

There are angels hovering 'round – singing for the dying

by Peter Amidon

A church choir director and leader of Sacred Harp singing and other American ethnic choral traditions, Peter Amidon leads workshops in hospice singing, church choir leading and singing, and choral music that is steeped in the oral tradition. His choral arrangements of hymns, spirituals, gospel, and American folk songs (many of which are published in the Amidons' collections "Fifty-five Anthems for the Small Church Choir" and "Twenty-five Anthems for Small Church and Community Choirs") are being sung by choruses throughout the United States and the United Kingdom.

Hallowell, southeastern Vermont's hospice choir, started ten years ago when Dinah Breunig was dying of cancer at home with her family. Dinah was a member of the Guilford VT Community Church, UCC choir (of which I am one of the music directors), she was a regular at monthly Sacred Harp sings, and she was deeply involved in the traditional dance community as a dancer and organizer. Our pastor, Lise Sparrow, had asked the church choir to sing now and then for church folks who were shut in or dying, and so it was perfectly natural for her to call me one morning and say "Dinah's going, you'd better gather some singers." I spent the morning making phone calls and sending e-mails to people in Dinah's various overlapping song and dance communities. That evening about forty friends showed up at Dinah and her husband Fred's house. I met with everyone in the Breunig living room downstairs and whispered: "We will go up, we will sing these three quiet songs, and then we will leave."

All forty of us walked up the stairs and into their bedroom. Dinah had been quiet, but not yet in a coma. We sang our first song and were surprised when Dinah sang with us. We were even more surprised when, after we finished, Dinah said, "Let's sing *Waters of Babylon*." After several more requests from Dinah, and about ten songs later, we finally left.

Two days later Fred called and asked if we could come one more time; there were family members there now who had missed the first singing. So, once again, about forty of Dinah's friends marched up the stairs. Dinah had stopped talking, but, amazingly, she sang along this time too; and, once again, we sang through eight or ten songs before we left. Dinah died a few days later, surrounded by her family.

Kathy Leo, Dinah's hospice caregiver, was inspired by these two extraordinary singing visits at Dinah's bedside to form a choir whose specific purpose was to sing for the dying. Kathy sang in Mary Cay Brass's community chorus "River Singers". When Kathy asked Mary Cay and me if we might share the role of musical director for such a group, we agreed on the spot. The three of us agreed that we would start by opening up our new hospice choir to anyone in either the Guilford Community Church Choir or in the River Singers, two groups which share an overlapping philosophy, repertoire and style of singing. About thirty folks joined and formed the core of "Hallowell," named after an eloquent song about death that Brattleboro's Stephen Spitzer had composed a few years earlier. All of the singers went through a three-hour hospice orientation session.

Here is Hallowell Founder/Director Kathy Leo on how she prepares for a typical hospice sing:

As coordinator, I am the bridge between hospice, the families we work with and the singers. When a call comes in I gather information, make contact with the family and call upon the singers to gather a group that fits the needs of the person we are serving. The more information we have about a person, the more relaxed and present we can be when in his company.

We want to know something about who this person is. What does he love? What has his life been about? What are his religious or spiritual practices or beliefs? Who might be there when we sing? What is the diagnosis/prognosis? Physical space? What might we expect in terms of physical appearance, smells, sights? I want to prepare the singers and I want to know who we're being invited to visit so we can bring our best intention into the room, choose appropriate songs, and bring the right spirit to the bedside.

We have two kinds of leadership in our hospice sings: the liaison person, who is responsible for communicating with the family and the patient, and the music director, who pitches and leads the singing. Typically for an individual sing Kathy is our liaison

and Mary Cay or I take the role of music director, but Hallowell has enough folks in our hospice singing “pool” (about 40) that there are a number of people who can take on one or the other or both of these roles.

A typical bedside sing: Eight Hallowell singers arrive at the home of Janice at the appointed time. The singers wait outside the home while Kathy, the liaison for this visit, goes inside to check in with the family. She looks at the space where we will be singing, finds out if the family is ready, has a short visit with Janice, who is in bed, and then comes out to prepare the singers. Kathy has found out that Janice had been an English teacher who loves classical music. She tells us that Janice is probably a few days away from dying, and though she is not asleep, it is not clear how alert she is. We have found that in a situation like this where someone is close to death it is best to sing songs that are not familiar (sometimes even in another language) so they can be a calming shower of sound rather than something familiar that might bring the patient too much into the present. Kathy kneels down and whispers to Janice that she does not have to open her eyes, she does not have to respond to us, she can just let the singing wash over her. We had decided outside that we would start with Thuma Mina, a simple calming South African chant-like call-and-response song. Larry, one of the singers, leads with the opening phrase, and the eight singers respond with the beautiful four-part South African harmonies. Janice moves a little bit, but her eyes do not open. The family members: Janice’s sister, her husband (holding Janice’s hand), two of her adult children, and a couple of grandchildren, start crying. A few of the singers also start shedding tears, but they keep singing. When the song ends, Kathy says “She looks beautiful,” and she does. One of the singers suggests “Blessed Quietness,” an old hymn with a reassuring text and quiet, calming harmonies. Then we sing “Khvalite”, a meditative Russian Orthodox hymn, followed by a slow, quiet, short version of the Bahama spiritual “Bid You Goodnight” (which is more typically a lively rousing piece). Then Kathy says to Janice and the family, “How are you doing? Are you OK for a couple more?” They say they would love a couple more. So we finish with a musical setting of the traditional Irish “Gaelic Blessing” and, finally, an old hymn that really feels more like a spiritual: “Angels Hovering Round.”

Kathy kneels down and says goodbye to Janice while the singers quietly leave the room. Outside of the bedroom the family members thank the singers, some with handshakes, some with hugs and tears, and the singers thank the family for the privilege of singing for Janice.

Outside, the singers gather in a tight circle, arms around each other. This is when we can really cry, and many of us do. I don't know quite how to put into words how deep the satisfaction of this moment is, how deeply honored we feel to have been invited into the intimacy of this family's life and death, and how sweet and precious the air is, the trees are, the sky is, how close we feel to each other.

Kathy Leo tells of another hospice singing visit:

The day we sang for Joe, six of us arrived in two cars at the small house on the hill off of a dirt road. Joe and his wife Carol sat side by side in two worn comfortable recliners, small tables beside each one with their tea cups and tissue boxes, TV remote, ordinary things. Joe pointed to the walker beside his chair and explained that he used to love to walk back before he had hip surgery. Now he has to use this walker and go slowly. Carol sat beside him, her soft white hair framing her sweetly smiling face. Two daughters were there and the husband of one. We sang song after song: "I Still Have Joy", "I Will Guide Thee", "What a Wonderful World", "Heart of my Heart". After about a half hour of singing, the daughter asked if we could possibly sing "You Are My Sunshine." We broke into four-part harmony and managed the verses. Joe began to cry. Not trying to stop the flow of tears, he looked toward Carol who reached for his hand across the space between their recliners. They held on tightly. The daughters and son-in-law were crying as well and it was no wonder when they later explained to us that Joe had courted Carol with that song 71 years ago. He would play it on his guitar and sing to her. All hearts were open, ours included. Afterward we were invited into the

kitchen where a heaping plate of chocolate chip cookies had just been baked and fresh coffee in a drip pot simmered. We were witness to a long life shared, to simplicity and family. It was a lovely gift to all of us.

We do our hospice sings in homes, nursing homes and hospitals. Hallowell has rehearsals once a month, and we expect all the singers to be able to sing our core repertoire with confidence. We give singing performances in nursing homes once a month. Although we also occasionally do performances at other special events (the annual Service of Remembrance at Brattleboro's Memorial Garden, at the annual Hospice Appreciation gathering, and sometimes at hospice conferences), we are careful to remember that our core work is singing for the dying.

Hallowell's initial repertoire was drawn from the body songs the River Singers and the Guilford Community Church choir already knew and loved: a cappella SATB songs from sacred and secular ethnic choral traditions of England, South Africa, Russia, and the Balkans; arrangements of old American hymns and African American spirituals; and American shape note music. We have also added songs such as "Amazing Grace", "Over the Rainbow", and "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" which we find to be familiar and comforting to many of the families we visit.

Hallowell has published a CD and companion book: *Angels Hovering Round-Songs for Hospice and Healing*, and a second CD: *Love Call Me Home*. Burlington Vermont's Camilla Rockwell made an eloquent film/DVD, *Holding Our Own – Embracing the End of Life*, that features the Hallowell singers and artist Deirdre Scherer who creates extraordinary fabric portraits of the very old and dying. Hallowell leads hospice singing workshops and Hallowell director Kathy Leo is quite generous in the time she spends consulting by e-mail, phone calls and visits on starting and sustaining hospice singing groups. All of this has helped spawn many more hospice singing groups in and out of Vermont. Since Hallowell was formed ten years ago, approximately forty other a cappella SATB hospice singing groups have sprung up in and beyond New England.

It is a privilege to be part of Hallowell. Providing harmony singing for families experiencing the death of one of their loved ones is the most satisfying work I have ever done. Thank you, Kathy Leo for your inspiration and leadership. Here is Kathy speaking for the Hallowell singers with her own thanks:

As Dinah Breunig lay resting in her husband's arms while surrounded by singers from her church and community in a well of songs she loved, as she was taking her final breaths in this world, Hallowell was taking its first breaths. Dinah's dying was our birth, our beginning. Because of her generous spirit, because she and her family invited us to be with her in her dying, to be witnesses, to sing around her bedside in joy, we are now able to offer this same gift to anyone in our community who desires to leave this world on the breath of songs.

Note: Dinah Breunig's husband Fred has given permission to tell their story in this article. Names of other hospice patients and family members have been changed for confidentiality.

*You can get more information on: **Hallowell** and their CD's and book at:
www.hallowell-singers.org*

*Hallowell director **Kathy Leo** can be reached at
kleo@sover.net*

*Hallowell co-music director and River Singers director **Mary Cay Brass** is at
mcbrass@vermontel.net*

*For more information on **Holding Our Own – Embracing the End of Life DVD** go to:
www.holdingourown.com*

*And for **Peter Amidon** go to:
www.amidonmusic.com • amidonpeter@gmail.com*