

I wonder if you ever saw the TED talk given way back in 2006 by Sir Ken Robinson.<sup>1</sup> In this, now classic presentation, Sir Ken convincingly makes the claim that education as we know it across most of the world is killing creativity. He points out that for the past few hundred years, since industrialization, we've developed a hierarchy of school subjects, with math (and science) at the top, then the humanities, and down at the bottom of the list is the arts. And, among the arts, singing and dancing are at the very bottom of the league. Sir Ken wonders: if aliens were to land here, watch the ways of this world, what might they conclude about us?

This is a powerful thought experiment: if anthropologists from another world or dimension wanted to know what was most important to us, and they tried to figure that out by watching the way we live in society, all the ways we are with one another, the ways we spend our time, the ways we tend to behave, what we do, what might they conclude? What might they say is most important to this civilization, based on what they observe, what might they conclude are our values?

Humans are incredible – despite the best efforts of my ancestors and the destructive historical actions of the Western World, there remains, thankfully, tremendous diversity in the human species. Shapes and sizes, cultures, genders, languages, abilities; truly, being human is amazing! And we are not all created the same, and there is no 'ideal' human, instead the incredible differences between us are one of the ways, I believe, that humanity reflects the full glory of God. ... and creativity, the ability to be creative and the impulse to be creative, is something that sets us apart from all other species.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY>

Humans have the creative capacity to be remarkable problem solvers, as a species we can put our massive brains to work curing disease or innovating technologies to solve some of society's most pressing issues. That humans are creative and amazing is beyond doubt, the question is: what are the forces that drive human creativity in our society today, what are the forces that allow it in some of its forms and expressions, encourage it, whilst clipping it, pruning it, or even shutting it down entirely in others?

In his TED talk, Ken Robinson tells a remarkable story about a world-famous choreographer he once sat down with. Born in the mid-1920s, this woman had a disastrous time at school, she found it hard to sit still, couldn't stay on top of her homework, she was often disruptive in class, she was a bit of an academic failure – so she was taken for evaluation by a doctor. After a long session, in which she said nothing, but concentrated very hard on sitting still while the two adults in the room talked about her, eventually the doctor said he and her mother needed to step outside for a private word. Before they left the room, he switched on the radio. When the adults were outside, the doctor said to her mother, let's watch ... the young girl was up out of her seat and moving to the music. The doctor turned to her mother and said, your daughter's not sick – she's a dancer, take her to a dance school. ... and the rest of this particular girl's life story is, as they say, history.

This family was incredibly lucky to have had the means for a consultation like this and access to different types of schools. Then, as now, this certainly wouldn't have been an option for everyone. Today, as then, succeeding or failing within 'the system' as it is, is the only option for most folks.

What's lost to us all when we create and maintain such narrow norms of education and definitions of success? So many folks will never know fullness of life given their "unconventional" talents or gifts.

Can we honestly say that the education system that props up our societal norms holds space for the flourishing and fullness of life of all people? Is it possible to deny that the world we live in is held together by systems and norms that focus our attention and the efforts of our lives, our purpose (even), not on the flourishing of all, but instead on the arbitrary narrow focus of wealth creation and accumulation and the claiming and wielding worldly power.

The world we've inherited is one in which some have the ability and privilege to succeed, and most will struggle to survive, and most will never have the opportunity to live fully into the God-given personhood within them that's longing to be given life and expressed.

I think Ken Robinson is right, and that it's a great tragedy that most of us are "tidied up" when we're children, that in school most of us are slowly weaned off our impulse to sing and to dance. If you're not thought to have a talent that's so defined it can likely be monetized for college scholarship dollars, or exploited as a livelihood, chances are by middle school even there's little in the way of encouragement or nurture of the human impulse to get up and dance, or to lift up our voice and sing.

And yet, it seems from Scripture, that to sing and to move our bodies is a primary and insuppressible response to the great presence of God, a base and instinctual, impulsive expression of worship, and something that pulls us into "community"/union with the rest of the cosmos.

If we take from Scripture that the purpose of human life is to glorify God, to be an expression of God's love and presence in the world, to care for one another and all creation, then singing, especially, would take a real and central role in the lives of most of us, rather than only of a few.

Today the Psalmist says, Sing to the Lord, you servants of his. In our reading from the Revelation to John we hear one of many references to the myriads and thousands of those surrounding the throne of God singing with full voice, and every creature in heaven and on the earth singing together. Every week we gather around the table and praise God, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who forever sing to proclaim the glory of God's name: Holy, Holy, Holy – we sing – God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of God's glory, Hosanna in the highest!

And so what of the visitors of our thought experiment, anthropologists from another place trying to figure out who we are and what we value by what we do – this *isn't* what they'd observe. Arguably, they'd see the opposite.

Ken Robinson brings his TED talk to a close by sharing a quote, if insects were eliminated from the planet, all forms of life would collapse within 50 years, if human beings were eliminated from the planet, all forms of life would flourish.<sup>2</sup>

Singing won't directly solve all the world's problems, but it is a shared universal human trait, across cultures and through history; singing can bring us together, as sports fans know well.

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Ken Robinson attributes this quote to medical researcher, Jonas Salk.

There's evidence that singing can bridge ideological and cultural divides, it can 'break the ice' between strangers, singing releases endorphins, oxytocin, chemical compounds that support feelings of wellness and feelings of love and connection. We are, arguably, created for this: to live fully, together, to flourish, together, and to sing and to dance together, in our joy and in our griefs, in union with the rest of the whole Creation in response to our living Creator God!<sup>3</sup>

The Good News of God in Christ is that Creation is for life, and for all to have life in abundance. And church is one way for us to make sure there's always a space and place where our singing voices, our creativity in all its forms, can lead us into all truth, set free from the narrow limits of societal habit and convention, and bring us home to our true purpose, together.

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<sup>3</sup> see <https://psyche.co/films/every-culture-dances-so-why-did-humans-evolve-to-get-down> for more on the importance and universality of dance