


## Article

# Finding Mountains with Music: Growth and Spiritual Transcendence in a U.S. Prison

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**Abstract:** Resulting in pervasive feelings of despair, the culture of incarceration in the U.S. relies on punitive correctional strategies such as solitary confinement to control the behavior of incarcerated individuals. Inevitably, correctional culture which focuses primarily on punishment is dysfunctional, rife with gang violence, drug use, suicide, and violence perpetuated by and against staff. Our dialogic essay is voiced by (a) a currently incarcerated, Native American person who has survived solitary confinement and the spiritual drain of castigating correctional culture; and (b) a music educator who founded a prison choir for both non-incarcerated and incarcerated individuals in an effort to erode and transform some of the revengeful structures of US incarceration. We draw from Indigenous educator, language specialist, and member of the Lil'wat First Nation, Dr. Lorna Williams' research on Indigenous Knowledge in our efforts to understand the relationships among group singing, spirituality, and our experiences in the Oakdale prison choir. Our dialogue charts a search for spiritual healing in the unsympathetic atmosphere of prison and offers an experience-based account of ways in which group singing can function as a medium of spiritual healing and growth in environments of conflict.



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## 1. Collaborative Autoethnography and Literature on Group Singing in Prisons

Collaborative autoethnographies combine ethnography, autobiography, and collaboration (Chang et al. 2013). Through a dialectical exploration of our personal stories, we interpret our contrasting sociocultural contexts to come to a shared understanding of the roles of group singing in our lives and our experiences with music and spirituality. Author one, Anthony Rhodd who goes by “ARhodd”, resides in a medium security prison in the Midwest of the United States. Author two, Mary Cohen, is a music education professor who researches choral singing and music-making in prisons. Collaborative autoethnographies are “self-focused, researcher-visible, context-conscious, and critically dialogic” (Chang et al. 2013, pp. 22–23). This qualitative methodology allowed us to explore our separate stories and weave together our understanding of Indigenous Knowledge in its relationship to group singing and spirituality.

This study adds to the growing literature on group singing in prisons (e.g., Cohen 2007; Cohen and Duncan 2022; De Quadros and Amrein 2022; Roma 2010). Researchers have reported that choral singing in prisons broadens attitudes toward incarcerated individuals (Cohen 2012a; Messerschmidt 2017), builds a sense of social harmony among participants (Cohen 2019a; Silber 2005; Weber 2018), and promotes well-being (Cohen 2019b). One report examined choral singing in prisons in global contexts including a pilot prison choir competition in New Zealand based on South African prison choir competitions (Menning 2010) and the applications of a musical learning exchange model in an intercultural group singing program in a prison (Harry et al. 2022). This piece contributes to the few collaborative papers that include the voices of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals

(Name withheld #4459 2020; Coleman 2020; Garcia-Vega 2020; Miller and Cohen 2017; Cohen et al. 2021; Washington 2020).

## 2. Introduction: A Sanctuary of Possibility and Warmth through Song (ARhodd)

The sanctuary's glossy pews reflected the red and yellow hues from the stained-glass windows perched high above the congregation. The parishioners sang my favorite gospel song, "Go Tell it on the Mountain". From outside the church, the smell of freshly cut grass wafted through the sanctuary's open windows. As an eight-year-old Native American boy enrolled in the Otoe-Missouria Tribe of Oklahoma, I sang a little too loud for the church's conservative crowd. Feeling the song in my spirit, I sang the lyrics and melody as if each was a gift from God: "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere!" In my imagination, the mountain's hills, fields, and streams were as real as the church's pews, as vibrant as the stained-glass depictions of saints and prophets.

Transcending the conservative confines of the church, I traversed the mountain's trails through singing. I swam its streams, basked in its grasses, inhaled the revitalizing breeze of mountain and music. To me, the song's mountain portrayed a natural sanctuary of possibility and warmth. Throughout my life I would relay on this sacred space in times of pain and loss, most significantly as an incarcerated adult treading the traumatic landscape of the U.S. penal system.

Manifesting this spiritual sanctuary through song and singing, I was tapping into Indigenous Knowledge, which Indigenous language scholar from the Lil'Wat Nation in British Columbia, Canada, Lorna Wanosts'a7 Williams (2018/19) describes as both "thinking and feeling", and says it manifests in "physical actions" (p. 33). Initially, I did not realize that I was experiencing Indigenous Knowledge when I allowed group singing to transport me to a space of comfort and safety. But I am beginning to understand how the physical experience of choral singing has been for me an exploration of spirit, easing the emotional strain and repressive atmosphere of incarceration. I now recognize this pairing of spirituality and physicality as Indigenous Knowledge. While I have experienced how the culture of punishment in U.S. prisons plunges individuals into environments of conflict, I have also experienced the act of choral singing as a medium of spiritual and emotional transcendence escaping the harsh realities of prison and solitary confinement.

## 3. Piano, Accompanying, and Building Community through Singing and Worship (Cohen)

My youthful experiences with music and spirituality began through the inspiration of my older sisters who played piano at home. I began piano lessons in third grade when my mom dropped me off each Wednesday afternoon in Mrs. Clark's home in Wichita, Kansas before mom went to Catholic mass. Five years later as a seventh grader, I started accompanying Catholic mass on organ and piano, played piano for soloists and choirs in high school, and later played in the rhythm section of my high school "stage band". As I continued my music studies in college, many of my experiences with music-making were presentational, different from (ARhodd's) communal singing of "Go Tell It on the Mountain". My sense of spirituality in my music-making was strongest when social connections or a functional purpose was part of the experience such as playing for a worship service, accompanying a modern dance class in college, or leading a choir rehearsal. However, when I perceived judgment from listeners, or the potential for judgment, such as at piano festivals or concerts, my nervousness diminished my sense of spirituality in my music-making; it was hard to be fully embodied in the experience. After completing an undergraduate degree in music education, I began teaching youth in elementary schools and directed a Catholic church choir called the "Spirit Singers". At the end of church choir rehearsals, members voiced their prayers and concluded with a blessing song I wrote for the choir. My intention was to create a space for building relationships among the members through prayer and song. I found the most satisfaction in music-making where a sense of collaboration and connectedness created a space for spiritual growth.

My PhD studies at the University of Kansas in music education brought me to prison. I traveled weekly to the Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas where a choir director, Elvera Voth, had started the “East Hill Singers” (EHS). I assisted with rehearsals, researched choral singing in prisons, completed interviews with choir members, occasionally sang with the choir, and for six months led a separate prison choir at a therapeutic community facility known as “Lansing South” where incarcerated individuals were working to heal from substance abuse issues. At the culmination of each EHS choir season, the incarcerated male choir members traveled from the Lansing minimum-security facility to public venues to join a group of nonincarcerated choir members for concerts. The blending of people accused of committing crimes singing in unison and harmony with people from society outside of prison instilled in me a sense of our interconnectedness. These experiences motivated me to start the Oakdale Choir in 2009 as part of my work as a music education professor at the University of Iowa.

#### **4. The Trauma and Atrocities of Solitary Confinement (ARhodd)**

Severing the social interactions that support spiritual well-being, long-term solitary confinement epitomizes the brutality of punitive corrections. I first experienced solitary confinement as a fifteen-year-old locked in a juvenile detention center. It was spirit-numbing. While implanting feelings of loneliness and despair may not be the goal of punitive correctional tactics like solitary confinement, from my experience, they are the outcome. Solitary confinement separated me from any sense of my community or the natural world; as a result, I lost all sense of myself as a spiritual being.

Throughout my sixty-day stint, I spent twenty-four hours a day confined to a cell no bigger than a bathroom. Three times a week, I was allowed a fifteen-minute shower. A guard escorted me to my shower, but he never talked to me. Several other youth were locked in cells I could not see. Occasionally, someone screamed or beat their cell doors incessantly. I wondered who these people were and where they had come from. I felt sorry for them, even as the lack of social interaction left me feeling lost and confused. After a few days, I cried under my blanket for hours and sought stimulation by any means I could find. I banged my head against the concrete walls and floors until I bled. I clenched my teeth for hours, praying to be anywhere in the world other than that cell. I felt so alone that I began to seek comfort in thoughts of suicide, convincing myself that death remained a viable alternative to isolation.

The cell walls were green and slimy, and the toilet’s water was rusty brown. Locked in that cell, I coped with despair by seeking solace in loneliness; my broken spirit found some safety in isolation’s reassuring illusion that conflict no longer exists. The foreclosure of social interaction produced violent and harmful thoughts. When I was not thinking of hurting myself, I was thinking of hurting others, and these thoughts of violence had a lingering presence in me. Once I was released, this animosity transformed into debilitating anxiety. After sixty days in solitary confinement, my interactions with friends, family, and classmates felt awkward, strained. For years I could not shake the feeling that everyone hated me, that I had become a burden to everyone I loved. At any hint of conflict, I would react violently. I fought at school, I stole, I ran away from home. I found comfort in fantasies of suicide and self-harm. Eventually my self-esteem plummeted, and I convinced myself I was undeserving of fulfillment. By the age of sixteen, I cut myself off from most social interaction through drug and alcohol abuse, which ultimately led to my victimization of others and incarceration. Since the age of twenty, I have spent most of my life in prison.

In this punishing environment, I eventually sought help from my Indigenous cultural heritage. Examining Indigenous Knowledge and its efforts to reclaim life, [Williams \(2018/19\)](#) asserts that “the knowledge of Indigenous peoples is of value today as Indigenous peoples rebuild their lives after near annihilation” (p. 31). Spiritual annihilation feels like the severing of love. It feels like a denial of humanity. It is a removal, a relocation, an abandonment of purpose, of use. The post-colonial reality of contemporary Indigenous Americans exposes the generational trauma associated with genocide, relocation, systemic

racism, and near annihilation. In Native communities across the U.S. suicide, addiction, violence, and high incarceration rates run rampant. Enduring the crimes perpetrated by the U.S. government, contemporary Native Americans struggle to traverse a social landscape resistant to their cultural space. Mirroring these historical goals of Indigenous annihilation, solitary confinement severs the individual from his community, his land, and the opportunity to contribute to, or rely on social interconnectivity. While exhaustive research exposes the trauma associated with solitary confinement, correctional systems in the U.S. continue to utilize the practice, seemingly uncaring of the social and spiritual harm they are causing. The horrific experience of juvenile solitary confinement left me in a state of social and spiritual annihilation that has taken decades to heal. After the trauma of punitive corrections separated me from my community, family, and self, I believed I had no purpose. No use. Where Williams (2018/19) asserts that “we learn from what we hear, see, and feel” (p. 35), the atrocity of U.S. correctional policy remains the designed disassociation of individuals and their communities. Like my ancestors, I would reclaim my worth, my spirit, and contributions to a social whole by rediscovering a community after my near social, spiritual, and communal annihilation caused by solitary confinement.

After a year locked in solitary confinement as a result of my drug/alcohol use in prison, I convinced myself the world was better off without me. I attempted suicide while locked in solitary confinement three years ago; I was thirty-five then. After my suicide attempt, prison officials transferred me to an institution where the primary focus was rehabilitation, mental health care, and community interaction. Two weeks after nearly dying from my suicide attempt, I walked past the prison’s gym and heard an amazing sound which made me think of mountains; someone was playing a piano and people were singing.

### 5. The Oakdale Community Choir: Intentions and Hopes (Cohen)

When I founded the Oakdale Community Choir in 2009, the initial goals were to provide a space for incarcerated and non-incarcerated members to sing together, a model I learned from Elvera Voth and the East Hill Singers in Kansas. My previous experience and study of choral singing in prisons had already convinced me that choral singing in prisons has the potential for measurable personal and social growth, if facilitated effectively. Effective facilitation, in my experience, required a clear purpose, critical reflective practice, and opportunities for members to connect with one another. The grounding framework for the choir was the South African concept of “*Ubuntu*”, a concept of interdependence and wholeness, a sense that each person’s humanity is bound to the humanity of others and to our shared connection with the earth. To encourage social connections among people who only interact weekly for rehearsals, I incorporated a weekly reflective writing component into the choir’s activities. Inside and outside members who wished to participate exchanged reflections inspired by a weekly list of prompts (Cohen 2012b). In this exchange, members learned about one another, and selections of the writing were compiled into a newsletter that all members received at the end of each choir season and posted on the choir website. Some choir members read their writing at the choir concerts in the prison gym where family, friends, and others in the community came to watch, listen, and join in communal singing. Held each May and December, these concerts encouraged audience members to develop a broader awareness of our common humanity. In summers we replaced choir rehearsals with songwriting workshops, generating over 150 original songs throughout 10 years, 75 of which the choir sang at concerts. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of college-credit bearing classes began through a partnership between the Oakdale Prison and the University of Iowa. I designed a class for this program called “Peacebuilding, Singing, and Writing in a Prison Choir” where I began to learn about Indigenous Knowledge, practices, and wisdom.

### 6. Choral Singing in Prisons (ARhodd)

In his book *Redemption Songs*, Andy Douglas (2019), a non-incarcerated member of the Oakdale Choir, described the value of a caring community inside a prison. He noted how the choir, embodying *Ubuntu*, is a model for overcoming the sense of separation that

is inherent in prisons (p. 181). Inside the prison's gym, several non-prisoners or "outsider singers" sat in a circle with twenty incarcerated individuals or "inside singers". There was a piano. There were voices. There was singing.

Offering the opportunity to interact with others in a world separate from incarceration, singing can assist in healing the sociological trauma incarcerated persons experience with isolation and solitary confinement. My arm still bandaged and stitched from my suicide attempt; I entered the prison's gym uninvited to inquire if I could participate. Stepping outside the circle to greet me, Mary Cohen from the University of Iowa replied that I was welcome to join. Someone handed me a ragged leaflet of a song inspired by a Navajo Night Chant, "May You Walk in Beauty". Almost instantly, I was back in the small-town church. After a year in solitary confinement, I distrusted the atmosphere of acceptance the choir seemed to exude, yet I was drawn by it. I held back tears as I cautiously sang, remembering my mountain. I did not know these people; they did not know me. They could not have known that I had spent the last year completely isolated; my voice faded from disuse. I tried to hide my bandages and prayed no one would notice. As we sang the lyrics, "May you walk in beauty in a sacred way", the power of the song overcame me. I breathed in, deeply. I stopped singing and focused on the voices and piano. Exhaling, I found renewed energy that I had not felt since I was a child, since before solitary confinement.

I looked around the gym and no one seemed to notice how emotional I had become. Perhaps I was just the new guy and easily overlooked.

I was brought to my mountain by the choir's singing. I closed my eyes, listened to the singing and basked in the mountain's sun and streams. I lay in the mountain's fields and traversed the peaks. In those moments, I was not in prison. I no longer felt the restraints of loss and despair. I did not feel any drive to isolate myself, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I belonged. Like the child in my church thirty years before, I sang. Loud. And I smiled and I tried to hide my tears.

I joined the Oakdale Community Choir, and soon after, I also participated in Mary Cohen's Peacebuilding, Writing, and Singing in a Prison Choir course through the University of Iowa. Through participating in the choir, the class, and the Songwriters' Workshop, I felt like I was reconnecting with my former self, the person I was pre-solitary confinement. Although I struggled, I relearned essential social skills and the importance of community. This social transformation through the physical, psychomotor, and emotional act of singing exemplifies the kind of Indigenous Knowledge Williams writes about: learning through experience, through the things we see, hear, and feel. I sang and I listened. In this process, I broke the cycle of unhealthy behavior, reclaimed my worth, and changed the way I interacted with groups and individuals, both inside and outside of prison. However, it was not until my older brother Lee's sudden and tragic death that I experienced singing's connection to spirituality and came to understand how this connection remains an essential aspect of Indigenous Knowledge in times of spiritual strife.

## 7. Singing and Grief (ARhodd)

I received an electronic message from my mother in March 2022 explaining that my older brother, Lee, had passed, most likely from a heroin overdose or complications of addiction. He was 44. He was also my hero, a person I've looked up to for as long as I can remember. I felt disoriented, as if part of me was lost. I had not spoken to Lee since my incarceration, over 14 years. In my mind, I had abandoned him, leaving him alone when he likely needed me the most. Recognizing my inner conflict, the incarcerated Native Americans housed at the prison requested a Pipe Ceremony to honor my brother's life. A Pipe Ceremony is a Native American prayer ritual, often held in times of grief or negotiations. The ceremony includes the burning of sage and sweetgrass, the smoking of sacred tobacco, and the communal singing of prayer songs. For me, the ceremony created a space to work through the spiritual turmoil I felt after the death of my brother.

Two days after my brother's passing, I sat with ten of my Native brothers in a circle under the domelike structure of the prison's sweat lodge. No one said much. There was



not much to say. I loaded the pipe with the tobacco and spoke: “My brother died two days ago. I am glad that you are all here. He would have been here also. He would have sung our songs”. The others sang loud, the drum beating a thick cadence. In the right light, the circle of Natives singing within the sweat lodge looked a lot like the circle of choir members who sang in the prison gym. Like my participation in the Oakdale Choir, the ceremonial properties of the pipe ceremony provided me with a sense of community and assured me that I was a part of a bigger picture (Williams 2018/19, p. 40). I could not sing, not that day, but I listened, and I felt. The Native Americans participating in the ceremony that day were my friends, my incarcerated brothers. Each representing their own tribal traditions and customs, we came together in a communal recognition of our collective spirit. Each came to sing. Each came to support me in my time of loss. Singing a Sioux Healing song “Wapiyapi Odowan”, I thought about my journey. I thought about Lee and imagined a world where he had the same opportunities for growth that I had. In the song my brothers sang, the narrator celebrates a changed heart while pleading for a North, healing wind to carry him away:

Wapiyapi Odowan—Tate Wan  
Cante mato keca ca wanmayanka  
Cante mato keca ca wanmayanka  
Cante mato keca ca he eya  
He wa ye yelo lo  
Waziyata tate hi iyo ma a u we  
Cante mato keca ca wanmayanke  
Cante mato keca ca he eya  
He was ye yelo.

Healing Song—A Wind  
With a heart that is different behold me  
With a heart that is different behold me  
With a heart that is different  
I say this  
A Wind from the North carries me away  
With a heart that is different behold me  
With a heart that is different,  
I say this.

I sought solace in the prayer’s lyrics and believed the Creator would acknowledge my pain. The song’s lyrics highlight change as a spiritual journey while affirming the relationship between Indigenous Knowledge and growth, and the juxtaposition of song and spirit. In the same way the Oakdale Community Choir provided the opportunity for social growth after my solitary confinement, the Pipe Ceremony offered spiritual healing through the communal sharing of song. I learned that healing remains a journey, experienced through the spirit and community. Ultimately, I drew upon my mountain, my Indigenous Knowledge, to mourn my brother’s death in a healthy and safe manner. Though my heart was different after my brother’s passing, the communal sharing of song eased my suffering and lifted me to a place of healing. This place was my mountain.

## 8. Songwriting, Singing, and Grief (Cohen)

In the 2012–13 choir year, before ARhodd joined the Oakdale Choir, I processed my own grief through creating, arranging, rehearsing, and performing an original song, “Find the Joy”. This song honored the unexpected passing of my dear sister, Judy, my role model in life, closest in age to me out of five older siblings spread across 16 years. She inspired me to take piano lessons, teach group fitness, and earn a Ph.D. We had fun together growing up. The morning of Sunday, 20 May 2012, as she was on her way to an agility trial with her two beloved German Shorthaired Pointers, Brunhilde and Ziegfried, a drowsy driver heading the opposite way on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway crossed the highway and hit her car head on. Judy and Brunie died instantly. One week later a group of Judy’s friends gathered to celebrate her and shared orange bracelets with the question: “WW Judy Do?” (What would Judy do?) and the answer “Find the Joy”. I worked through my grief by writing and arranging this song for the Oakdale Choir to learn. In the spring 2013, our concert was themed “Mourning Is Broken”, and my spoken introduction to this song was the most difficult talk I can remember doing. It was the process of gathering with people who cared about me, rehearsing the song I wrote in honor of Judy, and sharing it with the audience that provided a way for me to process my grief, mourn her passing, and start to find a place of healing.

## 9. Conclusions: Indigenous Knowledge, Group Singing, Healing, and Spirituality

An essential aspect of Indigenous Knowledge, group singing offers communal interaction, transcendence over the harsh realities of punitive corrections, and also, encourages spiritual healing through song and prayer. In profiling Native American spirituality, Black Elk (1863–1950), an Oglala Lakota medicine man, links the power of song to the divine, highlighting music's ability to invoke transcendence over near annihilation. After a near death experience as a young boy, Black Elk returned to his body and heard the sun singing as it rose. He noted: "When the singing stopped, I was feeling lost and very lonely. Then a voice above me said: 'Look back!' It was a spotted eagle that was hovering over me and spoke. I looked, and where the flaming rainbow tepee, built and roofed with cloud, had been, I saw only the tall rock mountain at the center of the world" (Neihardt et al. 2014, p. 53). Black Elk associates being lost and alone with the absence of song, and ultimately seeks transcendence over these harsh feelings by finding his mountain, a physical representation of the divine, and, further, a symbol of the Native belief similar to *Ubuntu*, that all things are related, that this universal relation connects all life. This idea of interconnectedness is commonly referred to in the Siouxian language as a sacred term used by Lakota people of North America, *Mitakuye Oyasin*. From the context of interrelation, *Mitakuye Oyasin* does not merely highlight humankind's relation to one another, but also celebrates every living and non-living entity's contribution to our universal whole. Where humanity realizes its conjunction with this wholeness (rather than its disjunction), we find harmony and purpose in life. I (ARhodd) learned about this concept while participating in religious ceremonies with incarcerated members of the Lakota Nation. I found that the Oakdale Choir emphasized this same essence of interconnectedness. Where solitary confinement seeks to disconnect the individual from this harmony, Indigenous Knowledge remains a cognizant recognition of all our relations. From my experience, participating in the Oakdale Choir brought me back in touch with this harmony. I was able to contribute my voice to a community. In this way, I reclaimed Indigenous Knowledge: my connection to all my relations.

Until collaborating with ARhodd on this paper, I (Cohen) had no idea about how group singing served as a means for him to reconnect to his Native spirituality. The power of communal singing as part of ARhodd's healing process and its connection to Native spirituality is profound. Through Indigenous Knowledge, we learn the deep values of connection: connection with those who have walked the earth, the beauty of right relationships and reciprocity, and "interdependent compassionate relationships as they manifest in life, earth/sky, self/family/community, and ancestors/descendants" (Williams 2018/19, pp. 31–32). ARhodd and I came from different ethnic and life backgrounds. As a teenager I (Cohen) played piano for school ensembles and for church services; as a teenager ARhodd served time in solitary confinement. Group singing brought us into community; a specific community that aimed to practice and build *Ubuntu*. The Oakdale Choir community worked to engage with what Lorna Williams (2018/19, p. 39) describes as Indigenous virtues of responsibility (individuals are tasked to help the group without impatience or anger), relationship (each person consciously develops and maintains relationships), and watchful listening (each person is open to listening with awareness of everything around). Group choral singing, through vocalizing and listening, through working to prepare harmonic arrangements along a common pulse, is an embodiment of these Indigenous virtues.

To Black Elk, his physical body, his spirit, and his relation to all living and nonliving things are part of the universal whole, of his mountain. In Native spirituality, those who swim in the water, fly in the sky, and crawl upon the Earth are of the same family. The purposeful coming together for group singing, whether through church, a prison choir, or a pipe ceremony, does not merely mirror the familial connections of all our relations, but quite exceptionally, offers a space conducive to spiritual nourishment where the spiritual and physical worlds unite in creation of a community. In contrast to the oppressive reality of social isolation attributed to solitary confinement, an individual flourishes within the safety and comfort of community. Solitary confinement isolates the individual; communal

singing connects individuals. This connection exemplifies both *Ubuntu* and *Mitakuye Oyasín*. When individuals connect with one another and with nature, the opportunity for spiritual growth magnifies, resulting in stronger communal relations. Through such experiences, Indigenous Knowledge is shared and heightened.

To understand singing and its properties of spirituality and healing, music scholars and educators should look to unconventional environments such as prisons to study the interactions among conflict, music, and spirituality. Music will continue to flourish in environments where it is most needed. For some of us, this place is a prison. For all of us, this place is a mountain.

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