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[Current Issue](#)

[Back Issues](#)

[Guidelines](#)

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## Song and Self-Discovery: Touching the Pattern that Connects

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### Abstract

This essay is a personal account of the power of song in health recovery and self-discovery. It follows the author's process of grappling with questions of where beauty lies and how to access it, and of the interplay and co-creation between artist, art, and perceiver. The author highlights music's "resolving" qualities: helping one to resolve past issues and hurt, and to strengthen one's resolve to heal. Told in an appreciative tone, this is a story of synergy and healing. Together, we sing our world into being.

Keywords: song, aesthetic experience, beauty, healing, identity, transformation, folk music, music therapy.

### Introduction

The encounter with beauty, the aesthetic experience of both perceiver and creator, is an affirmation of meaning, a whisper or proclamation that, yes, there is a point to all this, there is an order, and we have a place in it (Salas, 1990, p. 14).

In his article, "Music Therapy: The Use of Music for Healing," André Brandalise (2004) suggests the possibility of a "transformational creative experience in music." This concept might seem rather "lofty" to the uninitiated, but as one who has recently utilized music in my own health recovery, and am now feeling quite transformed and overflowing with irrepressible creative expression, which takes form in writing and music and art, I cannot argue with Brandalise.

I am a former academic (having worked in religious studies and higher education policy and administration), and I know my colleagues would be chagrined at my lack of skepticism, were it not for the fact that I have studiously delved into the literature of music therapy for further understanding. I am mindful of and grateful for the power of music as a catalyst in my healing. I offer this glimpse into my experience, as it may offer insight and affirmation, or raise questions, for music therapists.

While I was not interacting with a music *therapist* during my health recovery, I was drawn instinctively to the music that was most therapeutic for me. I readily integrated music into my health-promoting regimen and discussed that practice with my occupational therapist.

In some instances, music therapists view music itself as the primary agent for change, and view the therapist as more of a facilitator or intermediary. (See Bruscia, 1998, p. 129, "music as therapy;" Brandalise, 2004, "music-centered therapy;" and Suvama Nalapat, quoted in Bergstrøm-Nielsen, 2006). In my case, I served as my own facilitator in regards to music, with my occupational therapist supplying emotional support and encouragement, in addition to her

assistance and guidance with my recovery of physical abilities, including those needed to play the piano and sing.

## The Music

During my health recovery from chronic health issues (thoracic outlet syndrome, chronic fatigue, myofascial pain syndrome), which evolved over a period of years, I was intrigued by the intense draw I felt, beginning at about the fourth year of my illness, to the music of a particular artist – singer/songwriter David Roth. His songs offered me hope when my own resources thereof were waning; they offered beauty, harmony, and comfort when I was experiencing considerable distress, disorder, and overwhelm.

But all the while, I pondered my attraction to Roth's songs. They seemed to present an integrity and a beauty that made other songs pale in comparison. I felt a special sort of congruence with his music that I had not felt before, even though I had been a part-time musician most of my life, and appreciated a wide variety of types of music. What's more, I had had several of Roth's recordings on hand for years, and had previously listened to them and shared them with others. While I had always appreciated Roth's songs and admired his songwriting, now they seemed to offer something more. I began to listen to his recordings daily. What was it about these songs that was so life-enhancing... so healing? At times, I wondered (half-seriously) whether I was suddenly becoming a "groupie" at midlife.

As my health gradually improved, I began to research Roth's work, and I found that I am not alone in my evaluation of Roth's songs as inspiring, uplifting, and poignant. Roth's songwriting is lauded by folk music legends Peter, Paul, and Mary; fellow songwriters; music reviewers; and fans alike. One person describes Roth's songs this way: "Some music is to listen to, but these songs are to live by" (Jackson, 2000). Another reviewer writes: "Every song has a message with positive reinforcement...love, thankfulness, forgiving" (Anon., 1999). Yet another opines: "Rarely have I heard an artist who can move his listeners from irreverent laughter to earnest tears in a single set. David is a gifted lyricist" (Coffey, 2000).

Conference organizers who have hosted Roth as a presenter at their events speak of a transformation that occurs among participants and of Roth's ability to unify attendees by engaging them in a No Wrong Notes Choir. A teaching artist, as well as a performer, Roth is acclaimed for his incisive wit, delightful humor, and his own disarming presence, all of which serve to nudge the listener to drop one's own defenses and engage more fully as a participant in music making. An advocate of "singing for everybody," Roth recommends that "music should not be left in the hands of professionals" (Roth, 2005).

As I have now delved into the literature of music therapy, I find that the descriptors applied to Roth's music are the same as those used to describe the attributes of music as it is used in therapeutic settings: inspirational (Bailey, 1997, pp. 243-244); uplifting (Bergstrøm-Nielsen, 2006; Aldridge, 1995, p. 106); transformational (Aldridge, 1995, pp. 103-104, 107-108; Zuckerkandl, 1973, p. 23); regenerating hope and joy (Aldridge, 1995, pp. 104-107; Bailey, p. 245); reflecting the beauty, elegance, and grace of existence (Gaston, 1968, pp. 21-22; Salas, 1990); providing a structured reality (Gaston, pp. 14-19, 24; Bruscia, 1998, pp. 104-105; 128; Salas, p. 4, 13-14); and promoting empathy by uniting participants in an intimate way (Bruscia, 1998, pp. 60-61).

That Roth has substantial skill and talent in these areas is undeniable. But I still was curious about my own response to his songs. I wanted to understand more about the interaction between listener and performer, and between performer and composer. In the writings of music educator Christopher Small, and music therapists David Aldridge and Jo Salas, I found ample ideas to ponder, some that mirrored my experience precisely, and others that were a springboard for further contemplation.

## Musicking and Identity

Christopher Small (1998, p. 9) uses the term "musicking" to mean "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing." Small views musicking as a communal exploration and celebration of our interrelatedness, where our complexities are articulated, our contradictions reconciled, and our integrity affirmed.

In his book, *Musicking*, Small provides a possible explanation as to why we are drawn to particular music. He states that a piece of music conveys a set of values, and that it articulates patterns of relationships (the relationship one has with oneself, relationships among

participants, between individuals and society, between humanity and the natural world, and perhaps even between humanity and the supernatural world). When we resonate with a particular musical performance, it is because the relationships conveyed through the performance are congruent in some way with our ideal of what relationships should be. Musicking puts us in touch with the pattern that connects us, and, while the music lasts "we are allowed to live for while in the world as it ought to be, in the world of right relationships" (p. 142). Through music, we affirm how the world is, and that we have a place in it. Small succinctly states: "How we like to music is who we are" (p. 220).

As I reflect on David Roth's songs, it is easy for me to identify values embodied within them that I (and others) share, such as: respect and honoring of self and others; compassion; forgiveness; social responsibility; peace. I had noted these shared values from the time I first heard Roth's music, some sixteen years earlier. But Small's insights helped me to better understand my heightened affinity with Roth's music at this particular time in my life course.

At the time I began to listen to Roth's music in an intentional, consistent way, I was at a point when little seemed "right" in my life. I struggled daily (as I had for nearly four years) with overwhelming fatigue and pain that could easily spike "off the charts." A few years earlier, I had had to leave my work, knowing that it was doubtful that I would return. Activities that gave my life meaning and purpose had been abandoned because they inflamed nerves and triggered muscle spasms and pain. Things that I loved -- dancing, gardening, singing, playing musical instruments, writing, and entertaining guests in my home -- were now memories. I suffered not only from social isolation and disconnection, but also from a loss of identity. Who was I, I asked myself, if I was not a university instructor, a researcher in higher education, a writer, a musician, a dancer, a gardener, a welcoming hostess to guests?

In light of my health condition, it made perfect sense that when I found something (Roth's music) that helped me to reestablish a sense of "right relationship" in my world, and, moreover, that supported me as I redefined *who I am*, that I would hold fast to it, and revisit the experience of feeling meaningfully connected, again and again. Roth has a plethora of songs that describe relationships of all sorts, and portray individuals with the capacity for compassion, courage, inner strength, caring, and forgiveness. What the songs reminded me was that, even with my limited capacities, I had reason to *be*, and reason to hope.

### **Singing Myself into Being**

Small (1998) suggests that the ideal relationships expressed in a musical performance are not necessarily those that actually exist, so much as they are the relationships that those taking part would like to exist (p. 134). However, this does not mean that my sessions of musicking were escapes into fantasy. Rather, they were the practice of touching my deepest yearnings and tapping into my creative resources. I was engaged in an intentional endeavor, similar to the practice in some indigenous cultures whereby people gather in ceremony to "sing the world into being."

David Aldridge expresses similar ideas when discussing the transformational potential that exists when one struggles with illness. He views illness as a time of creative possibility. He states, "We are improvised as a fresh identity according to every one of life's contingencies. Our very identities are created anew although the theme may be repeated...we are each a song that is continually being sung." Aldridge goes on to explain that through musical expression, "we sing and play what we are" (1995, p. 104).

I had known from the time I became ill that I was in the throws of redefining my identity. If this was a process of "rebirth," I had had nearly four years of gestation and painful labor. Now it was time to *push*.

### **The Healing Potential in Beauty**

Jo Salas also offers insight into the relationship between performer and listener in her discussion of the aesthetic experience in music therapy. She speaks of an interplay, or co-creation, that occurs between art and the perceiver. "Beauty is perceived," she says, "when the conviction of the creator meets the conviction of the perceiver" (1990, p. 7). By "conviction" Salas is referring to an openness or commitment to the expression of inner personal experience and perception.

Roth's conviction was clear – I called it "guts." I thought to myself, "Boy, this guy's got a lot of guts to share all these stories about his life, his family, and his relationships." Roth describes relationships with an admirable honesty and forthrightness, without resorting to heavy-handed

exposé. Rather, he is a master of nuance, providing just enough information, through careful blending of lyrics, melody, vocal harmonies, and instrumental accompaniment and embellishment, so that his meaning is clear. (Less is more). He honors the complexities of relationships: the struggles, the tenderness, the strains, the lightheartedness, the forgiveness and understanding.

As I took stock of my own convictions, I realized that I was timid, perhaps even "closed," when it came to sharing my inner experience. I was a trained academic, after all, with my last position having been at a research university. When writing, I followed the conventions of my discipline. We didn't share about ourselves; we wrote about our research. Anecdotal information was questionable, unreliable. I couldn't even remember the last time I had written anything in the first person.

But here was Roth, crooning about heartache and triumph; about holding on to love and letting go of anger; about knitting our fractured selves back together and bridging the great divides that separate us, one from another. I admired his sincerity and candor, even if, on occasion, I felt a tad uncomfortable with the depth and breadth of his openness. If I hoped to express my inner experience as freely as Roth did, I would have remedial work to do.

Then, one day, I simply decided: "I've got a lot of guts, too." I laughed out loud at my bold internal announcement, realizing that I had nothing to lose by being "gutsy." At that point in my life, most things were already "lost" (health, professional life, social life). I had the perfect opportunity for risk-taking.

Given an opening, my inner voice began to nudge and nuzzle at me, demanding to be heard. My own stories began to form and tumble out in manageable "chunks"...stories about my relationships with my mother and my grandmother...stories about the prairie landscape of my childhood home—the meadowlarks, the cottonwoods, the tire swing in our willow...stories about my yearnings, my joys, my sorrows.

I had been accustomed to appreciating beauty *out there*, outside of myself -- in music, in the landscape, in architecture or poetry -- not *in here*, inside *me*. Roth had provided me with a fresh perspective. Many of his songs gently coax the listener to examine one's own inner qualities. His songs often present examples of individuals who have overcome substantial trials and obstacles by digging deep within themselves to call forth those attributes they needed in order to persevere. I decided to follow the courageous example of these other ordinary folks, and I found that the qualities I longed for (strength, endurance, hope, grace, beauty) waited, dormant, inside me, ready to be tapped... and shared.

## The Gifts

Salas (1990) posits that beauty exists only in potential until it is perceived and appreciated. When it is perceived, healing occurs (pp. 7-9). A gift that resulted from my time of intense illness, was that my inner beauty rose up to meet the beauty I saw around me. It poked and prodded me until I recognized it and honored it. I am still in the process of formulating my new identity; I am becoming more fully who I am.

Over the course of the past 18 months, my health has improved, at first in fits and starts, and then more steadily and significantly, and my musicking has expanded from listening to performing. Because I have utilized several health-promoting activities simultaneously (in addition to musicking), including nutritional and hormonal support, myofascial release therapy, water exercise, "land" exercises and stretches specified by my therapist, a homeopathic remedy, Qi Gong, meditation tapes geared specifically to my illness, and prayer, it is impossible to measure the individual impact of any one of these activities. Each activity plays an important and unique role, and, like an orchestra, there is synergy among the parts.

Though it cannot be quantified, my sense is that music's greatest contribution to my healing is its "resolving" qualities. Just as musical tensions find their way to resolution (for example, we speak of chords "resolving"), so have I found ways to resolve past issues and hurt, and open more fully to a deep and active experience of joy, hope, and beauty. Also, music is that which best puts me in touch with my resolve to heal – the strength of my will.

In my Christmas letter to friends and family last year, I shared these lyrics from Roth's (1990) song "This Is the Year," explaining that this song had served as my "mantra" during the previous year. I provided these verses for my loved ones to guide their upcoming year, and now, in gratitude for musicking and beauty and songwriters and healing, I offer them to you:

This is the year for making changes  
This is the year for moving on  
This is the year of overcoming  
This is the year for growing strong  
.....

This is the chance to renew my commitment  
This is the time to be conscious and clear  
This is the moment for living fully  
This is the year; this is the year

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