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SPIRIT'S CALL CHOIR

The choir for people who thought they couldn't sing!

By Margaret Tobin

Add background and 4 lines of poem to Spirit's Call graphic – as it appears on BACK of choir brochure



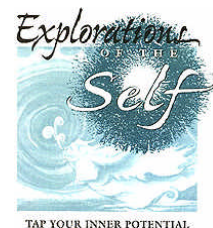
Introduction

A vibrant local example of the use of expressive arts to encourage the flourishing of human potential is the Spirit's Call Choir. The choir is a Winnipeg offering of Spirit's Call, which was established to support personal and universal harmony and balance through the integration of healing, learning and the arts. The serendipitous story of the emergence and development of the Spirit's Call Choir seems a fitting contribution to this special issue.

History of the Choir

The idea for the Spirit's Call Choir came from an "Explorations of the Self" workshop

Wrap text around Ex of Self graphic - as it appears on the choir brochure



with **Margaret Tobin** and **Dorothy Becker** on "Exploring Polarities" sponsored by the University of Manitoba Counselling Service and Spirit's Call at St. Norbert Arts Centre in November 2000. During a chanting activity in the safety of the workshop environment, people who had been told and believed they could NOT sing found their voices in new ways! When participants felt free to let their sound come out, they experienced the deep joy and transformation that can come from spontaneous vocal expression. They looked and felt radiant! Someone jokingly said "We should form a choir" and the Spirit's Call Choir was born!

Growth of the Choir

The choir started with a dozen people singing along to CD's in my home in December 2000. We thought we had a great turn out when about fifteen people came to our first Winter Solstice Celebration that year!

Spirit's Call Choir now has over sixty-five names on its member list and meets about twice a month for singing gatherings. The public awareness and growth of the choir in part are due to the enthusiasm, talents and contacts of **Catherine Cote**, our "PR Goddess"! Catherine's press releases have generated considerable media attention, including an interview and opportunity to sing on CBC's morning radio show with Terry McLeod. We have received invitations to sing at "gigs" of individuals and groups whose work we support (eg. **Lynn Bremault-Parent**'s show at the Franco Manitoba Cultural Centre, **Amnesty International** fundraisers, the "**Healing Harmonics**" concert). We have had offers of support for recording our joyous sound.

Spirit's Call Choir also sings for special events - to launch projects we wish to support, such as the launch of **Darci Adam**'s *Express Yourself* expressive arts venture - and to celebrate occasions such as holidays, important passages and Solstices. Solstice events that incorporate nature and the elements are fast becoming a special feature of the choir. These have included our inaugural Solstice Celebration in December 2000, last December's beautiful Winter Solstice Celebration (co-created by *Express Yourself* and the choir) and our upcoming Summer Solstice Celebration in La Barriere Park on June 23rd (a Singing and Drumming Circle Co-created by Drum Circle Facilitator **Henry Zacharias** and the choir.) This Summer Solstice event is a donation fundraiser to support development projects and is open to the general public.

The choir's new "home"

As the choir became more known and its numbers grew, our singing gatherings moved from one home to another until it was clear that a larger permanent singing space was needed. Finding our new "home" involved an extensive search. Since the choir is a co-created adventure, the various needs and preferences expressed by members were important factors to consider.

Choir members wanted a central location, close to bus routes, with convenient parking and reasonable rent. The "ambiance" of the space was important. Catherine Cote and I diligently visited and reflectively considered one site after another. Various churches were offered as possible locations. While Spirit's Call and the choir are based on a holistic perspective that integrates mind, body and spirit, members expressed a strong preference for a "neutral" space, rather than one with any religious or denominational affiliation. We thought an arts space would be ideal, since that would honour the expressive arts aspect of our merry "band". We also considered educational settings, since learning, growth and development are central to the choir's purpose.

Infinite possibility and the power of intention

Spirit's Call and the choir value a belief in "infinite possibility" and hold that intention is a powerful factor in creating our reality. However, we were becoming quite discouraged with our space search, as one place after another proved unsuitable. When someone finally suggested the University Women's Club, we realized immediately that this

beautifully maintained heritage home on the river was the perfect new “home” for our choir.

Members who had loved the personal and informal feeling of our home-based singing gatherings were delighted to discover that our new “home” even retains that special quality! Our choir also fits the club’s mandate for supporting cultural, educational and community activities. While the University Women’s Club honours tradition and the heritage of its property, it has been very receptive to our somewhat unconventional approach to a “choir”. Some club members already have joined our choral ranks!

Vision – Spirit’s Call Choir supports personal, choral and global harmony

Personal Harmony

As experienced in the workshop where the choir began, singing can bring balance, harmony and transformation to our inner state of being. Shifting our energy to a balanced state through making sound can help access and express the profound joy and beauty at our core.

Choral Harmony

Singing together with others in an atmosphere of acceptance, trust and fun connects us to each other through our shared experience and to a larger reality through the meaning and vibrations carried by our songs.

Many who believed they could not sing were told that early in life – by teachers, parents or others. Often this was because their vocal range was different from the relatively high range where the melody line of most songs is pitched.

In the fall of 2001, gifted musician and experienced choral director **Lyle Eide** joined the choir to help us learn to sing in parts. It can take time to feel comfortable singing a part that is not the familiar melody. Learning the parts separately before putting it all together helps those with different vocal ranges to feel confident in making their own special sound. The choir now has a rich harmonic sound that encompasses up to 4 vocal ranges. We also have added instruments and interpretive dance to our vocal expression. The choir’s repertoire consists of contemporary and traditional music, gospel, chants and original music written by choir members.

Global Harmony

Spirit’s Call Choir has supported community and global harmony by singing at “gigs” of groups whose work we support. We are beginning to receive small honouraria for our singing, which we add to our development fund. Preliminary plans are underway to support development projects through our own fundraising gigs. There is a donations dish at our singing gatherings for contributions to causes chosen by choir consensus. We also believe that the vibration of our joyful sound can help raise the vibrations in the field around us and in our world.

Hallmarks of the choir – Honouring Inner Wisdom and Balancing Polarities

As the choir is evolving and clarifying its vision and approach, the themes of listening to our inner wisdom and balancing polarities - from the workshop at which the choir began – have continued to be guiding principles. By acting in ways that are true to our deepest self, we believe we can support harmony and beauty in individual and larger ways. By moving beyond the either/or, right/wrong approach of the dualistic perspective and attempting to embrace the holistic both/and approach, we hope to honour and incorporate diversity in a way that strengthens the collective experience.

In practical terms, this means that when members have personal priorities that take precedence over choir involvement, their choice is understood and supported. When various members have different ideas about how the choir should evolve, we attempt to take the holistic approach of balancing polarities and respecting all voices in our decision-making, as well as in our singing. While this has posed interesting challenges at times, as we chart our course of growth based on these principles, the choir seems to be creating a synergistic magic that is very special indeed.

Flexible participation and beautiful sound

Regular participation at our singing gatherings is not “required” to be a member in good standing. Singing at “gigs” is also optional. It can be challenging to plan events with this lack of certainty. However, old and new members alike repeatedly say they value and appreciate this open approach, so our “group norms” support flexibility of participation as well as of expression.

Thanks to the talents and gifts of our harmonic choral director **Lyle Eide**, we now are learning some quite challenging music. Members are excited about this stretch toward new learning, harmonic sound and choral excellence. We do polish the fine points of our singing as we are progressing with this development. However, rather than a drive for “perfection” through practices mandated primarily to eliminate “mistakes”, the beauty of our joyous sound comes in large part from the joy in our learning and the energy of our free expression. In fact, when members who had not been at recent singing gatherings turned out to sing for the Amnesty International benefit concert, we sounded wonderful!

(insert photo here perhaps? We have a great group shot from the Amnesty event!)

Co-creation – organizational aspects

Spirit’s Call Choir is a co-created endeavour. I personally held that intention very strongly from the time we decided to form the choir, since I already was involved with many other things and was reluctant to establish an enterprise for which I felt the primary responsibility. While I was conscious of my familiar “counsellor” pull toward “making things work”, I withstood this temptation on numerous occasions and intentionally left space for whatever might be generated from within our membership or by fortuitous “coincidence”.

For example, after our two initial singing gatherings in December 2000, when we no longer could rely on seasonal music, I resisted the inclination to produce songs for the next phase of our singing. Members willingly responded to the invitation to bring music that was meaningful to them. Some of these songs remain core pieces in our repertoire today.

Other contributions from members have been central to the choir's success on many levels. **Catherine Cote** sends out press releases for choir events, handles media inquiries and has received preliminary recording offers through her media connections. **Beth Mason** regularly forwards information to choir members by e-mail. Beth also is responsible for the **Spirit's Call Songline**, a source of current information about upcoming choir events for members without e-mail and the general public.

Sheila Bradford suggested the University Women's Club for our singing space and has connected us with another exciting recording possibility. **Catherine Smallwood** created our database of information about choir members. **Heather Emberley's** regular mention of the choir in her "Happenings" column in the *Winnipeg Women's Magazine* typically generates interest. Vario us members offered their homes for our singing gatherings before our permanent home was found. Input from everyone was invited for our recent "visioning" meeting. Opinions about many aspects of the choir's development are sought, valued and incorporated as we continue to refine the vision and evolution of the choir.

Co-creation – musical aspects

The choir's musical activity also reflects our co-creative approach. **Linda Zacharias** brought the Peace Chant she wrote for solo performance to the choir and it has become a valued part of our repertoire. **Vijaya** (Beth Martens), whose arrangement of the traditional Sanskrit chant Amar Aanund started the choir, wrote the Spirit's Call Chant after joining us in person for a follow-up "Explorations of the Self" polarities workshop featuring chanting. The Spirit's Call Chant now is becoming a signature piece for the choir.

Drum Circle Facilitator **Henry Zacharias** has added his talent and instruments to bring a percussion aspect to the choir. **Clark Kenyon** provides a loyal musical influence with his guitar playing and singing. **Yannick Legrand Polejewski** has added improvisational interpretive dance to our performances. Members who play other instruments also have added beauty and richness to our singing gatherings.

When we sang at the Healing Harmonics concert in February 2002 and our "harmonic" choral director Lyle Eide was out of the country, choir members **Catherine Cote**, **Linda Zacharias** and **Vijaya** directed the choir. Various members now take turns facilitating our warm up time - based on activities they have experienced in other expressive arts involvements. The list goes on!

Of particular interest for this publication is the fact that the counselling community is well represented within the choir. Psychologist **Ingrid Toews** was the founding pianist for the choir and now contributes both her piano and singing gifts as required. **Caroline Pyevich**, a psychology intern with the University of Manitoba Student Counselling and Career Centre (here for a year from Tulsa, Oklahoma) has added her haunting violin to our choral sound. Choral director **Lyle Eide**, now retired, was the director of the University of Manitoba Counselling Service for many years. Other counsellors, social workers and psychologists from various settings are bringing replenishment, balance and "harmony" to their lives by singing in the choir!

Membership – Spirit’s Call Choir welcomes everyone!

In choral terms, Spirit’s Call Choir definitely is a “non audition” choir! The choir began with people who believed they could not sing. Women and men who have found their musical home with the choir now include:

- those who always thought they couldn’t sing
- novice to accomplished singers and musicians
- those who love to “*SING FOR THE JOY*”!



Conclusion:

The Spirit’s Call Choir is a living example of the use of expressive arts methods to support individual, group and community development. It has been inspiring to have experienced first hand the power of these methods to tap personal potential and support synergistic creativity. The story of the budding and blossoming of the choir strongly affirms the efficacy and richness of these methods. For me, the example of the Spirit’s Call Choir invites further experimentation with expressive arts approaches in many facets of counselling and in life.

Spirit’s Call Choir welcomes new members. To join the choir, contact **Beth Mason**, Choir Outreach (772-1800 or psychebethw@autobahn.mb.ca). For media inquiries contact **Catherine Cote**, Choir PR (477-1778 or kitkatcote@hotmail.com).

For more information:

Spirit’s Call Songline – 772-1800

www.spiritscall.com

For dates and times click on choir/online brochure.

For photos click on choir/Photo Gallery

About the Author:

Margaret Tobin, M.S.W., R.S.W. is a social worker and Counsellor/Associate Professor with the University of Manitoba Student Counselling and Career Centre. She has been counselling university students in Manitoba, England and Australia for over 20 years. With Dorothy Becker of Spirit’s Call, Margaret has been co-creating “Explorations of the Self” groups and workshops for university students and the broader community since 1994. Margaret is the Coordinator of the Spirit’s Call Choir.