

Portrait of a Music Therapy Session

Thoms' Story

by Nicola Oddy MA MTA CCC

Parkinsons patient, Thom is a person who surprises me every time I meet him. Thom is one of those whose response to music, defines the term 'Music Therapy'.

Music is therapy to this man.

Every time I go to see him, he appears differently. On one occasion he will be in bed, fitfully sleeping, on another he is sitting up uncomfortably wrapped in his clothes that he has half pulled off of himself, on another it is a 'bad ' day and he is shaking uncontrollably from his disease and drooling because of lost control of his facial muscles. (His speech is slurred for the same reason and it is usually difficult to make out what he is trying to say.)

On another day, he is leaning over seemingly asleep and with no sense of the world around him - seemingly incognizant.

Music Therapy is very uncomplex for someone like Thom ... we sing together. This may not seem very clinical and it may seem rather like a passing of time to an onlooker, but the depth of relationship and experience that is taking place is far reaching and wonderful.

As soon as I enter the room, greet him and begin with a song that I have learned he loves, he is with me. He is awakened, he is alerted, he is in the here and now, he has memories, he is gentle, he is verbal.

He begins to sing immediately - with a full rich voice - one that he has enjoyed throughout his life and one that doesn't let him down now. The difficulty that he has with speech vanishes in the singing - the words are clear, and ordered. He sits straight, makes eye contact, corrects me when I am mistaken about the

words, speeds me up when I am too slow, or fixes the pitch if I am in an incompatible key for him. He also harmonizes with me. 'We make a good team' - he tells me.

Thom has a sense of being in control - something that his life seldom offers these days.

This is a man for whom no family is nearby. He has children who live far away and cannot easily be with him. He has some friends who visit from time to time. To the nursing staff, he is fairly agitated, unruly and often rude.

I say these things to put in context, the man who emerges in the music - a man who smiles and jokes, and remembers all of the words, and remembers his singing experiences in life - a man who expresses joy.

Today he surprised me once again.

I brought a harmonica to our session to see if it might help to extend his breath. He picked it up and immediately began to play. 'Mockingbird Hill', and then 'There's no place like home' and then 'Way down upon the Swanee River'.

Usually, because of his delayed cognizance, it is difficult for him to think of songs. His slurred speech makes it difficult for him to communicate his idea even if he does come up with one. As a result, our routine has been that I make suggestions of songs, and he chooses from those suggestions.

Now when the harmonica is in his hand, these are not songs that I have suggested. They are songs that he has spontaneously picked and that are alive in there waiting to be reawakened by an opportunity. He is able to choose once again, by the act of just playing the music.

His face lights up, he sits up straight, he stops drooling, he plays beautifully and knows where the treble and bass are on this little instrument.

When else in his life these days, is he the knowledgeable one?
When else can he interact directly on par with someone?

Music sets things straight. It orders the brain. The rhythms, the melodies, the harmonies, the warm feeling that most people associate with making music, make it possible for Thom to experience a moment in his week, of purpose - of richness.

The shaking stops, the head is upright, his mood is calm and gentle. Now the Personal Support Worker will give him a little sprucing up, and he can join the music group down the hall. He is thrilled to be a part of the group - and sings with his big voice and plays his harmonica. No one would have dreamed to look at him 1/2 hour before, that he could be presentable, or alert enough to join a group and participate so beautifully.

His mood stays with him and later on I see him, still calm, relaxed and holding his harmonica. I am pleased to see that the feeling has stayed with him.

Next week there will be another little hiatus for him.