

Forum:

Power of Ballads: A Dramatic Case of Recovery from Silence

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We live with hope and joy. We cannot survive for a long time without hope and joy. Adding to this, it is almost impossible to live alone, as human beings live in social situations. So we talk and sing to someone and to ourselves. We sometimes do so even for survival; but, what happens when we forget words and tunes?

Barre Toelken, a pre-eminent professor of folklore, specialized in songs, folktales and Navaho studies at Utah State University for many years, had a stroke in 2002. Because of this, he became handicapped in speaking and memory. He also became paralyzed on the right side of his body. He lost, so he thought, the 800 songs he had learned in his life. Fortunately, however, he later recovered from the silence with the help of his friends, who sung the songs that he knew in his living room once each week.

In the forum, "Power of Ballads," the audience learned the amazing story of Barre's recovery. We sang the songs Barre had sung, lost and recovered; we came to know that the stories and sentiments expressed in traditional ballads could activate us vigorously and create happiness among us. We also experienced that our voices light up the candle of hope. What hope? The hope to live a happy life. After the singing workshop, we had a very meaningful discussion.

The discussion centered on the following topics.

- Was it important for his recovery that the songs narrated "stories"?
- Was it important for his recovery that his friends sang in his presence?
- Why was it that he could not converse in English but he could in German and Navaho (his second and third languages) after the stroke?
- How did his speech recovery positively affect his physical function?
- Did the happy feelings of his friends, who sang for him, increase for their own sake without counting their self-satisfaction of being helpful?
- The reasons why people of modern age still love to sing traditional ballads.
- The positive influence of singing songs and story telling on human welfare.

