do they provide? What value do they have for today's society? In response, we may say that their simple poetry and beautiful melodies are an enduring human legacy. The spirituals witness to the depth of the human spirit and its resources. They illustrate both the intense suffering which can be a path to that depth, and the beauty to which it can give birth. Singing of these beautiful songs becomes, for both singer *and* listener, a sharing of sacred time and space.

In *The Anatomy of Melody*, Parker (2007) stresses the importance of melody and of what she calls the “unadorned human voice.” She also says that “through the media’s constant barrage, we are subjected to endless chatter, listening to tunes written in an unceasing quest for momentary fame and ingesting surface information that rarely delves below the surface (p. xiii).” In addition, we find much of the so-called music of our time to be harsh, loud, and of low frequency. We suggest that one creative and healing response to this situation may be exposure to beauty, especially beauty of sound.

By reaching the core of the spiritual – its melody that contains the elements of pitch, rhythm, pulse, and text – we may be able to reach the centre or core of *our* personhood as well. If we are able to hear, feel, and be moved by the melodious voice of an engaged and truly free singer who conveys the depth of these melodies, we may discover or perhaps uncover our own inner self. If there is a genuine presence of singer, song, and listener, there may be at once, an experience of our own authentic voice, the depths of our unique personhood, our common humanity, and the bonds of community. We engage at once in an individual and communal act. It is “sacramental” in the sense of what we might term “tangible soul.” The music tangibly embodies this human depth and, at the same time, provides a concrete means of leading us into that depth. This very tangibility is a shared, and thus, communal experience. Thus, the primary gift of the spirituals may be to provide a much needed experience today of music that, through its simple poetry and beautiful melodies, may be heard and sung for its own sake and not as a means to a commercial end, and may lead us into the core of the truly free self.

With the spirituals, therefore, comes a call to be *free*, not only in the physical sense of “stealing away home” to freedom in a new land or another worldly dimension, but also the freedom to “steal away” to one’s own inner home through the singing of these texts and melodies. We too may find that the real answer to cruelty, oppression, and destructiveness is beauty. With a beauty of both melody and word, the spirituals provide an alternative experience to the cruelty of any enslavement, and a hope in some way to transcend it. They provide a place of expression to which the only “open door” is beauty and love. This door is closed to those who attack, and to those who strive only to own or possess.

Nearly a hundred years ago, James Weldon Johnson (1934), composer of the lyrics to the “Freedom Hymn,” wrote:

I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I shall defend and maintain its integrity against all the power of hell (p. 103).”

In these words, there is a recognition that we are not defined by, but are more than our pain, and that we are able to transcend what is inflicted from outside. This inner place of which Johnson speaks refers to the sacredness, worth, and dignity of the person: a place of beauty to be respected and cherished by self and others.

For the enslaved of the late 1800s, the words and music of the spirituals gave hope that there would be freedom from oppression, sorrow, and trouble; that, as a people, they would be “free

at last." The implication for us today also lies in the hope of freedom – freedom from revenge-seeking and violent images that clutter our psyches, freedom not only to find one's voice but also to express one's deepest self, freedom to be heard and to commit oneself to others. With their triumph of hope and beauty over despair and hatred, the spirituals may be one vehicle for us also to be "free at last." The spirituals, as voice of hope, allow us ALL, at least for a time, to "steal away home."

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