

The Four Elements

It has often struck me that chanting, in any tradition, is fundamentally a deep immersion experience in the creative power of the universe. Because to make music, you must work—in your body, mind, and spirit—with the four holy elements out of which the earth was fashioned and through which all spiritual transformation happens.

The first element is *breath*. Father Theophane used to like to remind people, “Every breath you take is the breath of God.” Many of the great world religions picture the earth as being created and sustained by the steady, rhythmic “breathing” of God. Virtually every religious tradition starts you off on a spiritual practice by bringing your attention to the breath and teaching you to breathe consciously and fully.

Gregorian chant, of course, works with breath in a particularly intentional way. Because of its long, flowing melismas, it forces you to adopt a breathing pattern of measured exhalation in which the outbreath is substantially longer than the inbreath. You learn to draw a full, conscious inbreath, then release it with a slow, measured count. This training parallels conscious breath work in other sacred traditions and leads to a hypervital-



ization of the body as the blood cells are flooded with oxygen. But all sacred chanting, no matter how complex, provides the opportunity to practice conscious breathing. In fact, unless grounded in the breath, no chanting is really sacred; it doesn't reach far enough into your being.

The second element is tone, or vibration, the sound you make as you add voice to that breath. Again, our religious traditions all tell us that creation came into existence through the power of vibration. The Christian language for expressing this idea is "In the beginning was the Word . . ." (for what else is a word if not vibration?). Mythologically, the world was "spoken" into existence. So when we make a tone, we are participating in the sacred creative act that shapes and sustains all being.

Singers very quickly learn that the only way to make an authentic tone is to start from the center—that place deep inside you, called the diaphragm, where both your breath and the bottom of your vocal column are anchored. Whether a tone is natural and resonant or forced, shrill, and breathy depends on whether you sing from this place. To make an authentic tone, you have to come back to center.

There are a lot of gimmicks to fake or force a tone. But to sing authentically, we have to begin with what we are, not what we're not. When we work with tone in music, we are really working with the deepest and most revealing aspects of our selfhood. Just as you can't fake your true self, you also can't fake your true singing voice. Herein lies one of the greatest transformative powers of the yoga of choir: it catapults you directly into the heart of your own deep selfhood, the authentic ground of all spiritual work.

The third sacred element is intentionality, or the meaning of the words. This aspect is particularly important in Christian psalmody. Certainly Christian chant makes use of breath and vibration, as all chant does. But it is not primarily about sacred vibration or about the rhythmic, almost hypnotic repetition of a single phrase or mantra—not traditionally anyway.⁷ In Christian sacred chanting, you have to know and understand the

words; you have to accept them into your being in a fundamental way. In fact, that's why the Vatican II council instructed that the psalms be translated into the vernacular—English, French, Swahili, and all the languages in which people worship. The meaning of the words is always primary in Christian chanting. Contemplative psalmody is a matter of staying close to the text, of being with it and in it.

It isn't easy, of course, to stay present without the mind wandering—it never has been. Remember that admonition of Evagrius, back in the fourth century: "To chant the psalms is a good thing; to chant the psalms without distraction is an even better thing." In the eleventh century, Saint Romuald added words of encouragement; if the mind wanders, one must gently but firmly keep bringing it back to the psalm. The idea of conscious attention and consent to the meaning of a passage is a key element in the Christian transformational path.

This awareness has immediate repercussions in the choir. The psalms embrace a wide range of emotions, and while you don't have to become emotional yourself, you do have to pay respectful attention to what the words are saying. If you're bored or your head is out to lunch, everything goes wrong in psalm singing: the pitch goes flat, you fall asleep, and the music is dead. Feeding intentionality into your chanting is perhaps the single most important way of making the music—and yourself—stay awake. When you energize the psalm by paying attention, you energize yourself as well, and your singing helps you gain spiritual force rather than losing it.

The fourth sacred element is community. A good part of the discipline of the monastic choir—or any choir—lies in the art of listening to one another and adjusting to one another. Everyone sings with a slightly different vocal instrument, and the beauty comes in blending them together through a subtle give-and-take. You also have to be aware of the space that the person next to you is taking up and avoid the temptation to wander off into a personal emotional high. I remember one evening at vespers

with the monks at Saint Benedict's when I was so pleased that I knew a particular psalm tone well that I started singing with wonderful drama and verve, having myself a grand old time. Afterward one of the monks pulled me aside and said very sweetly but pointedly, "My choirmaster once told me, if you can't hear the person next to you, you're singing too loud."

Breath, tone, intentionality, and community: it seems like there are a lot of things to pay attention to all at once. But sometimes it all comes together. One Saturday night at Saint Benedict's, when we again gathered for vespers, I looked around to see only a skeleton crew of monks; most of the best singers were away for the evening. "We're in trouble," I thought, for Saturday is the one night of the week when the monks sing the *Salve Regina*, an extraordinarily beautiful and demanding Gregorian hymn in honor of the Virgin Mary which soars to the stratosphere and lasts for more than five minutes.

It took only two seconds for me to realize that we weren't in trouble after all. I have never in my life heard Gregorian chant sung more beautifully. Something in those men kicked in, and the eight of them were singing with one voice, as if one angel was soaring above them, weaving their hearts and souls into a brilliant, utterly moving love song. It was definitely a case of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. It happened that night because the monks were intensely alive, connected with themselves, each other, and the prayer they were singing. Breath, vibration, emotional intentionality, and community—the heart of the Christian yoga in a laserlike moment of perfection.

It is probably not coincidental that the monks were singing Gregorian chant that evening. As I said earlier, there is a particularly intense chemistry between Gregorian chant and the love mysticism at the heart of the Cistercian charism, and when that chemistry is "on," it attains an unparalleled sublimity. But I have experienced much the same perfection in a very different setting; in fact, it remains one of my most remarkable experiences of sacred chanting. I was coordinating an interfaith worship



service in Vancouver, British Columbia, in the spring of 2004, celebrating the visit of the Dalai Lama. As each of seven religious traditions (Hindu, Jewish, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, and Native American) led us in ten minutes of their respective sacred prayers and chanting, the energy in the room began to build.

The plan had called for the service to end with a silent candlelit recessional. But as participants slowly and somewhat reluctantly began to file out, it seemed that something different was being called for, and without fully knowing what I was doing, I launched the chant “Holy, Holy, Holy One.” This is a very simple three-part round (to the tune of the old folksong “Hey, Ho, Nobody Home”) that our contemplative prayer groups in British Columbia had been working with as part of an ongoing project to develop simple forms of Christian mantric chanting suitable for use with Centering Prayer (I’ll speak more about this project in part three of this book).

The chant caught. In an instant, it swept like a grassfire through the crowd, and as the cavernous old church emptied row by row, the singing continued to build. An hour later, when the last row finally exited the building, I emerged into the night to a sight I will never forget. The entire group was still there, gathered in a circle on the sidewalk, and the chant was still going strong. By the light of hundreds of flickering candles, I watched Sufi dervishes whirling beneath Buddhist prayer flags, while Native Americans in feathered headdresses kept the drumbeat, and saffron robes, white turbans, and yamulkes all pressed closely together singing, “Holy, holy, holy one . . .” What a portrait of the human family!

The pictures of those two very different chanting experiences stand closely together in my heart; I don’t easily think of either separately. The taste of oneness was the same—the first within a small, cloistered group of men for whom the Gregorian love song to Mary carried infinite yearning and infinite particularity; the second within a far-flung group of human beings, held together by what is most simple and universal in all



human experience—breath, tone, intentionality, and community. Somehow these two interlocking vignettes renew my hope that it's not a question of either-or but of both-and. The Christian tradition of sacred chanting has been carried in some magnificent wineskins, but it works in very simple ones too, once they are put in the service of what seems to be the overwhelming movement of the Spirit in our own times: to unite the hearts of all human beings in a mutual compassion that makes a strength of our diversity and creates safety and healing for our planet.

As we begin again with what is most basic and universal in the art of sacred chanting, I am guided by the image of the fruit tree that must be pruned regularly if it is to continue bearing fruit. The Christian tradition has recently come through just such a pruning. In the next part of this book, I hope to show how we are beginning to reap the fruit.