

Chapter 10: Ritual

We relate to each other through what we share as humans. We come together through soul. Symbol, ritual music and myth are a celebration of this unity as well as a vehicle for practical growth.... We work on survival and improvement. This is the healing power of the arts. - Caroline Kenny, music therapist (1982)

The Children's Performance Group: Redefining Expectations

It was decided by the clinical team of a music therapy program for children with disabilities that I would form a group of children who had the ability and temperament to develop material and create repertoire. The children chosen were aged twelve to sixteen with developmental delays secondary to various diagnosed disabilities - autism, intellectual disability, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy. The children's emotional/intellectual/behavioral concerns included problems with impulse control, self-confidence, learning disabilities, social discomfort, speech impediments, emotional volatility and low frustration tolerance. However, they were high-spirited, fun-loving children, not given to shyness, disruptive behavior or limited attention. They loved making music and were always ready to jump in and make it happen.

Together, the children and I would choose, arrange, rehearse, and possibly compose some of this material. It was thought that this higher degree of responsibility and challenge within the sessions would be beneficial for the children, tentatively (but not necessarily) leading to some type of public performance. They met once per week for an hour-long session. After a few months of sessions, the children were responding positively and successfully to the material development aspect of the sessions and were expressing enthusiasm for the idea of performance, so it was decided that we would actually do it. The children had no experience performing and, after some discussions among the clinical team, it was agreed the most likely venue was the program's annual fundraiser. It was thought the audience would be receptive, attentive and appreciative. Even so, this was a major event, a formal dinner in a grand ballroom of a hotel with several hundred people in attendance (families, local politicians, and supporters of the program) - not exactly a low-pressure situation. When word got out that we would be preparing for this, several parents came to me with concern. Comments ran along these lines - my son/ daughter:

"is never going to be able to learn the material."

"will forget words."

"will be embarrassed."

"will have a meltdown in front of all those people."

My response was, we'll start preparing, but if it looks like it won't be a good experience for someone, we'll abandon the idea. I said I'd be willing to call it off even at the point of being backstage and ready to go on. The goals for the children were not modest. Although I had not yet formerly developed the Elements of Well-Being model at the time, my thought process still ran along similar lines (Elements of Well-Being term in parenthesis):

- *To rehearse once per week for an hour during the regular program and several additional times during the week for more than an hour as we approached the performance (Engagement)*
- *To find personal meaning and fun in the process (Enjoyment)*
- *To resolve interpersonal roles, managing the tension between collaboration and competition (Affiliation)*
- *To choose and learn material, develop necessary self-confidence and discipline regarding the rehearsal schedule and manage frustration and stress (Self-Efficacy)*
- *To feel self adequately represented in the group process and be willing to share creative input, opinions and needs during preparation (Self-Expression)*

Although there were a few bumps in the road - arguments and jealousies between children, crying frustration over the difficulty of mastering the material, a few moments of insecurity, and the like - in general, the children rose to the occasion with positive moods and exuberance, and the performance went flawlessly. Needless to say, the children received an ecstatic, standing-ovation. The audience applauded and cheered for five minutes. People were crying. Why? Of course, they were extremely happy and proud of the children, but it went beyond that. Nobody was sure, not the audience, certainly not the parents, not the children themselves, that they could pull it off. When they did, the sense of triumph was overwhelming. It was as if they had won the Superbowl!

There is a huge expansion of identity. Everything shifts. Now everyone is sure they can do it because they have just done it. The children's conception of themselves expands - the conception of the people around them - family, professionals - expands. It is like an explosion - like a Big Bang. Something comes into existence that wasn't there before. The parents that had previously expressed trepidation were beside themselves with joy. They were soon asking, "When can we do this again?" And we did do it again several times, always with the same success. They almost became like professionals, but nothing equaled the breakthrough of that first time.

God Bless America: It Almost Didn't Happen That Way

While that is a beautiful story, it is not the story I need to tell that is relevant to music as ritual. In fact, we almost didn't make it to the stage. Remember, I had reassured the concerned parents by saying, if it looks like it will be a negative experience for anyone, I was willing to call it off, *even at the point of being backstage ready to go on?* As we arrived at the hotel for the show, the children were excited and happy. As we gathered backstage, everyone was in good spirits and ready to go. Minutes before we were about to go on, one girl, the youngest, a generally positive, even-natured twelve-year-old with an intellectual disability, suddenly had an attack of nerves. She started to cry and panic. She couldn't do it, she sobbed desperately. I could hear the MC begin his introduction for the group. The anticipation in the audience was electric. This was to be the high point of the evening. The magic of music therapy that everyone was there to support and celebrate was about to come alive. In that heightened state of awareness and emotion, I searched myself. Would we need to call it off? What should I do?

As it turned out, I didn't need to do anything. In fact, I really have no idea how it began but suddenly the group was singing "God Bless America." One of the children must have started it but I didn't know who. This was not one of our show songs nor had we ever done it as a group before. Obviously it was a song they all knew because they all began to join in, and of course, so did I. With the emotion of the song rising, we put our arms around each other and sang our hearts out. With the final crescendo, "my home sweet home," we raised our hands to the air. The look on the children's faces and the energy that had been generated was rapturous. The children entered into the ritual space of the song. It wasn't about nationalism. The children inserted their own need for courage and camaraderie into its familiar, anthemic, majestic sounding structure. The face of the girl who had, moments before, appeared to be terror-stricken, was now beaming with confidence and joy. The group was introduced, we went out to play, and the rest is happy history.

As I have stressed, music therapy as performance is not showbiz. It wasn't the success of the show that was important. It was the power that the children discovered in themselves; their courage in seeing it through to the end. Discounting the (loving and well-meaning, it is true, but nevertheless) naysayers, they confronted *life*, with all its pitfalls and uncertainties. That is what inspired everyone present. As famously proclaimed by Pierre de Coubertin, founder of modern Olympic Games:

The important thing...is not winning but taking part, just as in life, what counts is not the victory but the struggle.

*- Pierre de Coubertin,
(founder of modern Olympic Games)*

Music Contains Magic

In that one desperate moment backstage, the parents' and children's worst fears could have been realized. They couldn't do it. Instead, it was a triumph. But for a few infinite seconds as we approached that treacherous crossroads, it could have gone either way. What happened? Lucky break? The great music therapy pioneer, Carolyn Kenny (1982) wrote: "Some of the processes inherent in music which can be used for healing have been ignored entirely because of a strictly clinical orientation." One of these that Dr. Kenny is not afraid to identify is this - 'Music is Magic.' Something happened that defied clinical or objective understanding. A leading authority on ritual, Bronisław Malinowski (Homans, 1941) argued that ritual was a non-technical means of addressing anxiety about activities where dangerous elements were beyond technical control. Anxiety stems from an inability to act. It is not the same as fear. Through ritual, we might still be afraid, but we can move forward; do what we know we must. According to Kenny (1982), "Rituals of initiation, transformation, creation, the hero myths, all relate to death/rebirth. Each re-enacted situation implies going through some difficult experience, dying to part of the self or letting go of something or someone and being transformed, reborn, or greatly changed in some way" (p. 44).

Certainly, those definitions relate to the children. What they did was dangerous and they were afraid. But they went through it and they were transformed. For the children in our story,

the momentousness of the event, the rising above massive forces of anxiety, somehow 'magically' caused a ritual to arise spontaneously.

Clinical Paradigm Shift

"Every choice you make establishes your own identity as you will see it and believe it is," it says in *A Course in Miracles* (p. 621). The children in our story intuitively called on the power of ritual to make the choice to expand their identity in the direction of growth, inspiring everyone as the truth was revealed. They awakened what Clive Robbins (2004) called "the health and healing latent in the livingness of creative musicing" (p. 12). There are forces in music which can only be considered human in the largest sense of the word. "I must despise the world which does not know that music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy," Beethoven wrote (Hicks, S., 2014).

The main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neurosis, but rather with the approach to the numinous. The fact is that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy, and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology. - Carl Jung (Ulanov, 2005, p.165)

The numinous refers to a dynamic agency or effect independent of the conscious will. It can be called God or the Divine if you wish, or not, but it is some essence that is there whether or not it is apparent: our true identity. To expand their identity, to live with greater possibility, clients need to live something new. As we consider the children involved in the preceding example, each had a long-standing identity that was deeply enmeshed with their disability - what they could or could not do; how their parents, teachers, and family treated them, underestimated them, protected them, compensated for them. By achieving something more than was thought possible, a new identity formation dynamic is placed into action: a new paradigm. Paradigm relates to expectation. When phenomena appear that are beyond expectation they might be described as miraculous. Therefore, to "expect a miracle," as they say in Alcoholics Anonymous (1978), is to place into action the higher power as called upon through ritual. It was the power of music as ritual that raised the children up high enough to cross over the forbidden zone between what was and what could be, leading to a:

Clinical Paradigm Shift

An expansion of the client's personal identity, as well as the way the client is perceived and treated in his/her social network.