

Carried by Song and Community

I was raised in a musical family. The house I grew up in was also filled with passionate philosophies about justice and human rights.

But for me, music and activism didn't really come together until I was 23, when the Amandla Chorus came into existence, largely by happenstance, and I began to see that my music and my activism didn't have to live separate lives.

I'd learned South African freedom songs while living at Noonday Farm in Winchendon, Massachusetts. These songs sprouted here in the Pioneer Valley after my friend, Rosie Heidkamp—who'd spent part of her childhood in South Africa—heard me sing one of them and suggested we get a group together for an afternoon and try singing a few more. Forty people showed up and could hardly stop singing these compelling and contagious songs. On that day in January of 1988, Amandla was born.

Singing on a regular basis with people I care about gives me strength: I can refuse to believe that the way to treat people is to bomb and brutalize them. Singing helps me debunk the myth that money is a god, and instead enables me to try to uphold ways of justice...because in Amandla we sing about it every week. The messages of Madison Avenue and Hollywood—that women are window dressing and men are for violence—bounce off me because I am inoculated by the deep experience of singing from the heart. Every cell in me resonates as the songs lift me to a better place.

Over the years, the group's personnel has changed and our repertoire has expanded to include songs of peace and justice from around the world. In my idealistic youth, I had visions of Amandla changing the world with our songs. Now (in my idealistic middle age) I have visions and the experience of Amandla singers changing *ourselves*. I've let go of an obsession about "saving the world"—whatever that means. But I haven't lost hope; I'm just coming at it from a different angle. I think the real "world-changing" begins when the Amandla Chorus *becomes* community. Not only when we work to sing at the same tempo and resist going flat, but also when we share each others' joys and sorrows. Amandla (as with any group) is made up of people...and people's family members die, marriages sometimes fall apart, cancer happens, miscarriages...and there are also weddings, babies born, dreams realized, children launched.

If Amandla has an impact on an audience, I'm glad for it. If, by some chance, we were to "save the world" with our songs, I'd take it! But as [Wally](#) and [Juanita Nelson](#) taught me starting when I was 21, change begins with the individual or it's all a bunch of hot air.

I can say for certain that my involvement with Amandla has changed me. It's made me less pessimistic, more able to grieve and enjoy, and more compassionate. It's given me community in the truest sense and restored a sense of "tribe" or "village" in a culture that's programmed to strip us of connection so we'll feel insecure and like we have no choice but to purchase more *stuff*.

While reading a book by David James Duncan, *My Story as Told by Water*, I came across three amazing sentences: "I believe we're all, at bottom, mere renters; mere campers; mere beggars

with bowls. I believe what we seek, ultimately, is not to possess but to be possessed by what we love. I don't believe this can happen, don't believe that things become ours, unless we too become theirs; love is reciprocal." (pp. 76–77)

Is the music mine? Not really. I am in love, I am heartbroken, I am jubilant...because I belong to the music. Singing with Amandla makes me more human; I see the same thing happen with others. The music carries us, and we learn to carry ourselves and, when needed, each other.

Frenzied shoppers at Wal-Mart may wish to be possessed by a DVD player or digital camera. I'd prefer to belong to a freedom song and one amazing community.

And as the songs lead us into prisons and schools, concert halls and homeless shelters, nursing homes and houses of worship, rallies, funerals, and to the bedsides of the dying...I know I have taken the musical gifts my parents gave me, and made them my own. I am no longer the isolated four-year-old, itchy in my fancy recital dress and fixated on getting every note right. Through the love of my community, I've discovered the relationship between art and activism.

I like this a lot better.

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