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## BODYSONG: How Singing Reveals & Heals

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Catherine, a large, imposing woman, walked into my studio one evening and forthrightly shook my hand. She had come, she said, to improve her singing, something she had wanted to do for a long time. We searched through some sheet music and finally agreed upon a song she knew, *Come Rain or Come Shine*. "I don't know this song by heart," she said, so I suggested that she stand behind me and sing, looking over my shoulder at the music, while I played the piano.

She began without hesitation and sang the song correctly, in tune and in time, in a strong steady voice. She sang well, as quite sure of herself, and I found myself banging out the song in a solid accompaniment. But as I continued to play, I realized that I was feeling somewhat uncomfortable, even intimidated by this large being, looming over me. For as she sang, she made no movement at all, holding her hands at her sides as if at attention. Her rendition of this passionate song was passionless. There was an implied attitude which seemed to say, 'I must do this right, and so should you.' And we were indeed doing it right. I wasn't about to make any mistakes.

And then an image came to me. Standing behind me was not a person, but a tree. A tall, rigid, unbendable, determined-to-stand-right-where-it-is tree, with no expressive or unique branches and leaves, just a thick straight trunk. It was not fun to play piano for a tree. How much fun could it be to be a tree?

I told her she had a good voice and a nice musical command, but she seemed rather stiff and formal. Beyond sensing her stiffness, I said I didn't know much more about her through her singing. I felt she was invulnerable and didn't let her real self be known.

She was able to take this in and agreed, without defensiveness, that this was her problem. She knew she could sing, but was unable to let go and sing with passion. I asked her if this was also true about her as a person, and of course, it was.

Catherine, who came from an Irish Catholic family, described her childhood as happy and carefree. She had a warm and loving relationship with her father and was truly daddy's little girl. But, as she remembers it, everything changed when she began to develop sexually. Her father became distant, critical and controlling, especially when she showed some independence. Both parents, in fact, limited her freedom and made her

teenage years very difficult, preventing her from normal adolescent socialization.

Now, at thirty-eight, she was stiff and wooden in her singing and in her personal life. Being attractive, there was no shortage of suitors, yet it was difficult for her to form lasting relationships. I reminded her of what she said about not knowing *Come Rain or Come Shine* "by heart", and suggested that maybe this was also true of her—that she couldn't sing the song from her heart and didn't let others know her by heart. She was affected by this and melted a little.

I did some bodywork with her for twenty minutes or so, pointing out the tightness of her belly, and the stiffness of her spine. I then had her hold a note on the sound *ah* while spreading her arms wide and vigorously rotating her hips or bouncing her entire body. She was able to let go, began to breathe much more fully, and seemed to enjoy it. Her demeanor changed somewhat, her body becoming more fluid, color flushing her cheeks.

I asked her to sing the same song again—the difference was dramatic. I do not overstate this. Underneath her formality and stiffness—her bodily defense against her sexuality—lived a passionate, strong, yet soft woman. And she could sing with more than just metered correctness. She sang with depth, with meaning, with a womanly sexuality—with heart—and by so doing, had allowed me to know her. I also realized that my piano playing was freer and more expressive. We were in tune, communicating in a harmonious relationship. I no longer found her to be so imposing, for I knew much more about who she really was. She had become human and real, and was easier to be with. Singing reveals.

Singing brings the truth to the surface. We have only to listen, and let ourselves be affected by what we hear and see, to know the person inside the voice. For singing can speak volumes about our past. It is much more than making a beautiful sound or hitting the right notes. It is human music—the sound of us in all our complexity.

From the outset, Sarah made me aware of her deep religious commitment. A gifted singer, with a smooth, warm voice, Sarah sang praise to her God. After several sessions, she invited me to a musical variety show sponsored by her church.

That night, I heard everything from folk songs, to show tunes, to rock 'n roll. When the show ended, however, I sensed something missing in all the performers I had watched.

"Everyone was very competent at what they did," I said, "but where is anger and sexuality in these people." She said candidly, that none of them were angry or sexual since they were followers of a spiritual group that expected them to transcend anger and remain celibate.

Then there was June, a pleasant, thickly built woman in her early thirties, who sang for me one day. She sang perfectly well, though, too softly. I told her I was sure there was more sound in there somewhere. She agreed and said she had always wanted to "belt it out," but couldn't.

So we went to work. I had her do aggressive vocal exercises specifically designed to open the mouth and throat, and therefore, to produce more sound. I sat her on a large gymnastic ball and asked her to bounce vigorously while vocalizing. I had her lie down and hold an extended note while I gently pushed on her rib cage, literally to force her sound—and indeed, more sound did come.

When I do this with most people, and they hear the sound that is locked up inside of them, they are usually affected in some way—excited by hearing their real sound or even moved to tears. When such exercises are followed with a song, they will easily sing louder and more robustly. By hearing the strength, power and resilience of their voices through my assistance, they are able to produce more sound themselves.

June, on the other hand, was able to make more sound when I pushed it out of her, and she was willing to let me do this. But when she sang afterward, nothing changed. She still sang nicely, but too softly. I tried everything in my arsenal to bring her out, to help her sing more loudly, with more energy, commitment and aggression, but to no avail.

Throughout this work her demeanor remained the same: She was always pleasant and agreeable, would do whatever I asked, showed no sign of complaint or discomfort and would remain unaffected. I realized, after some effort, that I was getting tired and frustrated. I saw that no matter what I did, it wasn't working. I could feel that part of my own personality that will endlessly swim upstream and get nowhere—my own neurotic struggle.

And then I understood what was going on. She was non-verbally telling me that I could not get to her. "You don't want to sing, do you?" I said. "You're holding out on me." She smiled. "You're just not going to do it."

She said, "No, I guess I'm not." She had been forced to do things she didn't want to do all her life, and now she couldn't even do things she wanted to do. She knew that deep inside she was very angry and resentful. She really did need to 'belt it out.'

I had her look at me and say, "No, I won't," repeatedly, while shaking her fists at me. Then I asked her if she was willing to hit the bed with a tennis racquet and imagine she was *belting* all those people in her life who made her so angry. Some genuine anger broke through. Almost immediately, before she could collect herself, I asked her to sing again. This time she sang a different tune. Her voice rang out with more volume and passion. Her strength, usually displayed by her endurance and tolerance,



was now mobilized actively in vocal release. She had taken a step away from her compliance and toward her real impulses. Singing reveals and heals.

In what part of the voice does a person instinctively?  
Here are some things I listen for when working with clients vocally:

Traditionally, women have tended to fear and avoid their anger and aggression. This might show up as singing sweetly, emphasizing the higher registers of the voice, the head tones. Men, wanting to be powerful and aggressive tend to sing lower and stronger. (Women, of course, do sing about an octave higher than men. What I am talking about here is more a matter of how people choose to express themselves than what their biology dictates.) In these days of changing and confused sexual roles, however, it is not unusual to find the opposite: women gravitating toward the lower part of their voices, emphasizing their aggression and avoiding their softness, and men singing more from the heart, more sweetly than aggressively. Singing sweetly is great if one is also capable of singing with some fire. What I look for is whether or not the form of expression tends to be fixed.

Something else I listen for in a person's singing is how freely that person can sing with the piano. What about someone who needs to hear the melody of a song played for them to sing the song correctly?

Ideally, the singer provides the melody—the piano, the accompaniment. After a reasonable rehearsal period, the vocalist should retain the melody and not require melodic support. Otherwise, such a need could indicate a lack of trust in oneself and possibly a dependent relationship. Dependency, for pianist and singer, as in any relationship, is confining and stifling.

What about expressiveness? How easily does one convey the emotional content and meaning of a song? One doesn't have to be an experienced singer to be expressive. I often hear beginners sing with flair. Such ease, or lack of it, is an expression of character.

Does one sing in tune or not? If not, are they one of the three percent who do not have the gene for singing in tune? Usually, this not the case. More often, people don't sing in tune because they are afraid, and because they are afraid they don't breathe, and because they don't breathe—they think rather than feel. And what they think is: *I'm making a fool of myself, he's going to laugh at me, he's going to say I have no talent, I have no business being here, I'm sure I'm doing this all wrong, I'll never hit that high note.* That's why most people sing out of tune. They're not listening to the song—they're worrying! They are not in a dialogue, which is what singing with accompaniment is. They are doing a monologue.

Helping a person to sing in tune is sometimes as easy as telling them they are off key—that is, bringing them back from where they are, in their heads, to the reality of the moment. Sometimes, in a workshop, I will sing the correct melody of a song directly into a person's ear. This often works. At other times, I put my arm around them and help them move to the music, and if they can relax, the correct pitch comes.

When we are in tune with ourselves, when we let the music take us, we flow and we often sing in tune. Conversely, when we are out of tune with ourselves, we are out of tune with the piano, and in some way, with the world. Simply, we can't relate.

I think of singing in tune like throwing a crumpled piece of paper into a waste basket. If we aim, we often miss. If we just throw it without too much planning or estimating, we often get it in. So, too, with intonation. Too much thinking about it and we stiffen up, and there goes the pitch. If we relax and let it go, more often than not, the pitch is okay. And the pitch only has to be okay to be acceptable. Many big stars sing out of tune at times, but their energy and expressiveness override these flaws. They mean what they say (or sing), and this is much more important than being perfectly in tune.

I once attended a voice symposium at which a paper was presented called, *Fifty Tenors Singing High C*. The main point made by the presenter was that of the fifty tenors, only six were actually hitting high C—the others were hitting **B** and **B b**, even though the written note was **C** and the orchestras were playing in **C**! The human voice doesn't hold pitch like a musical instrument, a machine. Humans sing sort of in tune. Our ears compensate and hear the notes as in tune enough. What does this mean for the average person? It means let go and sing, and don't be overly concerned about being perfectly in tune.

There are those, of course, who need more work to sing in tune or to sing at all.

And since we are not machines, this can be a complex process. I worked with a German man, Otto, for some time, who came from a very stern family—no music, no singing, no laughing, no touching. He could not sing a note in tune. He had no connection with the idea of matching his pitch to a piano. I'd play a note and he'd stare at me blankly. He couldn't reproduce what he heard. He couldn't tell, in fact, if he was singing higher or lower than the piano. He had no internal reference for this task.

I had him lie down and I sang the pitches to him while I sat at the piano across the room. Still no change. I sat by him, put my hand on his chest and sang a note to him. He sang it correctly. We went up and down the scale together, him lying down, I with my hand on his chest. He got all the notes right. I asked him to open his eyes and look at me and we shared a quiet moment for what he'd accomplished.



During the next several months, I moved further and further away from him in small increments. If I moved too far, his pitch would go. He would ask me to come closer. When I sang the note from a closer position, he'd once again, get it right. Little by little, I moved away from him and closer to the piano. When finally seated at the piano, I sang and played the note at the same time. He was able to sing the correct notes. I started playing louder and singing softer, until the piano was more audible than my voice. Eventually, he sang the correct pitches with the piano and no longer needed my tactile or vocal support

In time, he got off the bed and vocalized in a sitting position, and then onto his feet. He started singing simple songs---*Love Me Tender, Love me true, Never let me go*. This song had an easy melody and an important meaning for Otto, for if his family had loved him tenderly, he would have felt safer expressing himself.

Eventually, this man went on to sing completely in tune with ease and feeling. He did a weekend workshop with me and sang with a conviction that others found very moving. Of course, his singing remains somewhat awkward and new. He doesn't expect or desire to become a professional. He has merely expanded enough to enjoy the pleasure of expressing himself. Singing heals.

And moreover, singing just feels good. I once listened to a recording made by a very talented female singer, and realized that what made her singing so appealing was that she simply enjoyed making sound. The words almost didn't matter. She was just blowing off steam, releasing emotion through her voice, expressing her aliveness and passion---and it was very affecting.

I have enjoyed the pleasure of singing for almost as long as I can remember. It always made me feel better, more alive and more aware. When I started Bioenergetic work, I noticed that my singing was freer and more connected after doing bodywork. I developed my practice around this theory: If people are more in touch with themselves, their impulses and their bodies, they sing with ease and pleasure. I have found this to be almost universally true.

I have been working for some time now with a man in his early forties who is quite frozen in fear, and whose body is fairly uncoordinated because of physical abuse from his father. His sessions have become a source of liberation and have substantially loosened him up. We've worked to mobilize his aggression through expressive bodywork. He also takes great pleasure in digging into lyrics like: *I've gotta be free, I've gotta be free, Daring to try, To do it or die, I've Gotta Be Me*. And every day he is a little freer and a bit more himself, not only in his singing, but in his personal life. He is genuinely thrilled to feel his spirit rekindle. It is a joy to watch.

Singing goes deep. It moves, it inspires, it transforms, it enlightens. It makes us vibrate inside our bodies. We become a musical instrument, we resonate. Singing transports us to another mode of communication, beyond our normal means of self-expression, to heightened expression. We long more longingly, ache more achingly, love more lovingly, and express our happiness more happily. Music impels us to do this.

Here are a few pointers on how to sing for pleasure:

1. Before you sing, loosen up. If you know the Bioenergetic exercises, do them. If not, use whatever means you can to mobilize, to move, to stretch and especially, to get in touch with your body and your feelings.
2. As you use your body, let your voice express what you feel. Allow yourself to yawn, sigh, moan or groan. Try to find the sound for what you experience in your body. If someone steps on your toe, you make a particular sound. What is the sound of you stretching---or the sound of you bending over and letting your upper body, your head, the muscles of your face and your belly relax? Don't work hard at this, let it come naturally.
3. Next, do the following vocal warm-up exercises for ten minutes or so. (All of these should be done with your jaw hanging in a relaxed position, and your tongue easily lying flat behind your lower teeth. Your mouth should stay constantly open for the duration of the note you are singing. Important: Do not focus on how your voice sounds, but how it *feels*. Is your throat tight? If so, can you allow it to let go? How does letting go of your tight throat feel when you sing?)
  - a) With your feet about shoulder width apart and parallel, relax your belly, your shoulders, and your jaw, and bounce up and down from your knees, while holding a note on the sound 'YA.' Choose a note in a comfortable place in your voice. Don't push or force the sound. Let it flow out, allowing the bouncing to help you. Experiment going slightly higher each time you sing. Go as high as you can without hurting yourself, and then go as low as you can, all the while bouncing and singing 'YA.'

## BodySong: How Singing Reveals & Heals

Stop bouncing and hold the same sound while tapping or rubbing your chest. Tap or rub harder, softer. Notice what happens to your voice.

- b) Hold the same sound while gently rubbing your throat at the larynx (your Adam's Apple). Again, sing a little higher each time, then lower.
  - c) Spread your arms wide apart. Drop your jaw and hold a note on the same sound while rotating your hips. Let go and sing it out. Again, don't worry how it sounds---pay attention to how it feels.
4. Now, sing a song you know. Sing it in the most comfortable place in your voice. Sing it and move—bounce, rotate your hips or dance. Let the feeling of the song dictate how you move. Try to get past your own self-consciousness and see how much you can let go. Remember Tom Cruise having fun doing this in the film, *Risky Business*, or Gene Kelly doing *Singin' In The Rain*? Let it go. Sing it out. And most importantly, let yourself feel whatever you happen to feel. You might feel great joy or exhilaration, or perhaps, even an overwhelming sadness. Trust whatever comes up and be true to yourself. If singing makes you cry, cry until you stop. The release will probably feel good. When the wave of feeling subsides, try singing the same song again and notice how it feels. Singing can help you to know a little more about who you are. Singing reveals. And it can help you to let go, to express, to sing out your pain, your passion and your joy---your BodySong. This release brings pleasure. Singing heals.

Sing  
Sing a Song  
Sing out loud  
Sing out strong...  
Don't worry that it's  
Not good enough  
For anyone else to hear  
Just Sing  
Sing a song