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Sister-composer delights in giving expression to the ordinary

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Mar. 4, 2014 Conversations with Sr. Camille

St. Joseph Sr. Kathy Sherman
Age: 62
Profession: Composer/singer, activist
Lives in: La Grange Park, Ill.

New York *Times* reporter Laurie Goodstein got to interview Sr. Kathy Sherman before I did. Goodstein's article, published Dec. 1, 2012, highlighted Sherman's work [1], a combination of composing and performing, as an expression of prayer rooted in contemplation.

That spiritual union responds to social ills and injustice. Two of Sherman's compositions developed as she grieved for the war in Iraq and the Good Friday murder of another Sister of St. Joseph, Karen Klimczak, by a drug addict who had sought refuge in the halfway house Klimczak ran in Buffalo, N.Y.

Goodstein's article described the support the laity and members of religious communities afforded the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the aftermath of its being censured by a Vatican office. Sherman's personal support found expression in a song she wrote.

***Sr. Camille:* Kathy, would you share those lyrics with us now?**

Sherman: It's called "Love Cannot be Silenced," and these are the lyrics:

Love cannot be silenced. It never has. It never will.
Let justice roll like a river from the oceans to the hills.
Rise up, Sisters. Rise up. And stand with your heads held high.
We are faithful, loving, and wise. Dancing along side by side.
With a Gospel vision to lead us. And Holy Fire in our eyes.

Where can that be found?

This may be found at ministryofthearts.org [2]. It's on the CD titled "Love Cannot Be Silenced." Our CDs are also carried in many religious goods stores throughout the country. My music will soon be available on iTunes as well.

What response did "Love Cannot be Silenced" draw?

The song drew mostly a positive response. I believe it gave women religious a collective voice to proclaim who we are and who we long to be together for the world. The song was born out of deep sadness and some anger that stirred in me after the Vatican's harsh assessment of U.S. women religious. It was, however, never meant to be a song of protest, though some people tried to paint it as such. The songs I've composed through the years are often inspired by my own contemplation as I pray over situations and world events that have great impact on me

personally, on other people, and on the environment. I desire to be a voice for the voiceless. I attempt to express in word and song a vision of inclusive love in hopes of healing division and separation. That's what this song was about, a creative expression for dealing with a difficult experience.

When did you realize that this ministry is the one to which you've been called?

I wrote my first song when I was 14 years old and have been writing ever since. Looking back, I see that even as a child, I was a contemplative. I enjoyed spending time pondering life, paying attention to the world around me and noticing how everything was in relationship with everything else. I observed how this made me feel. I loved nature and spent as much time outside as possible. (I still do!) Nature has always had lessons to teach me. Through contemplation, I would take the world inside me and let it fill my heart and senses. This reflection would lead me to express my learnings, hopes and visions through music and song.

Please summarize your musical accomplishments/publications.

We began publishing my work in 1987 with the release of our first cassette (no CDs back then) titled "Touch the Earth." The title was inspired by the theme for Catholic Schools Week that year, which was "Catholic Schools Touch the Future." Since 1987, we have published 22 cassettes and CDs. The latest, "I Lift Up My Soul," has just been released. This one is a collection of adapted Psalms that I've set to music. I wrote many while in parish music ministry. I used inclusive language so that our sung prayer reflected a more expansive vision of who God is and how God is involved in our lives and in all life.

As for accomplishments, my music has been used at major conventions, conferences, gatherings, and liturgies through the years. I've worked with many teams and delight in creating specific music for enhancing an event or experience -- a song that can strengthen the group's message. I find that my own creativity is inspired by the creativity of others in the planning group. I delight in being a participant in any meaningful and creative process. However, my greatest joy, or sense of greatest accomplishment, is when my music ministers to others at the most significant moments in their lives, be it great joy, deep sorrow or anything in between. It's gratifying when people share with me how my music connects them to themselves, to others and to the God of their heart. I'm humbled that God speaks through my music to accompany others on their journey.

I am elated and humbled when people sing one of my songs with great passion and conviction, especially when the song is about the inclusive love of God or a Gospel vision for the world or about advancing the work of peace and justice.

What community works preceded it?

I have been an educator at the elementary and high school level. I've served as a high school and college campus minister and as a parish music minister. Currently, I minister as a composer, retreat presenter and through concerts. I'm a director of Circle of Song for Women and facilitator of the Associate Directors for the Congregation of St. Joseph. I also serve as adjunct staff for our spirituality center, The Well.

Did you grow up in a household in which music played a significant part?

Yes, music played a prominent role in my family; in our home, music was like breathing. Right from the start, music was an essence that shaped and enriched my life beyond measure. Our family has many musicians, singers and music-makers of all kinds. We frequently gathered around the piano, and my mother, who was a gifted pianist, would accompany anyone and everyone who had a song to sing. Music created an atmosphere of great joy and fostered a sense of belonging. It was a great equalizer and had a way of pulling everyone in. We had wonderful parties in our home and music was always at the core of the love and joy and creation of community. Even as a young child, I intuitively knew the power of music. I experienced music as a community

builder, as an integral part of celebrations and a meaningful expression of emotion. It would continue to shape and enrich my life and ultimately become my primary ministry.

Where and with whom did you spend your childhood?

I grew up in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago with my parents, three older brothers and a younger sister. My family was loving and nurturing and our home was a place where all were welcome. It was always a hub of activity where the friends of my siblings found a place of belonging. There was always something to eat, someone to talk to and always music for singing and dancing.

Our neighborhood was diverse and full of life. We knew the neighbors and most of the shopkeepers by name. I grew up appreciating the importance of community and looking out for one another. This milieu no doubt contributed to my writing.

I attended Our Lady of Peace grammar school and was educated by the Dominican Sisters from Kentucky. I received an excellent education. Our music teacher, Sr. Mary Oliver, strengthened my love for music with her own love and passion for music, especially choral music.

Did you have dreams of a life other than the one you chose?

Most young girls at the time had thoughts of entering religious life. I did have a dream of having a family of my own, and I also wanted to build an orphanage to care for children who were without parents. I actually attended a public high school and college and so I had no idea that religious life had changed so drastically after Vatican II. I entered the Sisters of St. Joseph after I had been teaching for several years. I was drawn to the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph, which is the mission of unity that Jesus speaks of in John 17. Sisters of St. Joseph live and work to "unite neighbor with neighbor, and all neighbors with God." (In recent years, the neighbor is also recognized as all creation.) This dynamic influenced the way I try to live my life. I recognized in the CSJs what was already inside of me. The Congregation of St. Joseph has been fertile soil for me and my gift of music to grow and to be shared with the world.

What do you consider the greatest gifts of life in a community?

A great gift of community is our shared mission and passion for living the Gospel as it is unfolding at this moment in time. In community, I find strength for living the Gospel and for creating visions and dreams that bring healing, hope and justice to the world. I'm challenged, stretched, supported and loved in community and encouraged to share my gifts to further the mission of unity in the world. Community is also a place for deep friendships and solidarity. I am blessed to be part of something much bigger than myself.

Please say something about your connection with Ministry of the Arts[3].

Part of the mission of Ministry of the Arts is to encourage and affirm creativity in ourselves and all people. This mission of unity brings us in our time to a deeper awareness of our communion with God and all creation. We believe in the power and prophecy of the arts and that the arts are an important ministry for hope and healing in a critical moment of world transformation. As an artist of music, I am deeply committed to this mission. Ministry of the Arts has been publishing my work since 1987.

Your social awareness certainly inspires your music. Does anything else exert an influence on it?

Honestly, everything influences my writing. I delight in giving expression to the ordinary that is permeated with the sacred. I have a strong conviction that the arts are as important to the transformation of our world as any other work of justice. That's why I have written songs about the violence to our children, war among nations,

ecological devastation, etc. Music can function as a troubadour of hope.

Equally important, I write about the beauty of life and love and relationship because the presence of the Holy One is there in it all and needs to be celebrated.

In recent years, I've come to realize that one of the important aspects of my writing -- or purpose, if you will -- is trying to make God accessible to everyone. Much of my music would not be considered sacred since there is no direct mention of God. However, the content of my music is often steeped in the Gospel and in themes such as love and unity, justice and healing. In fact, when people comment that they love my music, I tell them that the reason they love my music is because the songs are already inside them. I am not sharing anything that's not already theirs. I truly believe this. I simply name, in song, what they already know in their hearts.

Does any particular Gospel story or Scripture passage inspire or challenge you?

I am inspired by Luke 4:18: "The Spirit of God is upon me, because God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted. God has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of God's favor." This is inspired my music composition and ministry.

Another is from the Sisters of St. Joseph documents: Have for God an expansive love, which includes all love is capable of and all that a heart can love, in God and for God; an exalted love full of purpose and ardor; a profound heartfelt love, which is at your heart's center and cannot be uprooted.

I also pay attention to scriptures of the universe that speak to me of God's awesome beauty, power and unfolding life.

How do you relax?

I'm an avid gardener, planting mostly native plants and growing organic vegetables. There's nothing better than spending the entire day working outside and then spending the evening with friends for a barbecue, conversation and fun. I also am a sports enthusiast and a huge fan of the Chicago Bears, Bulls and Cubs. I can't say it's always relaxing, but I especially enjoy watching the Bears. I love being in the kitchen and enjoy cooking and trying out new recipes. And the more people around the table, the better!

What music do you enjoy listening to?

I enjoy most all music, depending on what I'm doing. I appreciate folk music since it holds many memories of singalongs I led during the turbulent '60s. I also enjoy Broadway musicals and show tunes. Choral music is another favorite of mine. I never tire of how beautiful it is when voices harmonize and blend, creating the sound of "oneness." Each genre of music is gift and has a contribution to make.

Do you have unfulfilled longings? Long-range plans to accomplish them?

I will love and work, sing and pray until the day we recognize that we are all one: one sacred community, God's one family. My longing is that we see how enriched and strengthened we are by our diversity and that it is this reverence for differences that will lead us to unity. When this happens, there will be an end to hatred and violence, exploitation and greed and the devastation to peoples and the planet. This is the unwavering hope and conviction I carry in my heart. I believe the arts are the soul of society, and so another unfilled longing is to see the day when the arts are seen as integral in the work for justice and as important in the classroom as reading, writing and mathematics.

Thank you, Kathy, for the songs from your heart that have entered into so many listening hearts.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [4] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, Conversations with Sr. Camille, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert signup [5].

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