

The Healing Power of Music

by *Balfour M. Mount, M.D.* / September 9, 2004



Music has touched the human soul across all boundaries of time, space, and genre. Indeed, the healing power of music has been documented for millennia. An account involving two of the legendary kings of Israel is thought to have been written during the reign of Solomon. "And whenever the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand; so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him." Saul's experience is echoed in our daily lives, leading William Congreve to observe, "Music has charms to soothe a savage breast," and Yo-Yo Ma to comment, "Healing? I think that is what music is all about. Don't you?"

Music and healing at the bedside

Anne was admitted to the Palliative Care Unit of Montreal's Royal Victoria Hospital with unrelenting back pain due to breast cancer involving her spine. Within days our worst fears were realized. Her symptoms worsened and, in spite of treatment, she became paralyzed from the waist down. A single mother with a new mortgage, precarious employment, and strained finances, Anne was devastated. Her perennial optimism evaporated and a sense of inadequacy mushroomed within our palliative care team.

Late one morning, during my daily ward rounds, perhaps two or three weeks after this crisis, I walked into Anne's room and sank into the chair by her bed. Our brief chat about her current symptoms was followed by the silence that arises from mutual recognition of shared impotence: not much to say! Groping, I asked, "Do you like music, Anne?"

"Yes, I do," she replied.

"What kind?" Her eyes met mine in a glance that conveyed her uncertainty as to whether she should tell me the truth. Did she trust me enough? There was a pause. Then, almost in a whisper, she said, "Elvis."

"Really?" I exclaimed. "Well, do you know, in 1957 I went to his concert in Ottawa?"

Her response was explosive. With eyes wide in astonishment, she fairly shouted, "*YOU were at the Ottawa concert?!*" I had never previously admitted that I had attended an Elvis Presley concert, but her evident awe was encouraging.

"Yeah," I found myself responding, "I was at the Ottawa concert!"

What followed was one of the most intense, deeply engaging conversations of my life. It probably lasted about half an hour. I told her about that memorable night, so long ago. And Anne told me about the King, his generosity, and the sense of accompaniment she had always experienced through his music. She was vibrant, fully engaged, and deeply probing for further details. As I left her room, her face was radiant. I felt privileged, like I had been on sacred ground. The significance of our conversation for Anne was evident. It was not just a transient "feel-good" thing. It was much

more than that. For the first time since becoming paralyzed she had experienced a sense of wholeness and the exhilaration of being fully alive. No one attempting to offer hope could have given to Anne what she had now experienced. Though paraplegic, she could be as fully alive as she had ever been.

Anne's experience and those of other palliative care patients led our team into research areas that posed new questions. What determines quality of life? What is the significance of the inner life and what is its impact on illness? What is healing? How do these issues relate to music?

Quality of life and its determinants

"Quality of Life" (QOL) may be defined as *subjective well-being*. It is the basis for answering the question, "How are you today? How does it feel to be in your skin?" QOL is a composite assessment that is influenced by all aspects of personhood – physical, psychosocial, and spiritual. Surprisingly, *physical* health contributes relatively little to QOL. For instance, *emotional well being* and *life satisfaction* (two constructs that determine QOL) have been found to be the same for people with serious physical disability as for those in the general population. Furthermore, QOL significantly improves in response to skilled, compassionate whole-person care, even in the face of imminent death. The *existential or spiritual domain* has been found to be a major contributor to QOL, particularly in cases involving life threatening illness.

The relationship of music to QOL and healing

Our QOL varies from moment to moment along a continuum that extends from suffering and anguish at one extreme to a sense of integrity and wholeness at the other. *Healing* involves a response shift toward the latter. What enables an experience of healing such as Anne's? Wisdom traditions, depth psychology, and recent research suggest several factors. Healing occurs when we are drawn into the present moment and away from the ruminations about past and future that consistently dominate our lives. It requires a letting go of literal, rational, linear patterns of thought and an acceptance of an intuitive, imaginal, metaphoric way of experiencing reality (expressed in some traditions as a shift from head to heart). It is associated with a sense of enriched personal meaning and a sense of connectedness. We may experience these *healing connections* at four levels: at an inner level, between ego and "Self"/"Deep Centre"/the essential self (the "individuation" of Carl Jung); secondly, healing connections with others, in community (the I/thou relating of Martin Buber); thirdly, connectedness to the phenomenal world, as perceived through our senses -- for example, in response to music, nature, long distance running, the creative arts; finally, through a sense of connection to ultimate meaning/God/"the More," however that is perceived by the individual.

Music, when it is truly healing, may be acting through any or all of these four paths to cut through our carefully constructed defences, thus liberating a deeper appreciation and acceptance of mystery and the potential for healing that lies within. Newtonian physics told us that at base we are particulate; quantum physics, that we are vibratory. It seems that the reality is that we are not either/or, but both/and. Perhaps, in its vibratory nature, music opens us to a greater appreciation of our essential connectedness to the cosmos, our oneness with all that is.

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