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The Vitality of Vulnerable Voices

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Introduction

Since the previous issue of *Voices* there has been a change in the team. We want to warmly welcome Andeline Dos Santos as our new African editor, and we also want to express our gratitude to Mercédès Pavlicevic who has served as the editor from this continent from the beginning and up till now.



The opening words of "Music Therapy in Africa: Seeds and Songs," Dos Santos's first piece in *Voices*, are:

The seed of Music Therapy has been planted in African soil. Some water the seed, some are not convinced that it is necessary to have such a seed in this particular garden and others are unaware that the seed has been planted at all (Dos Santos, this issue).

Dos Santos here touches upon the fact that music therapy is young and vulnerable in many contexts. In a similar vein, but from a different perspective, the Japanese music therapists Rika Ikuno and Izumi Futamata in this issue write about how Asian music therapists might need to empower themselves in relation to dominating Western models of therapy.



Some times our voices as therapists are vulnerable, but there seems to be considerable vitality in the reflections these music therapists give about possibilities for change and development.

In indigenous societies, music is experienced as an energy system that is generative, and thus can bring vitality to both the individual and the community. Music and dance activate the body, mind, emotions, and spirit. We see this in the ceremonies and rituals of many people around the world. This is not an abstract idea of vitality, but rather a very pragmatic approach. People dance and sing to keep the world in order, to stay engaged in the processes of Nature, to protect them from harm.

Our daily clinical work is usually with people or groups that are fragile or vulnerable in some respect. A pertinent question we may ask ourselves is; are we sensitive enough to the vitality of these people, or are we only seeing and hearing the vulnerability? We need only observe the resilience of some marginalized groups around the world and observe their practices to understand why and how music can play a part in generating energy and vitality.

There is of course no "either or" here. Focusing upon vitality and rejecting vulnerability is as problematic as focusing blindly and deafly upon vulnerability. Music therapy case studies may tend to highlight how vulnerable (and inadequate) clients can be at the beginning of a therapy process, and then how music therapy promotes growth and strength.

From vulnerability to strength, or: strength through vulnerability? Sometimes the most vulnerable voice has tremendous power. Think of the power of a baby's crying, if somebody listens and cares, that is. And think about our own global and idiosyncratic vulnerabilities.

There's global warming, the constant threat of nuclear war, the darker side of human nature. Aren't we all vulnerable in one way or another? And aren't we all capable of generating energy, through music, dance, and other means?

Maybe one of our errors in logic is to imagine a kind of us-and-them situation in which we are not the vulnerable ones. Certain kinds of privilege do not give us permission to dominate others, even in the most subtle ways. This is particularly true in health care where our clients are vulnerable in ways that we are not. But a truly non-hierarchical attitude brings an egalitarian empathy in which vitality and vulnerability are shared in the overall sense.

In several of the original papers of this issue - such as in Jukka Tervo's and Katrina McFerran's papers on music therapy with adolescents - the dialectics between strengths and problems and limitations are illuminated. Music therapists may play a vital part in giving people voice. To have a voice may help people find a path to empowerment, if somebody cares and the vitality of our vulnerability is heard. In Alan Turry's paper, to work with the client's voice is literally a theme, while the therapeutic value of this is related to psychological and communal aspects (standing up to the voice of the critic inside as well as developing a more vital voice in the community). Voice is a critical aspect of socio-political environments. Mary Rykov offers her ideas on music therapy theory, certainly a topic that touches upon the discourses, and thus the politics and dynamics of our conversations as music therapists.

In health care we often weigh the advantages and disadvantages of our treatments on a "benefits / risk" continuum. Vitality, as a concept, is free. It is a concept and thus a potential theoretical building block for some music therapists. But the very next question we must ask, if we are being historically astute, is how are we bringing such concepts into our practice? What does vitality look like in music therapy practice? And what are the risks and benefits of adopting it into our theoretical family?

In order to fully recognize the potential of music therapy, vitality, perhaps, is one of the concepts that could serve to bring a sense of balance to our conversations and our practices because it is not only about the mind. It is not an abstract concept in practice. It is something that can be experienced holistically - in body, heart, mind, and spirit. This ancient wisdom is also in the tradition of music therapy.

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