

Singing at work

David Parish suggests we sing a new song

Singing a song is something that marks out humankind from all other creatures. Birds are a possible exception but their song can be described as a lyrical sound from their syrinx which is melodic to the human ear.

Song seems to create within us humans a sense of wellbeing, healing of a sorrow or other deep emotion. The reductionist neuroscientist can watch the brain scan as we sing and see different sides of the brain react. He or she can also observe the cerebral cortex light up and change colour, which is the effect of the neurotransmitters on our brain. Such scientists can describe the mechanics and see that our mood centres change. But what they can't do is tell us why we sing.

The archaeologists and anthropologists find traces of songs back into antiquity but once the printing press enabled words and tunes to be captured, people began to collect and publish the peasant songs they heard.

I love the work songs. The farm workers singing rhythmically, 'a capella', to give a steady pace to the progress across the harvest field. The harvest hymn 'We plough the fields and scatter' began as a work song in Germany - 'wir pflugen und wir streuen' - and the tune is an old German melody. Get your worship group to sing it slowly unaccompanied and you will be transported to the harvest field.

Then there are the sea shanties to help the sailors hear instructions over the sound of wind and waves. These are now a part of Britain's folk culture sung

everywhere from folk clubs to the Last Night of the Proms.

The African-American slave songs not only enabled them to work to a steady rhythm for long hours but also became the source of comfort in suffering and a future hope of freedom. The song 'Follow the Drinking Gourd' was a code telling fleeing slaves to follow the Plough constellation north to freedom in Canada.

The poet Walt Whitman is an enigmatic figure in terms of his faith. A Unitarian and humanist, he held unorthodox views on biblical teaching and his poems often included sexual themes.

But Walt had an unusual ability to capture the 'everyday' experience in his poems and one of his best is *I hear America singing*:

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deck-hand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The woodcutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

These lyrics capture for me the sense of joy to be found in our work when we value our work and when we are valued in what we do. Singing 'This is the day that the Lord has made' in the open

plan office could make you seriously disliked, but most firms allow you to listen to your music via headphones while you work. When your work colleagues ask, 'what's on your MP3',

you can share, according to taste, the latest song from Rend Collective or the Bach B Minor mass. As the Psalmist says: 'Sing unto the Lord a New Song' (Psalm 144:9)



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