Why are they singing?

by L. Gregory Jones in the September 8, 1999 issue

Our hosts in Estonia were somberly describing the challenges they faced in maintaining a Christian presence throughout the Soviet era. One Methodist district superintendent had been deported to Siberia during the Stalin era and then executed. The KGB was regularly present at their church gatherings, watching suspiciously to see what was going on.

Then one older leader of the church, a minister, smiled. "Let me tell you how little they understood us, and how little they could understand people's deep longings for God's love." He described how the churchpeople would often disguise their time for Christian education with the children, fearing that the KGB would use their catechesis as an excuse to arrest church members. "Yet," he added, "they just didn't get it. We couldn't disguise the children's love for singing songs about their faith. We were afraid of their reaction. But one of the officers came over to me and, with a puzzled look on his face, asked: 'Why are the children singing?'"

A bureaucratic world committed to the exclusion of any purpose except what can be imposed by human will cannot be open to the working of God's Spirit. In such a world, singing seems nonsensical. Yet these children's love overflowed in songs of praise, an activity which the KGB found not so much illegal as unintelligible.

The Book of James contains a passage (5:12-20) that links the singing of songs with other activities such as praying, suffering, anointing, confessing. The passage seems to suggest that "singing of songs of praise" is a sign of salvation that reflects God's abundant grace and love, and offers the possibility of sustaining people in joy as well as suffering, bodily cheerfulness as well as spiritual pain, eschatological anticipation as well as haunting memories.

Perhaps the KGB officer sensed a threat to the Soviet order in the children's singing, but he did not recognize how transformative singing praise of God can be. Singing together unites, or reunites, people by redrawing the boundaries of community in which there is a responsibility both to perform and to listen—precisely the kind of active receptivity that opens us to God, one another, and a deeper understanding of

ourselves.

In his recent book *Self and Salvation*, David Ford explores powerfully the theological significance of singing in community. "Sounds do not have exclusive boundaries—they can blend, harmonize, resonate with each other in endless ways. In singing there can be a filling of space with sound in ways that draw more and more voices to take part, yet with no sense of crowding. It is a performance of abundance, as new voices join in with their own distinctive tones. There is an 'edgeless expansion' (Begbie), an overflow of music, in which participants have their boundaries transformed. The music is both outside and within them, and it creates a new vocal, social space of community in song."

Countless examples in the history of the church and of social movements exemplify how singing has sustained communities and created contexts for transformation. Slaves singing in the rush arbors, choirs singing in medieval cathedrals, people singing "shape notes" in early American churches, civil rights marchers singing "We Shall Overcome," children singing in Estonian churches.

The Letter to the Ephesians emphasizes the power of singing, explicitly contrasting singing to drunkenness. Ford's comments on this passage are illuminating: "Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, by contrast [to drunkenness], enables a 'sober intoxication' which attunes the whole self—body, heart and mind—to a life attentive to others and to God. It is a practice of the self as physical as drinking—and as habit-forming. One of the main habits formed is that of alertness. There is also the habit of obedience, a word closely connected in many languages with hearing. Singing is a model of free obedience, of following with others along a way that rings true. In this often the body leads the self, and we find ourselves absorbed in a meaning which only gradually unfolds and pervades other spheres."

Often the body leads the self. One of the reasons that music is so powerful in shaping community, in sustaining people amid oppression or grief, in causing us to overflow in praise, is that singing engages our body and passions as well as our mind, forming us to desire the right things rightly. Singing calls us out of the immediacy of our current situation into a world far greater than we could otherwise imagine.

Perhaps that is why I found myself so moved by the singing of the "Hallelujah Chorus" as the benediction of my father's memorial service. I was really in no mood

to hear it, even sung by an assembled choir of friends and strangers. I was grieving, and I felt isolated from God and others. Even so, as the choir sang, I found my body straightening. I eventually discovered that I was on tiptoes. Later a friend told me I had begun singing with the choir. I was drawn out of my grief and isolation, called back into relation with God and the community, in spite of myself.

"Why are they singing?" the KGB officer asked. Because even good habits are hard to break. Once caught by the sober intoxication of singing, of forming and re-forming communities through song, it is very difficult to get people to stop. Oppressors can take away physical freedom or material goods, but they can't take away people's music. In the midst of Nazi Germany, a guard commented that the disruptive singing led by a priest came not only from people but seemed to be "in the bricks."

Why are they singing? Because their lives overflow in God's praise, and because they protest any forms of life where rigid boundaries and false order preclude the edgeless expansion of communal living.