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Here's What I Know for Sure... Everybody Can Sing

by Mary Sue Wilkinson,
Founder – Singing Heart to Heart

Lois was a quiet woman who often sat in an easy chair just outside of our song circle. I always invited her to join us, but she would almost always decline. As the singing started I would keep an eye on her to see if there were any songs that she seemed to particularly enjoy. One day I saw her ever so quietly mouth some words to a gospel song. Without making too much of it, because I didn't want to embarrass her or scare her off, I softly commented that she seemed to like that song. I told her, "I would love to have you sing it with us." She replied, "Oh no, I don't sing. My husband told me a long time ago that I was not a good singer and that I shouldn't sing."

Lois' husband had been gone for many years. Lois has dementia and has difficulty remembering many things. But she remembers she is not supposed to sing. Even though her husband is not here to remind her – she continues to believe this. It breaks my heart, because I can see a little voice inside her that would love to come out. I saw it when she quietly mouthed those few words to the song she so loved.

My mission is now clear. Using gentle persuasion, humor, and respectful support, I will encourage Lois to sing. Lois is not alone.

So, what do I tell people when they tell me they can't sing? I tell them - *"That's okay, you can just listen."*

Wait a minute. You thought I said everyone can sing and that I want people to sing. And now I'm telling you it's okay to tell people they can just listen?

Yes. And here's why.

Telling people, it's okay to "just listen" helps them feel safe enough to stay in proximity to the singing. And that's the first step. Some people are so convinced they can't sing, they believe they should leave the room. They may be embarrassed; they may worry that you will put them on the spot. So, they simply leave. By telling people they can just listen, you give them the opportunity to observe and to see others joining in. It helps them relax. Then, once people have gained a comfort level with you as the song leader, and with the dynamics of the group, you will find that many will take baby steps to joining in. So here is what happens next.

They listen. You observe and learn.

Remember that Lois quietly mouthed the words to one of her favorite gospel songs? If I had not been keenly observing her as she listened, I would not have picked up on this. I could not know at the time how important that observation would be. For when I asked

her if she liked the old hymns, she told me that her father had been a preacher in Alabama. Her brother had played guitar. Once I knew this, I was able to relate to her on a much deeper level. As I sang more southern gospel songs, her urge to sing along overcame the words of her late husband telling her not to sing. We sang hymn after hymn – *I'll Fly Away*, *Do Lord, Power in the Blood*, and more. And now, each time I sing with the group where she lives I make sure to include some of these hymns early on to get Lois started singing.

Now there's one more thing you need to know. And that is this.

What you **don't** say is just as important as what you do say.

Even though I **really** want to, I never say "Oh, of course you can sing!" If, for whatever reason, someone truly believes they can't or shouldn't sing, you won't convince them by telling them they have a good voice or that they truly can sing.

What you *can* do is be patient and reassure them through gentle encouragement that this is different - that no one is judging.

Here's some other encouraging words you can try after folks have had some time to just listen. Said with a sense of humor, but without teasing, it can help create an environment where even reluctant singers will dip their toe in the water of group singing.

"No one has to audition for this choir." "This is just for fun." "No solos here." "Would you like to join us now?" "I think you might know this song."

As my experience with Lois points out, finding the right music can really help increase engagement. If you need help with this – visit the [Resource Library](#) on my website for song lists and suggestions. With your help – everybody truly can sing!

I'm Mary Sue. I grew up in Iowa in a musical family and I've been singing as long as I can remember. I got my first guitar when I was 12 years old. My mom saved up green stamps to buy it for me. (Thanks mom)! That's me playing it for the Miss Neighborhood Contest in my backyard back in the 60's.

I'm the founder of [Singing Heart to Heart](#) and the Young at Heart Music Program. My passion for singing with elders started when I sang for my father-in-law who had dementia. He had lost all language but when I sang the hymns he knew and loved, he could sing every word. Perfect pitch. He even added harmony.

I quickly learned what research is now documenting. Music is a powerful tool to help us connect, find joy and spark memories. Especially for people living with dementia. I've seen this first hand. I lead over 400 singing and music experiences for seniors each year.

I'm a career educator, a certified music teacher, an experienced speaker and trainer, and a professional musician. I'm also the author of [Songs You Know by Heart: A Simple Guide for Using Music in Dementia Care](#). Teepa Snow endorses my book and my work.