

“Are You A Guitar Player?” “No, I’m A Cow Milker.”

How knowing just a little can help a lot in a music session

*by Mary Sue Wilkinson,
Founder, Singing Heart to Heart*

As I played the first song for the folks in the adult day program, I noticed a man in the front row whose hands were moving in time to the music. He looked like he was strumming an air guitar.

After the song I asked, “Are you a guitar player?”

He answered with a chuckle, “No, I’m a cow milker.”

I asked if he used milking machines or if he did it by hand. He told me they used machines.

Have *you* ever milked a goat or a cow?

I have.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, I was put on the spot and had to milk goats by hand with only a few words of instruction. My husband was too sick to do it. And of course, the goats HAD to be milked.

I told this little story to the folks in the music session and demonstrated for them how you twist as you pull down. I said, “I got those darn goats milked!”

Everyone laughed and the cow milker smiled and nodded enthusiastically - especially at my demonstration.

What just happened?

Connection made with the cow milker. Laughter shared by everyone.

Later in our music session we sang one of this group’s favorite songs, “If I Knew You Were Comin’ I’d’ve Baked a Cake.” We make up our own verses.

I asked, “If you knew I was coming over to visit what would you do to get ready?”

I started by telling them I like to sleep late and don’t always make my bed.

So... we sang “If I knew you were coming I’d make my bed, make my bed, make my bed...”

Whenever I use this song there are usually enough people who get the idea, and we go along inserting their ideas into the song. “I’d make some coffee.” “I’d sweep the floor.” “I’d lock the door!” If no one can offer answers I make things up and we keep singing. And it’s still fun.

But back to the cow milker.

I caught his eye and said “I’ve got one for you!”

“If I knew you were coming I’d milk the cows, milk the cows, milk the cows...”

Everyone laughed. Everyone sang along.

When that verse ended, the cow milker said “We better feed the horses.”

“If I knew you were coming I’d feed the horses, feed the horses, feed the horses...”

What just happened?

Engagement increased.

Why?

Because I knew a little something about this man’s life.

Are there cow milkers in your midst? Dancers? Pilots? Teachers? Dog lovers? Carpenters? Shoe store owners?

Who are the people you serve?

How do you increase your connection to them?

How can you increase engagement by knowing even a little bit more about them?

Let’s think on this. Let me know your thoughts. [Click here](#) to email me.

[Click here to view a quick video](#) that helps you learn how to use the song “If I Knew You Were Comin’ I’d’ve Baked a Cake.”

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.