

*“A Swede from North Dakota”:  
Setting Poetry to Music*

# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

There is nothing quite like the sense of humor of Upper Midwesterners. Familiar topics include rivalries between the Dakotas, life on the prairie, and the weather don'tcha know. This sense of humor is also found in poetry, such as limericks, cheer songs, folk songs, and other such forms, including the examples found on page 273 of the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. This activity combines the artistry of comedic poetry and the expressive vehicle of music. Using familiar melodies, choose one or more of the four songs on page 273 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, and then put the existing words to music that everyone knows. For an added challenge, take out some words and create an improvisational piece that the activity director will help the participants to construct and then sing back.

## TIME:

One session of forty-five to sixty minutes. (This activity could also be repeated with other folk songs over the course of several weeks. The accumulated songs then could be combined into a songbook for posterity.)

## MATERIALS:

- Audio playing device, such as an MP3 or CD player
- Overhead projection of "A Swede from North Dakota," or copies for each attendee
- Some means to the display lyrics may include:
  - A white board and dry-erase markers with enough room to write out new lyrics in a large font for easy readability
  - A laptop connected to a projector and a word processing program that would allow for the editing of a written-out stanza
  - A large notepad on an easel with markers
- A few verses of very popular songs written out on the word processing program, white board, or overhead projector so that they may be edited later
- Piano, guitar, or invited live musician
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

(Recommended optional publication: *Play Along With Eldersong* by Beckie Karras, Eldersong Publications, 2001.)

### **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

This activity especially addresses the plague of boredom, as it requires the attendees to creatively take existing songs and rewrite them to parody a particular aspect of their lives or surroundings by reminiscing and reformatting their ideas into song. As a group activity, people are brought together to interact with one another. By sharing aspects of one’s life, the door is opened and the ice is broken, thereby allowing the participants to get to know one another in a safe and often humorous way. This interaction and sharing sets the stage to ease the participants’ loneliness.

### **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:**

A group of older adults with functional mental health problems were enrolled in a poetry group facilitated by psychologists over six sessions. Qualitative and quantitative measures indicate that all group members appreciated the sessions and reacted with positive responses.

*--Papadopoulos, A., S. Wright, and S. Harding. “Evaluating a Therapeutic Poetry Group for Older Adults.” Journal of Poetry Therapy 13, no. 1 (1999): 29-37.*



# Activity Plan

## SESSION 1 (45 TO 60 MINUTES):

1. Refer to Chapter 10 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers* to facilitate an opening discussion on what folk songs are and their use in our culture. Folk songs are primarily used as points of pride or self-deprecation and foster a sense of unity for a particular group of people. Sometimes they are set to music; sometimes they are just poems that creatively tell others a little bit about a group.

For instance, the tune “A Swede from North Dakota” (on page 273 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*) goes like this:

I’m a Swede from North Dakota,  
Been on the farm for just one year (pronounce it “yahr”),  
But I go back to Minnesota  
Just to see the big state fair.

2. Suggest a song that might have a similar rhyme scheme and see if the group can sing along to make the words fit an existing melody. For instance, the poem “A Swede from North Dakota” may go along with the melody from “Yankee Doodle” with a little editing. The person directing the activity plan should encourage everyone in attendance to tap the table, their chairs, or their knees with their hands to the beat of the song as they sing to encourage movement. More often than not, the best way to encourage others to participate is by setting an example.

3. Next, create the “fill-in-the-blanks” verse like so and get feedback from the group without them knowing what they are filling in or where it will be located in the verse (just ask for an ethnicity, memory, etc., and fill in those blanks privately):

I’m a (ethnicity) from North Dakota,  
Been (favorite memory from growing up) for (duration),  
But I go back to Minnesota  
Just to see the (favorite thing to do in Minnesota).

So it is possible the finished verse may look a little something like this:

I’m a Norski from North Dakota,  
Been choppin’ wood forever it seems,  
But I go back to Minnesota  
Just to see the old Metrodome.

4. Develop several versions of the folk poem, utilizing other contributions generated by the group.

5. Repeat this or a similar process with either of the two folk songs or two cheer songs on page 273 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, or ask for more suggestions if the participants know of other songs or poems that are particularly reminiscent of growing up or that fit a familiar melody.

### **AUTHOR • ANDREW KNIGHT:**

Andrew is an assistant professor of music at the University of North Dakota, a board-certified music therapist, and a teacher and supervisor of music therapy students in Grand Forks, North Dakota. Previously, he was an active clinician in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, area. There he held various music therapy clinical roles in nursing and geriatric facilities, school districts, and agencies serving adults and children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. He also established a branch of the “Tremble Clefs,” a nationwide group of individuals with Parkinson’s disease and their caregivers, which works to support them physically and emotionally through singing and movement. He lives in Grand Forks with his wife and three children, frequently bikes around the city, and has completed seven marathons . . . so far.