

## **“Like Cords Around My Heart”: Sacred Harp Memorial Lessons and the Transmission of Tradition**

**Kiri Miller**

My Christian friends, in bonds of love,  
Whose hearts in sweetest union join,  
Your friendship’s like a drawing band,  
Yet we must take the parting hand.  
Your company’s sweet, your union dear,  
Your words delightful to my ear;  
Yet when I see that we must part  
You draw like cords around my heart.  
(“Parting Hand,” 62)<sup>1</sup>

After spending all day Saturday and most of Sunday morning engaged in full-voiced, energetic singing, the two hundred fifty people gathered for the 2009 Midwest Sacred Harp Convention grew quiet for the memorial lesson. The three members of the memorial committee stepped to the center of the hollow square of singers, carrying two lists of names: the deceased list, representing Sacred Harp singers, friends, and family members who had died in the past year; and the list of “the sick and shut-in,” people too infirm to attend the convention. The singing room, an elaborately painted performance hall on the University of Chicago campus, had been ringing with sound all weekend; now even its bright Progressive Era murals seemed momentarily subdued. Bob Meek, a singer from Kentucky, spoke on behalf of the deceased:

I’d like to tell you a story, and it’s about Chicago. Many years ago, when I had hair—and it wasn’t the Midwest Convention; it was at the Anniversary Singing in January. I came up [from the South], and it was at the Irish-American hall, the heritage hall, and I was singing somewhere in the back row. And I looked up and saw—literally saw—a feathered angel sitting right across over the treble section looking down. Now, before you think I’m nuts: the Polish-American Christmas pageant was next door [*laughter*] in its full regalia with feathered angels, so one of the guys came

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<sup>1</sup> Text by John Blain (1818), music by William Walker (1935). All *Sacred Harp* song texts are cited as they appear in McGraw 1991, including tune title, page number (with “t” or “b” to indicate top or bottom of the page), author of the text, and composer of the music.

over to see what was going on. All I know is I saw angels. So the only thing that I could think of when I got home, only in Chicago you would have a Polish-American angel looking over Southern-American music in an Irish-American hall.

And it brought to me the first Bible verse I will read, which is, “And after these things, I looked and, behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and people and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cried out with a loud voice.” Now, who sings with a loud voice? I don’t know. These might be Sacred Harp singers.

A memorial lesson is something that brings back sad memories and something that brings back happy memories. It’s something that brings back this idea that one string from this Sacred Harp has been removed, and it’s no longer with us. And because that string is gone, we miss them. And we wish they were here, because Sacred Harp has taught me one thing, and that is fellowship. I have listened to a lot of memorial lessons; one from Richard [DeLong] on a tape, and he would rattle off name after name after name of all these people that came and helped him to be where he is today. Everybody that stands here before you has somebody that helped you get here, and we have a tendency to forget. So this memorial lesson is simply an idea that this is our feeble attempt to honor those that have helped us along the way.<sup>2</sup>

*The Sacred Harp* is a non-denominational American shape-note tunebook first published in 1844 and most recently revised in 1991 (McGraw 1991).<sup>3</sup> It contains over 500 four-part unaccompanied songs set to mostly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christian texts. Sacred Harp singers sit in a hollow-square formation with one voice part to a side and take turns standing in the middle to lead songs from the tunebook (see Figure 1 below).

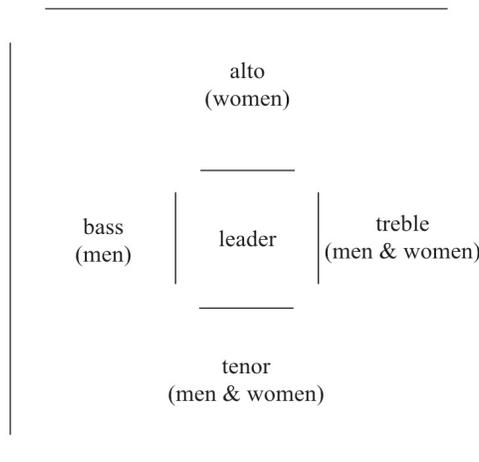


Figure 1: The Hollow Square

<sup>2</sup> Recorded May 31, 2009. All cited memorial lessons are transcribed from field recordings.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to the “Denson book” line of *Sacred Harp* revisions; some Sacred Harp singers use the “Cooper book,” which represents a parallel revision line. The split between Denson and Cooper revision lines dates to 1902; see Campbell 1997.

The musical notation in the tunebook employs four shaped noteheads that correspond to the syllables “fa,” “sol,” “la,” and “mi,” a system designed at the turn of the nineteenth century as an aid to sight-singing (see Figure 2 below).

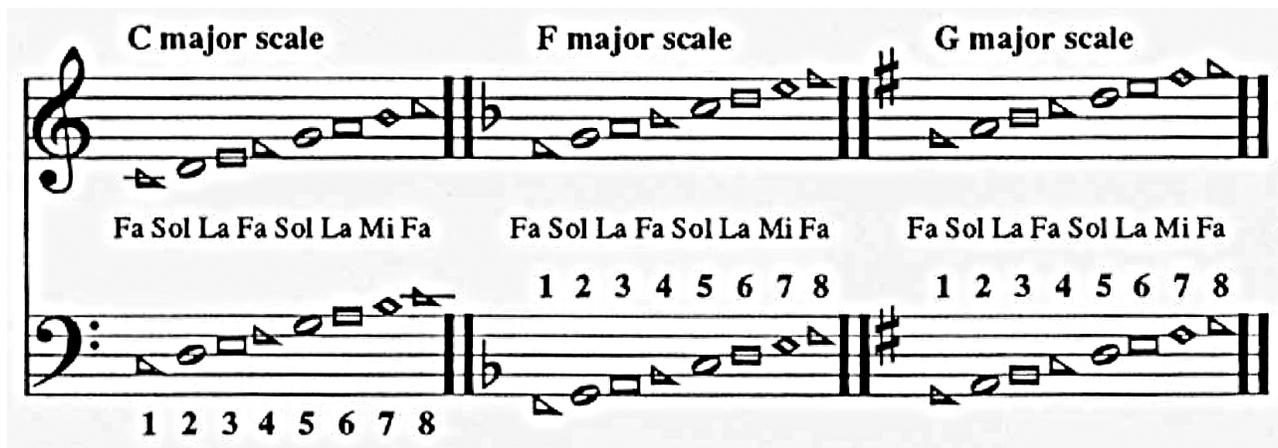


Figure 2: Shape-note notation (rpt. from McGraw 1991:18). As McGraw explains, “The figure illustrates the following principle for the keys of C, F, and G major: *The degrees of a scale have the same shapes, syllables, and relative positions on the staff in every key and under every clef. . . . This is the principle that allows the shaped notes to be read by their shapes and relative positions*” (18).

Participants sing through each leader’s chosen song using these syllables before singing the words. Any assembled group of Sacred Harp singers is called a “class,” and leading a song is called “giving a lesson” (a legacy of early American singing school terminology; see Marini 1983). Small, local groups of Sacred Harp singers often meet to sing together informally on a weekly or monthly basis. Hundreds of singers gather for annual Sacred Harp conventions, which take place around the country on virtually every weekend of the year.<sup>4</sup>

The musical repertoire in *The Sacred Harp* and the participatory tradition that grew up around it have long been identified as fundamentally American, associated with discourses of rugged individualism, egalitarian democracy, and American exceptionalism (Miller 2008). Over the past four decades, folk revivalists have increasingly joined rural Southern lifelong singers in singing from *The Sacred Harp* and self-consciously preserving and perpetuating its associated performance practices and social values. Some Southern singing conventions date to the mid-nineteenth century; more recently, new local groups and annual conventions have sprung up all over the U.S., with outposts in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Sacred Harp now comprises a network of regional singing communities linked by reciprocal travel and connections to lifelong Southern singers (often termed “traditional singers”). The national singing community today is quite diverse in terms of age, class, religious affiliation, political stance, sexual orientation, and musical experience. I call this dispersed community the Sacred Harp diaspora,

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.fasola.org> (Sacred Harp 2009) for a list of annual singings and conventions. The term “convention” refers to an annual singing lasting more than one day.

because of singers' reliance on kinship metaphors and their treatment of the rural South as Sacred Harp's "homeland."<sup>5</sup>

Sacred Harp singing engenders alliances among disparate groups in part because it offers assurance that the local, the particular, and the traditional still live on in hidden corners of American life. In this context, knowledge derived from face-to-face transmission is a crucial form of cultural capital: vocal timbre, melodic ornamentation, song tempos, travel stories, and recipes for dinner-on-the-grounds are all freighted with meaning as emblems of personal experience at singings and personal relationships with singers. It might seem odd that oral transmission would be so prized in a musical tradition that revolves around a printed, mass-produced tunebook and a distinctive musical notation system, but oral and written tradition are deeply interdependent in Sacred Harp practice. Singers negotiate a delicate balance between celebration of Sacred Harp's openness and egalitarianism—"anyone can do it" as long as s/he has a tunebook—and veneration of the tradition's historical particularity and depth of community sentiment, comprehensible only through long experience. Sacred Harp singing thus presents a case where the prestige of orality tends to prevent a printed text from "assum[ing] authority over the utterance" (Goody 2000:56).<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere I have addressed the interplay of oral and written transmission in Sacred Harp musical practice (Miller 2004). In this article I focus on a moment in Sacred Harp conventions when the assembled "class" closes their tunebooks: the commemorative ritual called the "memorial lesson." There is no set text for these memorial speeches. No examples are printed in the tunebook, and memorial lessons are only rarely included on published or informally circulating recordings of Sacred Harp singings; one learns how to give a memorial lesson by witnessing other memorial lessons. Anyone can sign up to lead a song at a convention, but participation on a memorial committee is by invitation only; the chair of the convention selects the speakers. Like other lament genres, memorial lessons are characterized by "the dynamic interplay of individual expression and collective forms and sentiments" (Feld 1990:241, following Propp 1984:32). All memorial lessons tell the same basic story—in this case, a story about grief, memory, history, tradition, family, responsibility, and community—but the details of each version are painfully unique, since they deal with particular deaths.

Many lament traditions explore "the boundaries of speech and song" through texted wailing or musically patterned grief-stricken speech (Feld 1990; cf. Urban 1988, Tolbert 1990, Briggs 1993). Sacred Harp memorial lessons instead emphatically mark this boundary, with distinct spoken and sung portions: each member of the committee makes a short speech and then leads a song from the tunebook. Hours of group singing suddenly give way to solo speech. In that moment of emotional utterance, "the very failure of representation is recognized and brings an emotional response itself" (Reddy 1997:332)—that is, speech draws attention to its own inadequacy. The juxtaposition of speech and song in the memorial lesson serves to demonstrate the efficacy of music as a "particularly affective and direct way of knowing" (Turino 1999:221), providing a ritualized confirmation of the power and purpose of the singing tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> See Miller 2008:28-36 for further discussion of the Sacred Harp diaspora.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Thérèse de Vet's work on Balinese traditions that contradict the "general supposition in Western scholarship that the advent or presence of literacy will, over time, supersede orality" (2008:160).

Because of their reliance on oral tradition, their emphasis on memory and personal relationships, and their explicitly didactic function, memorial lessons are among the key markers of a traditional Sacred Harp convention (along with the hollow-square seating formation, rotation of song leaders, singing the shape-note solfege syllables before the words of each song, and opening/closing a convention with prayer). As more and more participants fall into the category of “diaspora singers”—those who feel a strong connection to lifelong Southern singers but were not born into “traditional singer” status themselves—memorial lessons play an increasingly important role in transmitting community values and history to newer participants. Like the Kaluli laments analyzed by Steven Feld (1990:242), they are “central to the evocation and symbolization of transition” and play a key role in “the social construction of emotionality, and in the collective responsibility for its display and interpretation.” But because many singers at a convention may not even know the names of the people on the memorial lists, memorial lessons often include appeals to *imagined* emotion or promises of future emotional experience. For example, when lifelong Alabama singer Elene Stovall gave a memorial lesson at a 2008 singing in Brooklyn, New York, she vividly described the experience of growing up hearing the names of an older generation of beloved singers read out during memorial lessons. Then she called out the names of several well-traveled singers who were present in the room, turning around the square to look at each of them, and asked the group to imagine hearing *their* names on a memorial list. For the newest singers, the names of the living were scarcely more meaningful than the names of the dead. But for those who had begun to know those living singers, it was a chilling moment, and an injunction to get to know them better.

The memorial lesson is the only moment at a Sacred Harp convention when individuals are encouraged to speak at any length in the hollow square, rather than simply calling out a page number and leading a song. Talking in the square is explicitly discouraged during the rest of the convention—in part because it takes up time that could be used by another song leader, but also because the religious and political beliefs of Sacred Harp singers vary so widely that any opportunity for preaching, grandstanding, or linking a song to current events might threaten the atmosphere of pluralist tolerance.<sup>7</sup> Appointed chaplains offer prayers for opening, closing, and dinner-on-the-grounds, but these are generally brief, ecumenical, and non-proselytizing; only in the memorial lesson are certain singers singled out to speak from personal experience and offer instruction to the “class.”

Framed as exceptional and essential, memorial lessons are positioned to confirm, define, and perpetuate “traditional singing.” As in the Balinese performances analyzed by Thérèse de Vet (2008:164), “saying the environment, or context, shapes a performance is not telling the entire story; at the same time, the performance aims to influence the audience. . . . The performance is not only *descriptive*, but also *prescriptive*.” Nearly every memorial lesson includes an explanation of why memorial lessons are necessary and what they are meant to accomplish (as in

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<sup>7</sup> One might assume that this religious and political diversity is a post-folk-revival phenomenon, but in fact Sacred Harp singing has never been linked to any particular church or sect, and the texts in the book are not doctrinally consistent. While singers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared common experiences as Southerners, Christians, and (mostly) rural people, they worshipped in a wide variety of Protestant churches with conflicting stances on key doctrinal issues such as predestination and baptism (see Bealle 1997, Campbell 1997, Miller 2008, and Vinson 2006).

the example that opened this article). Such incursions of explicit, public explanation into a domain of insider experience and unspoken mutual knowledge are common in lament traditions; as Elizabeth Tolbert writes, laments act “simultaneously as a commentary on the intricate ritual complexes and as a necessary efficacious force” (1990:80).

In a memorial lesson at the 2004 Midwest Convention, Jesse Roberts, a preacher from Georgia and northern Florida, explained the practice this way: “Sacred Harp singers voice their experiences, their trials, their hopes in song. That’s what makes their message resonate so strongly with those who are not familiar with Sacred Harp. The memorial lesson is the climax of those experiences, trials, and hopes.”<sup>8</sup> Roberts claimed for Sacred Harp singing what the hymnodist Isaac Watts (1674-1748) claimed for his psalm paraphrases, which provide the texts for many of the tunes in *The Sacred Harp*: the ability to express “the most frequent tempers and changes of our spirit, and conditions of our life . . . our passions, our love, our fear, our hope, our desire, our sorrow, our wonder, our joy, as they are refin’d into devotion, and act under the influence and conduct of the blessed Spirit” (cited in Marini 2003:76). As Roberts noted, singers constantly infuse particular songs with their “experiences, trials, and hopes”; in memorial lessons, they perform explicit exegesis of that process. Memorial speakers draw on a wide range of texts and prior experiences, including Bible verses, sermons, and funeral speeches. Many make reference to Sacred Harp song titles or texts, some of which may be closely associated with people on the memorial lists. They often directly address the uncertainties, injunctions, and requests that saturate Sacred Harp texts. For example, consider the texts for the songs “Jackson” and “Granville”:

I am a stranger here below,  
And what I am is hard to know,  
I am so vile, so prone to sin,  
I fear that I’m not born again. . . .

I find myself out of the way,  
My thoughts are often gone astray,  
Like one alone I seem to be,  
Oh, is there anyone like me?  
 (“Jackson,” 317b)<sup>9</sup>

Remember, Lord, our mortal state;  
How frail our lives! how short the date!  
Where is the man that draws his breath,  
Safe from disease, secure from death?

Lord, while we see whole nations die,  
Our flesh and sense repine and cry;

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<sup>8</sup> Recorded May 30, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Text from Mercer’s *Cluster* (1810), music by M. F. McWhorter (1908).

Must death forever rage and reign?  
 Or hast Thou made mankind in vain?  
 (“Granville,” 547)<sup>10</sup>

Songs like these constitute a shared repertoire of rich metaphors and collective experiences, while previous memorial lessons afford a model for narrative structure and key themes.

Because memorial lessons address common human experiences—sickness, old age, bereavement, and death—their narratives are accessible, even for those who do not know the names on the lists. At the same time, not knowing the names makes listeners aware of constraints on their empathy. The memorial lesson can be a lonely moment for inexperienced singers—a fact acknowledged by speakers like Elene Stovall, who invited people to imagine their future grief if they couldn’t grieve in the present. Memorial lessons directly address the accumulation of singing experience; they mediate between living and dead, present and absent, new and lifelong singers, placing them all within the bounds of the tradition. In this respect the memorial lesson closely resembles some performance traditions of ethnic diaspora communities. For example, like the *pizmon* song tradition of diasporic Syrian Jews, memorial lessons “provide a cultural space in which individual and collective memories may both be mediated and juxtaposed” (Shelemay 1998:10). Like the New York and New Jersey *sonidero bailes* (Mexican deejay dances) described by Cathy Ragland (2003), memorial lessons “accommodate, dramatize, and legitimize” the singing community’s experience of loss and absence. Ragland’s *baile* attendees “imagine the presence of those who are physically absent” by having the deejay read dedications and salutations aloud during the dance; in this way “they can speak to [the absent] and bring them into the local public space, while also addressing those that are at the dance who overhear the dialogue” (351). Sacred Harp memorial lessons serve much the same purpose for singers, creating a line of communication with the absent in a public, formal social space. For newer singers, they also have the potential to generate “nostalgia without memory,” a phenomenon Sunaina Maira has explored in her work on second-generation Indian American youth culture (1999:51, following Appadurai 1996:30).

As a public lament, the memorial lesson has several straightforward functions: to praise the dead, comfort the living, pray for the sick, and provide a formal outlet for grief. Memorial lessons teach strategies for approaching the idea of death, one’s own or that of loved ones. The “narrative defeat of oblivion” (Caraveli-Chaves 1980:150) accomplished by Sacred Harp memorial narratives sometimes relies on Christian concepts of the afterlife, but regardless of their religious content, all memorial lessons assert the continued life of the dead in the memory of the living. In Hayden White’s terms (1980:15), these narratives “put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time.” They hold out the promise that a newcomer will be accepted by the community and remembered after her own death, providing some relief from the anxiety of anomie.

Memorial lessons also explicitly assert the continued life of the singing tradition itself. Publicly acknowledging the illness and death of singers serves to remind the grieving class that

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<sup>10</sup> Text by Isaac Watts (1719), music by Judy Hauff (1986).

new singers must be brought into the tradition; meanwhile the “discourse of the vanishing” typical of memorial lessons engages the sympathies of newcomers (Ivy 1995). Many speakers urge the class to come to every singing with a “last chance” attitude, since the future is uncertain for everyone. Memorial speakers often invoke the grief and fear associated with sickness, aging, death, and degenerative conceptions of modernity (for example, the conviction that new technologies and pervasive mass media are destroying local, particular, and traditional cultural practices; cf. Giddens 1991). They press those powerful emotions into service for commemoration, community-building, and perpetuation of the singing tradition.

The lessons I will discuss here, given by singers with widely varying backgrounds and levels of experience in the Sacred Harp community, show why this commemorative practice is so often cited as a key marker of traditional conventions and how it creates, perpetuates, and references quasi-familial affiliations among singers. I draw on twelve years of experience at Sacred Harp singings around the country, including participation at over one hundred annual conventions in nineteen states. My analysis has its own memorial aspects; these lessons deeply influenced my understanding of the Sacred Harp community and my place in it. Thus this article memorializes and documents an oral tradition that is itself concerned with commemoration.

### **“More a Tradition Than Anything Real”**

The University of Chicago Anniversary Singing was founded in 1998; today it is called the Hyde Park Anniversary Singing, in recognition of the participation of neighborhood singers who are not affiliated with the university. Many of the singing’s early supporters belonged to the well-established Sacred Harp community on Chicago’s North Side. The annual one-day singing on the South Side was initially organized by University of Chicago students (including myself), but it was influenced by more experienced singers who gave us explicit advice on how to run the singing and select committee members. They recommended that we choose mostly local people in order to make the group more coherent and avoid burdening visiting singers with assignments; pair experienced singers with newer ones to help foster mentorship and the transmission of traditional practice; and select well-respected and well-spoken singers for the memorial committee.

The 1999 session met in a Quaker meeting house near the University of Chicago campus. I served as chair and therefore selected the committee members. Memorial committee members are chosen according to an array of overlapping criteria, including life experience, singing experience, rhetorical skill, place of origin, and personal connections to the sick or the dead. Suzanne Flandreau, who began singing in the late 1960s and had strong ties to lifelong singers in Mississippi, was an obvious choice; she lived in the university neighborhood and was among the most experienced singers in Chicago.<sup>11</sup> I paired her with Jim Swanson, a middle-aged university

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<sup>11</sup> Most of the experienced singers in Chicago live on the North Side and began singing together in the early 1980s. Flandreau’s Sacred Harp experience also emerged from a Northern folk music background but soon turned to total immersion in a rural Mississippi singing community, where she lived for several years. Flandreau now heads the library and archives of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago.

librarian who had been singing for three years and had made his first trip South for the United Convention in Alabama the previous month.

Jim Swanson spoke for the deceased; he began, as many memorial speakers do, by establishing the special nature of the time at hand:

A number of years ago now I heard a rabbi speak at Rockefeller Chapel [where the University of Chicago holds ecumenical Christian services]. And for the first part of the service he sat and gazed around that magnificent room, as people will. And when he came to speak he paid gracious recognition of the Christian tradition of sanctifying great and often magnificent spaces for worship and meditation, and went on to point out that in the Jewish tradition virtually the first thing God does after Creation itself is to sanctify not space, but *time*, with the Sabbath. And that in effect is what we do here with the memorial lesson—we would be perfectly happy to sing our hearts out during this time, but we very deliberately have always set aside this time to think about sickness and death. Which is something that we in late twentieth-century America do not do very well.<sup>12</sup>

As a relative newcomer, Swanson relied on personal experience rather than an invocation of shared Sacred Harp experience in introducing his lesson. However, within a few sentences he drew a circle around those present, by shifting into the first person plural and explicitly separating his anecdote—what *they* do in worship—from “what we do here with the memorial lesson.” Then he placed the day’s singing in its broader cultural context, “late twentieth-century America,” and began to suggest a function of the memorial lesson specific to that context: to aid in a difficult task made more difficult by modern habits. He continued:

Back in the early days of AIDS, a good friend of mine sickened and ultimately died. And my generation had had no experience with death, or serious illness to speak of, and did not know how to handle it. We were scared, we were bitter, we were angry, we were grieving, bereft, but we didn’t have the means to face the reality of death. And at Jan’s memorial service someone very aptly pointed out that one of the last legacies he left us was to allow himself to be a test subject, a laboratory animal in effect, for our halting and awkward and painful, and I’m sure hurtful attempts to console him or ourselves or each other, to deal somehow with this terrible, new reality that was at that time in the form of his impending departure from us. And the Sacred Harp tradition allows us to do that as well, to gain experience in facing this reality that must not be denied. It’s present in the grim words of the songs that we often smile at, but even at that level death becomes a little more familiar and a little less difficult to deal with, aside from the promise implied in the words of the songs themselves.

Swanson’s idea of the function of the memorial lesson became much plainer here, as he drew attention to a problem described as specific to his generation and community of friends. This idea, that today we lack “the means to face the reality of death,” comes up very often both in memorial lessons and in my discussions with singers about why they value their Sacred Harp practice.

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<sup>12</sup> Recorded October 30, 1999.

In describing the social construction of death in late modernity, Clive Seale writes, “Life, in a sense, can be understood as a deliberate, continual turning away from death” (1998:11). Sacred Harp singers point out the rarity of hymns or sermons about death in modern church services; many use this as part of an explanation of why church “doesn’t speak to me.” As Minnesota singer Martha Henderson wrote of one service she encountered, “No sadness was allowed in this church. The songs were so saccharine and so relentlessly cheerful that they were cloying. There were no minor keys, no mournful songs about death, suffering, or sin. The pastor was an ecclesiastical cheerleader, walking up and down the aisles with a microphone, exhorting people to feel good.” This church experience not only failed to meet Henderson’s spiritual needs but actively inspired a kind of homesickness for Sacred Harp singing; as she explained, “All of this encouragement to be happy and praise Jesus in nursery-school style songs had an unexpected effect on me. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by an incredible feeling of loss. I missed my singing friends desperately.”<sup>13</sup>

Swanson’s memorial lesson and Henderson’s post to a Sacred Harp listserv both express concern about a lack of genuine engagement with death and suffering in contemporary American culture. In the Sacred Harp community, they find some of the same characteristics that Stephen Warner attributes to modern American religious institutions: “In a system where religious institutions comprehend not the whole society but subcultures, modernity, migration, and mobility make it possible for people to found religious associations that are at once self-selected and adapted to present circumstances” (Warner 1993:1060, cf. Olson 1993). Sacred Harp associations function in much the same way, sometimes for people who have found religious institutions unwelcoming or constricting. More loosely organized than a religious denomination, with no fixed credo but many ritual aspects, Sacred Harp presents an alternative to existing institutional options.

Reframing problems that plague modern American life within the extended history of Sacred Harp practice creates a coherent temporal trajectory for the tradition and its participants. Such rhetorical gestures assert a connection to singing “forebears” without reference to the actual ancestry of singers, providing a means of entry into the community for those not born into the tradition. Singers acknowledge change—referring to teen suicide rates, drugs, new forms of violence, and AIDS, for example—but simultaneously valorize traditional coping strategies. As singer Bob Todd of Pennsylvania wrote to the Sacred Harp listserv *discussions@fasola.org*:

Americans are not faced with death and many of us grow into mature adulthood without having a close family member die. As a result we do not learn how to mourn and how to discover our spirituality until later in life.

The row of children’s graves [encountered in a church cemetery at a Southern singing] reminds us that a hundred forty years ago, when our ancestors faced death every day of their lives and the frailty of the human condition compared with the power of the environment around them, spirituality was a force used to accept the happenings of each day. . . . Shape note singing has an

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<sup>13</sup> Posted to *singings@fasola.org* on August 9, 1999.

immediacy and an opportunity to discover and get with our spirituality that was a necessity a hundred forty years ago and I believe it represents a source of what makes our society great.<sup>14</sup>

Like the words of the songs, many of which were already archaic when they were first printed in *The Sacred Harp*, the singing tradition has proved able to accommodate modern anxieties and griefs. Singers constantly call on the tradition and community to meet new challenges, from individual deaths to the AIDS epidemic and the events of September 11th, 2001 (Noren 2002).

Jim Swanson continued his memorial lesson by turning from his personal experience pre-Sacred Harp to his relatively brief experience within the singing community:

Music binds us, and it doesn't have to be with those who have died. I can look around this room, and I think of music with people. [*pointing to various singers as he mentions songs titles*] "Kingwood." And "Boylston." And "Primrose," you know? "Babylon Is Fallen." It goes on and on. We can *all* do this.

Because he had been singing for only a few years and had seldom traveled to singings outside Chicago, Swanson knew few of the names he was about to read from the list of those who had died in the past year, names written by more experienced singers. Unable to assert a personal connection with the dead, and aware that many of the young singers in the room were equally inexperienced, he chose to emphasize connections among the living by pointing out the tunes that he associated with individual singers.

Swanson concluded:

But however we react and relate and respond to this time we've set apart, whether it's through associations with music and people, or kinds of music and people, or the power of this music that we love, or with the prayer and promise in the words of the music; whether it's the friendship in this room, or the ritual of reading names, which is about to be repeated throughout the world now, this is a time we set apart for ourselves, to reconnect with those who have at least temporarily left us, for this brief time of the memorial, or for the time it takes to sing a favorite hymn. I don't know if Jan was familiar with Sacred Harp. I know there is a hymn in here he did love. Let's sing 159. These people have died. [*reads names*]

In demonstrating several ways to approach the memorial lesson, Swanson recognized the multiplicity of experiences within the united community he constructed in his own lesson. He chose the well-known hymn on page 159, "Wondrous Love," to make Sacred Harp both accessible to and appropriate as a memorial for his friend Jan. In so doing, he also rendered Sacred Harp and his own memorial lesson more accessible for the new participants at this particular singing, who were probably more likely to know this tune than any in the book besides "New Britain" ("Amazing Grace").

When Swanson finished leading, he sat down and Suzanne Flandreau moved to the center of the square to speak for the "sick and shut-in." Flandreau was distraught as she began, and the

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<sup>14</sup> Posted September 13, 1999.

catch in her voice had a visible impact on the group; several people teared up as she spoke. Here her brief talk stands as an example of the kind of lesson given by a singer who was not born into a singing family but has “become traditional” over time.

When I first started singing in the ‘60s, more than thirty years ago, the memorial lesson was more a tradition than anything real. Because I didn’t know any of those names. And today I put five names on this list. It becomes more and more important as the years go on. I’m going to be reading my own father’s name today. I’m going to be reading the names of the people who can’t be here, the people we want to think about, the people that we care about. And these people are for the most part faithful people. They’re not necessarily singers, but they’re people that we love and cherish. Now my father *is* a singer and if he were here he’d be booming away on the bass. He’d lead Lenox, which is his absolutely favorite song, and he would appreciate the day enormously. But he’s not well now. And I don’t know if he’ll ever be in Chicago again. Jim read the name of a woman who was my second mother, in Mississippi. I’m going to be reading the name of my former mother-in-law today. This happens. It happens to all of us, that this lesson, every time we read it, becomes more and more important to us. Thirty years ago it was a tradition. Now it’s something that really, really, really means something. I want to read the names of these faithful people, and we’ll think about them as we sing 68 on the bottom [*reads names*].<sup>15</sup>

Flandreau used the word “tradition” in an unusual way for a Sacred Harp singer—setting it apart from something “real” that “means something.” She alluded to the idea that the memorial lesson might be considered “just a tradition,” in the sense of something outmoded but inoffensive, a vestige of the past. There are singers who treat some elements of Sacred Harp practice this way: one ought to tolerate the prayers, the memorial lesson, or the explicitly Christian texts to the tunes for the sake of historicity or respect for others’ beliefs, but one need not engage with them on a personal level. Others have questioned whether these elements even need to be tolerated—why not eliminate prayers when hardly any local singers are believers, or rewrite texts with gender-neutral pronouns and lines about joy instead of judgment?<sup>16</sup> In an interview a few months after this memorial lesson, Flandreau (2000) described how

I flamed some poor guy on the harp [Internet discussion] list once, kind of inadvertently, for saying “Why do we have to sing all these religious songs?” Well, go elsewhere. You *don’t* have to, that’s the whole point, you know? And I feel pretty strongly about that.

Folklorist John Bealle has observed that in the early days of Sacred Harp’s spread to Northern regions, “veteran singers were alert to the various motives newcomers brought to the experience”; he cites lifelong Alabama singer Sheila Wootten, who was careful to tell a video documentarian that Sacred Harp is “not just a type of folk music” (Bealle 2001:19). Flandreau’s memorial lesson conveyed this same message, drawing on the rhetorical tropes learned from three decades of memorial lessons.

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<sup>15</sup> Recorded October 30, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> See Miller 2008:188-200 for further discussion of controversial texts and the issue of tolerance.

When I asked Flandreau if she felt there were any standard elements in a memorial lesson, she replied (2000):

It may be like a preaching tradition. Nobody gets up and reads a memorial lesson. People who preach know what has to be in a sermon, and they get around to it all sooner or later. I think that it's that kind of thing—you know what's important in a memorial lesson. You talk about remembering the people, and you have to say something about keeping the tradition going. . . . I sort of got up and talked about the tradition itself, and I sort of did that on purpose because of the number of new singers who were there. About, you know, this may not mean anything to you now, but just wait . . . . So it's two things: remembering people, either in the aggregate or one or two exemplary people that can point to something—usually, how devoted they were to the tradition. And then you sort of sneak in the devotion to the tradition and keeping it going. So it's inspirational, too.

Here Flandreau used “tradition” in the more typical way: as a stand-in for appropriate Sacred Harp practice, informed by personal and collective history, filled with meaning, rather than the empty shell of “just a tradition.” At the start of her lesson, Flandreau placed herself in the position of many members of her audience: college students who were enthusiastic about folk music, and about this music in particular, but might not understand the point of the memorial lesson, prayer, or other practices beyond knowing that they are considered “traditional.” By identifying with the experience of her listeners, Flandreau drew them into her narrative and made a preemptive strike at the idea that the memorial lesson is “more a tradition than anything real.” If the new singers could not fully understand the import of the memorial lesson for themselves, they might at least be able to get a sense of the meaning it held for others.

Flandreau's visible tears and the catch in her voice, the physical manifestations of her emotion, might have been as important as her words. Most memorial lessons present and inspire “a patterned display of the icons of emotion” (Tolbert 1990:102), including tears and hoarse voices. When Flandreau described her own first impressions of a Southern memorial lesson, at the first National Convention in 1980, she focused on the public weeping there (2000):

I remember a lot of people openly crying, and so it made an impression that way, although I didn't know anybody they were talking about. . . . I'd been singing for about ten years, but only in Ann Arbor. I'd been South once before for a singing. . . . Other people were so clearly moved. Now I don't think they're *upset*. Crying isn't upset in this case. There's a lot more overt emotional response to anything religious and spiritual down South. I remember one elderly gentleman who used to cry when he prayed. . . . It's just something that, you know, anybody can do that. And even grown men can cry . . . .

I think it's a group dynamic. I think it's a group psychology thing. It's sort of the reverse of a mob mentality. If there are enough people that are moved, and sort of emotionally vibrating, then other people pick up on the vibrations. It resonates, that's it exactly. Because I know that's what happened to me at those first few Nationals, when there actually was a memorial lesson. . . . I remember it's sort of embarrassing if you're sitting there with tears running down your face, and you don't know why. I mean, why are you just crying like an idiot, you know?. . . Just because,

you know, what's going on and why am I doing this? And then I figured out it was a sort of everybody in this frame of mind thing.

Tears, both those of others and one's own, are an index of emotional involvement at a singing. Singers cite tears as a mark of the power of a memorial lesson or a particular tune: "There wasn't a dry eye in the house." After giving a memorial lesson at the Midwest Convention in 2000, Georgia singer David Lee joked with me that memorial speakers could judge their success by the number of women who left the room to fix their mascara. Flandreau's observation that "even grown men can cry" is a common one.

But as in Flandreau's early experience, many new singers who find themselves in tears during a memorial lesson experience guilt or embarrassment: "Why are you just crying like an idiot?" Because she did not know the names on the memorial list and was too young to have much personal experience with death, Flandreau could not justify her tears to herself until she "figured out it was a sort of everybody in this frame of mind thing." A singer who had not reached this level of equanimity told me that she felt like she was taking inappropriate advantage of an opportunity to cry about her own troubles. When I outlined these concerns to Flandreau, she replied (2000):

No, I think that doesn't matter. . . . I mean, lots of times I have felt as though I was not exactly leaving my troubles at the door. But it helps. . . . We're there as individuals, and contributing to something bigger than all of us.

Flandreau's use of the trope of "leaving \_\_\_\_ at the door," often used by singers with reference to divisive political or religious issues, provides insight into what an individual brings to the hollow square. Certain things aren't left at the door, even though they aren't publicly aired; private comfort transpires in the midst of a public ritual (Bealle 1997). Meanwhile, the cumulative experience of shared emotion during memorials and of knowing more and more of the names on memorial lists both contribute to the process of "becoming traditional."

### **"There'll Come A Time When You'll Know"**

Some newer singers suggest that for lifelong participants—the people who are universally recognized as "traditional singers" and often considered to hold "standard Christian beliefs," as one singer put it—the memorial lesson must be a straightforward expression of grief and remembrance, without these reflexive trappings. They naturalize the grieving process of these singers and contrast it with their own self-conscious struggles. But many lifelong or longtime singers are cognizant of the complexities of the memorial lesson's functions, challenges, and potential, especially in the context of their interactions with new singers. Richard DeLong, a Georgia high-school teacher and lifelong singer who currently serves as executive secretary of the Sacred Harp Publishing Company, has often spoken about his mixed feelings as he watches seats once filled by members of Southern singing families become occupied by new singers from all over the country. For DeLong and others, it is crucial that these new singers

develop respect for traditional practices and pass them on to their home singing groups and eventually their children. Because the memorial lesson is the only time when singers may speak at any length to the class, it offers an opportunity for lifelong singers to make these points to those who will eventually succeed them.

At the 2000 All-California Convention in San Francisco, DeLong was not formally a member of the memorial committee but was specially invited to speak about his grandmother, Dollie Hudgins, who died in 1999. Most of the assembled singers were familiar with DeLong, since he had taught many singing schools in conjunction with this convention over the years, but few of them traveled to distant conventions or knew much about Southern singing families. DeLong began:

I wish that my grandmother could have had the opportunity to come out here and sing with you, because it would have just thrilled her to death to know that Sacred Harp was being carried on way over on the West Coast. And not just carried on—it was being carried on *in the tradition*. There're some fine singers here. But more importantly, you're carrying it on, and you're trying really hard to uphold the traditions that my grandmother lived for all of her life. She went to singings when she was a little girl. And she died at 81. Last year at this convention I sang for my great-uncle Horace, who was her brother-in-law, who was 93 and started leading when he was five. Those people knew what it was about. Some of you are still trying to figure out what it's about. But keep trying. And there'll come a time when you'll know just about all of the names on the memorial list.<sup>17</sup>

In a few sentences, DeLong evoked the long history of Sacred Harp in his own family, acknowledged the changes in the transmission process that brought Sacred Harp to the West Coast, and suggested that all of those present could “figure out what it's about” with enough time and effort. By praising local singers for “carrying it on,” DeLong subtly enjoined his listeners “to uphold the traditions that my grandmother lived for all of her life,” as though this were the only legitimate option. Because he had attended the All-California Convention for years and had taught nearly all of the singing schools held in conjunction with it, DeLong was well aware that many of the singers present did not in fact regularly observe traditional Southern practice at their local singings; indeed, as Janet Herman has shown (1997), the California Sacred Harp scene was one where regional differences had been particularly resistant to outside influence. Thus DeLong needed to establish his authority as a traditional singer without alienating his listeners. His lesson offered an invitation while withholding full approval: “Some of you are still trying to figure out what it's about.”

The memorial lesson is an especially good moment to reinforce traditional practice and values because its very presence at a convention already indicates respect for those values—even though its inclusion and format might be the work of a few convention officers rather than something desired by all in attendance. Including a memorial lesson in a newly established convention is one way of letting Southern traditional practices get a foot in the door. It provides a formally sanctioned opportunity for a pre-selected representative of the tradition to talk to the

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<sup>17</sup> Recorded January 16, 2000.

class about traditional norms while commanding the respectful attention due to someone in mourning. At the 2000 All-California Convention, a local singer, Mary Rose O’Leary, spoke before DeLong and prepared the ground for his memorial for his grandmother, explaining to the California singers why it was their duty to remember someone who had sung on the other side of the country:

Yesterday in the singing school Richard talked about his grandmother, who took him to Sacred Harp singings when he was four years old, and I never met Dollie Hudgins, but I’m connected to Dollie Hudgins, because she passed on a gift to Richard that Richard was generous enough to pass on to us. And I think it’s our job also to pass this on.<sup>18</sup>

O’Leary’s remarks conform to the style Suzanne Flandreau described, “remembering . . . one or two exemplary people that can point to something—usually, how devoted they were to the tradition. And then you sort of sneak in the devotion to the tradition and keeping it going.” Because of her extensive connections to lifelong Southern singers and those directly influenced by them, O’Leary had an investment in DeLong’s cause. The nature of the group assembled at the All-California Convention made reinforcing the value of traditional Southern practice a priority for its organizers; the memorial lesson was the perfect conduit for that message. O’Leary sketched a line of transmission that established DeLong as a keeper of the tradition and someone to whom California singers should feel indebted.

Subsequently, DeLong’s obvious emotional distress during his talk helped convey his devotion to traditional practice and its transmission. His words matched the tightness in his voice at the end of his lesson, when he described how many memorial lessons his grandmother had heard for family members and said, “So when all of that starts happening, you get a little closer to Sacred Harp. And these sentiments and people, they wrap just a little tighter around your heart. And when you start knowing most of the people on the memorial list you’ll know what I’m talking about.” The emotion displayed in DeLong’s voice, along with his expressed validation of the singing community in California, encouraged his listeners to empathize with his desire to see the tradition continue in the way his grandmother would have wished. There was no arguing with his grief.

Singers often evaluate and analyze individual renditions of songs and memorial lessons, drawing on their knowledge of the conventional elements that cue certain responses from participants. At the moment of the song or the memorial, however, each is “*framed* to be taken literally as emotional expression” (Turino 1999:239). Like crying in the square, speaking with a ravaged voice can powerfully gather the emotions of the class. Many observers have commented on how *loud* Sacred Harp singing is, and some have suggested this volume is a form of self-indulgence or self-aggrandizement (Marian-Bălașa 2003); indeed, singers occasionally criticize over-loud singing on these grounds. But the felt impact of loud singing on the body also serves as a reminder of personal vulnerability, and of the smallness of one’s own voice outside of the hollow square. In memorial lessons, a worn-out or cracking voice replicates the physical sensations of grief or illness while confirming the depth and intensity of one’s Sacred Harp

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<sup>18</sup> Recorded January 16, 2000.

commitments. As in Feld's Kaluli laments, the embodied performance of grief serves to "centrally display and focus the aesthetics of emotionality, and to positively value these social articulations as organized, thoughtful expressions of personal and social identities as deeply felt" (1990:257).<sup>19</sup>

In their lessons, O'Leary and DeLong enjoined new singers (and experienced singers who did not adhere to traditional standards) to recognize an obligation, to realize that traditional singing needed and deserved their support. DeLong's lesson placed himself and his family's tradition in a vulnerable position, and suggested that he knew something that the other singers might come to know in time if they did the right thing. Like Flandreau, DeLong preempted the idea that the memorial lesson is "just a tradition" by demonstrating its intense importance to him—borne out by the cracking voice and held-back tears of authentic feeling—and suggesting that those who did not fully share his feelings simply had to wait until their experience matched his.

### **"Let's Sing Them Some Traveling Music"**

The United Convention met for its 96<sup>th</sup> annual session in 1999. This convention has been held in various locations in the South, mostly in Alabama; in 1990 it took place in Chicago (a watershed moment for diaspora singing). The 1999 session took place at Liberty Baptist Church in Henagar, Alabama, a beautiful rural area with powerful associations for many singers. This session marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the seminal 1959 Alan Lomax recording of the United at Fyffe, Alabama; a recording team was present to commemorate the occasion. During one of the breaks everyone who had been present at the 1959 session gathered on the steps of the church to be photographed, and several singers made brief references to the 1959 convention before leading.<sup>20</sup>

When his turn came to lead, Richard DeLong—who was born some years after the 1959 convention—described the changes he had witnessed since first attending the United:

Mr. Bowen, Don's daddy, brought me here in 1979, it was the first time I came to the United. And we got to Henagar out here, where the crossroads is, and they had a sawhorse in the middle of the road with a sign on it, and I thought "This is a *big* deal, they just put a sawhorse in the middle of the road!" [*laughter*] . . . . But the house was just as full, like it is now, there wasn't a place to sit down both Saturday and Sunday. But there wasn't a *soul* here from outside the South. And I don't mean that in any sort of negative way, I'd just like for you to know, all you visitors, what we used to have. And we are so thankful that you're here, because if you weren't, we couldn't have it. We

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<sup>19</sup> See also discussions of hoarseness as an index of authentic feeling in Feld 1982, Briggs 1993, Tolbert 1990, and Urban 1988.

<sup>20</sup> Selections from the 1959 recording were released on *All Day Singing from "The Sacred Harp"* (Lomax 1960) and several other albums. California Sacred Harp ethnographer Janet Herman organized the 1999 recording, called *In Sweetest Union Join* (Community Music School 2000).

couldn't have it. And I wish they could all be here to see *you*. Because every one of 'em would be so proud.<sup>21</sup>

As in his memorial lesson in California, at the United Convention DeLong walked a line between asserting ownership of the tradition and thanking and encouraging relative newcomers in their efforts. Despite the demographic shift he observed, however, there were few inexperienced singers at the United. At urban singings like the two I have just described, passers-by often wander in, drawn by the sound. Regular singers bring friends, and people may turn up who come to a Sacred Harp singing once a year or so, when it's convenient. The location of the United precluded much casual attendance of this kind, since making the trip required a degree of commitment from most participants. Singers came from all over the country, including sizeable groups from Minnesota, Illinois, and the Northeast, but for the most part they already knew each other from other singings or previous sessions of the United.

The three members of the memorial committee were Elene Stovall of Birmingham, Marcia Johnson of Chicago, and Kelly House of Rhode Island. In addition, Mark Brown of Dutton, Alabama, was invited to lead the singing of "Beulah Land," a call-and-response hymn that is not printed in *The Sacred Harp*, and Tony Ivey of Henagar was asked to provide a prayer.<sup>22</sup> The choice of memorial personnel was inclusive, almost to the point of providing proportional representation for the major groups of singers present. Stovall is a lifelong Southern singer; Johnson represented the core group of Chicago singers who traveled South frequently and had been singing Sacred Harp together for about fifteen years; House was among the organizers of the Western Massachusetts Convention, an important new singing founded earlier that year. Mark Brown's rendition of "Beulah Land," with responsive harmony from the class, was an assertion of specifically local tradition; indeed, it violated the original constitution of the United Sacred Harp Musical Association, which specifies that only music printed in *The Sacred Harp* (the 1911 James revision and its descendants) should be sung at the convention.

Kelly House read the names of the dead but did not make any remarks, as is typical for the least experienced member of a memorial committee with more than two people. Then Marcia Johnson spoke:

Ted and Melanie and I, and Judy, travel all the time together.<sup>23</sup> We just get in the big old car and hit the road to come down here, and on those long trips it's a good time to spend a lot of time thinking, and a lot of times I just look out the window, and something reminds me of I don't know how many trips I took in cars with my aunt, my uncle, my granddaddy, my mother, my father. And you all were raised in this kind of music, I was just raised in music. We sang on those trips, we sang by the hour, my cousins, my sister, my brother. And I remember being here, and I believe it

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<sup>21</sup> Transcribed from *In Sweetest Union Join* (Community Music School 2000), recorded September 12, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> "Beulah Land" is a favorite of the Wootten family, a prominent singing family from the surrounding Sand Mountain area of Alabama and the subject of the documentary *Sweet is the Day: A Sacred Harp Family Portrait* (Carnes 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Ted Johnson is Marcia's husband; Judy and Melanie Hauff are sisters.

must have been Noah Lacy who was talking about coming here by horse and wagon, and I bet you there are people out here who remember taking trips with their family, in a horse and wagon, and then maybe in a car. I bet you that there's nobody here who hasn't made a long car trip with their family.

And you look around, and if you think when you look out the window: this one's gone, that one's gone, this one's gone, they're *gone*. Your children, some of them gone; my mama gone now; my daddy; our son; Mr. DeLong—those of you who've had what I'd call a *hard year*. Now we take these few minutes just to put that ache back in our hearts. Because we need that. Because we need to draw them back to us just for this little while. We need them. We need that comfort of them. We would not call them back to suffer. But we call them back to memory, because of the—because we need 'em. Because we need that—*hug*—And now, all of those people they just—took off on the wings of a dove, and they've taken another kind of trip, and they just kind of left us here, and we love them with all of our hearts and we miss them—intensely. And so what I'd like to do today is just sing a beautiful song. Let's sing them some traveling music. We'll sing them songs from us. I know that they can hear us. I *know* that. I want to sing page 547 [“Granville,” composed by Chicago singer Judy Hauff in 1986 with a 1719 text by Isaac Watts]. This is a beautiful song. And the poetry of this song—it's just some of my favorite. I appreciate your caring enough.<sup>24</sup>

Johnson's lesson focused on traveling, a theme as common in Sacred Harp memorial lessons as it is in song texts. In both rhetorical traditions, mortal life is often characterized as a journey, usually a difficult one. This journey may be framed as solitary or shared with fellow strugglers. Illness and death are also identified with traveling, as part of the trip “over Jordan,” the river that separates the dead from the living. The text to “Wayfaring Stranger” (457) is typical in its description of life's troubles juxtaposed with the rest, safety, and comfort of “home” after death:

I am a poor, wayfaring stranger,  
While journ'ying through this world of woe,  
Yet there's no sickness, toil nor danger,  
In that bright world to which I go.  
I'm going there to see my Father,  
I'm going there no more to roam;  
I'm only going over Jordan,  
I'm only going over home.<sup>25</sup>

Other songs follow this convention but refer to travel in a group rather than as a solitary stranger:

What poor, despised company  
Of travelers are these,

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<sup>24</sup> Transcribed from *In Sweetest Union Join* (Community Music School 2000), recorded September 12, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Text from Bever's *Christian Songster* (1858), music arranged by John M. Dye (1935).

That walk in yonder narrow way,  
 Along the rugged maze?<sup>26</sup>

Come on, my fellow pilgrims come,  
 And let us all be hast'ning home.<sup>27</sup>

Another kind of traveling song invokes bereavement, linking the solitary traveler and a community of friends in a narrative of departure:

Farewell, my friends, I'm bound for Canaan,  
 I'm trav'ling through the wilderness;  
 Your company has been delightful,  
 You, who doth leave my mind distressed.<sup>28</sup>

Johnson's lesson invoked all these kinds of travel: the isolation of looking out a window, the comfort derived from shared traveling, and the pain of making a farewell to loved ones who have "just kind of left us here." She made a connection between family and singing companions by juxtaposing her own childhood trips with family, her present-day trips to singings with her husband and friends, and the family trips that lifelong singers have made to singings since childhood. Johnson drew an all-inclusive "circle of the we" (Hollinger 1993) by saying "I bet you that there's nobody here who hasn't made a long car trip with their family." Then she tightened the circle by leading her friend Judy's tune "Granville," added to *The Sacred Harp* in the 1991 revision, reminding the class of how thoroughly she and her fellow Chicago singers had been integrated into the tradition.

Almost anyone can identify with the sense of isolation and loneliness expressed in "Wayfaring Stranger" and similar songs, even total newcomers to the singing community. But cumulative experience promotes identification with the "poor despised company" and "parting friend" along with the "wayfaring stranger." One aspect of this experience is not the singing itself but the real-world traveling that Johnson described: car-pooling or booking flights together is a standard part of contemporary Sacred Harp practice, a continuation of the horse-and-wagon history she cited. Much Sacred Harp "outreach" takes the form of persuading new singers to travel to a distant singing, and conversation on the trip contributes to the establishment of closer relationships among a local group of singers. Participants become bonded by traveling together, the same experience described in so many tunes.

Many singers compare singings to family reunions, and when new singers first engage with Sacred Harp emotionally it is often on these terms. A Chicago friend of mine, an accomplished singer and worldly scholar, made her first Sacred Harp trip South for the United in 1999. She left the room in tears after leading and returned to tell me "I just started thinking 'Why

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<sup>26</sup> "Irwinton," 229, text anonymous (1774), music arranged by T. W. Carter (1844).

<sup>27</sup> "Sardis," 460, text from *Charles' Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1803), music by Sarah Lancaster (1869).

<sup>28</sup> "Parting Friends (First)," 267, text uncredited, music arranged by John G. McCurry (1842).

was I always so independent and eager to get away from home? Why couldn't I just have stayed at home with my family?" When I relate this story to more experienced singers, they identify it as part of a kind of conversion process: recognizing and assenting to the values of the Sacred Harp community while still feeling not entirely a part of that community. Marcia Johnson's memorial lesson posed a response to such feelings, invoking a broad and inclusive Sacred Harp "family."

Lessons like Johnson's show how Sacred Harp "family" relationships blend together blood or marriage ties with voluntary relationships. These Sacred Harp families resemble the "families we choose" described by Kath Weston in her work on gay kinship ideologies (1991, 1995). As Weston writes, "The same gay kinship ideologies that warn of the fragility of 'blood' ties"—owing to rejection by family members—"celebrate friendship as an enduring bond that can assume the status of kinship" (1995:91). A similar ideology deeply informs some predestinarian Christian concepts of family; predestinarians cannot assume they will be reunited with blood relatives in heaven, so "chosen families" of faith are a foretaste of the kind of family reunion they might experience in the afterlife (Patterson 1995). The Sacred Harp kinship ideologies articulated in memorial lessons resonate powerfully for singers from many backgrounds, merging the family-of-faith rhetoric some encountered in childhood with an offer of a welcoming chosen family. To borrow Weston's terms, memorial lessons that focus on an extended Sacred Harp family "recreate an authenticating vision of social ties each time they bring forward evidence to demonstrate enduring solidarity or argue that what perseveres is 'real' (if not everlasting) kinship" (1995:101).

Johnson effectively illustrated this point by talking about her own travels with family (both blood relatives and her Sacred Harp family), the travels of the many singing families represented in the room, and the journey of deceased family members whose passage to the afterlife required "some traveling music." She referred to a family that stretched across boundaries of time, geography, blood kinship, and mortality, brought together by the Sacred Harp tradition. In commemorative narratives like this one, "words are fitted with new histories as utterances become shot through with the full range of ways they have been recontextualized" (Briggs 1993:952). The words "family," "travel," and "tradition" all acquire new layers of meaning for singers.

The lessons I have described begin to demarcate the steps along the way to becoming traditional. Johnson's "traveling music" for the dead is also the music that accompanies this journey. As one singer told me in conversation, "I journeyed from 'Oh is there anyone like me?' to 'Your friendship's like a drawing band'."<sup>29</sup> The latter song continues, "Yet we must take the parting hand"; it is virtually always used as the closing song at Sacred Harp conventions (see the epigraph to this article above).

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<sup>29</sup> "Jackson," 317b (cited earlier); "Parting Hand," 62, text by John Blain (1818), music arranged by William Walker (1835).

### Unspeakable Affect: Grieving for the Failures of Language

The emotion generated by and displayed in memorial lessons raises broader questions about Sacred Harp's affective aspects. Singers attribute much of the tradition's power to the authenticity of the feeling-states it evokes—a sense of lived reality and unmediated knowledge of emotional bonds. As one lifelong singer wrote in a response to a qualitative survey I circulated in 1999, “I sing it because I love it and I love the feeling/connection I feel in my own little space when I'm singing. I generally love the other people who sing also . . . those who understand what I'm talking about here . . . but the beauty is, We, those people, hardly ever talk to one another, verbally, that is, about this feeling” (ellipses original). Thomas Turino's Peirce-based theory of musical semiotics can be productively applied to this kind of Sacred Harp experience; as Turino observes (1999:235-37), musical indices “condense great quantities and varieties of meaning—even contradictory meanings—within a single sign,” and the ambiguity of the sign complex may facilitate a “semantic snowballing” of feeling.

“Snowballing” effectively models what a convention's “arranging committee” tries to accomplish as they sort through registration forms and choose the order of song leaders. It also sheds light on the frustration that singers experience when a leader disrupts that cumulative experience by talking in the square or choosing a song that does not build on its predecessors. Such a model is especially effective in accounting for the associations that accrue to individual songs over time. In a musical tradition characterized by cyclic repetition within a relatively stable repertoire, “snowballing” suggests how such accumulations are “experienced as ‘real’ because they are rooted, often redundantly, in one's own life experiences and, as memory, become the actual mortar of personal and social identity” (Turino 1999:229). Sacred Harp singing is characterized by long stretches of shared emotional intensity punctuated by individual efforts to assess and explain that intensity, and these explanations suggest that many singers think about musical experience in the way Turino describes.

Given singers' celebration of the affective power of collective music-making, it might seem surprising that the memorial lesson—positioned as the emotional climax of a convention—channels shared feeling through individual speech. Yet the analytical and exegetical tendencies of memorial lesson rhetoric wield considerable affective power over listeners. Turino suggests that “propositions and linguistic arguments about identity,” being mediated by language, “do not provide the feeling or direct experience *of* belonging; rather they are claims and arguments *about* belonging” (241).<sup>30</sup> Sacred Harp memorial lessons complicate this assessment: they provide a direct experience of belonging by reflexively drawing attention to the *limits* of language, producing an intense sense of loss.

The emotional utterances that characterize memorial lessons are not simply linguistic arguments; following William Reddy (1997:327), we should be attentive to their power as “emotives,” utterances that “alter the states of the speakers from whom they derive” and channel the emotional responses of listeners. Reddy's “emotives” are distinct from Austinian constatives and performatives. Like performatives, emotives “actually do things to the world” (331), but they

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Greg Urban (1988:397): “Ritual wailing is precisely not talking about feeling. That is what makes it convincing.”

are unique in their capacity “to alter what they ‘refer’ to or what they ‘represent’” (327). Emotives are therefore “instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, [and] intensifying emotions” (331). When Elene Stovall asked a group of singers to imagine future loss, calling out the names of still-living community members as though they were on the deceased list, the singers’ immediate emotional response supported Reddy’s suggestion that we should “attribute extensive power to the conventional emotives authorized in a given community to shape members’ sense of identity and self-awareness” (333).

In a memorial lesson at Holly Springs in June of 2000, Richard DeLong provided one of the most explicit definitions of traditional singing that I have heard from a Sacred Harp singer:

There’s been some discussion as to maybe what is traditional singing. Well, just as we have a memorial in which people take time to grieve other losses in their lives, and other sadnesses, sad areas of their lives, so do we take time in a singing to sing about our lives. To sing from the heart. And when you learn to sing from the heart, and not from the voice, that’s maybe when you’re a traditional singer.<sup>31</sup>

DeLong juxtaposed talking about death with singing about life as parallel aspects of the emotional experience of traditional singing. His account of “singing from the heart” represents a common trope of memorial lessons: things can be sung that can’t be said. Yet these word-based arguments, grounded in oral tradition and spoken with a grief-cracked voice, do provide “the feeling or direct experience *of* belonging.” They index shared emotional intensity even as they deny the possibility of expressing that intensity in words.

Turino makes special claims for music over language, as Sacred Harp singers often do; he proposes that semantic snowballing sheds light on “why we need music” (1999:250). Without disclaiming music’s affective power, I would argue that speech can also have snowballing potential, particularly when it occurs in emotionally charged ritual contexts. Memorial lessons do not simply persuade: they actually transform speakers’ and listeners’ feeling-states. Their orally transmitted conventional tropes, including phrases drawn from song texts and the Bible, are “vectors of alteration” (Reddy 1997:327) that account for emotional change in individuals and communities. Memorial lessons demonstrate that spoken words also have the power to condense multiple, contradictory meanings and to function as “fluid, multileveled, and highly context-dependent” (Turino 1999:236). Singers’ deep understanding of song texts’ multivalence helps make it possible for memorial lessons to work this way; everyone knows that diverse religious beliefs, political convictions, and cumulative singing experiences shape a given song’s potential meanings, and singers are primed to locate the same multivalence in memorial lessons. Like hymn texts, particular songs, or particular styles of song-leading, memorial lessons “continually take on new layers of meaning while potentially also carrying along former associations,” as Turino glosses the idea of semantic snowballing (235).

It is plain that Sacred Harp singers do “need music” to generate a felt experience of social synchrony, but singers’ insistence on the importance of memorial lessons suggests that music alone is not enough, especially when the transmission of individual and collective memory is at

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<sup>31</sup> Recorded June 4, 2000.

stake. Rather than postponing language-mediated thought so that “emotional and direct energetic effects can be prolonged” (Turino 1999:233), memorial lessons generate and sustain intense emotion by closely juxtaposing speech and song. Memorial speakers use spoken language to ask questions and create needs that only singing together can answer. They channel collective emotion, transmit history among members of a dispersed community, and deliberately assert the grievous inadequacy of speaking in direct contrast to the efficacy of singing. Memorial lessons open up an expressive chasm that has to be filled; standing together on the edge of that chasm provides as direct an experience of belonging as singing itself.

### **Refrain: Cords Around the Heart**

In January of 2000, Suzanne Flandreau asked me to serve on the memorial committee for the Chicago Anniversary Singing. I initially demurred, pointing to my youth and inexperience. I had served on the memorial committee for the Young People’s Singing the previous year, but had been responsible only for reading a list of names; besides, at that singing all the officers had to be under age thirty. Suzanne reminded me that I had been singing for as long as many of the people who would be present for the Chicago singing. Furthermore, she said, it might give me extra insight for my research. Ten years later, I realize this moment was an extraordinary opportunity to engage in what Della Pollock (2003:263-64) has called “a performative epistemology: a mode of knowing by doing and feeling the sensuous, concrete, vital, risky, relational, and highly contingent claims of live performance.” After some thought, I agreed to be on the committee, but I asked to speak for the sick and shut-in rather than for the dead.

With the conservatism of the zealous young ethnographer who thinks she has learned the rules of her chosen tradition, I felt strongly that I was too young to give a memorial lesson. This was a sign of trouble in the transmission process, I thought—imagine someone like me being put in a position to expound to new singers on the ideals of the Sacred Harp community! I was embarrassed by the whole idea. And so I determined that at the beginning of my lesson I would emphasize my youth, so that at least people would see that I knew myself to be an inappropriate choice for the memorial committee. I decided to lead the tune “The Gospel Pool” (34t), because the text was about healing and because Richard DeLong—who was present—had once led it as part of a very moving memorial lesson.<sup>32</sup> Beyond that, I didn’t know what I would say. This is the lesson that I gave:

I’ve been asked to read the names of the sick and the shut-in. [*Reads list of names.*] I want to say quickly that—sometimes it’s a little hard to be young at a singing. [*laughter*] It’s hard because I’m twenty, I’m twenty years old, and a lot of you started learning Sacred Harp when you were a little bit older, and you have your cohort of peers around you. But I know that I’m going to have to hear a lot of memorial lessons. And I want to live to be an old lady, and keep singing Sacred Harp until I’m an old lady. But I know that during that time I’m probably going to have to see a lot of the

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<sup>32</sup> John Newton’s 1779 text reads, “Beside the gospel pool, / Appointed for the poor, / From time to time my helpless soul / Has waited for a cure. // But whither can I go? / There is no other pool, / Where streams of sov’ reign virtue flow / To make a sinner whole.” Music by Edmund Dumas (1869).

people who taught me to sing—and even some of the people that I taught to sing—go. And that’s a really hard thing to think about.

This summer I gave my first memorial lesson, at the Young People’s Convention, and it broke my heart there to read John Bailey’s name on the list of the sick and the shut-in. And it’s such a pleasure to see him back here today. And I hope we can all remember that—that the names on this list, these are people we might see again. So keep them in your hearts.

I wrote John a letter when he was sick, and he wrote back to me—I don’t know if you remember what you wrote, John—he wrote “How could I tell you how precious that you could know me at all and give a hoot.” And I hope that— [*laughter; John Bailey jokes, “I didn’t mean it.”*] I hope you’ll remember that. It’s amazing that I know all of you. I never would have known you if we weren’t here singing together. I don’t know where I would have run across you. So. Please sing with me on page 34, on the top.<sup>33</sup>

As I began my lesson, I looked around the hollow square at the people who taught me how to sing Sacred Harp, who drove me to singings, who gossiped with me and encouraged me, who gave me their sick to speak for. I saw John Bailey in particular, who had fallen ill with cancer very suddenly in 1999 and had not been expected to survive long. It was at John’s home singing, the Illinois State Convention in 1997, that I had first cried at a memorial lesson, finding myself terribly moved by the song we sang: “I’m a long time traveling here below, I’m a long time traveling away from home.”<sup>34</sup> In John’s house, filled with eccentric collections and musical instruments, he and D.J. Hatfield and I had softened the sting of that song by playing it on kazoos. John’s joke brought back that moment of intensely mingled humor, grief, and affection—the same feeling conveyed by his letter, which I found in the back of my book while giving my lesson.<sup>35</sup>

Most of the singers around the square were in their forties and fifties, and as I looked around it struck me that I would probably live to hear almost all of their names on memorial lists. When I told them “You have your cohort of peers around you,” what I was thinking was that they would die together and I would still be twenty or thirty years behind. Then my eyes fell on Richard DeLong. He may have been the only lifelong singer in the room; in any case he was one of very few. He was still in his thirties and had already begun to see the deaths of the generation of singers who taught him to sing Sacred Harp. Richard knows what I’m talking about, I thought, and it made me know him better. I realized why he traveled to so many singings, why he was in Chicago that day and would be in California the next weekend: to carry out a family obligation, certainly, but also so that in twenty years he wouldn’t be left alone. He and I would continue to give and listen to memorial lessons, and we would know more and more of the names that spent their prescribed year on the lists and then dropped off. But the dead would remain with us, and new singers would learn.

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<sup>33</sup> Recorded January 9, 2000.

<sup>34</sup> “White,” 288, text from *Dobell’s New Selection* (1810), music by Edmund Dumas (1856).

<sup>35</sup> John Bailey, a long time traveling, died in 2002.

I knew then that I was not an inappropriate choice for the memorial committee, that Suzanne Flandreau had neither bent nor broken the rules of authority and transmission to put me in the center of the square. I had already begun to feel that I belonged to the tradition, that its promises, injunctions, exhortations, and questions were webbing me in and prefiguring my understanding, making me complicit with its demands. During my memorial lesson I realized that the tradition had conspired to belong to me. At the center of the square, a place where time is transformed and the song leader is transfigured, “I am a stranger here below” becomes “I belong to this band,” always joined poignantly with “Farewell, vain world, I’m going home.”<sup>36</sup> The square is the homecoming and the point of farewell, the destination for a stranger and the place to prepare for a journey back out into the world and eventually into death. Memorial lessons are displays of loss and of determination not to lose; each one demonstrates the extent of the tradition’s gift and the singers’ responsibilities.

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<sup>36</sup> These lines come from “Jackson” (317b, cited earlier) and “Ragan,” 176t, text uncredited, music by W. F. Moore (1869).

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