Continuing Education—July 2009

MAGIC OF MUSIC

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(Stan Goldberg is a hospice volunteer, cancer survivor, author, and Professor Emeritus who for more than 25 years taught, provided therapy, researched, and published in the areas of learning problems, communication disorders, loss, and change. His published articles range from the humor of being forced to ride an angry horse on the open range to the profound spirituality he experienced holding someone as they died. Downloadable articles and complete resume can be found on his website: stangoldbergwriter.com)

I was forced to play the accordion as a child when my parents owned a grocery store. Since we lived in back and above it, my mother often would call me into the store to play for customers such classics as the Anniversary Waltz, Beer Barrel Polka, and Lady of Spain (complete with bellow-shakes). As I mechanically raced through the songs, I hoped to outrun the inevitable “mistake” I knew would occur. There is a Gary Larson cartoon that is split in half. On the top frame someone is entering heaven with St. Peter saying, “Welcome to heaven, here’s your harp.” Below is a picture of hell and the devil greets his new resident with, “Welcome to hell, here’s your accordion.”

Many years later, I decided to inflict pain on myself and my wife by playing the banjo. I quickly realized that while most notes were in 32nds (beats per measure), my fingers could only do 16ths. Throughout the years came a series of musical failures: violin, trumpet, autoharp, and resophonic guitar (Dobro). Only recently did I discover the pleasure of making music and using it in my hospice work.

I’ve heard stories of how live and recorded music were helpful in creating a peaceful setting as someone died. I recently started playing the Native American Flute. A number of times I brought three of my flutes to the George Mark Children’s House, but never had the courage to take them out of the car. Since I was seven, I hated playing publicly. Not only did I believe I was a terrible musician, but became so frightened I would always forget the notes I memorized. I overcame my reluctance to play publicly when a child staying for respite care was restless and unable to be comforted. According to her medical records, she was profoundly deaf and totally blind. Her mother said she connected with the world only through touch and smell. But that day, even holding and rocking her didn’t help.

Reluctantly, I went back to my car and returned with one flute, an E, which has a tone low enough that I hoped she could feel the vibrations. Going back into her room, I closed the door and tried to play softly so nobody would hear. With Alice lying in bed I began to play. None of the songs I had memorized came out. Instead, there were a series of notes that were magically strung together, creating a tune I had never played or heard. How old was this tune? Was this something a Native American played to his sweetheart because he couldn’t say the words publicly? Or was this a variation of a tune, someone on the Mongolian plains played forty thousand years ago on a bone flute in awe of the full moon?

I’ve talked to musicians who play in hospices and hospitals. They all have had similar experiences -- they played incredible tunes they couldn’t remember when they left the bedside. As I
played inches from Alice’s face with my eyes closed, I realized I found something as powerful as touch. I opened my eyes and saw her head following the end of the flute. She started to relax and then fell asleep.

The more I play for hospice patients the more I realize there is something very basic about music—something that may even be more important than touch to someone who’s dying. Levitin, in *This is Your Brain on Music*, writes that the ability to follow and understand music is neurologically hard-wired; predates our ability to develop language; and remains intact long after the ability to use language disappears.

Although I wouldn’t encourage accordion players to use their instrument in hospice, there are other instruments that have been shown to be effective, such as all types of flutes, violins, cellos, lutes, guitars, harps, and soft electronic or standard pianos. I’m sure there are others that would be appropriate. There are only three suggestions I have about playing for patients.

1) Ask them a week before you visit if you can play for them.

2) On the day you’re playing, play a short sample tune in three different keys (low, medium, high) and ask which they would prefer to hear

3) Don’t worry about practicing—play from your heart.

There’s a wonderful story about the role of practice in becoming proficient. A student wanted to study with a martial arts master. He asked the Master how long it would take for him to become accomplished if he practiced six hours a day. The Master said, “10 years.” The student said, “What if I practiced for 12 hours a day?” The Master said, “20 years.” When I stopped trying to sound good, and just let the notes emerge, I was able to create melodies I couldn’t describe. I felt somehow, the right notes were already in my flute. My job was to let them escape.

And then there’s the experience you’ll have. Those of us in hospice have been trained to be with patients and witness their deaths as they progress through it. You already know how profound that is. Playing music for them adds on an additional spiritual layer. If hearing is the last sense that the dying experience (according to some experts), you’ll stay physically connected for a longer period and in a more profound way than you may have ever experienced—and maybe, just maybe, give them an added boost to their harp.

[If you sing or play a musical instrument (preferably not an accordion), and would be willing to try connecting with patients in this way, please call Carolyn. Please don’t be shy.]

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