

Music as a Sacred Experience



**Music is the mediator between the life of the senses
and the life of the spirit.**

Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827)

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The Day the Music Died

We sat facing each other in a quiet room at the back of the church where Jade, now 45 years old, had attended youth group many years earlier. Her return to start spiritual companioning with me here in this place, was a brave move. She left this very church years earlier feeling misunderstood and judged for her free creative expression of her love of God. Fortunately, she never lost her connection with God and has followed Christ faithfully for years, serving with all her heart. She runs a very successful outreach to large groups of women in her community who she influences through music and dance and gatherings. Over time, she has reconnected once more with the music in her soul but Jade spoke of how difficult it was to bridge back to reconnection with God in her creativity due to the deep self-doubt about her song preferences and creative dance that entered her at this early age.

At 13 years old this beautiful creative extrovert (Myer's Brigg's ENFP; Enneagram 8 :The Challenger) was "converted" at this church from a non-Christian background. She went along to youth group early in her Christian journey, innocently wearing a top baring half an inch of midriff and enthusiastically spoke about her love of all sorts of music, especially rock, and her desire to dance creatively for God. She remembers well the heart felt desire to "be all she could be for Jesus" and her innocent enthusiasm in expressing her creative yearnings to her leaders and friends trusting she would be understood and guided to a pathway to do this. She was sent home that night to get into something "more suitable" and told she must never listen to music with a rock beat as it was "from the devil." That was the day the music died for Jade and she lost her personal lifeline to God, her individual creativity.

Did God really love and create her to be a lover of music and a dancer?

During the first year of spiritual companioning, Jade talked during each session about her doubts that God was able to provide for her and how she couldn't trust God was really there for her. At times I wondered about the link between her early church experiences and her current struggles that God really sees her for who she believes she is in her authentic self. As our sessions progressed I companioned and empathised in the midst of this struggle and, for a few months, we made some headway into her connecting creatively to God through honest exploration, contemplative connection and drawing. Over time I noticed her frequent references to some song or concert she had been to or the dance class where she leads women each week to dance, in her words, "to get back in touch with their bodies and their creativity." Jade has always enjoyed many genres of music and would often deepen into a place of quiet reflection when she would refer in our sessions to how God was using a particular song to speak to her. I became curious about how we might weave this passion within our sessions together to see if music and song might break through to a new place spiritually.

Jade came into our session one day and right at the beginning spoke of Bob Marley's song, Is This Love. I know this song well and we chatted about how it gets to the heart issue for her of knowing that God really and truly loves her. I noticed how attuned she

was to the essence of the song lyrics and how they laced through her being with many metaphors. Could I do something with this in my spiritual companioning with her?

I was curious, about the rhythms of grace Jade might discover and recover if she was invited to explore the depths of meaning of this Reggae song so I asked her to: "Tell me more." I was aware of how I might be veering from the known spiritual companioning skills I was familiar with in my training into unknown waters for me, so moved into this sphere with some caution and trepidation.

Immediately Jade became animated and more engaged spiritually to her experience of God within this song. I suggested she play it in the session and we spend some time just being with the song ever present before we tried to analyse or apply it to her life. Jade immediately agreed and found it on her phone, switched it on and we were transported into the world of Reggae. We listened together to this song a few times in silence.

Is this love, is this love, is this love, is this love that I'm feeling?

I wanna know, wanna know, wanna know now.

I'm willing and able so I throw my cards on your table.

I wanna love you, I wanna love and treat, love and treat you right,

I wanna love you, every day and every night.

We'll be together with a roof right over our heads

We'll share the shelter of my single bed.

We'll share the same room, yeah! For Jah provides the bread.

Is this love, is this love, is this love that I'm feeling.

Oh yes, I know, yes I know, yes I know now!

As we both listened to the Reggae beat, I noticed how deep and personally reflective the experience of the dance between Bob Marley, Jade and God seemed to be. Jade immediately closed her eyes, smiling softly and moving her body poetically as she sat on the couch with her little black dog companion nestled at her side. I noticed the transformation and joy on Jade's face and liked that I was present but merely a watchful facilitator of this delightful interchange; almost invisible.

When Jade opened her eyes, we spoke briefly and I asked if she would like to listen again this time to engage with the song and reflect on how God might be speaking to her and when she was ready to capture this through, for example, dance, writing or drawing what she felt might be coming to her through the song or to sit quietly reflecting. I suggested to her she might like to notice first where her attention alighted: to a line or phrase, to the music itself or to the whole song and with pastels and art paper ready if she felt she wanted to she could creatively express this.

We played the song several times over and I noticed Jade deeply sinking into the lyrics and the music as they resonated within. At the end of the informal and unscripted

listening process, Jade opened her eyes and picked up several colourful pastels and drew large expansive fronds of unfurling ponga leaves all over the page in front of her.

When we eventually talked about the experience, Jade spoke enthusiastically, using metaphors and symbols from this song and her drawing, to talk about her growing and unfurling intimate relationship with Jesus. The single bed of up close, face to face intimacy; the knowledge that she is willing and able and wants to throw her cards on God's table as she knows from her own life experience that Jah (Jehovah) provides for her in so many ways including a roof over her head of accepting her creativity as a sense of protection and love. Yes, she said brightly, she knows who she is created to be and that God loves her and now she wants to love and treat Christ right. She appeared to have encountered her God deeply through this Reggae song.

I was curious to see if the use of song as a sacred experience would have a lasting impact on Jade's faith journey with knowing God's love for her personally and shift some of her doubts.

We went on to use this open, and at times wild form of Audio Divina as a way of connecting Jade with the Presence of God whenever she came with a song and requested it. These sessions flowed with an intensity that marvelled me at times, like the days we listened together to Prince, Love, Thy Will Be Done, and how Jade spoke of when she went to a Prince concert she felt he led 8000 people from so many different backgrounds in the most beautiful worship she has ever encountered.

When Jade came for one of our last sessions together she was hesitant as she offered her song choice. She said she was nervous that she might be going further than I might be able to go in this journey with her. She excused the music as very heavy rock and wondered if I might not enjoy it but it was her choice for the session; Kiss singing, God gave us Rock n Roll. We listened and laughed together at how God was so present through the enjoyment of an arena of music that had been previously forbidden to Jade in her first religious experiences. It was important to her that I was able to welcome her choice into the companionship and she was delighted that I knew the song and "didn't judge her for bringing it". This allowed Jade to experience a healing antidote to her earlier experiences of judgement. Healing was happening through the songs she chose; songs I would never have thought of to use to usher in a sacred experience but in each song, Jade appeared to experience something spiritually transformative.

I was delightfully surprised when Jade spoke of how in listening to the heavy rock group, she had the realisation of just how expansive God is; especially if God could be encountered in the places she delights in, wherever that might be. She now believes God is indeed with her and has been with her throughout her lifetime even when she ventures, "to places others might forbid her to venture to". She discovered Christ there in the midst of her beloved rock n roll! I guided her to David, the psalmist songwriter and how he too had been misunderstood for his passionate dancing in his loincloth and how he is known as a psalmist or songwriter and musician with a heart after God. We explored how this related to her passion for music and dance and how it affected her and also how she is reaching into the hearts of many women in her community through dancing to contemporary music.

There have been significant shifts in faith within Jade over the past two years companioning together. She spoke of feeling less “boxed and limited” and “more adventurous and expansive and free to explore her God concepts and previously tightly held beliefs fearlessly”. In our final session this year Jade reflected that the use of songs of her own choice and my open embracing of them within the spiritual companioning here in her original place of misunderstanding has been powerfully healing. She said she felt she has been invited to expand and explore where she had been forbidden to go in the past. When she discovered God was there, she felt a shift in her own paradigm of beliefs to being more intimate with God and began to settle back home into her authentic self.

As she left the room that day I believe Jade engaged in a transformational journey with song as a sacred experience. Thomas Merton (Contemplation in a World of Action, P. 83) speaks of the foundation for personal growth and transformation being through “fidelity to our own truth and inner being and our desire to attain a fully human and personal identity”.

Jade is a challenger and a vibrant creative extrovert and the journey back home to her authentic self in her spirituality as a committed follower of Christ has been a rugged, courageous one. Once more she is regularly dancing and singing with all her might as David in the Old Testament did, and at times with her midriff showing.

The Sounds of Silence: Why Use Music and Song in Spiritual Companioning?

“The sense of God is the heart of sound.”

Ann Kulp, 2015

I was travelling on the Kawau ferry this winter with a 70-year-old Department of Conservation ranger. As we chatted about her work on the island, she quietly mentioned to me that “the songbirds carry the seeds”. It was one of those moments of ordinary conversation that was infused with inspiration as I thought about my ongoing experimentation with song in accompanying others spiritually. I wondered what seeds of connection, inspiration and transformation the use of song might carry within my spiritual accompanying practices.

Although contemplative spiritual practices are commonly associated with quiet and silence to clear space for the Holy and a quality of attention, I am convinced that they can basically be any vehicle that will help us attune to the Divine Presence within; be that Glam Rock or Gregorian Chant! In my own experience I have connected with God in a deep way through a myriad of paths: meditation, theological study, spiritual conversations, prayer, silent retreats; being out in nature, art, dance, Lectio Divina, worship and liturgical prayers, and in the ordinary moments of life, yet I have noticed that it is often through music and song that I centre in a deep way with God. It is a wonderful gift to be able to enjoy the sense that God might be singing directly to me, heart to heart, through a diversity of sounds, quietening me with love (Zephaniah 3:17).

So I wonder if it is in the silencing of the noise of our inner being and quietening of soul that we allow ourselves to notice the Holy in a myriad of avenues.

There is a tendency to separate sound and silence thinking they are opposite. According to Ann Kulp in her article on *Music as a Doorway to Prayer* (2015) comments that, “there is no such thing as complete and absolute silence, in the same way God is both distant and intimate, silence draws us into sound and sound draws us into silence”. Music itself is composed of both intervals of sound and intervals of silence in distinct mathematical patterns that integrates both hemispheres of the brain and our bodies also react deeply to the sound of music. Ann speaks of sound as a vibration and energy found at the root of all of creation- The Infinite Divine created using The Word, a sound.

On a fundamental level, humans are wired to respond to music from the young two-year-old bobbing to a beat to the seasoned musician playing his favourites well into old age. It is no real surprise then that from birth we are hard wired to hear and listen. The first bone to develop in the human foetus is the ear bone and the first human sense to develop in utero is the ability to hear (Bill Moyers, 2001). Many researchers claim that the body is like a musical instrument with every cell having its own resonant frequency and when we hear musical intervals we can be brought back into harmony with our natural vibration (McLellan, 1991). Music, like breath, has rhythm, tension and release and is an integral part of our development as humans. Nearly all religions include music in expressions of spirituality to lift us into a realm beyond the self.

Throughout all time music has been an important element of human experience, not only for entertainment but for fundamentally impacting our physical wellbeing, mental development, emotional expression and stress levels. The Mozart Effect (outlines how modern science has researched evidence to support that music speaks to us at a very deep level. Campbell (2001) suggests that listening to certain types of music can improve the quality of life, increase spatial awareness, reduce chronic pain, boost creativity, bring us back into balance and lift our spirits, improve long term memory storage, inhibit and even heal physical ailments like Parkinsons disease and dementia, improve lateral thinking and creative problem solving. It does this at a physical level by actually changing the brain chemistry and body functions, for example, releasing dopamine, activating our reward network, memory, language, emotional, organisational and planning networks and can even regulate bowel activity, reduces blood pressure and can improve depression and anxiety. In thinking about or engaging in singing, large areas of the brain light up or activate to augment social bonding and empathy.

Not all music and song have a beneficial effect on our beings nor is it always created and intended for the benefit of the human spirit, as each musical interval and the words used has a different effect on our body, emotions and mind. Some music does have a negative effect so in spiritual companioning some information and guidance on the different types of music to enhance spiritual experiences would be helpful. For example, when the human body receives a pure tone our muscles relax and tension will be released; in singing very simple chants the mind becomes relaxed and clearer; music rich in harmonics changes our brain patterns to be more relaxed and connected (Maman,1997). Ancient cultures understood that music and song can affect mental health, e.g. David played the harp to soothe Saul in his mental distress with great effect (1Samuel 16 verses 14-23).

The gift of song in spiritual companioning has become for me one of many ways I can offer the hospitality of a safe emotional and spiritual space for a person to be open through the creativity of music and song to the Eternal One in their lives and discover for themselves their identity in relationship to the Creator of their world.

Music and song somehow slip under the radar of even our best cognitive guards and reach the depths of our emotional and spiritual beings, calling deep unto deep, and so I am finding song to be another effective tool in my spiritual companioning toolkit. I am aware it may not be useful for some, however a careful offering of Audio Divina to several of my directees has elicited surprising dynamic responses. This has made me more aware of how we can give our directees the freedom to bring anything to spiritual direction and in doing this with song and music we can open up a sacred space for them to reflectively listen to a piece of their own choosing.

I hold my knowledge of Fowler's Six stages of faith when a directee suggests a song that doesn't appear to be very "spiritual". I remember well my own journey to my current appreciation of music and suspend judgements as I would when my teenager would ask me to listen to their latest "favourite" head banging song. They just wanted me to be present while they explored this music; try to enter their experience of it and then we would chat about it together as a way of connection. By suspending my own biases, I have been able to provide the space for my directee to explore their song and connect in some way to experiencing Divine Love.

I particularly enjoy the way I become a background facilitator in their experience with God and have noticed deeper than usual relaxation, laughter and openness to the spiritual and creative flow of energy as spiritual connections are made when the songwriter, spiritual directee and God have moved into perichoresis.

Singing me softly with Your Song

"There is nothing in the world so much like prayer as music is".

William P. Merrill

Music, as a form of spiritual expression, seems to be a doorway for the songwriter as well as the listener and provides an instant connection to something bigger and greater than us. Songwriters have known the power of music to influence social beliefs and experiences in both the shadow and light throughout time. Further research on the topic of music as a spiritual expression indicates that any music that helps reconnect us to our essence and if created from truth and pure intention can be a spiritual expression of a universal nature that transcends religion, culture and genre and can be used to raise consciousness in spiritual experience.

In interviewing several songwriters, inspiration appears to come from a transcendent place beyond them. They speak of being touched deeply as though melodies are coming to them from elsewhere and resonate with a deep unknown part of themselves. These melodies and words unlock a inspired part of the song writer and becomes a pathway from the head to the heart that seems often to have direct access to their spirit. The song or music engages them, stills them, inspires and connects them to the

Source of all sound and silence. My songwriter interviewees spoke of feeling in tune with a different reality from their everyday routine; their hearts appear to open with sheer attentiveness as music becomes a doorway to the spiritual.

I interviewed a song writer whose debut album inspired me during my Spiritual Growth Ministries training to speak about her creative gift of song writing as a spiritual experience to perhaps understand the source of song better. I will quote excerpts here to capture the essence of her song writing experience:

- To realise I could write songs was deeply identity forming. Song writing felt like an outlet, a voice, a way to connect to my deeper self. Song has called me back to myself, back to my centre, back to God, back to me. A meditative and flowing, fluidity and grace, a Creative Call I recognise as God in me.
- An understanding was imprinted into me, song is a gift that could be shared with others, from me, but not just for my sake.
- The process of song writing at its best, is not about mastery, but discovery, almost like a spiritual direction session, where I set aside my dominant consciousness, with all its competent capabilities and allow my soul the welcome space it needs to emerge. It can't be forced, but it can be encouraged.
- A song will just come-almost unbidden-my role is to then catch it and to find it and develop it. It is always a process of soul discovery in which I know myself, and God better.
- Song writing acts like a mirror, an echo, a sounding of the depths, a compass, an inner guide, a reflection of what is going on in the truest, deepest layers of me, underneath the overthinking, the busyness and the noise.
- Something that felt so natural to me, like breathing, also felt so holy.
- Songs of spiritual growth, edge places, shorelines, frontiers- an inner geographical landscape of the soul that calls me to stand, with God, between the known and unknown places.
- Curious noticing of themes and patterns of my soul, reflecting the "secret song of you and I- a lyric that captures my favourite ways of understanding the intimate, fluid, playful and colourful relationship between me and the Spirit.

My agnostic older friend who is a prolific songwriter, spoke of being visited by something outside himself he calls "the muse" and how he has learnt to always be ready to receive that which feels like a gift from beyond himself. It usually comes to him "like water running and dripping over the edge of his soul". He said, "It is just there running within you while you play. You can't force it."

He too describes it as "a gift that reveals himself to himself". He told me Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones would call out "Incoming!" and the band members would assemble to see what he was getting as his next song.

I hope understanding the creative experiences of song from these insights will encourage the further exploration of music and song as effective sources of inspiration within the Spiritual Companionship we hold as a gift to our directees. One way to extend a directee's experience might be to encourage them to write their own songs to deepen their intimate connection with the Divine as David did in the Psalms. Song writing or exploration of the meanings made in listening is a powerful genre for accessing deep emotion in the Presence of the Divine. I encourage relistening to the song and journaling the experience between our sessions to access more meaning and to extend the understanding of the directees' experience within our session. There have been times the directees return with songs and poems and writings and artworks that have come from doing this. I am left wondering about the power many minstrels and songwriters hold in inspiring us to draw closer to our sacred union with Christ.

It causes me to reflect on David as he eased the soul of King Saul through playing music to him and how I as a spiritual director may offer songs to soothe and bring peace and deeper spiritual consciousness within the lives of my directees.

Music and Song as a Doorway of Prayer

“Receptivity to the Eternal Sound, as expressed in music, can lead us into the Eternal Silence, to God, with opened hearts”.

Ann Kulp, 1996.

My take homes from this foray into using song as a spiritual experience in Spiritual Companionship practice are to remember that music has been a part of every aspect of spirituality in all cultures throughout the world, whether that is religious or an innate sense of spirituality.

The spirituality of music is subjective and affects each person differently so keep open to whatever genre of music the directee brings. It is possible to have a spiritual experience from music written by artists that do not share your spiritual beliefs.

Music provides for us a strong connection to something bigger and greater than us, and can be powerful in creating deep personal intimacy with the Divine. Music can be a powerful link to our ancestors, to a time and place, to a feeling of love, comfort and belonging.

Music can calm and cause us to reflect to the point of changing and improving our lives. Music and song are capable of stimulating us to contemplate things beyond the confines of time and space and guide us to a place where the spirit exists and where the “real” self communes directly with our Creator.

Music can indeed be a doorway of prayer so I keep a Bluetooth speaker in my room and use Spotify to access music when appropriate to intentionally provide song and music in spiritual direction sessions.

I have attached a brochure you may find helpful to use with directees in the use of Song as a spiritual experience of Audio Divina.

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