

"Don't Stop Playing"

by Raphael Weisman

She felt a tap on her shoulder. The doctor whispered into her ear, "Pythagoras said that music heals. Please don't stop playing." She had asked to be allowed to play the harp for her father, who was not expected to live through the night, in the hospital's ICU "as a final gift to him", and had been given permission to play for five minutes. But then no one had asked her to stop - the monitors were showing that her father's vital signs were beginning to improve. His oxygen saturation level was rising; his heart rate and breathing were moving to within less critical limits. After playing for her father day and night for a week, he was out of danger, and Laurie Riley decided to make therapeutic music the focus of her life.

Stella Benson was playing the harp to an unresponsive elderly man in the oncology ward; a man about 70 or 80 years old. He had many tatoos. At one point she noticed he was no longer staring at the wall but had turned his gaze upwards towards the ceiling. A moment before, she had sensed a need to change the mood of her playing. He had a different expression, as if he were looking at something. "It was the closest thing to ecstasy I've ever seen," she said. "He was in a place that was unimaginable." Then she noticed him taking a breath. His eyes closed. A tear formed in the corner of his eye and then rolled down his cheek. It had been his last breath. His color changed, and she realized that he had made his transition. "I sensed something of the mystery was present," she said.

Who has not been charmed and elevated by the sound of the harp! Mythology abounds with tales of the magical healing properties of the harp. Orpheus softened the heart of the Hades to release his beloved Eurydice. David with his harp was the only one able to soothe the troubled soul of King Saul.

Virtually every visitor to my workshop recalls a memory of a harpist or performance with the words angelic, soothing, relaxing or healing. What are the secret qualities that make this instrument, above all others, an icon of healing?

The harp is a harmonic instrument. So is the human being. The harp has the same range of frequencies as the human body. When you pluck a string on a well-tuned harp, not only does that note sound forth, but the whole harp sings. The other

strings resonate and echo creating a ringing sound as the overtones are activated. There are two principles of physics at work here:

1) When a string is plucked, not only does that note (called the fundamental) sound, but also the harmonics or overtones. These are a series of notes that also sound, beginning with the octave, the fifth above that, the fourth above that, etc., each progressively quieter. These frequencies of sound result from the division of the vibrating string into wavelengths of diminishing sizes, all happening simultaneously.

2) The other principle is that of resonance ,or entrainment. If you were to activate a tuning fork and place another of the same frequency in close proximity, it too would begin to vibrate. Itzhac Bentov in *Stalking the Wild Pendulum* describes how the pendulums in a room full of grandfather clocks all synchronized after 24 hours even though they all started out at different rates of swing.

Practitioners of vibrational healing today have at their disposal an array of devices and machines that "tune" various parts of the body to specific frequencies to "remind" them of their natural resonant frequency. (See the article on Sound Wave Energy in the premier issue of *Magical Blend's* Natural Beauty & Health) . Some use crystals, aromatherapy, flower essences, sound, color, etc. These modalities all use this principle of resonance. Because everything is energy, and made up of vibration, the resonance effects a healing.

Sarajane Williams, harpist, psychologist, and editor of *The Harp Therapy Journal*, has been treating patients suffering from pain, stress, anxiety and depression using the acoustic harp plugged into a vibroacoustic table. The harp music is not only perceived through the auditory sense, it is felt kinesthetically throughout the body. She has documented the results of her work in the journal. She quotes D. Estes as saying "No other vibrating medium (strings) except water produces such a full complement of harmonics - and the graphed wave-form of a plucked harp string approximates that of the human voice. The very special waveshape is the sound-equivalent of white light." (Quoted from "The Harp As a Divine Communication Tool", *The Harp Therapy Journal*, vol. 3, no.3).

Our physical bodies are mostly water. Memory and order are held and configured in the cells of our body and in the molecular structure of the water in our intra- and extra-cellular fluid. Modern research into the molecular structure of various formulated waters is revealing that cellular communication is achieved through resonance and the standing waves generated in the water's microcrystalline

structure. When a harp is played, especially in the hands of a trained practitioner who can adapt the mood of the music to the physiological, emotional, and mental state of the patient, the message, or reminder, of order and harmony is delivered to the patient even at the cellular level. Music is an expression of order. It is made up of melody, rhythm, and harmony in time and therefore entrains a state of order in the patient's body systems.

Even beyond the range of the human ear, the inaudible harmonics align and entrain the subtle bodies of the listener, producing a harmonious state in the mental, emotional, and spiritual bodies. Many patients report associations, memories, and states of awareness that arise while listening to the harp. Perceptions and blocks to wholeness become available to be cleared and transformed through this surfacing, and the music is the medium that carries them away. For those in transition, the music becomes the current in which the dying patient is transported into an expansive state of oneness with the Light so they can experience the dissolution of all barriers to Reality and timelessness.

There is a growing body of literature that attests to the healing and therapeutic value of music, much of it backed by solid medical and scientific research done in hospitals and research facilities. Music therapists have been active in investigating the physiological effects of music. This body is being enlarged to include research into the specific contribution of the harp. Nurses, doctors, and anesthesiologists have recorded diminished need for pain and anesthesia medications before or after surgery; elevation of oxygen saturation levels, stabilization of EKG and EEG patterns, improvement in respiration rates and marked decrease in stress measured by reduced cortisol output. Whole teams of caregivers report how the sound of the harp being played in a hospital ward, lobby, or even ICU affects even their own level of tension.

Amy Camie, a harpist in St. Louis, Mo, and Dr. William Collins, psychologist and neurotherapist, are shortly to conduct research into the effects of harp music on cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. Dr Collins has already recorded marked reduction in beta waves and elevation of alpha waves by connecting patients to an EEG in a pilot project. Joyce Beukers, a pastoral counselor and harpist at the Hospice of The Valley in Phoenix AZ, is currently engaged in a pilot study to assess the role of the harp in pain management. The data from these studies can then be used to provide supportive evidence for applying for future grant funding, specifically a National Institute for Health proposed research project. Other projects in Oregon and Florida are receiving grant money to conduct scientific studies of the beneficial effects of the harp.

The harp is a therapeutic tool, not only for the listener, but also the player. Dr Ron Price, the founder of Healing Harps was able to overcome a physical disability by playing the harp. He has spent over thirty five years working with people who are challenged by pain, illness, and disability. "Though 65-75 percent of the members of the program are challenged by disabilities or health problems," he says, "it is clearly the harp, music, and musicianship that unites them. Today many of the members are playing in hospitals, with the elderly, in churches, synagogues and temples, with shut-ins, the incarcerated, the homeless, the abused, with the dying and the very young."

Christina Tourin, like Laurie Riley, a harpist for many years, also found herself in the ICU playing the harp for her father. Two months after emergency by-pass surgery, he was still unresponsive, and it seemed they were going to lose him. She had been playing soothing harp music much of this period, but on this particular day, something moved her to play "Satin Doll", a jazz tune. All of a sudden the intensive care nurse said to her, "Keep playing, keep playing, his life force is coming back!" His big toe had started to wiggle with the rhythm of the music.

Both Laurie Riley and Christina Tourin began volunteering their services at the hospitals. Soon each felt there was a need to train other harpists to fill the growing need. They both started to share information on the work they were pioneering, and in 1994, unbeknownst to each other, they each announced, in the same issue of *The Folk Harp Journal* the programs they had developed. Laurie Riley co-founded the Music For Healing and Transition Program (with Martha Lewis), and now works as a consultant to other emerging programs. Stella Benson is the executive director of the program. "Christina founded the International Harp Therapy Program which is based in San Diego in conjunction with the world leading teaching San Diego Hospice. They have conducted a pilot research program for the past two years and have collected data on the effects and benefits of therapeutic harp music for patients and care-givers. Their goal is to have a harp player for every hospital and hospice by 2020. She says "the benefits of sound healing are far too great to be overlooked in our evolutionary conscious development". Christina is also working on initiatives outside of the USA. Today new programs are springing up around the country and abroad, some connected with the growing hospice movement. And the demand for clinically trained therapeutic musicians is growing.

And yes, the harp is even being used as a therapeutic instrument with animals. Sue Raimond is the founder and director of Pet Pause. Bio-Whitaker funded an album for use with their animals and the U.S. Army Medical Institute of Research for Infectious Diseases has expressed interest in using her skills with the harp to

alleviate stress and suffering amongst the animals. Other agencies are anticipating upcoming work and research with the harp. She has told some amazing tales of her experiences with animals that are kept for medical research in laboratories.

Imagine riding the subway to work to the sound of harp music; or sitting in the dentist's chair while harp music relieves your anxiety. Or imagine rushing from gate to gate to catch your next connection at the airport while a harpist sits in the lobby, reminding you to take a deep breath of that healing essence. Tell your dentist, your doctor, your clinic, your sick friend or the family of a terminally ill patient that this wonderful experience is available. One day we will have a peaceful world, one note at a time.

Raphael Weisman

Notes:

I am grateful to the [*Harp Almanac*](#), 1999, for permission to quote from various articles on Harp Therapy. The 1999 edition featured a spotlight on Therapeutic Harps and Healing Harps.