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# An act of presence: Threshold singers bring songs of comfort and healing

by Lucinda Bowen · October 22, 2015



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A year ago I joined the Threshold Singers of Indian Hill, a choir with an unusual mission: to sing at the bedsides of people who are sick or dying. Though I am a lifelong musician, I had never experienced music quite like this before. Threshold singing is not a performance; it is an act of presence. And this Friday evening, you can experience this remarkable music for yourself at “Songs of Comfort and Healing,” a free community event at Littleton’s Indian Hill Music School.



I discovered bedside singing the same month my childhood best friend’s father lost his life to esophageal cancer and a college classmate lost her three-year fight with ovarian cancer, leaving kids the same ages as mine without their mom. These deaths filled me with powerless grief and also a sense of urgency. As I wrestled with my inability to fix the eventuality of death or the brutality of pain, it felt imminently important to learn to stay present in the face of loss. I wanted to be able to offer comfort when there wasn’t a single helpful thing to say. But how?

In Threshold, we sing a cappella—without accompaniment—in small groups of three or four. Most of our songs are simple three-part harmony, with calming rhythms and encouraging words. Though they are similar to hymns, our songs are not religious, and most are written specifically for the national Threshold Choir. Some are about celebration, and others are about grief and healing. All of them are sung quietly.

### Intimate, emotional, comforting

Because it is so quiet and small, bedside singing is a very intimate experience. We sit clustered around clients who are ill or dying, sometimes in their last hours of life. Without accompaniment, our voices sound bare and sometimes raw, as we are touched by the emotion in the room. With Threshold I have been invited to sing in bedrooms and in hospitals, at dining room tables, and, once, seated around a client’s beautifully decorated Christmas tree. Though we sing to provide comfort, we do not touch our clients, who may be fragile or in pain. Even so, the voice’s vibrations can comfort and gentle a dying body in ways we might not be brave or careful enough to do with our hands. And as many clients find, through the ears is a sneaky way to be touched. The music can slip right past your defense mechanisms and get to unguarded emotions.

Of course, you do not have to be gravely ill to receive or appreciate Threshold’s music. As part of our training, we practice singing to each other, as well as being sung to. This is one of the most pleasurable parts of our practice, and the desire to share that experience with the community has inspired events like Threshold’s “Songs of Comfort and Healing” this weekend. We have a large reclining chair at every rehearsal, and we take turns lying back and receiving a song from small groups of singers. Receiving a song feels totally different from listening to one. The group’s soft voices surround you in unison first, then braid into harmony. Sometimes the singers will repeat a song three or four times, and the words layer over themselves, shifting the meaning each time you hear them. I once received the song “You Are Not Alone” (whose verses are not much more complicated than the title), and it wasn’t until the fifth repetition that something unlocked in me and I understood how not alone I was.

That kind of experience is common, though not expected. While the impact of our singing is often invisible and deeply personal to each client, sometimes you can watch something meaningful happen. I once saw a comatose client’s whole body visibly relax during the fifth relentless verse of “Amazing Grace,” long after I would have preferred to move on to another piece. We have watched clients’ vital signs change on their monitors—heart rates slow down and oxygen increases. Nurses often comment on how peaceful their floor feels when we sing, especially at night.

### Singing lullabies

Because receiving the music is so different for each person, the leader of each sing makes decisions about tempo, repeats, and volume at the spur of the moment. We have to watch one another, and the client, very carefully during a sing, and it takes a deep presence and ability to notice and respond without losing focus or the melody line.

There have been sings that have profoundly moved me. Recently a client asked to show us photos of his huge extended family, as a way to reciprocate the intimacy of our singing for him. There was the supposedly unconscious gentleman who opened his eyes and called out his wife’s name a few notes into our first song, the first time he’d spoken in weeks. And there was the charming, lonely woman who spent 20 minutes regaling us with stories of growing up out west after we happened to sing “Shenandoah” to her.

When I first started singing with Threshold, the idea of bedside singing was brand new to me. I didn’t know that singing to someone afraid or in pain was something that helped. It felt like such a small thing. After all, this kind of singing is small, and quiet, and not designed to fix anything. But I have been affected profoundly by my experience singing at bedsides, and once I encountered the idea, I felt like an evangelist—I wanted everyone to know about it. I called my childhood best friend, whose father had just entered hospice, and told her about Threshold, thinking that maybe she could have a local choir come visit him once he got settled over the next few days. It turned out there wasn’t time for that. Dave died later that same evening, with my friend sitting by his bedside in the middle of the night. But because of our conversation, she was singing lullabies.

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Claire · 7 days ago

What wonderful, wonderful work you are doing! This makes me want to sing and be sung to!

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Elizabeth F · 7 days ago

This is a beautiful piece, that brings tears to my eyes; especially the ending. Thank you for sharing it with us!

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