

Music is a powerful healer

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When Jan Bryant's 10-year-old daughter fell from a tree and died, song deserted her.

The former school administrator and life-long singer, could barely breathe, talk, eat or shop for dinner, let alone sing.

But almost a year after Lindsay's death, Bryant ventured out for the first time. She went to a concert put on by the Universal Gospel Choir. One emotive song in, Bryant knew she had to join the choir.

"There was no question I was supposed to go do that," she says, adding she'd thought at the time that she would never sing again.

Today, 14 years later, in a small community church that the multi-faith, multicultural community choir rents, Bryant belts out the lyrics to an African prayer song. Singing has restored her.

"I have discovered that you can sing and cry at the same time," she says. "Before, I couldn't. Now I can do them together. I think that is healing. I may be crying, but I can go on."

As anyone who has seen the movie *Young at Heart* knows, being part of a choir makes people happy. The film, in the theatres now, showcases a group of elderly people facing all kinds of health issues who sing rock and roll in a choir. They do it for the friendship, the laughter, the mental and physical exercise and the sense of connection that only harmonizing creates. They almost never miss a practice. They know intuitively what science is starting to show. Singing is good for them.

Gerard Tan, an acupuncturist with Inspire Health in Vancouver says that singing helps the immune system because it moves the body's energy. When the energy moves, it either prevents disease or speeds up the healing.

"I encourage patients to make (chanting) sounds and sing because I want them to self heal," he says.

Gene Cohen, director of the Center on Aging, Health and Humanities at George Washington University in Washington D.C., recently conducted a controlled study of seniors with an average age of 80 years to see how art in a group context benefits people.

A year into the study, the choir group used less medication than the control group. They visited the doctor less frequently than the control group, their moods improved and they got involved in more

activities over the year, while their control counterparts got less involved. They also experienced fewer falls compared to the start of the study, while the control group reported more falls and more hip damage than before the study.

Kathryn Nicholson, the new music director of the Universal Gospel Choir, is also a music therapist and coordinator of bereavement programs at Canuck Place. She doesn't doubt Cohen's study results.

"Music generally is metaphoric in terms of its effect on people," she says. "It's a combination of the fact that it reaches the head and the physical body and the heart at the same time. Therefore it becomes an integrating experience because you are experiencing it with all parts of yourself."

And what she discovered after joining this choir is that gospel music in particular or "cosmic R&B" as she always thought of it, provides a metaphor for working through life's difficulties until you find your way back to joy. It starts off slow as if the singer is heavy with burden and builds to an explosion of joy at the end.

"It's like it helps you understand what it feels like to move from being depressed or chaotic inside to a place of harmony," she says.

Choirs meet in halls all over the world and each one, like the Young at Heart chorus or the Universal Gospel choir, has its own unique blend of music and singers. But much of the experience seems universal.

Like the James Brown song performed by the Young and Heart chorus, they feeeeeel good.

"It makes me feel wonderful," says David Friesen, a yoga instructor. "At certain times when I'm singing I can be aware of my voice coming out and aware of the whole choir and just feel like there is light everywhere. It feels wonderful and so connecting."

Friesen, who also practises meditation, says singing has the same effect on him as a Buddhist meditation. Nicholson agrees.

She once heard someone on the radio say that cats purr to heal and calm themselves. The person suggested people could tape the cat's purr to calm themselves.

"This is ridiculous," she says. "We can purr. It's just that we don't understand that humming is the same thing."

Nicholson says that it has been shown that when people hum, all their busy thoughts dissipate, just like meditation. But, as a music therapist, she also knows that singing is physiologically therapeutic.

"The act of singing, the act of the deep breathing you have to do when you are singing, just simply the exercise, the vocal warm-ups we do, encouraging people to use their diaphragm and breath deeply -- it's the same thing you do when doing yoga," she says.

Bryant says singing, and the deep breathing it requires definitely relieved the sense she'd had since Lindsay's death that her chest was being crushed.

"Just being able to breathe was big," she says, adding that the choir has also given her a supportive community she really needed.

"Because we are many different faiths or no faith at all, for us to be able to sing and harmonize even though we have really disparate views about theology, it's a model for what can happen in the world."

As the choir warms up before rehearsing for its season-end concert June 6 and 7, members sing out sounds, swing their arms high and walk around greeting each other. You can almost see the stress lifting off their faces.

Then Jonathan Bruce, a young man with a big voice picks up the microphone and launches the choir into People Get Ready, There's a Train a Comin'. Bruce has just come from a day working with adults with behaviour problems. Bryant drove from North Vancouver where she now counsels school children. Nicholson came from Canuck Place. They need this: the singing, the community, the support, the joy.

The choir is currently preparing for a concert complete with a band and the St John's Children's Choir, but they also sing in old folks homes, hospitals and their favorite, the First United Church.

"This is the greatest stress releaser there is," Bryant says. "It doesn't really matter what's happened during your day. You could drag your weary self in here and two hours later its all gone."

"Indeed," Nicholson says. "It keeps you young."

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