

not nearly so important as the sound. "Talk to me," we say, half jokingly, knowing deep within ourselves that the speaking itself is something that nourishes. When a friend speaks to us in a voice that is gentle, encouraging, and supportive, this can have a tremendous restorative effect.

In the sound of the voice we find a rich source of information that we often miss as we focus on the content of the conversation. Indeed, it is common for people to say the opposite of what they mean: "yes" when, in truth, it is "no." The words say that they agree, that they are ready to begin the project. The sound of the voice conveys their self-doubt, their hesitation, their reluctance to engage and get started. "How are you?" we ask. "Fine" is the response and, if we care to linger, we may find out that there is more to the story. "But you *said* . . ." is our cry, after the fact. Understood, but too late, is "But you *really meant* . . ."

The voice is the barometer of our physical, emotional, and mental condition. It reveals our state of health and our amount of available energy; it holds the reservoir of our emotional life, indicating our present feelings and attitudes in general, and in the par-

THE WAY CHANT IS SUNG

The Sound of the Voice

The human voice is a magnificent instrument. It is such an intimate part of us, so characteristically and personally our own, that friends are able to identify us on the phone after we speak little more than a single syllable. The sound of the voice can be very comforting and consoling, but it can also tear us apart. We may engage in conversation for many reasons: to entertain or be entertained, give or receive information, exercise our will, find companionship and support; however, more is always taking place than we are generally aware of. Especially when we are ill or when we are lonely, the actual content of what is said is

ticular situation in which we find ourselves. It also retains, to a certain degree, what we have experienced in the past. From the sound of the voice comes information about our general alertness and intelligence. It tells if we are quick to process and move on or if we are more reflective and take our time in thinking about things. It tells the type of company, intellectual and social, that we keep. In short, the voice is a repository of everything that we have acquired, from our most persistent habits to our highest aspirations.

In addition to pitch and volume, the voice has speed and measure. Some people speak very quickly, with thoughts tripping and overlapping. It takes others much longer just to get the message out. Each sound has, also, its timbre, which is its own particular quality distinguishing it from all other sounds. These qualities are all variable and subject to change in accordance with our inner mental, emotional, and physical states.

Listening

Now and again we pay attention to the sound itself, allowing

it truly to inform us about what is going on behind the words. Listening to the sound of someone's voice, like listening itself, is a subtle effort. It is not the actual listening that is difficult, since listening is basically a passive activity. It is rather the effort needed to focus our attention on the sound and not to be distracted by our own thoughts or things that are happening nearby. If we are interested in what is being said, this is easier. If the conversation seems boring and tedious, we are ready to tune out and think about topics that we find more interesting or personally stimulating. At times it is difficult, especially when we are overwhelmed by all that we have to do, to stop our own activity and give listening the attention that it deserves. We keep on with the busyness, while the other person is speaking to us, with the result that we hear neither content nor sound accurately but, rather, a kind of faint echo on the periphery of our minds. It is no wonder that conversations like this are lost to memory, and errors creep into the work we were trying to accomplish while the other person was talking.

True listening requires presence of mind and a measure of

quiet in the head. People who engage in a daily practice of meditation find that such a discipline is helpful in providing a platform of silence with which to approach the day. Those who have come upon Gregorian Chant find that it, also, has the effect of opening the listening and stilling the mind. A little quiet is needed in order to stay with this kind of music in the first place. More quiet comes about as a result of continuing to avail ourselves of it.

The opening up and out of listening is important for our health and well being. There is a strong tendency on the part of most people to become completely absorbed in certain thoughts in their heads, sometimes even to the point where these fixed ideas induce a pathological state of mind. The simple exercise of sitting quietly, with straight and comfortable posture, and becoming aware of all audible sounds as they present themselves, is helpful in this regard.

Begin with sounds that are close by in the room where you are sitting and slowly expand the attention to encompass a steadily widening area—the whole house, the surrounding neigh-

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borhood, the community. Do not set up boundaries as to how far you may be able to hear. Do not let commenting on the experience detract from the actual listening. This simple effort of paying attention and remaining quite still will have the effect of opening up space in the mind. Having this space available at will is useful both in informing ourselves about the world and in listening to Gregorian Chant.

Hearing Our Own Voice

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In speaking or singing we can feel very vulnerable. Without necessarily understanding how it takes place, we are aware that the voice reveals a great deal about us. Fearing that the voice will expose too much—more than we want other people to know about us—we hold it back when we speak, causing the sound to stop only a few feet in front of our noses. Sometimes we refuse to use it altogether and actually remain silent in situations where speech would be a helpful gift to someone else. Even after years of performance, many professional lecturers' or singers still expe-

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rience twinges of anxiety before going on stage. The mouth goes dry and the legs tremble.

So great and so apparently normal is our identification with our own voice that we are especially sensitive to any criticism about it, especially when we are young. It is a sad fact that countless adults confess that they are unable to sing a note. They attribute this inability to perform what should be a natural and joyous activity to being told as children that they had no singing voice, should not participate but only mouth the words—worse, that they would ruin everything for the group if their voices were audible. These painful impressions of early childhood often go deep and are very far-reaching and damaging in their effect, so much so that people may be permanently prevented from ever attempting to sing.

Most of us do not listen closely to the sound of our own voices as we speak or as we sing. We have this pointed out to us most clearly when we realize that we no longer remember what we have just said! Perhaps we are racing, jumping ahead of ourselves in the mad dash to “get it all out.” Maybe we are distracted

by all the ideas, bright and otherwise, that bombard us on a more or less continual basis. It might also be that we feel we would hear in the sound of our own voice things that we are unprepared to hear. In any case, and for whatever reason, we find that we are not really listening to our own sound in the moment of speaking. We hear it on the rebound, as it were, and with a certain delay, if we hear it at all. If we are not willing to listen to the sound of our own voice, why should anyone else bother to listen to it?

Purifying the Sound and the Heart

Just by listening to the sound of one's own voice it is easy to “get behind” the sound and unite with it. In this regard the practice of singing or toning simple vowels such as A (ah), I (ee), and U (oo), gently and easily on any comfortable pitch can help. As we sing and continue to listen to the sound we are making, we will notice that it changes. The amount of extraneous noise surrounding the sound gradually disappears and the note becomes clearer, purer, and more beautiful. There is increased awareness of

what is being sung, a brightness and alertness that was not so apparent before. The sound becomes alive because there is someone present observing it and caring for it.

Eastern spiritual teaching says that certain sounds called mantras have the power, through their repeated utterance or chanting, to clear the mind of its superficial layers of thought—such as what I'm having for breakfast, what kind of car I'm going to buy, what movie I'd like to see—making it more receptive to the inner promptings of the spirit. In the context of Christianity, the repeated singing of the words of the Psalms is understood to have this same effect, giving the mind respite from its habitual meanderings and penetrating to the inner realm of the heart, where even the intentions and will may be purified.

Conscious Listening

Since attentive, fine listening is somewhat of a lost art, even more should be said about it before we can turn our attention easily to the singing of chant. Good listeners do not turn on and

off at will, shutting out what they think they do or do not want to hear. They consider this kind of voluntary deafness a high-risk activity that leads to missing not only important surface information but also the inner meaning of what is going on. They do not consider someone's speaking to them as an interruption, an intrusion into some sort of predetermined agenda that they have already established. Rather they view it as an opportunity to serve not only the person asking for their attention but the whole creation by engaging in a conscious rather than a mechanical activity. Doing this requires faith that the listening itself is worth the effort, that there will, in fact, be time to take care of all the other pressing concerns. It is, ultimately, the gift of ourselves and our time, in unselfish service to someone else.

Spiritual teaching has always pointed to the fact that everything in creation has a sound, its own unique vibration. As conscious listeners we may perceive more and more of what the universe is saying to us by the simple act of listening. We can learn to appreciate each and every sound—the chirp of the first July cricket, the whir of the booting computer, the calls of chil-

dren playing on the street outside. We can hear the sounds people make as they wash dishes, climb stairs, close the car door. We can give the gift of our complete and undivided attention when anyone is speaking to us.

Why all the emphasis on our own powers of listening in a book on the singing of Gregorian Chant? The reason is that monks are people like you and me, subject to the same hang-ups and distractions, yet called to sing to the glory of God as many as eight times in a single day. We need to appreciate the intention and effort required to sing in this way and have some understanding of how the monks themselves are trained.

The Practice of the Chant

The chant is always sung as an act of worship. It is prayer, whether in the context of the Mass or the Canonical Hours, and is a particular interpretation of the scriptures according to the tradition of the Church. The chant itself is a single melodic line and is always unaccompanied. It is sung simply, in unison, and

without undue vocal vibrato. The unadorned quality of the music lends itself to single-minded focus of attention, to full and undistracted participation in the act of worship that it embodies.

Within the Western Church chanting has not been limited to monastic settings. From the very beginning it was part of congregational worship in parish churches and cathedrals as well. All continued to use it until the sweeping changes following Vatican II. *The Hymnal 1982* of the Episcopal Church retains a number of these chants for its worship services.

There is no need for the monks or nuns to be professional singers. In fact, it is preferable for them to be without the vocal accoutrements that characterize the cultivated, artistic voice. In their singing is a sense of measure governed not by the individual and his vocal expertise but by the united effort of the group as a whole. It is important for everyone to sing the same pitch, breathe in the same place, sustain vowels, and articulate final consonants in a united and timely way.

Practice and training are needed, and in some cases it can be as long as four years before novices are ready for full participa-

tion. They must learn to listen not only to the musical notes but to the spaces between them. They must learn to make a resonating cavity not just of the mouth and throat but of the whole body. Since the lines of scripture to be sung are sometimes quite long, the singers must be capable of sustained control of the breath. For all of these requirements, posture must be straight.

The foundation of the chant is the daily *lectio divina* (reading of holy scripture), which is an intrinsic part of the religious life. The purpose is not to read at length, but in depth. A short passage is selected, often from the Psalms or the Gospel. The practice may be done alone or with a group. At first it is necessary to read the chosen lines slowly and carefully a number of times. If this is done silently, the words are repeated to oneself almost syllable by syllable. At first the texts are treated as subjects of conversation, each passage asking for a personal response. Interpretations and applications arise in the mind, and are then either spoken aloud or reflected upon inwardly. At no point is argument or dispute allowed; whatever comes about as a result of the reading is gratefully received and the process continues. As

familiarity with the passage increases, the reader is led, more and more, to an experience of prayer. No longer a purely intellectual undertaking wherein one speaks with the characters involved, takes part in the drama, or relates and applies the teaching, the reading begins to affect the heart, the deepest seat of the emotions. It takes on more of the quality of a direct encounter with God or Christ. As faith and trust develop, the fruit of continual practice, the reading increases one's ability to rest in the presence of God, far beyond any concepts, feelings, or particular acts. These results remain even when one is in the midst of tremendous activity. For the singing monk or nun, intellectual acquaintance with the text is not the only thing to be desired; rather, it is the living experience, the realization within the self, of the passage that best informs the singing of it. Monastic life allows time not just for reading the holy words but also for their inner digestion and integration: the interiorization of the word of God.

In Benedictine monasteries a rule of silence is observed, whereby the community refrains from speaking for all or part of the day. The object of this discipline is to bring about an atmos-

phere in which controlling the tongue is less of a problem and full attention can be given to the singular purpose: that God's immanent presence become a living reality. The prevailing quiet provides a background for the singing of chant. It is a palpable presence before, during, and after the sound.

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The Purpose of the Chant

In every event, whether it is hammering a nail, caring for a young child, or playing a musical instrument, there is not simply the person who is carrying out the activity and the person or things being worked upon, there is also a hidden or third factor that will determine the quality of what is taking place. In the case of singing, there are the singers and the song. The third factor joining the two is the attitude of the singers, their personal and intimate response in the moment to the music. They may care deeply about what is going on, they may be indifferent, or they may be somewhere in between. In any situation people may be distracted, interested in personal gain, desirous of receiving

something for themselves, or simply giving attention to the matter at hand.

The singing of Gregorian Chant requires a very calm, clear third point. This type of devotional music begs for complete anonymity on the part of the singers—a willingness to surrender all personal concerns, at the very least during the chants. Any lack of attention to the music, words, or breath, any stray thought or distraction, will be audible and will detract from the worship experience. The singing demands total presence of mind, total absence of self-concern, total obedience to the divine will as revealed in the exigencies of the music. Those of little faith may not be ready for this sort of experience.

Each time Gregorian Chant is sung it is first and foremost an act of obedience and faith. The music is there to be sung, not interpreted or embellished. The aim is to praise God through the musical expression of holy scripture. Singers report an experience akin to God singing through them rather than their singing to or for God. Through music they are brought to clearer remembrance of their divine source.

The Effect of the Chant ♦

The practical effect of this music is that it bears the mark of absolute anonymity. It is as if there is no actual singer, and yet the music itself is full of presence. During the singing, time seems to stop and the darting mind falls still and attentive, arrested from its worldly concerns and preoccupations. The sound itself is rich and full and yet, in some way, unobtrusive. It embodies all the elements of the universe itself. It is wide open as the ether or space in which it rests and is supported, and palpable as the gentle summer air touching our faces. With each phrase it is sent forth from silence and returns to silence, carried on the wave of the breath. Like fire, each line has its own brightness and energy, a force that is called forth, raised, and then surrendered. Like water, the music rises and falls in a gentle wave of love that bathes, cleanses, and caresses our spirits, leaving us buoyed up and restored. Like the smell of the earth overturned before planting, it is fresh and sweet, a gentle balm for our spirits.

CHANT ♦

*The Origins, Form,
Practice,
and
Healing Power
of
Gregorian Chant*

**KATHARINE
LIE MÉE** ♦



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