

Listening to the Stories of their Lives...

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The purpose of this paper is to share with you some of the stories and music of my clients and to have you experience in some small way as I have their joys, struggles and strength. This is not meant to be a didactic presentation. I will not be referring to any literature or theoretical concepts. It is meant to be a time for reflection upon the real life scenarios of the people who come to us for support and how we respond as music therapists and human beings.

Owen's Story

Listening Excerpt

"Enough of this Suffering"

The music we just heard was an improvisational excerpt taken from a session that I had with Owen - an adult male in his early forties who has been living with HIV/AIDS for over 20 years. Owen has undergone multiple losses in his life including the deaths of family members and friends. As a child and adolescent, he was subjected to repeated occurrences of sexual and physical abuse. He reports having an unspecified learning disability, which went undiagnosed during his school years causing him much frustration and he dropped out just prior to graduation. Both at school and at home Owen describes having periodic "fits" or "tantrums" where he was held down and/or sat upon until he stopped. As an adult, Owen has experienced periods of extreme physical deterioration and bouts of depression. In the time that I have known him, he has had "run ins" with the law, issues with his health, difficulties in his social relationships and may be developing a drug addiction. He came to music therapy in order to express his feelings around past and present events and to find ways to more effectively cope with the intensity of his emotions and the activities of daily life.

Prior to the excerpt that we just heard, Owen had been attending music therapy sessions for two months. He had been musically hesitant in previous sessions and this was the first time that he chose to actively engage in an improvisation. Prior to beginning, Owen indicated that he wanted to "make noise" in order to "get out the frustrations of those damn nightmares" which he had been experiencing about the past abuse and related present fears. The improvisation lasted for 8 minutes and became quite loud and intense as Owen played both snare and conga drums and I stayed with him on piano. Near the end of this experience, Owen was hitting the gong loudly. He stopped and said, "enough of this suffering". The piano cadenced and the gong faded.

At this point, Owen referred to an image of his abuser. He spoke about his anger, memories of being abused (including his first memory) and his anticipation regarding upcoming events where it would be necessary to face these memories. He spoke about the support he had received from others. He discussed family members, his mother's sudden death and recounted difficult conversations and relationships. We took our time in ending the session and as he left I remember thinking that something new and significant had occurred. At our next session, Owen and I listened to a recording of this improvisation. He began to cry and at the end said, "All I could hear was the scared little boy." This experience seemed not only to have significant meaning and impact in the moment but also outside of the session environment as Owen stated that he was now sleeping much better and could not remember having any more nightmares.

"A Story about becoming a Man"

After this experience, our therapeutic relationship seemed to take on a new intensity. Although Owen temporarily pulled back in terms of being musically expressive in sessions he became quite comfortable in verbally expressing his feelings and thoughts. He brought in his journal and read

excerpts that outlined some of the memories of abuse that had been surfacing for him. I felt that this was something that he needed to do with me especially since he had indicated that it was important for people to believe his story. I wondered how we might bring this material back to the music especially since he seemed hesitant to improvise and when he did, he appeared to disassociate from what he was playing. I asked him what he thought about writing a song that would somehow address some of his feelings. He seemed open to the idea and even excited. He came to the next session with words that I put to music taking into consideration his stylistic suggestions. Throughout the week as I composed the music, I became increasingly aware of the potential impact of setting such complex personal themes to music and thought that I had perhaps made a mistake in suggesting this idea. Prior to presenting the song to Owen I explained that the experience might be difficult but he assured me that he wanted to proceed. I remember feeling nervous and wanting to sing the words gently as if they could somehow physically hurt him. Owen sat just behind my right shoulder as I sang and played the piano. He seemed to be listening intently and tears soon began to flow.

Listening Excerpt

A Story About Becoming a Man

Chorus

*There is a scared little boy, who is now a grown man
Now he has a story to tell, about becoming a man*

- 1. A story about rape and rape that was done – by his big brother
The little boy could only remember the size of his snowsuit
6X was the size of his snowsuit the first time he was raped*
- 2. As time went on and on the rape – became more violent
The little boy could only remember the size of his snowsuit
6X was the size of his snowsuit the first time he was raped*

Spoken Part

- 3. The only time the big brother took it easy on the little brother was when I broke my jaw
but once I was better and healed, the rape and abuse got worse
The little brother tried to fight off the big brother and I said
STOP-LEAVE ME ALONE – but he never did*
- 4. Now 18 years have passed and now it is time to tell the police
The story of a little boy who only felt safe when his brother was in Toronto
But then he would come back again...and again*

Final Chorus

*There was a scared little boy, now a brave grown man
He is now no longer afraid, he cannot hurt me anymore...no more.*

When the music stopped, Owen exhaled, took off his glasses and wiped away tears. He compared himself to a family member who had also cried recently. He was sweating and sighed frequently. He wished that his abuser “*could see this*” and he asked if I could make him a copy of the recording. He spoke about being the scared little boy and wondered what other people would think. He discussed the importance of heightening others’ awareness around this subject because “*...no little boy should ever go through what I went through.*” He spoke about his family, difficult conversations and his anger, then about the song itself. “*It’s incredible how you put it to words, to music – it is, it really is...The part that really got me going, got me started crying was the scared little boy and the only thing he could remember was the 6X.*” He went on to describe his “memory of remembering” and how traumatic that was for him. He referred to a friend who had summoned up enough courage to confront someone who had been an abuser and spoke about how much he would like to do the same thing but “*he would kill me.*” He began to describe

the last time that the abuse had occurred and referred to what he had written in his journal over the past week. We continued to work on the song for the remainder of the session.

I realized that this had been a riveting experience for Owen. We took our time in finishing the session in order to achieve appropriate closure. I also felt that he needed to have access to ongoing support throughout the week as he continued to process this experience. I encouraged him to contact me should he wish to do so. He phoned the next day and we further discussed the experience and its impact. I also ensured to the best of my ability that he had other appropriate coping strategies and supports in place.

I experienced many different feelings and reactions both during and after this event. I brought this material to supervision, which was very helpful. However, I believe that most of my own personal processing occurred over time, as I seemed to need some distance from the experience in order to fully understand its impact. The research, writing and presenting that I have done has also been an integral part of my personal journey.

Therapist's Reflections

When I first met Owen and we discussed his goals and expectations I realized that I would be working with someone whose past experiences of abuse and current related challenges would be the central issues of the therapeutic process. I also soon came to understand that over 20 years of living with HIV/AIDS had provided him with the motivation and courage to face these complex issues. The sessions with Owen had a strong impact upon me. I experienced feelings of admiration, sadness, disbelief and anger as the stories of his life unfolded. For me, these feelings occurred in sessions but they seemed to occur even more intensely outside of sessions and were sometimes triggered unexpectedly by some aspect of a situation or activity that would remind me of him (i.e. watching a movie). Luckily during this first set of 17 sessions, I was receiving weekly supervision and I had someone with whom I could address these issues. I also had to be willing to acknowledge my feelings and fatigue outside of the therapy context, have enough personal insight to make the connection and take steps to address it.

On a final note, Owen and I parted after 17 sessions due to the fact that our work was conducted as part of a qualitative research study that I was doing in conjunction with my Master of Music Therapy studies. I did not feel that we had really finished what we had started but the circumstances were beyond our control. Several months passed and when Owen found out through the original referring agency that funding had been secured for music therapy sessions, he phoned and asked if we could continue. Now we have come to the end of our second journey having only one more session to go. We have covered a lot more ground and although it is hard to say good-bye, this time the ending feels right. There is one last significant moment that I would like to share. About a year ago, I asked Owen if he would like to re-schedule an upcoming session as I realized that it landed on the day of his 40th birthday for which he had been making big plans. He looked at me and said, *"I never thought that I would live to see 40 – this is the best place for me to be on my birthday."* He was right – we had a great birthday session and I felt honored that he chose to share that day with me.

Sharon's Story – Love, Loss & Longing

Song for Regina

Sharon is a beautiful woman in her thirties who is living with HIV/AIDS. When I first met her, she seemed withdrawn and sad. I also got the feeling that she was unsure as to why we were meeting. The referring counsellor gave no reason for referral other than "I think you two will really get along". In a quiet voice, Sharon stated that she was interested in attending a music therapy group but wanted to know more about what was involved. We soon realized that she would be unable to make the time at which the group sessions were scheduled. I indicated that individual session times were more flexible and she asked me to proceed with my explanation about music

therapy. As I outlined the particulars she seemed to be paying close attention and subsequently stated that she would be interested in giving it a try. I continued with the assessment and asked her if she had any idea of what she might want to achieve or work on in music therapy. Without missing a beat she answered, *"I would like to resolve the grief I have around the death of my daughter."* She cried softly as she spoke about her 4 year old daughter Regina who had passed away a few years previous. We spoke a bit more and established a time for our first session. As we got up to leave, Sharon turned round to face me. She smiled and said, *"I like to be hugged. In my culture it is what we do."* Over the next 9 months we never parted without a hug.

When Sharon arrived at the first session she stated that she did not want to discuss Regina. We spent the next few sessions exploring music and becoming comfortable with each other. One day Sharon walked into the session and said, *"I am ready"* and began to talk. Regina had passed away over 5 years ago as a result of HIV/AIDS that had been unknowingly transmitted to her by her mother. Sharon did not find out that she was HIV positive until she immigrated to Canada – shortly after Regina's death. For various complex reasons, Sharon's family would not allow her to speak about Regina - they took away all photographs and evidence of her existence. After all of this time, Sharon began to have unsettling dreams about her daughter and was having difficulty sleeping and coping with activities of daily living. Between smiles and tears she told me about the beauty of her daughter, portrayed her kind and generous nature and described an intelligence that seemed beyond her years - as if this little girl knew that she would not be on this earth for long. Sharon was experiencing feelings of guilt related to the fact that she had passed on the virus to her daughter and also felt that she had not spent enough time with her near the end of her life. She had a strong desire to speak with Regina and tell her how she felt. She longed to be able to enjoy Regina's visits in her dreams. With Sharon's permission I made notes as she told her story. I suggested that although Regina could not be here with us, it did not mean that Sharon could not say what needed to be said. Together we wrote a *Song for Regina*:

*If I had a chance to say, what I couldn't say before
I would tell her that I love her &
I miss her more & more
So beautiful was she that I hardly could believe
That this little girl was mine
I don't know why she had to leave
No pictures to remember but her pain is now no more
I wish I'd understood then,
That our time would be so short –
She is always in my heart; love will never, ever die
No one can take away her memory
My baby girl, my special child*

Although Sharon's situation was very different from Owen's, I again felt that I had to be very gentle with regard to the way in which this song was employed in the sessions. Sharon had a quiet and somewhat tearful response when the song was first presented. She kept a copy of the lyrics and did not speak about it again for a few weeks. She then requested that I make a recording for her so that she could listen to it at home. Eventually, Sharon decided that she wanted to sing her own words and we worked toward this goal bit by bit when she felt she had enough strength. The recording that you heard today containing both of our voices was the realization of this goal and was recorded in the second last session.

Sharon told me that writing this song and the process involved helped her to resolve the feelings of guilt and loss that were impacting upon her life and her health. She reported improvement in her sleeping patterns. She felt that it had allowed her to embrace and celebrate her daughter's life and memory and her own life could now move forward. She has asked me to use Regina's real name when I present this material as it helps her to know that others will remember her life as well. She is also planning on sharing this song with her family.

Song for my Mom

Sharon's story does not end here. Throughout our time together, we addressed many complex issues – each a story in and of itself. Some sessions were emotionally intense, some were joyful and some were full of sadness and fatigue. One day Sharon arrived for her session with a mission in mind. She walked in and said *"I need you to play some music on the piano."* She sat down, pulled out a pad of paper and a pen and began to write as I improvised. Around 15 minutes later, she indicated that she was done. I came and sat beside her. She said, *"I want you to write a song for my mother."* The majority of Sharon's family lives in a small village in Africa. She is in regular contact but finds it difficult to discuss her life in Canada - a land that they believe to be full of unimaginable wealth. They do not know about her HIV status. It is Sharon's hope that she will someday go back home and see her family but that day may not come for some time due to circumstances beyond her control. Sharon is especially close to her mother and feels that she will accept her daughter and her situation without judgment but that such issues must be discussed in person. This song is a both a letter to her mother and a prayer to God to keep her mother safe until she is able to get back home to say what needs to be said.

Song for my Mom

*Dear Mom, it's me your daughter, I'm so far away from home
Life is nothing like we thought it would be and I miss you more than you know
There's so much I have to tell you, when we next meet face to face
And I will see the warmth and love in your eyes but for now I must have faith*

CHORUS

*That God will keep you for me, till I can come home
How I pray for this each night
When I see your gentle face and hold your hand I know
That everything will be all right
May God keep you for me till I can come home
So I can tell you what I'm going through
You're the one who'll understand with your open heart
And I need to say how much I love you*

*I see now your love and patience, how you went the extra mile
To keep us safe and now this sweet memory gives me strength to survive
So many things have changed, but for better this I know
With every risk that I take each decision I make
Every prayer is filled with hope*

CHORUS

Ending – Mom do you know how much I truly love you?

After 20 sessions, Sharon decided to terminate therapy. She felt she had accomplished a great deal and did not feel prepared to go any further at this time. She shared with me how she had had such doubts about music therapy in the beginning and how she had *"no idea"* of how it could help her as much as it did. We spent our last session making music and discussing her future hopes and dreams. A few tears were shed during that last hug. I think about her often and wonder if she has indeed shared her songs with her family. I may never know how the story ends.

Therapist's Final Reflections

The stories that I have shared with you today are fairly representative of the complexity that I experience in a great deal of my clinical work. This does not mean that I work at this level of intensity all of the time nor do I only work with clients who come to music therapy seeking

transformational experiences. Much of my time is spent working with individuals and groups where the focus may be on music and wellness, relaxation techniques, activity based interventions and even performance. However, I like to leave all options open and believe that if we allow clients to lead or even invent the process that they will take us to where they need to go - sometimes when we (or they) least expect it. Are we prepared to truly listen to our clients' stories and recognize when they are being revealed whether that be through music, words, actions or some other medium? Are we able to provide them with what they really need on mutually acceptable terms? Are we prepared to acknowledge our own feelings and responses and are we equipped to deal with them? I still sometimes underestimate the impact that clients' stories and intense sessions can have on me and also have trouble setting aside time to address my own needs. I'll keep working on it because I owe it to the clients who have honored me with their trust, to the others in my life that I care about and above all to myself.

Some material retrieved from:

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