

Songs of loss and living

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Humankind has always written songs. There surely cannot be a significant event in our history that hasn't been represented, one way or another, by a song that both tells the story and expresses our feelings around it. All cultures have used song to preserve their truth, traditions and history. A world without song is unimaginable. Try it, it just doesn't work.

But songs also have work to do. They will help us to lull our babies to sleep, they'll unite us in achieving common goals, they will mark every major transition in our lives, and at the end they will help those we leave behind to grieve, to heal and to remember.

I grew up in a large, musical family and by the time I was a teenager I was not only writing songs but

also performing them with my brothers and sisters, standing on the kitchen table with broomsticks for microphones and tennis racquets for guitars. As I got older it became more serious and songs became my way of dealing with the angst and anger, the highs and lows, the loves and losses of life.

It was therefore no great surprise that, when I started to work as a hospice music therapist in my 40s, songs and songwriting would become an important part of my clinical repertoire. I was based in two different hospices, and so was soon meeting people who were grieving and searching for a way to make some sense out of their loss.

I first met Jane at one of our regular bereavement tea parties, which are an opportunity for those who have recently lost someone to meet and share with others. Jane had lost Sharon, her only daughter, at the age of 34. We chatted briefly and I mentioned music therapy and gave her my number. The sense of Jane's loss was almost overwhelming and I wasn't sure if she would follow it up.

Several months passed before Jane finally made her way to the music therapy room, via our Bereavement Support Service. I showed her a few instruments and invited her to play on the metallophone while I accompanied her on piano and guitar. The music we played was incredibly sad. My notes from our first session contain descriptions of feelings such as helplessness and hopelessness, of a bleak landscape where everything good was gone forever and ever. Through her tears Jane repeatedly played a mournful descending phrase, which resolved in one single low note being played slowly over and over again like the tolling of a bell. I asked her if this could be her lament for Sharon and she nodded. I wondered if she had any words to accompany the melody, to which she replied: 'There are no words today.'



Bob Heath – 'Songs have work to do'

We met again a couple of weeks later and Jane told me that she'd been out walking when she'd remembered her mournful melody and started to write down some words to go with it. She had taken her inspiration from King Lear: 'She'll come no more, Never, never, never, never.'

Jane describes her first song experience:

'I went to Bob and I could hardly wait to tell him that I had made up a song. I found the starting phrase on the metallophone and started to sing. Bob listened while I sang the song all the way through. Then he started to make up the chords to go with it. Then I sang while he played. It felt like some kind of validation. It was a real song! My song. A song for Sharon.'

Jane called this First Song-Lament. In its simple mournful progression, it captures the devastation of her loss:

To say I miss her says nothing at all
To say I miss her says nothing at all
An empty space
An empty space
Where all your love should be.'

By the end of this session Jane had written and recorded her first song and we had been able to sit together and begin to reflect on some of the feelings that the song expressed.

Over the following months we met regularly and Jane began to develop into a prolific songwriter. At first the songs were all about losing Sharon and the darkness that had settled on her: songs like *Sitting Beside You*, in which Jane recalls their last moments together, the unbearable goodbye, her rage at the cruelty of the illness; others like *When You Were Alive* and *Happy Birthday*, which mark anniversaries and in very plain language express the devastation she feels.

I confess that at times I struggled with the work. I could feel myself being drawn into Jane's world through the songs and wasn't sure how helpful I was being. I sought out the help and experience of others who had experienced therapeutic relationships in this

creative and collaborative form. Psychoanalyst Michael Balint (1966) has described these relationships as a harmonious, interpenetrating mix-up, with no sharp boundaries, where a fusion occurs between therapist and client and should indeed be allowed to reoccur. Music therapist Nigel Hartley (2001) describes reaching points in his work where the very craft of music therapy becomes suspended and both the client and the therapist give way to the experience:

'Somehow, knowing deeply that this giving way is healthy, safe and without complication, we abandon ourselves to it.'

I suspect that many bereavement counsellors and support workers will recognise not only this suspension of boundaries between themselves and their clients, but also the anxiety that this can sometimes provoke. While I recognised my own need to separate myself from Jane's experience, I was also aware that I needed to spend some time inside her world if I was to fully support her.

Changes

The first time I began to notice changes in Jane's approach to her songwriting was when she began to work on a song called *North Wind*. Up to this moment Jane's lyrics had been written primarily in the first person, using straightforward and often very tough language to describe her experiences and feelings. This first, subtle shift occurred when she began to use metaphor and to represent her feelings in a broader and more global way. The result in this case was a beautiful and reflective song about loss without any apparent reference to death or bereavement.

The song opens with the plea: 'Oh North Wind, don't blow down my road,' as Jane seems to look back and reflect on her recent experiences, noting how small things have begun to change: 'Icy fingers crept inside/And froze the tears I might have cried.' At the end of the song there is the slightest hint at optimism: 'Wish the spring would come again, bringing sunshine, bringing rain.'

Jane plays with the words, creating beautiful poetry

to accompany the simple and gentle melody. She had discovered a lyricism that up until then had not been present in her work. Both she and I came to see North Wind as the pivotal song in her journey, a healing marker and a signpost to better days.

We recorded the song and began to add some production values to it, such as percussion, a string section and classical guitar. What eventually emerged was a song that represented loss in a much broader form; it could, in fact, be a love song and, on reflection, we decided that was exactly what it was. Jane was

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immensely proud of this song and was able to play the CD to her friends and family. She noticed that they were much more able to listen to this song and share a little more in the experience.

The next phase of Jane's creativity included songs such as Memory Box, Don't Forget to Remember, Missing You and a truly remarkable song called Sometimes I Cry, which reflects the distance that Jane had travelled since beginning music therapy and is, in my opinion one of the most beautiful love songs I've ever heard.

Throughout this process we continued to reflect on the nature and content of the songs, and in many ways they became the barometer of Jane's progress.

It was around this time that Jane decided to write about her songwriting experiences and began work on what has become *Songs for Sharon* (Coutanche, 2007), a book to accompany the recordings of some of her songs. She has also become a colleague, sharing her experiences with therapists attending my songwriting workshops in a slot that I call 'Meet the Patient', much to Jane's disapproval.

Her songs have been used to help train music therapists, student doctors, bereavement support workers and a whole range of other professionals involved in palliative and bereavement care. They give

us valuable insights into human processes, they shock us with their honesty, and they inspire us with their beauty.

At a recent concert I played North Wind. Jane describes the experience in her book:

'The band played the opening chords. Everyone was listening. It was North Wind. I couldn't believe it; they were playing one of my songs to a room full of people. It had been validated by Bob listening to it and playing it. But this was an even greater validation. It was a real song that other people could listen to. A song for Sharon. A song for others too.'

Despite the machinations of the modern music industry and the growing international prevalence of celebrity before content, songwriting, even in its simplest form, offers us a unique opportunity to express powerful emotions and to share them with those we love. Jane's songs are wonderful and inspiring examples of how we can engage with an ancient and often misunderstood healing tradition and put it to work. In one of her later songs she describes her own relationship with songwriting:

'I need the music, I need a song
So I can tell it to everyone
So I can let it out of my broken heart
Into the world'

Jane is now teaching again and is also working as a bereavement support volunteer. She continues to write songs. ■

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Balint M (1966). *The basic fault: therapeutic aspects of regression*. London: Tavistock.

Coutanche J (2007). *Songs for Sharon*. Unpublished book. Available from the author at jc@zetnet.co.uk

Hartley N (2001). On a personal note: a music therapist's reflections on working with those who are living with a terminal illness. *Journal of Palliative Care* 17(3) 135–141.