


Facing the Dread and Desolation of Cancer Through Music Therapy: A Client's Perspective

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Abstract

When I was diagnosed with stage 4 non-Hodgkin lymphoma, it plunged me into a crisis. Unexpectedly, I found myself with a desire to sing, not knowing why. I started by searching for a singing teacher but wound up in music therapy, a journey unlike anything I had experienced. Improvising in music therapy made it possible for me to face the desolation and dread of cancer and to express my deepest lament. I found new wellsprings of life in myself, while my cancer went into temporary, spontaneous remission.

Keywords

cancer, client's experience, Nordoff-Robbins, improvisation, lymphoma

When I was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, I felt nothing; foreboding and paralysis took over. It was the fall of 1994, and my job was going well; I was the general manager of my company's state-of-the-art learning center. I had been a key player in the design and construction of this 168,000 square foot facility only 2 years earlier. Then one day, I noticed a lump in my neck and weeks later was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

I began to research doctors. I feared them almost as much as I feared treatment. I had already watched my father and 2 dear friends go through the horrors of chemotherapy and radiation only to deteriorate and, in the end, face miserable and agonizing deaths. I was angry that I might have to submit to treatments prescribed by doctors.

I went to 6 oncologists hoping to find one who would tell me it was not cancer, but the fact was that I had stage 4 lymphoma. The diagnosis shook me so deeply that my usual way of thinking was turned upside down. I prayed, and the idea that I should sing came to me. It seemed ridiculous, and yet I followed up on it. I asked around for the names of singing teachers. I had no idea what I was doing, just put one foot in front of the other and moved. I went to see several teachers but did not return to any of them for a second lesson. What was I looking for? Through a circuitous route, involving my dentist and a music therapist in Brooklyn, I wound up with an appointment to see Dr T, a music therapist. I did not know what a music therapist was, but I decided to see him when I learned that his office was located within walking distance of my home. This was very important as I anticipated the fatigue and exhaustion that would accompany chemotherapy.

Dr T greeted me at the door. The instruments in the middle of the room caught my eye: an upright piano, hand drums, bongos, maracas, bells, shakers, tambourine, and more. Dr T suggested I try the instruments. "Feel free to make any sounds at all," he said.

I picked up a drum, then some bells, and started to fool around. He played the piano. In a few minutes, the room was full of sound. I was laughing and giggling. I had not laughed once in the two and a half months since the diagnosis. An article I had read about a man who had recovered from cancer by laughing flashed through my mind. I felt comfortable with Dr T; he was sensitive and attentive as I told him my story. I decided to come back. He told me to feel free to make any sounds I wanted. This time, I did not laugh; I made retching and spitting sounds; I groaned. Dr T kept playing the piano no matter what sounds came out of me. Then came another voice, the one that told me that I must go for treatment. It was the voice of all the doctors and of my own logical/thinking side. The logical me started to yell at the frightened me—intense, ugly, scary sounds. I felt threatened. Paradoxically, the experience of singing felt soothing and gave me a place to stand.

They tell me I'm sick (3x)
I move ahead, I make appointments
I take notes, I analyze everything
They tell me I'm sick (3x)
And I have to learn to believe it
They tell me I'm sick¹

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When I would speak to my friends about my illness and concerns, I was logical and organized. Even if upset, I had a plan. But when I sang, I felt my fear and anguish. The words in my mouth surprised me. I had not expressed this level of feeling to anyone. Although I could not explain it, I knew that I felt a certain freedom when I sang, and it was a real antidote to the loss of autonomy that accompanied my cancer diagnosis. At the start of our work together, Dr T suggested I bring a tape, and we recorded our sessions. Later, I found the courage to share some of these tapes. One friend flew into a rage, telling me to go to chemotherapy and “stop this stuff,” while my sister and another friend listened and wept.

Despite my desperate attempts to find an opinion to the contrary, all the doctors agreed I had to start chemotherapy. I had, however, used up so much time going for additional opinions that the initial computed tomography (CT) scan was no longer valid and needed to be repeated. I bowed my head in defeat and went for a second CT scan.

The next day was raw, cold, and rainy. I left work around 6:30 PM for an appointment with Dr T. I was tired, beaten, and scared. On the way, I walked into a deli and bought 3 Hershey bars—milk chocolate with almonds. I started eating one while I was in line to pay for them. I crossed the street, stopped in the drug store, got 2 more chocolate bars, and walked to my session with Dr T. These are the first words that I sang that night.

Chocolate was the anesthetic of choice
It's all about a cover up, chocolate
Do I really want to be alive?
Maybe that's the important question
Do I really want to get through this or not?
Maybe I would rather not make it
Every now and then I think I'd like to make it²

A week later, I saw the oncologist for the results of the second CT scan. The lymph nodes had shrunk somewhat, Dr P noted: “The fact that your lymph nodes are smaller at this point is insignificant; lymph nodes wax and wane. You have a stage 4 mantle cell lymphoma with bone marrow involvement. It's dangerous. You should have started treatment already. Don't you understand?”

“I'm worried about what the chemo will do to my immune system,” I said. She said, “What do you think the cancer is doing to your immune system? There is no free lunch. You've already compromised your immune system by waiting so long.” By now, she was quite irritated.

I was frightened but did not follow Dr P's advice; instead, I made an appointment to see one of the other 6 oncologists. Dr R studied the results of the second CT scan and told me that Dr P's opinion was valid; that is, I could start treatment right away. However, since the lymph nodes had shrunk somewhat, he felt we could wait a month. He emphasized that lymphoma is not curable and predicted that we would most likely start treatment after my visit the following month. It felt like a stay of execution.

Each day was a gift; yet I was not afraid of dying. It was my anticipation of the cancer treatments that struck terror into my being. I was seeing Dr T once a week. I kept singing and weeping and singing. Dr T could hear my deep cry of sadness. He played music that did not just respond to my words but pushed my emotional awareness and recognition into unexplored areas. Feelings of despair, silliness, fun, and fear spewed out of me. Sometimes, he answered me with big dissonant clusters, and at others, he tuned in to my tears and sighing with lilting melodies. He played fabulous jazzy blues as I belted out words, and there were times when we entered into an eerie world with a whole tone or atonal music. I discovered as I improvised with Dr T that “I have no voice.” I would not have used that expression before, but it came out of the music. Somehow, I was able to give it sound and to express my feelings in a way that I had never done in my life. Images of silence, oppression, and darkness abounded in the improvisations. I was often overwhelmed and full of tears. Yet, as I was singing that I had “no voice,” I was finding my voice and finding my strength.

I went back to Dr R two months later and was told to return in another two months. After a few visits, he described my condition as “spontaneous, partial, temporary remission.” The 2-month follow-ups continued. During this time, I met Ms J, a vocal coach, teacher, and music director. She listened to some of the sessions with Dr T and was deeply touched by the music. She said there were “songs” in the improvisations and that she would help me learn them. She further insisted that I organize a gathering of my friends and perform the songs. At first, I felt incredulous; then, panic set in, and I remembered my last visit to the oncologist. Perhaps my days were numbered; perhaps I would like to try this crazy idea; perhaps I would learn something, and maybe, just maybe, it would be okay. She instigated, and I finally went along with her idea. I described the impact on me in an earlier publication: “Singing the songs was the happiest day of my life . . . when I look at the photos, I see myself smiling in joyous exuberance. I was celebrating a year without chemotherapy. I was flying.”³

After the initial performance, she pushed me to perform again and again in more public venues. It was this intervention along with the music therapy sessions that completely transformed my life.

I sang about my fears and my wanting to hide. One night, Dr T and I sat at the piano together and played. Dr T said, “That was beautiful.” I replied, “It's only beautiful because of what you're doing.”

He noticed that I could not take in the compliment and reflected that back to me. How could I have created something beautiful? It spun down into a far deeper issue, my deep discomfort with my being, with my worth, with my contribution.

No, I can't take in what I just did
I just want to hide, I just want to hide . . . yeeaaow . . . yeee . . .
It's nothing, it's nothing, I didn't do anything
Please don't notice
Please don't notice what I do, oh please
Oh please don't notice what I do

I am nobody
I would rather lie and tell you everything's all right
Let the broken pieces lie on the floor⁴

I was singing about the broken pieces of my life, and yet, I was functioning very well. But the deeper aspects of my self-image were now coming to light. I continuously wanted to hide and never show my face to the world. Simultaneously, the music was bolstering me, giving me permission to voice both my rational and irrational thoughts, releasing me from my dark cellar. It was good to feel so alive and creative even while expressing my turmoil. Exploring my pain through music was helping me feel more whole.

And then, there were the music therapy sessions where I laughed a lot. I imagined myself smiling and tipping my hat when I came to the doctor's office and then leaving. Oh, it filled me with delight to sing this!

Are we having fun?
It's good to laugh once a day, it's good to laugh once a day
Good to laugh, keeps the doctor away
Let's you say, "hi doctor, how are you doing, have a good day"
Let's you walk away, let's you walk away
Keeps the doctor at bay, laughing once a day
Keep the doctor away, laugh every day . . . ha . . . ha⁵

I was just getting used to the fact that my cancer was in "partial spontaneous remission." Yes, I knew that the oncologist believed it would become active at some point, but he could not predict when. Through music therapy, my sense of myself was changing. I was seeing new opportunities that I had never imagined. I created several theater pieces using the songs we improvised in music therapy. A sense of renewal and newness pervaded my life.

We've come to a new place,
There's room for something new
We've sung about the past, we've swept our room clean
And now there's room for something new
I can open my arms, let in the sun
Open my arms, let in the sun
Because I know there's room for something new
I know there's room for something new in my life, in my life
I know there's room for something new⁶

As I gained strength in discovering new parts of myself, I was able to grapple with other lifelong issues, like compulsive over-eating. I was always eating more than my body could handle, and when I did, I felt isolated from people and from love. Even though I knew the feeling of isolation intimately, I was shocked when I heard these lyrics come out of my mouth. Was it true that I could never be satisfied? My isolation in the midst of social gatherings was clearly expressed in the following excerpt.

Never satisfied, I live with never satisfied
Always never satisfied
Never satisfied prowls around

Never satisfied refuses to talk to people
Never satisfied prowls around and settles for whatever food there is
Never satisfied, no Voracious
More, more, more
Never satisfied, ahh . . . ahh⁷

Even as I was creating music with lyrics that depicted my struggles, I also felt strengthened by the fact that I was making music. The music therapy was triggering my creativity, a creativity I never knew I possessed. I also found that I enjoyed being playful and funny. I was able to laugh at myself. Maybe that is what it would take to lighten up on the intense criticisms I subjected myself to daily.

You are voracious; you want to eat
We're going to give you something better than food
Don't worry about going hungry
We're going to give you something better than food
Oh Voracious don't you worry
We are going to listen to you deeply
So you won't have to go out prowling looking for food
Guess what else we've got for you Voracious?
We got Shakespeare
Don't you worry no more⁸

Although I did not set out to create a product in music therapy, beautiful songs have come out of the process. I have used the songs to enter the world of professional musicians and theater people, constructing a supportive network of artists for myself. The many songs that arose as we improvised in music therapy have fueled a series of public performances, presentations at professional conferences, recordings, and the creation of theater pieces.

My first piece, *Singing My Way Through It*, was developed in 2001 with encouragement from the Creative Center, an organization for cancer survivors that supports the notion that artistic, creative activities promote healing. The response from the audience was overwhelming. At the urging of many people, I produced *Singing My Way* the following year at the Blue Heron Arts Center with 4 musicians and shimmering videos supporting my singing. In 2003, my theater piece *And You Gave Me Music* was performed at the New York International Fringe Festival. Along with a Greek chorus and 4 musicians, I spoke the text and sang original music. In 2008, I produced *Love, Longing and Separation: Songs and Stories*, and in 2009, *The Lemon Tree*,⁹ a play with music focusing on my Greek roots. I also recorded a CD in 2002, *Do I Dare Imagine*.¹⁰ This has caused my image of myself to expand. I now see myself as a performance artist, singer, writer, and producer. How amazing! And I put my corporate skills to good use in managing these artistic projects. I continue to seek opportunities to present my story and music; performing is a healing experience for me.

I see the oncologist regularly; he evaluates the lymph nodes and my blood work; the lymphoma continues to be in "partial remission." This is called a "watch and wait" period. Statistics show that lymphomas can go into an "indolent" phase, as mine

has, but in most cases, the cancer eventually becomes active again and requires treatment. The oncologist cannot predict when that might be in my case. As of this writing in 2010, I have been in remission for 15 years. In 2008, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and went for surgery. Unanticipated complications during surgery traumatized the nerves and tissue surrounding the vocal chords. My speaking voice had a harsh rasping quality, and singing was impossible. It took many, many months and much patience before I was able to sing again. I now go for follow-up visits with an endocrinologist every 6 months.

As I look back now, I know that the experience forced me to decide whether or not I was going to fight for my life. This crisis triggered a shift in the way I define myself to myself and to the world. I went beyond my cancer to confront my lifelong depression and its cruel effects on my self-esteem. The conflicts are less debilitating, and the pain in my life is less intense. I have more resources to handle whatever comes my way. Dr L, my best friend in college, reflecting on my experience in music therapy, summarized it as follows: Expression/Awareness/Action. And so it is. Through music therapy, I was able to express my feelings, to become aware of the source of my pain, and to take action to make a new life for myself. One of my songs, *Magnolia Tree*, expresses the profound change I have experienced. I become the magnolia tree in bloom.

You're lovelier this year than you were last year
You're happier this year than you were these last few years

My spirits soar, and I am filled with gratitude for the change,
for my new life.

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Bio

Maria Logis, MA, has written and produced several theater pieces. *The Lemon Tree*, her most recent work, was performed in November 2009. *And You Gave Me Music* was shown at the NY Fringe Festival in 2003. She is a management consultant with expertise in training, leadership development and succession planning. In 1994, Ms. Logis, a successful corporate executive with Con Edison, was diagnosed with stage four, non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Something unusual happened—she started to sing her way through her illness in collaboration with a music therapist and discovered her voice as an artist. This discovery went well beyond her cancer and transformed her life—from illness to wellness, from the life of a corporate executive to that of a performance artist, writer and singer. She has presented her music at many conferences including the World Congress of Music Therapy in Washington DC, the Training Institute for Mental Health, the New School, Beth Israel Hospital, and New York University and on NPR and Cosmos FM radio.