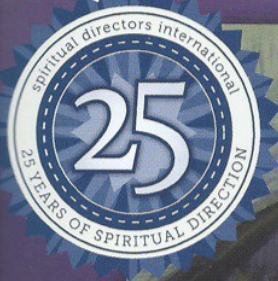


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AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION • VOL. 21, NO. 4 • DECEMBER 2015



Contemplativeness and Spiritual Direction • Finding the Voice Within
Embracing Wisdom: The Path of the Sage • Thomas Merton and Leonard Cohen

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AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Finding the Voice Within **Meredith Barber and Julie Lipson**

Spiritual direction has the primary intention of opening a door to invite God in. Adding creative musical expression opens the door wider. In our monthly spiritual direction group, *Finding the Voice Within*, participants explored the connection between their spirituality and their creativity. Because music helps us bypass the intellect, we connect to one another and to God in a more embodied way. In this article we explore how working collaboratively in the process of creating music inherently opened spiritual doors and created joy. We describe the basic structure of our group, explain why and how it was powerful, and provide illustrative vignettes.

Creativity is a direct pathway to the Divine. Because God is the great Creator, and because human beings are created in God's image, we are acting like God when we create. In the group, we used improvisational music-making to respond to one another and to connect to the Divine. The group, which had five participants, was led by the two writers of this article—spiritual director and psychologist Meredith Barber and music therapist Julie Lipson. We met once a month at a religious institution in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

Group Structure

Each session lasted an hour and forty-five minutes and began with centering breath-work and chanting. To open, we chanted the Hebrew word *Hineini* and its English translation, "Here I am," the reply Moses gave when God asked him, "Where are you?" Next, we led the group in an exercise designed to get out of our heads and into our bodies and voices. These warm-up activities varied from session to session. Most were some variation on a prompt: "Create a sound and movement to reflect how you are feeling right now." The group repeated the sound and movement created by each participant, and often group members were instructed to change them, amplify them, or add to them. The exercise had an element of repetition and silliness. The goal was to create an open, light space, free from inhibition or self-censorship.

We followed with a few minutes of silence.

After we were all spiritually present, we entered the main work of each session. The first person was invited to speak, sharing from her heart whatever was going on for her at that time. Julie then initiated a musical framework, using her guitar to match the tempo, rhythm, and general emotional tenor of the person who had just spoken. The guitar provided a foundation on which the group could build its singing. Each group member added a lyrical phrase or joined in singing another's phrase. The lyrics were composed spontaneously and often referred to or quoted the speaker's words or feelings. The phrases and melodies wove together, creating harmonies and layers. It was often surprising how much sound and complexity were created with just seven voices and a guitar.

We chanted this way, changing and playing with the words and melodies, for five to ten minutes. After that, we sat in silence to let the chant soak in, because as rabbi and chant leader Shefa Gold teaches, the riches of the chant are felt even more deeply in the echoes of the silence. Each member had time to share, and we repeated the musical response for each participant. Afterward, we closed with a group exercise that varied each month but was designed as a wrap-up, such as inviting each participant to sing one phrase that held meaning for her from our session. We ended our sessions with Yofiyah's "Oseh Shalom" chant, a prayer for peace.

Finding the Voice Within contained many of the elements of traditional group spiritual direction. We started with the assumption that we gathered to be present for one another, to hold the space, and to invite God in. Group members all had a chance to share, without interruptions, with the promise of confidentiality, and the understanding that they could talk about whatever they wanted. The listeners experienced listening without interrupting while noticing their impulses, including the desire to judge, fix, and problem-solve. We encouraged participants to keep themselves grounded and rooted in their own connection to the Divine while listening to one another. As a result, participants had some of the same experiences seen in a more typical spiritual direction group, such as the initial anxiety over not knowing



what to talk about. This worry gave way to increasing trust, as participants learned to talk about whatever arose. Feelings emerged simply from the act of stopping the daily grind and taking notice of desires and emotions beneath the surface. They experienced relief when they released themselves from the responsibility to fix one another and understood that being together is enough.

Using Music to Reflect

The following vignette illustrates the healing nature of both the musical and nonmusical elements of the spiritual direction group:

Laura described how overwhelmed she was as a result of her busyness. Small children, aging parents, and numerous volunteer activities left her feeling depleted and exhausted. She paused in the midst of her list of obligations and shared how difficult it was for her to know what to talk about, given her belief that the direction to “share what’s on your heart” was too loose. She took a breath into the “not knowing” what to talk about, and in that moment became tearful, realizing how uncomfortable she was to just be. This was poignant, as it pointed out her difficulty with being still, rather than filling her life with activities. She spoke too about her newfound ability to say “no” to requests. In our musical response to Laura, one participant started with a chant of “no no no no,” and we joined in, supporting Laura in her nascent ability to say “no.” We also humorously chanted, “Being is the new doing.”

Some contributions were joyful, and some were full of conflict and insecurity. Most often, the speakers wound their way through several emotions, touching on many aspects of their lives. In the music, the group was often able to reflect back the complexity of the speaker’s words. Sometimes the music amplified certain elements of the speaker’s contribution, and sometimes the music lightened them. Even if the music sounded heavy or sad, we still marveled at its beauty.

Hearing a spoken phrase repeated in music often had a transformative effect. Participants reported that when they heard their own words reflected back in song, they heard them differently. The words and melodies became pieces of a musical quilt that was more than the sum of its parts. This gestalt effect reflected the original intention of the

group, which was to seek doors that can only be opened by illuminating the connections between group members, thereby acknowledging the presence of something larger—something divine.

When we speak to one another, we rely heavily on words to convey a message. When we respond musically, however, we incorporate not only the words but also the melody, the rhythm, the tempo, and more. All of these elements reflect the complexity of our emotional lives in ways that words alone cannot express. Reflecting the speaker’s words with music provided a powerful experience of mirroring. The repetition provided the opportunity for each group member to play with different phrases and explore sounds in the service of authentically representing the speaker’s words and emotions. Sometimes the resulting chants became melodies that rose and snowballed into laughter. Sometimes the lyrical phrases morphed as they flowed through the circle, and sometimes they were remembered throughout the month. The experience of chanting bypassed the intellect entirely as the music took on a life of its own.

Martha came to the group feeling enraged. She had been to a cousin’s *bar mitzvah* over the weekend in a wealthy area of New York, USA. Describing the ostentatious affair, she reported her anger about how much money had clearly been spent on the event, and how the trivial matters of hair, clothes, and jewelry held a lofty status, whereas it is taboo in her family to talk of things that are “real.” She described how family members’ struggles with mental illness are swept under the rug. For her, the *bar mitzvah* stirred up the stark contradictions in her family between what is real and needs healing, and what is trivial but gets exalted. She felt the whole affair had been filled with “fake” family members and guests. She was furious, talking very quickly and loudly. She noted that even though a few days had passed since the *bar mitzvah*, she was unable to let go of her anger.

Julie began to play a very fast beat to match Martha’s frantic pace. We all began singing—with much lightness and humor—about the fakery. The music was funny and upbeat, and whereas often the speaker just listened to the music, in this case Martha jumped right in and contributed to the song. At one point, she and others stood up and did a dance to indicate the different body parts on which one might receive plastic surgery.



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The Creative Flow

After each speaker concluded, there was usually a brief pause before the music began. Usually during the pause, there was a feeling of excitement in the air—a sense of childish anticipation of how we would create something from nothing. Then someone would begin the chant, and our song began. Folks joined in with the first singer, as they were instructed to do—we did not leave anyone singing alone for long. After a while, members began to add their own chants to the original melody. It was clear, from listening to the variety of musical contributions, that we each interpreted the speaker's words a bit differently.

As both participants and leaders, adding musical phrases seemed scary, and we realized that this was a vulnerable task to give the group. It required a leap of faith to trust that any lyrical contribution would be accepted by the group and incorporated into song. This group was born from Meredith's desire to provide a group where participants could experience God through creativity and resulting interdependence and trust. Meredith's intention became fulfilled as group members described feelings of pleasure while singing together, joining and altering each other's phrases, and inevitably watching the song take off by itself, becoming detached from its creators.

This flow of creativity opened us up to a playful spontaneity to which adults in Western society often lack access. The experience was reminiscent of being a child, and the practice got us out of our heads and into the sheer joy of creating. This was entirely an in-the-moment kind of spiritual practice. Because there was no imperative to produce anything for future use, we did not become overly attached to an outcome, and we simply felt wholly in the moment.

Exploring and Holding

We each had the experience of giving generously with nothing personally to gain except what is gained in community. By design, we all had to give—and receive—together. It was especially meaningful that our creations were based on actual details of each other's lives—real-time joys and pains.

Sarah shared with the group the following vignette: Walking with her toddler granddaughter Grace, Sarah noticed some purple lights shining from a porch. Sarah pointed them out and shared with Grace that she loved the lights. A few days later, Grace's mother told Sarah that she had been walking with Grace when they came upon the same purple lights. Grace had told her mother, "See those purple lights? Grandma loves them. And so do I."

After Sarah's check-in, Julie began strumming on her guitar and softly chanting, "purple lights." After a few repetitions, another participant added, "Grandma loves them." We repeated the two phrases until another participant added, "And so do I."

Music psychotherapist Diane Austin (2001) writes about repetitive "holding" techniques in which the music therapist uses music to create a safe and predictable container for the client to improvise sounds and phrases while exploring



psychic and emotional material. Although our group was not a psychotherapy group, the repetitive nature of our collaborative music served a similar purpose, containing the speaker's words and elevating them to the level of an uninhibited creative exploration. Music therapy literature also emphasizes the importance of mirroring and matching as techniques that support, confirm, and validate clients' musical and emotional expression (Wigram). As the group echoed and complemented one another's lyrical phrases, often fusing two together or building on one another's, we created a sense of attunement that reflected the speaker and changed with the feel of the group.

Deborah came to the first group excited to tell us everything going on in her life. It felt as if she knew she had only ten minutes to unravel for us her entire past and present. She spoke extremely quickly, listing diagnoses in her family history and hardships she had endured throughout her life. She mentioned her history of depression and listed creative outlets she found helpful. She also spoke about her strained relationship with her daughter. When her time was up, she was out of breath. She inhaled deeply, exhaled, and sat back in her chair with a sigh. The group seemed half shocked and half unsure. We took a few moments to be silent together and let the essence of Deborah's words emerge. Julie began a quick, choppy rhythm on her guitar, being careful not to reflect back something that would feel too scattered to provide a foundation for singing. One participant sang the words "slow down" and others joined in. Other words were added, but "slow down" remained the base of the song.

Deborah closed her eyes and seemed to bathe in the sound. She motioned "thank you" to the group with her hands on her heart. The next week she spoke at a slower pace. She focused on a few topics rather than a pressured outpouring. She thanked the group for the previous week's music and shared with us that she had remembered the music several times during the month and had tried to incorporate "slow down" into her daily life.

Finding the Voice Within was a journey of responding to one another in music. We experienced each other's support and viewed our stories from new angles. With few words, we held one another and created an opening to connect with the Divine. ■

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