

# Still Singing for our Lives: Singing in the Everyday Lives of Women through this Century

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*We are young and old together  
And we are singing, singing for our lives*  
Holly Near

Thirty years ago when I visited summer camps in Ontario, I heard beautiful singing in unison, parts or canon; songs such as "Tell me Why the Stars do Shine," "Michael Row the Boat Ashore," and "My Paddle's Keen and Bright." I also heard some healthy and quite raucous renditions of "Fish and Chips and Vinegar" and "They Built the Ship Titanic." In the past few summers, when I've heard singing at those same summer camps, I've heard mostly raucous shout singing, out of tune singing, and what I call the "plug your ears and shout" version of singing rounds in which "the loudest group wins." Singing beautifully seems to have disappeared from the camps I know in Ontario.

I teach the music component of the teacher education programme for pre-service elementary school teachers. When the pre-service teachers return from three week practice teaching rounds in primary classrooms, a third of them report that there was no singing in their classroom. The percentage rises to over half when the teacher candidates have been in junior grade classrooms.

Is singing a dying art in Ontario? Much has been speculated about the roles of radio, television, urbanization, and the rise of expert performers in the demise of singing in people's lives. I decided to examine this phenomenon through the stories of women. Singing is my life line. It seemed fitting, at the close of this century, to investigate singing in other women's lifelines and lifetimes through the last hundred years.

Although there are many ethnographic studies of women's singing in cultures outside North America, little research literature on this subject within North America exists. A comparison of public singing by American men and women (Gates, 1989) documents the changes in public singing, but private singing was outside the scope of the study. Effects of maternal singing on the child in utero have been examined by Proia (1993) and Woodward (1992). The work most clearly connected to this study was reported by Joyce (1993), who interviewed seven women who facilitated singing with women in order to examine how singing empowers individuals and groups who are engaged in personal or political struggle and transition. Evidence of singing as a healing tool, a peak integrating experience, and as a tool for integrated learning and the development of a critical consciousness emerged.

In her new book *Music, Gender, Education*, Lucy Green speaks of the role of

mothers in music education through the oral transmission of not only lullabies and children's songs but folk music and chants. She uses a personal example to illustrate the universal practice of the mother singing to her baby and then writes, "It is not because of mere whim that I have reverted to personal anecdote in order to illustrate this practice: its history of course, is unwritten" (Green, 1997, p.48). The experience of women's private and non-performance group singing has not been studied or written about because it has not been deemed important or worthy of study. Writing some of that history became the secondary goal of this study.

In order to examine the changes in the role of singing over time, rather than the differing roles of singing in the lives of women it was important to maintain some homogeneity of culture and experience. For that reason, I selected, for participants, girls and women who have lived in the same small city and attended the same church for most of their lives. I planned to talk with 20 girls and women, two representing each decade, ranging from preschoolers to women in their nineties. In the end, I was able to find seventeen women who met the homogeneity of culture and experience criteria. All the girls and women are therefore white, protestant, and middle class. Because I was interested in singing in women's everyday lives, I did not seek out women who would identify themselves as performing singers but neither did I reject the two who do happen to call themselves singers. I interviewed each girl and woman in her own home. Interviews included questions about earliest musical memories, songs of childhood and adolescence, the songs of both wars, the lullabies; and how they feel about singing and their own singing voices. I also asked about the place of singing and songs in their spiritual life, their emotional life, their social life and their family life.

What a privilege it has been to hear all of those stories. The first question I asked each participant was "What is your earliest memory of someone singing to you?" I suggest that you close your eyes for a moment now, and think back to your earliest memory of someone singing to you. Now, in some way, you have become a participant in this research as well. For each of you will read this paper in the context of your own life experience, as I have written it in the context of mine. My research stance in this study is that research is about constructing possible meanings, rather than about proving an hypothesis or revealing a single truth. I acknowledge that research is an interpretive act at every stage, through the design, the data gathering and the analysis to the reporting. Whereas subjectivity is regarded as a flaw in traditional positivist research, in qualitative research it is regarded as the lens through which we look at the studied phenomenon. It is important to acknowledge the properties of the lens to ourselves and to our readers. Kirby and McKenna (1989) call this examination of our lens "doing conceptual baggage", Peshkin (1994) calls it "tracking subjectivity."

The questions I asked the participants, the threads I pursued in our conversations, the findings I report and the ways I analyzed and reflected upon the data are all coloured by my experience and values. I chose to become a participant in this study, and selected my daughter as one of the children under ten. The inclusion of my own perspectives and memories transformed the interviewing situation into a conversation between two women rather than between researcher and subject. I hope it will also make explicit my interpretive lens to the reader. In order to remove one layer of my interpretation, I have presented many direct quotations from the transcripts rather than paraphrasing or discussing what

the participants said. The women's words are rich and authentic and need to be heard.

### Earliest memories

Many of the participants' earliest musical memories were of their fathers singing to them. Fewer remembered their mothers singing to them, and some had no memories of someone singing to them when they were very young. Emily, in her nineties, whose mother died when she was two, remembers her father singing to her. "My father used to take me around in his arms, you know, walking up and down, I suppose I was fretful, I don't know, and he'd sing (hums the tune of Go Tell Aunt Rhody)." Although that singing occurred over ninety years ago, she still remembered clearly the sound of his voice, "nice, deep" were her words.

Mary, in her late seventies, had missionary parents and spent her early childhood in China. When I asked her what her earliest memory was of someone singing to her, she replied,

Oh that's easy, my father, and he would sing the Harry Lauder songs, that would be back about 1923, I would be four, I guess, I was born in 1918. And he would sing, "She's my sweetheart, I'm her girl, we'll soon be married." He was this wild missionary and he had lots of energy and just surrounded us with warmth. . . It was so very central to my life, because he sang so much to me. . . It was all part of sort of an ongoing loving situation with him. He would explain how much he loved me, he'd been all around the world, and he'd name all the ports he'd stopped at, when he came out to China by boat. He'd name each port and "more than Singapore" and he'd say "I love you more than that", and he'd name all the wonderful ports he'd travelled to and he loved me more than each one.

Shauna, now in her late twenties, tells the story of one vivid memory of her father singing.

I was under five because I was living in my first house, and my brothers and I had been playing out in the yard with toy trumpets. . . I think we were playing armies and we were beating up on each other. I had this trumpet in my mouth and I was running doing the bugle call and I fell and it cut my mouth. I went into the house, and my mom and dad had company or something, and so my mom stayed with them, and my dad took me to the kitchen and washed my mouth. After it was all done, I was still kind of crying, and he sang "You Are My Sunshine" to me. I remember that so well. My dad doesn't remember it. He insists that I'm making this up, but I have a very clear recollection of that.

Teenage Emily shared warm memories of quiet times alone with her mother at bedtime.

Probably before bedtime, just lullabies and just little songs that I wanted to hear just to calm me down. I just remember that it was a time that we just had to sit and it was kind of quiet time. . . when I could be just with my mom and there was no other people around and it was just us and it was quiet, there was no

Sarah, my daughter, now six, told me, "It was 'Hush Little Baby,' it was you singing, but that was before I was born." I did sing to her in utero, and I've told her that many times. There is no doubt that she heard my singing (Woodward & Guidozi, 1992; Verry & Kelly, 1981), but it is difficult to ascertain in what form she remembers. The most treasured singing moment of my life was at Sarah's birth. I had sung my favourite lullaby to her throughout my pregnancy. "What'll I do with my baby-o". When she was born, she was immediately taken to a table in the corner of the room for a medical procedure. I wanted to keep connected to her so I started to sing. "What'll I do." Before I got to the "do" that little one minute old head whipped around and riveted those clear blue eyes on my face. A hush fell in that room around my singing and there were tears of awe and wonder.

I don't remember either parent singing to me. My earliest memories are of playing little 78rpm records. The family story is that by my second birthday, I could identify each record by its colour and centre label. I certainly remember the songs: "Little Goldie Goldfish" and "Tina, the Ballerina." Emma, who is now in her twenties, also remembers recorded music rather than her parents voices. "Hey Jude" was her earliest song memory. Perhaps parents are singing less to their infants now than in previous decades, but that trend did not emerge strongly with this particular group of women. In fact, each adult participant spoke of singing to her own children when they were infants.

## Singing in childhood

Singing in childhood seems to have changed in context more than substance. All the girls and women remember singing in their childhood. The context for the childhood singing for women over 50 was the family home. All the older participants reported family singing around the piano, particularly on Sunday afternoons. Those were days when singing hymns around the piano was one of the few activities deemed entirely appropriate for Sunday afternoons and evenings.

### Jan (fifties)

We did an awful lot of singing with mother around the piano. I mean that's what we did on Sunday afternoons, as much as anything, you know. . . I think it was mainly hymns. . . I remember all of them.

### Eleanor (sixties)

Around the piano in the family I grew up in, singing had quite a big role and partly because I had a favourite aunt who visited every summer with my cousins and she was a very good alto singer. She was an alto soloist in a big church in Detroit, and my dad could play the piano and they always had the neighbours in to come and hear Jen sing, so you know, there was always singing, and my mother was a good singer, and she sang in a lot of operettas. They would practice at home and my dad was a good accompanist. So we had a lot of family music.

### Mary (seventies)

My father was Presbyterian so we sang the psalms. Missionary people are very lonely people, they're separated from their relatives and home country so they sing the things that are familiar or comforting to them. So whenever missionar-

ies gathered, someone would play the piano and we'd sing. "Unto the hills," oh, I'm sorry, I can't give you all the hymns, maybe I should get the hymnal. The 23rd Psalm to Crimond of course. Whenever missionaries would depart, I can still see it, we would all go down and watch the boat go out and throw steamers and we would all sing "Blest be the tie that binds" till the boat was out of sight.

#### Irene (eighties)

We had a little, what we call an American Organ, and my father used to play. He wasn't a good player, but he used to manage hymns and we used to sit around while he played hymns on Sunday afternoon or evening. We always enjoyed that . . . I did have some favourite ones [hymns]. Let me think of what they were now. I always liked "All Things Bright and Beautiful." I can't think of the titles but there were some good ones that I liked. I should have to look through a hymn book to remember them probably. But he would more or less play the ones we wanted him to, and then when he'd had enough he'd play "Now the Day is Over" and that was it. He wasn't a good player but it was enough to play, it was an organ, an American Organ, and he used to play with all the stops.

When the women and girls under fifty talked about family singing, it was always in the car, not around the piano. The influence of recorded music showed up in their stories. The younger women spoke more often about singing along with tapes and CDs or just simply by themselves.

#### Shauna (late twenties)

Whenever we drove in the car my mom used to always sing to us, and sing with us, and so I remember doing "Itsy Bitsy Spider" and "Deep and Wide" and all those songs. We always sang in the car, whenever we were going anywhere and my parents' families lived two and three hours away from us, so we did a lot of those kinds of trips in the car.

#### Emma (twenties)

I remember singing "Free to Be You and Me," and singing with the TV . . . Zoom, the Electric Company, Sesame Street, and to Sesame Street records, Muppet show records, and Free to Be You and Me. We sang and had the books . . . I remember having the words all there, so singing from word books too I remember with music on . . . I think I sang everywhere. I sang in the bath. I remember singing to my sister in the bath, when we were young, like four and two or five and three. I remember singing with records a lot. And singing in the car a lot. We travelled in the car and we'd sing. We'd have tapes in the car and sing.

#### Emily (teens)

Just little songs on the street. I'd just skip down the road and I'd start singing a song that I heard on the radio or something, or on one of my tapes. Sharon, Lois and Bram, and, oh what was his name? Raffi? and then just silly songs that you picked up on the school ground. Stuff like that.

School music, in the form of classroom music or music as a subject did not emerge as an important influence for any of the participants. Extra curricular school or district choirs and musicals were more influential than any other school music activities with this particular group of women.

Emma, now in her twenties, reports,

Once a week we got bussed to another school for music . . . and I don't even remember what instrument I did. . . Singing - I don't remember singing at all. Alana spoke about the local school board's district choir.

I remember that being a real thing, who got into the choir and who wasn't in the choir . . . a lot of the class auditioned for it. I sang "Downtown" by Petula Clark , and I think everybody actually did maybe, but I remember people getting their acceptance letters and from then on, I mean, maybe it happened earlier, but then there were people who could sing and people who couldn't sing and that division was made. I think that's probably a shame.

### Singing in the teenage years

For women under 50, Girl Guides and summer camp emerged as strong singing memories in the teenage years. They even reported singing the same songs at summer camp, "Barges" and "Fish Gotta Swim." The women who sang with Girl Guides at camp and international conferences spoke of singing songs from many lands and the rich sense of community and sisterhood that singing had embodied. High school musicals, mostly shows from Broadway, were also an important part of the singing lives for the women under 50.

The stories of women over 50 about singing in their teenage years included singing in choirs, at family gatherings, in busses and trains on the way to sport events and while they were dancing.

#### Jan (fifties)

I belonged to Miss Nesbitt's Orpheus Choir and there were nine or 12 of us at different times. Miss Pearl Nesbitt was our local Board of Education music teacher. She raced around from class to class and she got us singing some pretty good stuff. . . she had a good sense of humour and she would throw in sort of modern stuff now and then. "Don't tell anybody." That kind of thing. And then she got this choir going and we all wore pink blouses and grey skirts, and that was a big part of my life and I think I had some really good voice training from Mrs. Nesbitt.

#### Eleanor (sixties)

You'd sit at the end of the train car, you know, and the basketball team would belt out and sing the whole way to Toronto.

#### Polly(seventies)

Then of course we went in high school and we didn't have any music per se, as taught to us as courses, but we had a gym and one of our friends played the piano very well and every single noon hour practically we danced. The girls danced. We learned to dance in the gym, and she played and we sang. . . just the current songs. "Isle of Capri", that was a big one, 1934, oh yes. . . And we used to gather, see there was no TV of course, and we didn't have a movie house in Vankleek Hill, we had to go to Hawkesbury, so we used to gather in each others homes and sit around the piano and sing. And a lot of it would be hymns, because hymns are very singable, but a lot of it would be whatever.

### Mary (seventies)

Singing was associated with friends gathering, You know [names of families] they're all connected, and they would gather. Particularly in the summer, we would gather and they sang every Sunday night, they would have hymn sings which were just remarkable. We just enjoyed it so much....They sang, well, it was just a requirement, Sunday evening, a hymn sing and then we sang everything else once we got started, mostly things like Gilbert and Sullivan. The singing was very central.

### Sarah (nineties)

They all sang then. They sang the Queen's songs and there were a lot of them. There's a whole book of Queen's songs you know. Nobody sings them anymore.

## Singing in adulthood

All the women who are mothers, including myself, sang to our children when they were infants and young children. The songs we sang include "Morning has broken" in the 1970's, Speed Bonnie Boat in the 1960's and Hush a bye baby in the 1950's.

### Sarah (nineties)

Of course I sang to my children. Everything I knew. And my daughter, it was so lovely to go back and find her singing the same things and also singing everything, every night.

Other adult experiences of singing were quite varied. Polly (seventies) remembered singing hymns with the soldiers, during the second world war, Wednesday evenings at a local church, and dancing with the soldiers in Ottawa,

Oh well, you probably know a lot of war songs, and they're all very, they still make you nostalgic. It was a very big part of the war years, and I worked in the Bell telephone in Ottawa, in the business office and they asked groups from all different companies to go to the Red Triangle Club to dance with the soldiers, and we sang as we danced. . . We did that at Queen's even in those days. We used to sing as we danced.

The women in their twenties spoke about singing around the house with a partner and singing alone while playing guitar.

### Emma (twenties)

Now I sing in the car, tons. We're totally into Frank Sinatra and jazz, Ella Fitzgerald, Diana Krall, new people and old people. . . We sing in the car, we sing at home, we sing in the kitchen, when we're cooking. It might be Spirit of the West, like new stuff, Holly Cole. A lot of Holly Cole. I love Holly Cole. I love old jazz standards now. Cooking is jazz, definitely.

### Alana (twenties)

Having learned how to play guitar, it makes me more independent with my

voice. I learned how to play guitar so I could accompany myself. . . My housemates used to listen at my door last year when I would play, and I mean I don't mind it so much because I love them all, but it's sort of something that has been just for me, which is nice. I keep it to myself . . . I want to be modest about it. I want to keep it just for me.

In the experience of this group of women as adults, the widespread practice of singing in social and family groups around the piano ended in the 1950's, singing in social groups with guitar was prevalent in the 1960's and 1970's, and singing with social groups happened rarely in the 1980's and 1990's.

## Feelings about our singing voices

I asked each participant what she thought about her own singing voice.

### Emily (teen)

Yeah, I do think I'm a good singer. I'm a very shy person so I don't like singing by myself. I can't really sing for long periods of time because I have asthma and it's very straining on my lungs, but I mean I do try. I do hope that I will get more musicals at my school, so I mean, obviously somebody thinks I'm good because they got me into that play, so, yeah I do think I'm a good singer.

### Emma (twenties)

I sing whatever but I don't put a lot of emotion into it. It's just sort of a voice or a noise or a pretty melody. But I don't think I've ever put a lot of emotion in it. I would just sing. . . I just sing my singing, I just do my own thing. . . my very uninterpretive interpretation"

Shauna (twenties) shared this memory of singing in a music festival.

There must have been 20 or so of us in this class. I was the very last one, and everybody got up and sang their song . . . "I See the Love of God." Twenty times. And I was thinking, the poor adjudicator just must be bored out of her skull, you know, at this point, and I got up there and I think, I don't think it was the words so much but it was the sound of my own voice in this church, and I just became so enthralled with it and slowed right down and I just got lost in this piece. . . I got to the end and I stopped and then everybody started clapping and I was kind of brought back to reality, but that was a wonderful, wonderful singing moment . . . I didn't even know what a head voice was until grade 12 when we did Sound of Music and the History teacher who was the vocal coach showed me over and over and finally I started to hear it and it was a wonderful discovery that I had this whole other voice that I'd never used before. I remember going home at night and not doing any homework, just spending like three or four hours trying to sing and I would get it and then I'd lose it for the next half hour and then I'd find it again. It was just so exciting. That was amazing! Having this head voice, and it's always been the one thing, singing, that I've loved to do more than anything else.

### Eleanor (sixties)

I guess I had a fairly good voice naturally. I mean I could hold a tune and made a decent sound, so as a little person I sang some solos here and there. I sang a little solo at the morning service once. But the story . . . mothers talking to mothers, was that Mrs. Somebody, her little girl was a bit miffed that she didn't

sing the solo and said that "Eleanor sang solo because she lost her front two teeth and the sound could come out."

I guess I was musical, I mean I carried on. I had a little more training after the Mrs. Weiland thing, and I sang in some good choirs in downtown Montreal, so yeah, I sort of kept up on choir singing and a little bit of solo singing and a bit of vocal training.

#### Polly (seventies)

I sang alto when I joined the choir because Glenn [her husband, the choir director] thought it would be more interesting for me and I don't have a very high voice. But I just sang the best I could and the kids, when they're young, it's just mommy singing. . . So I joined the choir, even though I wasn't a singer, but at least I could, as he said, I was intelligent enough to keep quiet when I didn't know what I was doing.

#### Mary (seventies)

I have felt very shy about my own singing voice. I don't think it's very good. I remember we had a rehearsal for "Pinafore" and I was singing, I thought on key, but obviously I wasn't because they were all sort of looking at me. I always feel a little afraid of my singing voice. I'm not afraid of speaking, I've done a lot of speaking in my time.

I love to sing which embarrasses my children no end. Well now they're away and don't worry about it any more but when they were sitting with me in church I could just tell cause I'd be betting out these hymns. Well this would be the sixties so they didn't enjoy mother's enthusiasm for singing. It didn't worry me. I kept on doing it. I think my voice is very rusty, it does, as you get older you know, but I don't care.

#### Sarah (nineties)

It was all right, but I didn't sing harmony. My son could. I can hear it sometimes, but I can't sing it. . . But I love singing and I do enjoy singing at church. Of course I wish it [my singing] was better. But I, oh I don't wish to sound like someone else, I just wish I could sing better and more easily.

Although she loved singing as a Girl Guide, Jane (fifties) has been uncomfortable about her singing voice ever since her twenties when her husband told her she sang off key. Jane was the only participant to report that kind of permanent damage from criticism. Women's feelings about their own voices did not seem to reflect change over the years. The one exception was Sarah's (nineties) comment "but I didn't sing harmony," which revealed that her criteria for being a good singer included being able to sing harmony. I doubt that the ability to sing harmony would be a criterion in the nineties.

### How singing affects our lives

Even though some participants thought their singing voices were not very good, many spoke passionately about how singing affects their lives. Singing, for these women, was a form of self expression, a stress release, a transcending or transforming activity, a confidence booster, a powerful binder with other women, a support, a sedative and a comfort and joy to others.

### Emily (teen)

I love singing. . . I guess as a way to express myself. Really. I hadn't found any other way that I could do that yet and, I mean, I sang a lot when I was little. I still love singing. I don't sing in any choirs now though. I prefer to sing on my own. I sing to my little brother at night sometimes. I've noticed lately that I sing to release stress and anger when I've been riding down the street or whatever I just start belting out a song or whatever came into my mind or I'd make one up myself, just about a situation that was bugging me.

I don't think I'd be able to survive if I didn't know how to sing (chuckle). I have to be able to sing. It doesn't matter where I am I have to, like when I'm in my room or anywhere, like when I ride my bike to work, just before I go to work I turn on my radio so that I can hear a song and then the last song I hear I sing it all the way there and all the way back. So there's always music in my life.

### Alana (twenties)

If my voice is just right and the playing's just right then I feel like I'm watching it instead of doing it. Do you see what I mean? It's, I feel like it's just happening and it's not because of me . . . sort of dream like

### Shauna (twenties)

Singing in front of an audience. I love that. And I became a totally different person when I was on stage . . . And now, singing in [young people's church group], being with people doing something that I love and that I'm good at, I mean I think socially it's good for me because I feel confident doing that and I can take a leadership role and, like I feel very much in my own element when I'm doing that and can be who I am, say stupid things. When I'm in that situation I can just relax and be a little bit more me than if I'm with the same people but in a different situation. I think it just makes me feel comfortable. I feel more open.

### Louise (forties)

I've had a difficult year in my personal life. I sang to hold myself together when it felt like my world was coming apart. There's a beautiful chant- the verse goes

May the beauty of the fire lift your spirits higher  
May the beauty of the earth fill your heart with mirth,  
May the beauty of the rain wash away your pain  
May the beauty of the sky teach your mind to fly.

At a surprise breakfast birthday breakfast picnic, a group of my friends placed their hands on me and sang that over and over again. It gave me courage where none was before and I still sing it to myself whenever I need strength and courage, and it works!

### Jan (fifties)

It's a real powerful binder and a wonderful excuse for women to communicate which in essence is what singing together is. A form of communication. And I think that one of the biggest difficulties, when you're just trying to get a bunch of women to sing, is overcoming self consciousness. . . I think once you can overcome that self consciousness and you can sing it's a marvellous foot in the door to talking to each other or communicating with each other in other ways. I think if I ever had to do it again I might want to learn how to sing professionally. The thing that has always caught me more than anything else is the idea of people with wonderful voices, and that's all they had, but it was a wonderful

instrument, trained instrument, singing people into the gas chambers. And I've always thought, imagine having a portable means of bringing such joy and pleasure or comfort to other people. More than any other instrument. That's what your voice can do.

#### May (sixties)

I feel involved. I feel so totally involved that it doesn't really matter what else has been going on, I mean you can come to singing, I'm thinking of choir practice, feeling really tired and down, but you get right into the music and everything else is peripheral. I'll tell you one thing, one time I remember when this happened too. My son had been in a car accident and I'd seen him in the morning in hospital. He had some damage to some of some vertebra in his back and it was quite painful and I was really upset, but I went on to school and it happened to be a morning when about four or five or six country schools were getting together to sing and I had to go with my class. The whole school went. And everything else fell away. That got me through that morning . . . it cleared all those terrible feelings out of my mind until it was over, and then of course, I wanted to go and phone and I found out immediately from my husband that he was feeling much better. But I can remember how clearly it blocked out those negative painful feelings and got me through the morning. That was children's singing, of course, which is always a rather uplifting kind of experience I think.

#### Polly (seventies)

Well, I use singing if I can't sleep at night which isn't too often, but as one gets older one doesn't sleep as well, or need as much, but I sing to myself a lot. Not out loud, just in my head. It's good for your memory too. Good memory work, you know.

#### Mary (seventies)

I'll tell you one that I used to sing after school. I taught for twenty years, I was doing supply teaching for two or three weeks at a time. We needed the money so I did it, and I might have a kind of distressing class, or a rough day and then I would go home singing, "Oh Love that wilt not let me go." An I'd be thinking "why am I doing this" and I would be singing out loud as I was driving home and it would be a help. And I still do, I still sing those kinds of songs that support me,

#### Emily (nineties)

Well, I think always that it's there, that feeling that music, whether you're singing or not, but music is so important. To me, of all the things that we have, all the arts, music is tops, because you have it until the end of your life. You really do. And I'm sorry for children who don't have it. And I don't think our church does enough for children singing and I don't know why that is.

### Singing in our social, emotional and spiritual lives

From the turn of the century into the 1950's, singing around the piano played a large role in teenager's and adults' social lives. Sunday afternoon and evening hymn sings with family and friends, and house parties centred around singing were frequently mentioned by the older participants. They sang hymns, Gilbert and Sullivan and, later on, the Broadway musicals. Helen, now in her nineties,

described these events in this way; "It would be a fashion at one time where you'd go to somebody's house, and this was when we were adults, you'd go to somebody's house, have some dinner or supper or something and spend the evening singing Gilbert and Sullivan around the piano."

In the sixties and seventies, the teenagers and young adults gathered with guitars rather than around the piano and sang camp songs, the songs of the peace movement and contemporary folk songs of the day. Jane who was in her twenties in the 1960's told me "We'd sing for hours, sometimes there'd be several guitars, everyone knew the words, all the Gordon Lightfoot songs." Little social singing was reported in the eighties and nineties. Several women have sung in choirs through the last two decades, and acknowledged the social aspect of singing in a choir, but each felt the social aspect was less important than the singing. For the women, now in their teens and twenties, singing tends to be a more private than public activity although one expressed a wish that she would sing in a choir if her work schedule allowed it. Going to concerts to hear groups perform, seems to have replaced gathering to sing as a social music activity for the younger participants.

Emily, in her mid-teens, does enjoy singing with a few close friends "it's a common bond between us, and we're all pretty good so we sound good together and it's fun. It's a way to tell each other things without actually having to say it." Emily also reported the popularity of coffee houses at her school where students get up and sing with guitar, some solo and some in groups.

The younger participants in this study had much less to say about singing in their emotional lives than did the older women. The single descriptor the two children under ten used for singing was "fun." Several older participants spoke of physical and emotional sensations while singing, and of times when they couldn't sing for crying.

#### May (sixties)

Well, I've always wondered what is it in music that gets the physical response. You know, those tingly feelings up your back and your hair standing on end, and it can be the same thing over and over again. What always does it to me is in the Brahms Requiem, "Death, Where is Thy Sting?" I always get those physical reactions. I know there are other times when I have this feeling too, a certain kind of rising to this moment, and you feel it coming and you're sort of waiting for it and you know you're going to have this wonderful physical feeling as well as intellectual and emotional enjoyment of the actual sound. The other one I'm thinking of is in Willan's "Rise Up My Love." Isn't that gorgeous? I mean that's so lovely.

#### Polly (seventies)

One hymn that my father used to sing to me, it was in the old green hymn book, "My Father is Rich is Houses and Lands." I don't know where my dad learned that. But as a child I loved that one and I used to ask him to sing it to me. At his funeral, Glenn [her husband] played the organ and he found that music. Well I was fine until then, and it broke me.

#### Mary (seventies)

I found that some of the songs we'd sung at the women's conference, I couldn't sing some of the verses. I think probably at my stage they affect me, in times having past and coming into end times. It affects very much my emotions in the

sense of the beauty of life, the beauty of what I experience, the wonder of just being, but I wouldn't want to be without music. I'd find that very difficult. . . I wonder if we are, as people repressed in many ways in the earlier part of this century, needing to sing just to express ourselves, just to somehow feel that we were emotionally freed up. I think that's so. And people have sung of course through the ages, likely for the same reasons. There's always been a time when we need to either dance or sing or both. Music just does it for you doesn't it? It brings out something that is so essential.

The most consistent response to my question about the links between one's singing and one's spiritual life was a nod. It was more difficult for participants to put their thoughts into words.

Several women spoke of hymns. Some are unable to sing many of the old hymns because of the gender exclusive and imperial language, others regret that they don't sing the hymns of their childhood in church anymore. I have chosen to not discuss this issue, because it would comprise an entire paper in itself. I will say only that women of all ages, except the ones under ten, expressed conflict between the current or old hymnody and their spiritual needs and beliefs.

Emily (teen)

I think it is tied into all aspects. To my spiritual life, it's a way I connect to God more than sitting in a church. I like singing better.

Shauna (twenties)

Spiritually, I think it's more of a group, rather than a personal type of spiritual expression. . . being part of a group of people who are looking for the same thing, and expressing that through music. The reason I don't sing in Dominions choir is because I feel that they're up there doing a presentation every Sunday and there's no worship from us about what they're singing at all.

May (sixties) expressed a different view of the same choir:

Singing in Dominions choir enormously enhanced my appreciation of the service and the whole total package of what is being presented in the service. I think that's one of my reasons for going into the choir was because I began to feel that the music part of the service was so important that I'd like to be part of the actual production of it.

. . . And, I find it very rewarding from the message of the music, perhaps because you are so familiar with it so that by the time you're singing it in the service, hopefully you don't have to worry about what you're doing. You can pay more attention to the words and what is actually being said as it were, through the music.

Eleanor (sixties)

I think in the experience of singing in a large choir, or even a small choir, that there is occasionally that sort of transcendent moment when all people are one, because you're doing this group activity all focused on something that is beautiful or whole and so you're doing it and you're doing it together. And sometimes it works and a lot of times it doesn't work, but just sometimes there's a patch of something that is, I would say, "soulful or spiritual". And that just comes from the singing and the doing it together. I mean you might not be singing anything very textually sacred. You might be singing about the green lawn or the whatever You can also get close to the spiritual when you're doing

something that's quite irreverent, but has the heart beat. The heart beat of humanity, the rhythm beat of the drum. I think you get it there too. As they sometimes say, soul music in New Orleans. I mean they call it soul music.

Polly (seventies)

I think music and prayer are very closely related.

Singing has remained an essential part of these women's emotional and spiritual lives even though the social aspect of singing has diminished. The following section reinforces the importance of singing in our lives.

## Do people sing as much as they used to?

There were mixed opinions about this question. I began this study with the assumption that singing was not as prevalent now as it was earlier in this century. I have learned from these women that that assumption may be faulty. Singing has changed considerably in context, and perhaps not so much in quantity. Those who thought that there was less singing now suggested several reasons for the demise of singing: smaller families, wider variety of music, television, recorded music, attitudes towards the arts, and educational practices which discourage singing. Those who did not accept that singing was disappearing from our culture presented the practice of singing along with recorded music and the growth of choirs as evidence.

Emma (twenties)

I think probably less. Well certainly adult friends or people I've met as a young adult, nobody has a singing background that I know of. I mean one guy had a piano background but not a singing, so I wonder if not a lot of kids of my generation had certainly as much music and singing as I did. My sister didn't really. So yes, I'd say less.

Alana (twenties)

I think it's also a trend away from the arts. People tend to think of the arts as being flaky, a little bit, and I think even as kids you know that if you know math and you know science then you're going to make it. I think, unfortunately, the perspective I have now is that anything having to do with the arts get silenced very young in kids and they are told basically that they're a good drawer or a good singer and they should do it, or they're told that's not really very good, and maybe you should try something else. So I think the singing or being an artist or whatever, got put off on this higher sphere, this unattainable sphere where some people can do and some people can't. It's too bad that it's just not an expression, that the creativity of singing or the creativity of drawing, regardless of the fact of whether you're within the lines or within the notes that you're supposed to be. It was just an expression. You should just be able to do it.

Jan (fifties)

No, I don't think they're singing less. Oh, maybe, I think they're just singing in different ways. . . Well the odd thing now is the return of Frank Sinatra and the lounge singers. I mean that would lounge thing phenomenon is fantastic,

because now, finally, my daughter and I know the same songs. They know all the words far more than I do, and I knew Frank Sinatra quite well at one point . . . And choirs. Why would you ask that question? I mean there are lots of choirs out there.

#### Eleanor (sixties)

I'm impressed by how many choirs there are . . . You would know better about how the music system is going in all the schools, but I'm just not aware that people are singing less. They're not standing around the piano at home, but that's because they can do it elsewhere. I'm sure my mother had no choir to go out and join. So she was quite happy to sing around, she happened to be one of nine too. That's a good start for a gang of voices. Maybe, well, smaller families, but also the whole transportation thing, technology, I mean the whole change in society of the proportion of urban to rural. Sociological shifts I think make a big difference that way, and, I suppose maybe the larger single one. I mean when we think of music we think CD and tapes and records. I mean families will sit around and watch a "family" program. . . now 30 years before that, that same family without the TV might have been standing around a piano singing. So are they singing less, I'm not sure.

I've come to the end of this stage of the research and I'm not sure either. I have learned that women, young and old together, are still singing for their lives. Singing is still immensely important to these particular women's emotional and spiritual lives. The context of singing has changed from social and family gatherings to more private singing. Young women are far more likely to sing along with recorded music by themselves or with one or two others than to sing with a social group for entertainment. The young women recognized the therapeutic role singing plays in their lives and acknowledged that that is their prime reason for singing. The older women also had a deep sense of the effects and importance of singing in their lives, and yet the social and entertainment functions of singing emerged as their motivation for singing. How the quality of vocal singing has changed was not part of this investigation, and is a subject for future study. The quantity of singing may actually have increased over this century. Whereas singing was a social activity at the beginning of the century, evenings and Sunday afternoons, singing along to recorded music has become an all day, everyday activity for some women in their teens and twenties. Recorded music on their stereos and Walkmans accompany all aspects of their lives and even the women themselves don't realize how much they are actually singing along.

I realized, in the process of this investigation, that I carried with me a bias about what constitutes singing. I was mourning the loss of singing in schools, around the piano or in the midst of guitars and was blinded to the prevalence of singing in young women's private lives. We, as music educators, need to be vigilant about our own "conceptual baggage" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), not only in research but in our practice as teachers. If we value choral singing more than the practice of individual singing along with recorded music, we need to examine that stance. How do we address the widening gulf between "school music" and the "real" music in our students' lives? Do we value Cecilia Bartoli's contribution more than Madonna's? Or in Canadian context, Catherine Robbin more than Holly Cole or Alanis Morissette? This is not a question of valuing one musical genre over another, it is a question of valuing one musical culture over another. It has become unacceptable to value one ethnic culture over another, when will it be-

come unacceptable to value one musical culture over another? Is classroom and group singing more important, or should we be spending more time teaching guitar, so girls will have the means to accompany their own singing? Is the canon of choral music for young people more important than encouraging composition and giving girls the tools for song writing? What are our music education priorities? What should they be in the light of the dramatic changes in context of girls' and women's singing? Are we aware of gendered practices in our teaching? For a thorough and provocative discussion of these gender issues I recommend Lucy Green's book *Music, Gender, Education*, (1997) and in particular the chapter "The music curriculum and the possibilities for intervention" Certainly, I have been asking those difficult question of myself as a result of this study. My hope is that some of those questions will join the ones already swimming around in your head.

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