**Steve Spilde:** Welcome. Today my guest is Tom Roberts. Tom is well-known in the La Crosse community. [He is] a longtime therapist. He’s also a presenter of retreats and workshops. He’s done many workshops here at the Franciscan Spirituality Center, and [he’s] done retreats at various places across the country. He’s especially well-known here at the Franciscan Spirituality Center as the presenter of the Tibetan Singing Bowls. It’s my pleasure today to welcome Tom.

**Tom Roberts:** Thank you, Steve.

**Steve:** Tom, tell me how you first encountered the singing bowls.

**Tom:** This will really date me. I’d always had a really small, little machine-made brass bowl that I used in my meditation, to start and to end. I can’t even tell you how long ago that was. The first time I was introduced to singing bowls and what they were and how they worked and what they were used for when I was either a junior or a senior undergrad at [UW-] Madison. A friend of mine had gone over to Nepal. I’m not quite sure why it was, but when he came back, he brought back these bowls that were about this size – about 6 inches across, kind of a deep kind of bowl. We’d crossed paths, and he said, “Tom, you’ve got to come over to my place and hear these things. I’ve never heard anything like this.” And so I did, and he was right. They were very, very powerful [with] tones and resonances that, even myself being a percussionist, hadn’t been subjected to, so to speak. I think he had about three or four of them, and he started playing them by striking and then by singing around the rim, and I was captivated. Obviously, this was back in the ‘70s. There was no Google, there was no internet – none of that stuff. I said, “Short of going to Nepal, where do you find these?” He said, “I have no clue.” He said the one thing that he did learn when he was over there was the Tibetan people – and I suspect the Dalai Lama was involved in this decision – were discussing releasing some of the artifacts – the social, the art, the medical, the spiritual artifacts of the Tibetan culture that had been driven out of China. Obviously, the bowls were in those discussions, and there were tens of thousands of them stored away in northern India, Nepal, and what have you.

Shortly afterward, I began to start hearing about people going over there and being allowed to bring bowls back to the West, to introduce them to the West. I began searching around and found a couple of places where the people who were selling the bowls actually went there, were allowed to go into the large storage areas and select a limited number of bowls to bring back and use for themselves, as well as make them available to people in the West. That was my first introduction to that. As they became more plentiful, I began collecting bowls and matching them up. And then, as I have been doing for several decades, sharing them with people, like I have at the spirituality center.

**Steve:** When would you say you got your first bowl? Would that have been in the ‘80s?

**Tom:** My first bowl … You’re really trying the old memory here. … I would say late ‘70s [or] early ‘80s. It was in Minneapolis. There was a store there that specialized in Eastern artifacts: Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Southeast Asian. There were a couple of bowls there. I picked one up, and I started to ring it and then I started to sing it. It sounded good to me. I didn’t really know the fine points of what made a good bowl at that point. I don’t think many people did except for the people in India and Nepal and Tibet. I purchased it. Again, it was a bowl very similar to this – the same size and shape and what have you. It was ridiculously inexpensive compared to what they’re going for now. It was my first bowl, and I would say late ‘70s, early ‘80s

**Steve:** Do you still have your first bowl?

**Tom:** Yes. I don’t play it much, simply because of how much I’ve learned about bowls in terms of resonance and how they’re made. That bowl doesn’t play very well with the other ones. The resonance isn’t very good, and the tone isn’t very good compared to the other ones. But, yes, I still do have it.

**Steve:** You mentioned that you were a percussionist. That’s the instrument you played growing up?

**Tom:** Yup. I started playing the drums at 10. My brother had a little snare drum and a cymbal. I stole it from his room and started playing it. Yeah, I started at 10.

**Steve:** Compare the experience you had when you used to play the drums, and maybe particularly like the cymbals, and how it feels different for you to play the singing bowls.

**Tom:** Well, the one thing is the volume. The music was very loud back then. It’s interesting because the materials with which cymbals are made – good cymbals – and singing bowls are made are identical. They’re made from bell metal. Obviously, cymbals are shaped differently [and] they’re created much more differently from a bowl, so they have a different kind of resonance. The cymbals, when I was playing the drums with other musicians, was kind of like the frosting on the cake. There was the basic beat that was going on, but then bringing the cymbals in – whether they be a large cymbal or a smaller one or a hi-hat – really added a sense of vitality and dynamic – a resonance – to not only the music, but also to the percussion. The percussion was very methodical, but the cymbals really added something. So, the bowls being made of the same kind of material, there isn’t a beat that’s involved with this. The playing can be much more spontaneous. For the most part, when I play the bowls I’m playing them with no other musicians. Whether it’s with a crowd at, say, the spirituality center or by myself, it is just the focus of the resonance and the depth and the length of the tone that really becomes very primary. There is no beat or rhythm – I mean, there can be. For the most part, it’s just bringing the resonance and the tone of the bowl into a person’s awareness and physical experience.

**Steve:** For someone who hasn’t been to one of the concerts here, would you refer to when you play the bowls as a concert?

**Tom:** I refer to them as “soundings.”

**Steve:** [For] someone who hasn’t been to a “sounding,” how would you describe that experience? A lot of people have heard music, they’ve heard a band, they’ve heard an individual performer, [and it is] a very different experience. How would you describe the experience to someone who hasn’t had it?

**Tom:** I don’t think words can really describe it. It’s kind of like you can describe the Grand Canyon to somebody, [but] basically you end up saying, “You’ve just got to go there.” I can describe the colors of the sunsets and the sunrises, [but] you just have to go there and be in the presence of it. I would say if you’ve never been to one, don’t expect anything. Just come being willing to receive the sound, being willing to be in the presence of the different resonances and how they play off of each other, and how they affect you. I can talk about the different shapes and sizes and what that all means, but you just have to go there. You just have to allow yourself to feel that experience and what that does to clearing tensions and stresses as well as really calming down the nervous system in some pretty significant ways. The thing that’s really kind of cool is Western science has finally caught up with what’s been known for thousands of years about the effects these bowls have on our nervous system, on our cellular system, [and] our endocrine system because now we can measure them and have things on our head and taped all over our body to measure things. And these bowls would not have lasted as long as they have if it was just “woo-woo” kind of stuff. They are very powerful, and they finally have been incorporated into Western medicine in helping people with a variety of conditions. Even though these bowls come from a long time ago, they really do play a very important part in a person’s spiritual and physical and emotional well-being.

**Steve:** You were talking about how it basically connects with the body. That’s the piece I would probably describe to someone who hasn’t been. Coming out of it, I feel more like I’ve gotten a massage than I’ve listened to something. It is that sort of an experience. When I’ve had a massage, it’s almost like I go somewhere else, and then I kind of have to find myself back in the room again. The bowls [are] kind of like that. It’s almost like I go somewhere else, and at the same time my body feels relaxed in a way I’ve only ever experienced with a massage.

**Tom:** It is kind of like a sound massage. When people describe their experiences, they describe them much the same way you did, Steve. Other people report visual kinds of things – colors, images. People feel some significant kind of release is going on in their body – muscular or nervous system – where they have stored tensions and stresses that people have reported that they came in with maybe an injured shoulder. And when it was over, they said, “For the first time in however amount of time, I forgot about the pain. Now that I’ve kind of come back, I’m not noticing the pain as much.” When I ask on a scale of 1 to 10, what is it usually and what is it now, they may say like a 7 or an 8, and now it’s a 3 or a 4. Because our bodies are predominately made up of water – and we know how water responds to vibration – the resonances help kind of release and discharge areas of injury or wound or tightness. I tell people, “Just be open. It’s going to be different.” People will occasionally say it wasn’t a pleasant experience, that it was too intense [and] it was stirred-up emotions they weren’t prepared for. I let people know that although these are wonderful and soothing and there’s all sorts of wonderful stuff written about the bowls, occasionally it might reach an area that has remained silent for a long time, creating physical experiences or emotional experiences that may not always be pleasant. I always let people know to approach anything that you’re going to use for your well-being with a measure of caution. Make sure that it’s right for you.

**Steve:** What I hear you saying is it is powerful medicine. Like any sort of powerful medicine, it can do more than you expect.

**Tom:** Bowls in the Tibetan culture have been used extensively in their medical practices. If you read about the Tibetan approach to medicine, it’s very, very fascinating. Bowls were a very active part of that, as well as for spiritual and social and those kinds of things. So yes, it’s very powerful medicine that the West is finally catching up to recognizing.

**Steve:** My experience with the Tibetan bowls is it’s very much of an experience of kind of being surrounded by something – like I said, it feels like a massage, but being surrounded by something. But I’ve also heard the crystal signing bowls, and that is a much more piercing … For me, it almost feels like a laser. I really like the crystal bowls, but there have been experiences where it almost feels like a laser going into a particular part of my body. And I can imagine if I’ve had some wounding there or some trauma I’m storing there, it could be too much.

**Tom:** Indeed. And again, we have to take a look at, why are we doing this, first of all – why am I coming to this? What am I expecting out of it? And [one needs to] recognize that it could be. The distinction between the crystal and the Tibetan bowls is … you described it very well, Steve. The crystal bowls are a pure note; it is an absolute, pure note. It is like a laser, and when it’s used in healing, you will feel that very much more directly with a crystal bowl. They often will resonate at a variety of different notes. You can hear there is a high note, there is a medium note, and there is a lower note.

**Steve:** Ring it a little bit louder. The Zoom is kind of straining out the sound.

**Tom:** That’s what the bowl does. When people have wanted to do this over the internet, there is such a range of tone that a platform like Zoom doesn’t know which one it should pick up on. When I get a tuner to find out what is the predominant tone of a bowl, it’s bouncing all around until it zeroes in on one. It has a wide range of high, medium and low tones, especially the medium-sized bowls, [which] will have much more of that. It can have a varied kind of experience because there are different resonances going on at the same time as opposed to the crystal bowls. When they strike that or when they ring one of those bowls, it can make the walls shake if they’re made properly. [It is] a very pure tone.

**Steve:** You’ve shared that there is a reaction between the bowls and the surrounding environment. If you put people in a room, you could play the bowls for 10 different groups of people and the bowls would sound different to each of the 10 settings, correct?

**Tom:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Steve:** Say more about that, how that happens.

**Tom:** I’m not quite sure how it happens. I will give you my suspicions about why it happens. There’s a variety of things that go into it. Obviously, the shape of the room has a lot to do with it. If it’s a regular square kind of room with an 8-foot ceiling, you’re going to get one kind of a sense. For example, go to the chapel at Sinsinawa Mound and play them in there, [and it is] a totally different ballgame. It’s almost like the ceiling, which is extremely high, almost lifts the sounds out of the bowl. The room is a very important kind of piece. The number of people in the room: How many people are absorbing these sounds? Kind of the energy … people coming in feeling stressed or excited or what have you. My mood plays a role in it, too. If I’ve had a really stressful day, I have to make sure I’m approaching these bowls with a greater sense of patience. If I’m bringing my tension into it, they’ll react very differently. The bowls themselves – I use the metaphor as kind of like a family – they don’t always get along. There will be times when it’s absolutely beautiful; the bowls are singing back and forth and resonating off of each other. And there will be times when there are two or three bowls that are just like a 12-year-old saying, “I’m not going to play.” So, it’s like, fine – I’ll play with the ones that want to. Why that happens, I’m not sure. It could be temperature, it could be humidity. I know when I come to the center in the winter, I have to come about an hour or so early so I can get the bowls warmed up. There’s a variety of kinds of things. You’re absolutely right: There will be times when I’m amazed at how it’s going, and there’s other times when [I ask myself], “What’s going on here? There’s like an argument going on.” I have to try to respond to that in a way that works.

**Steve:** This kind of segues into how the bowls are a spiritual experience. How do you understand spirituality? And how are the bowls a resource in that?

**Tom:** And you said we only have 35 minutes? I will give you a very condensed explanation of how I view spirituality. Spirituality, to me, is moving from a linear explanation of who we are and our place in it all – a linear kind of cause-and-effect – to much more of a dynamic, fluid understanding. But [also] being able to understand that we are a part of it all rather that apart from it all. A more linear kind of spirituality or whatever you want to call it places me here and all of that out there, including whatever we call the divine. It’s almost kind of a conflictual relationship. But when it’s more circular and dynamic and fluid, we can relax and realize the universe isn’t picking on us and however we define the divine isn’t picking on us. We can relax into joining the dance and being part of and recognizing that our space here, even though it consists of about 70 trillion cells, is the result of it all. We are a part of it rather than apart from it.

**Steve:** Do the vibrations serve as a reminder to that or an invitation into that?

**Tom:** It’s moving from a sense of awareness, which is what we have when we look around the room and we can see a car going by or the sun coming in or the computer screen, to a sense of consciousness. Awareness just says, “That’s there, and I will label it. I’ll label that a desk and a lamp and chairs and what have you.” Consciousness moves us from that awareness to being able to understand that sense of interconnectedness – it is all here because of it all. I know that sounds really kind of abstract, and we are a participant in what creation has brought about. However you define creation, we’ve been invited to this. Our role is to understand how to best interact, and I call it “being in the midst of being.” The bowls allow us to stop and pause and remind ourselves … You used exactly the right word: to remind. “Re” means to return back to your original source. It’s to remind ourselves that we are an expression of the divine – not something removed from it or what have you – and how to be able to respond to that with greater patience and openness and compassion as we journey through our days because we have our challenges. And being able to be reminded allows us to say, “What is going on right now is inviting me into what is going on.” It isn’t always pleasant. I hear so many people say, “I’ve been doing this kind of meditation or this kind of prayer or this kind of journey, [and] it’s not making anything any better.” It’s not supposed to. You’re not in charge of that. What is occurring, it’s occurring because of things way beyond any individual. Our role is, “What can I contribute, even though it might be difficult?”

We’ve heard of kind of that wonderful shift that people are understanding when they’re struck with cancer. I am not the cancer. Cancer does not have me; I have my life. In the meantime, my body has cancer, so what do I do in the meantime rather than [saying], “Oh my goodness, I have cancer and why is this happening?” That’s the linear part, the cause and effect. Just being able to say, “This is happening. It’s not pleasant. I’m scared. [But] in the meantime, I’m going to enjoy my grandkids or I’m going to take a moment and enjoy the sunset or I’m going to remember that even though I may have cancer, I’m still alive and how to make the most of that.” The bowls, when they ring, it’s an opportunity to say, “Stop for a moment.” What I like to invite people to do is recognize that the sound comes from silence, the sound emerges, and then it returns to silence to remind people that silence was God’s first language. The bowls are just that reminder of saying amidst all the noise, all the distractions, all the fears, remind yourself to go back to that original source, because that will make how you journey through your life be one that comes out of a deeper place of compassion.

**Steve:** My first introduction to the bowls was a reminder that there was more to who I am than just my mind because it’s so easy just to live there. That sense of feeling those vibrations in the center of my body was like, “Oh, wait – there is a body. That feels really good. There’s a heart here, too.” It’s a reminder that who I mean by myself is so much bigger and more dynamic than just my mind. I think that very easily dovetails into the fact that reality is a lot bigger and more dynamic than just my mind.

**Tom:** Exactly. Our mind likes to think it runs the show, that what it thinks is the most important thing going on, so we have this disconnect between our body and our mind. Being able to unify that and remind ourselves that how our body goes, our mind goes, and how our mind goes, our body goes. It’s an interplay, and [we need] to remind ourselves of that. I share this in the retreats. I [say], “As a human being, each of us is incredibly irrelevant and insignificant, but at the same time, an amazing miracle.” Inside, your body [and] my body is comprised of 70 trillion cells. That’s more cells than there are that we know of in our Milky Way. Just to be able to say, “How did this all happen?” is an amazing miracle. But in the bigger scheme of things, we may not be as important as we were once taught to think we were, and that’s humbling. I don’t think that that’s a bad thing. I think it’s kind of like, we were invited to this. It’s not all going to go perfect; keep your perspective. It’s a real relief to know that we’re not as big a deal as we once thought we were. It takes a lot of pressure off of us.

**Steve:** In all your years of doing the sounding, is there a story that comes to mind that is a particularly powerful story where someone had an amazing experience?

**Tom:** There was an individual that had sustained an injury a long time ago. It was catching up with her and it was making it very difficult for her to walk. Doctors were trying all sorts of stuff, and basically she had to remind herself that her leg was there, because she didn’t feel it. The doctors were trying to get things going with surgeries and medicines and electrical stuff. She came up to me afterward and she had tears in her eyes, and she said, “I felt my leg. I don’t know what happened, but one of those tones came in through the bottom of my foot and went right up to my leg, and I felt my leg for the first time in years.” She said, “I don’t know how long this will last, but thank you.” I said, “It’s the bowl. I’m the messenger.” It was pretty powerful. She would come periodically, and very similar kinds of things would happen – sometimes more dramatic than others. We picked out which bowl it was, and she said, “That tone wakes my nerves up in my leg. I told my doctor about it, and he just kind of stood there and looked at me like, ‘Really?’ ” She said, “Really.” He said, “Then keep doing it.” That would be one experience. Just don’t forget that you are an expression of something so much larger. Celebrate it when you can, and I think silence is one of the ways to do that.”