

Music and Being: Reflections of a Music Thanatologist



by Sharilyn Cohn

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“What does it mean to be a human being?” There are as many different answers to that question as there are people. In fact, my answer today is vastly different from the one I would have given prior to my education at the Chalice of Repose Project School of Music Thanatology in Missoula, MT, and my ensuing career as a music thanatologist. For me, one aspect of being human involves being authentically engaged in work that transforms those whom I serve. And when this happens, my work also transforms me. After numerous close encounters of the spiritual kind—three of which I want to share with you—I now know what Albert Einstein meant when he said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science.”

Three weeks after the World Trade Center was destroyed, I was called to a NICU in which an infant had been born extremely prematurely. There were many complications—the baby was on life support and not expected to live much longer. While the nursing staff had the unenviable daily task of draining fluid from the baby’s brain, the parents were faced with an even tougher dilemma: Should they remove their three-week old son from life support? Still grieving the death of a child the previous year, their choice was made all the more difficult. Finally they decided—their son’s life support would be terminated.

The comfort care nurse specialist, feeling

that our presence would help support and comfort the parents, called us for a vigil. The baby was bathed by his mother and the nurse and then placed in the mother’s arms. As we played, a rocking chair moved back and forth with mother and son as one. His parents continued to struggle with their decision: “Are we doing the right thing? Is our son suffering?” They decided life support could not, would not be removed. The tender sight of mother and son rocking together evoked a lullaby from our harps, and the parents continued to second-guess their decision.

After a short while, they realized their son was indeed suffering, and their hearts and minds at last were in agreement. The mother said softly “I want to see my baby’s face before he dies—without the mask and tubes.” The nurse was informed, and the vent was withdrawn shortly thereafter. The infant’s pulse gradually slowed, and he drew his last breath in the shelter of his mother’s arms. I knew in my body that both music and “being-ness” had deeply and gently touched those dear parents and lovingly led them to a path of acceptance during this gut-wrenching time.

A second vigil involved a woman we had previously seen three times. This time she was declining quickly. When I arrived, she had been experiencing seizures for several hours. Her husband, son, and daughter-in-law were at her bedside, distraught at the sight of their loved one in such distress. Once the vigil began, and the music filled the room, the woman’s respiratory rate slowed down. Her seizures stopped. The family was relieved to see her more relaxed and comfortable. The son expressed his gratitude to me afterwards. “This was better than medicine,” he said.

The third transformative vigil involved a woman who had been the sole caretaker of her invalid husband who was blind and a quadriplegic. They had been married more than 50 years. The woman knew she was going to die and was at peace with the inevitable, but her husband was struggling. For days he pleaded

—Albert Einstein

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with her: "Please don't leave me! Who's going to take care of me?" He had not previously wept about his wife's impending death, but once the music began he started to cry. He sobbed throughout 45 minutes of the vigil, until the music gently loosened fear's grip on him. He then breathed in deeply, turned to his wife, and said, "It's OK, you can go now. Go into the light. I'll be OK. I love you." A few minutes later, after receiving her husband's blessing, the wife died peacefully.

What I have experienced from my work as a music thanatologist is this: It is not about "doing" music thanatology. It is about "being-ness"—both as a music thanatologist and as a human being. I experience my own human being-ness in relationship with the human being-ness of those I serve. I am blessed to be a conduit for the profound effect music has on



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the patients and families we serve. Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent. During a vigil, music reveals both everyday life and the transcendent—it is a symbolic system, a vehicle for making meaning. Those in attendance are transported to nonlinear time and space, and then, afterwards, gently returned to the here-and-now, transformed by the experience.

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Established 1994

WINTER 2004
Volume 10 Number 1

The official newsletter of
Supportive Care of the Dying: A Coalition for Compassionate Care

- [2] **The Miracle of Time**
Kathy Carroll
- [5] **For the Children: Palliative Care Team Eases the Pain**
Eva Marie Sylvester
- [7] **Joy on the Journey**
Judy Wagner
- [10] **Chairperson's Corner**
Bridget Carney
- [11] **CALL Care: One Year Down the Road**
Ellen Geerling
- [16] **Standing Vigil: PRESENCE Looks Back at Its First Year**
Nancy Gendron, Marilyn J. Williams, and Marianne Zoltowski
- [19] **Palliative Care Program Earns Circle of Life Citation of Honor**
Mary Davidson
- [22] **Holistic Therapies Augment Palliative Care**
Andrea J. Ziser
- [24] **Music and Being: Reflections of a Music Thanatologist**
Sharilyn Cohn
- [26] **The Philadelphia Story Continues to Unfold**
Sheila MacMaster and Vicki Lelli

The Miracle of Time

Page 2

