



Choir leader Doug Dunsmore and writer Anne Bokma.



Newfoundland

A “singcation” on the edge of the Atlantic

By Anne Bokma

Singing – especially with other people – is one of life’s most joyful activities. Study after study proves it. Yet most of us don’t do it nearly enough. Perhaps you’re like me and you love to sing, but somewhere along the way self-consciousness set in and you lost the confidence to raise your voice in song.

So when I receive an unexpected invitation by email – the chance to participate in a weeklong “singcation” retreat on the rugged coast of the North Atlantic in Newfoundland – I jump at the chance. Maybe a full week of choir immersion will help me learn to warble like a songbird.

The invite is from Susan Knight, the founder of Growing the Voices, a non-

profit dedicated to getting people to sing more. She explains that the organization’s goal is to be a leading source of information, inspiration and innovation enabling people everywhere to experience the joy and value of singing. To that end, Growing the Voices hosts pop-up choirs, choral workshops, community sing-alongs and an annual singing retreat called Come All Ye, held in the small village of Port Rexton, a three-hour drive from St. John’s.

Here our group of 30 or so singers will sleep, eat and rehearse at Fishers’ Loft, an isolated and elegant inn, which played host to silver screen luminaries Dame Judy Dench, Julianne Moore and Cate Blanchett when they were here to star in the 2002 film adaptation of Annie Proulx’s Pulitzer Prize winning book, “The Ship-

ping News,” shot amongst the foggy coves and picturesque seascapes of this area known as Trinity Bight.

When I have dinner with Knight the evening before the retreat, she explains that when her 78-year-old mother was dying of cancer 30 years ago she asked her if she had any regrets. There was only one. “That I was a mute in a household of songbirds,” came the reply. It was at that moment that Knight, a celebrated choral director and chancellor of Newfoundland’s Memorial University, learned that when her mother was six years old, a nun had pronounced her tone deaf and instructed her to stand in the back row of the choir and simply mouth the words. “All five of her children loved to sing and all four of her siblings sang, but she never did,” says Knight, who

is still angered by the memory of her mother’s voice being silenced.

“There are so many people who can tell you with great clarity the exact moment they began to believe they couldn’t sing.” When she says this, I remember the moment when it happened to me—I was nine and had been asked by mother to sing at her second wedding, to my stepfather in 1971. When I took to the stage I realized that singing in front of a crowd of 100 people is a much different thing than singing into your hairbrush in front of your bedroom mirror. To honour her mother, Knight made it her life’s mission to help people like me discover and recover their ability to sing.

Think you’re tuneless or tone deaf? Self-diagnosed bad singers are never as inept as they think. In fact, only a tiny portion (1.5-4 per cent) of the population have congenital amusia, the technical term for the innate inability to hear pitch properly. The rest of us can indeed sing like songbirds. “We are born with the developmental capacity for it,” says Knight. “It’s an essential part of the human condition.” She truly believes the world would be a better place if more of us just sang more.

The retreat is designed to turn insecure non-singers like me into the kind of people who can confidently carry a tune that will soar sweetly into the rafters. The first lesson our music director, Doug Dunsmore, teaches is simple: “When in doubt, open your mouth.” Specifically, we should be able to stack two fingers on top of each other between our teeth because this immediately helps improve vocal range. And keep your tongue soft, he instructs. And use your eyebrows to animate your face. His many singing instructions double as sound advice for life: “Be sure to breathe,” “Stand tall,” “Don’t let yourself get small,” “Do it over and over until you get it right” and “If you screw up, just keep going.”

For the next few days we open our mouths wide and spend several hours each day practicing our repertoire of Broadway show tunes, Beatles’ hits and rousing Newfoundland folk songs that we’ll perform in front of a live audience at the historic Garrick Theatre in nearby Bonavista at the end of the week. Dunsmore says there’s no need to be nervous. “Anyone can sing,” he insists. “It’s 90 per cent brains, 10 per cent talent.” I’m not so sure. I’ve spent a lifetime thinking

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my voice is as monotonous as the lonely foghorn outside my bedroom window.

There are a handful of pros who are assisting our group, including Julia Halfyard, who has performed across Canada as a professional cabaret singer. She's sympathetic when I confess my trepidation about performing on stage: "Singing is such a naked experience and when you're naked you tend to be judgmental about yourself," she says. That makes sense, but how do I psychologically cover up on stage? Ted Rowe, a member of Crooked Stovepipe, the oldest bluegrass band in the province, who has performed on stage thousands of times, says to just focus on connecting with my fellow choristers and not worry about the audience. "When you sing with others you immediately create a bond that's lasting." I know what he means. Singing in community is like being hooked up to a continuous IV drip of dopamine. It's even better for you than singing alone. Studies prove that people who sing in choirs not only have lower rates of depression and anxiety, they may even live longer. That's because their heartbeats synchronize when they join voices, creating a calming effect similar to doing a yoga class. Communal singing offers one of life's rare opportunities for "truly sublime moments," says Dunsmore. "We're better together."

At the final night's performance, our group belts out the tunes we've been working so hard on all week — "Side by Side", "Monday, Monday", "Sweet Caroline", and "Can't Buy Me Love", among them. I get

a little weepy on "You're My Best Friend" ("Ooo, you make me live/Whenever this world is cruel to me/I got you to help me forgive") and feel a sweet connection of intimacy with my fellow songsters, strangers just days ago.

Before our performance someone in our group had read aloud a few lines from "The Elegance of the Hedgehog," a passage that perfectly sums up the bonding aspects of singing with others: "There's this life we're struggling through, full of shouting and tears and laughter and fights and break-ups and dashed hopes and unexpected luck—it all disappears, just like that, when the choir begins to sing. Everyday life vanishes into song, you are suddenly overcome with a feeling of brotherhood, of deep solidarity, even love, and it diffuses the ugliness of everyday life into a spirit of perfect communion. Even the singers' faces are transformed."

I look at the flushed and happy faces that surround me here on what feels like the edge of the world and sense that perfect communion. At the end of our performance we strain together to reach the high notes of the final phrase of Leonard Cohen's "Anthem" ("Ring the bells!") that's repeated eight times in a rising crescendo. There's a famous line in that song, about a crack in everything and that's how the light gets in. My voice falters but I carry on. It doesn't have to be a perfect offering. What matters is I've finally found my voice.

The next Come AllYe retreat will be held October 6-11, 2019. For more details visit growingthevoicesfestival500.com.