

Music as A Gateway to the Devine Within

When I think about the various sources of joy in my life over the years, there have thankfully been many of them. At any one developmental period of my life, however, I frequently did not realize or appreciate the presence of these sources that I all too often took for granted. It is also true that I often times did not recognize the degree of positive impact they exerted in my life in significant ways that helped to offset the myriad of negative happenings that also occurred. During my childhood years when I suffered from almost constant and chronic respiratory illnesses and yearly hospitalizations from the age of two through the age of eleven, the joys in my life were few and far between. Watching my peers cavort in simple activities of childhood bliss (that I suspect they took for granted) and seeing them engage in what every other “normal child” who didn’t suffer from various disabilities were added levels of pain for me. They became almost constant reminders that I was “different” and that this difference was a dubious honor at best. The comforting support and presence of my parents, coupled with the cognitive “gifts” that had been identified early on and the artistic skills I seemed to possess through my painting and ceramics, helped me survive the seemingly endless rounds of doctor visits, shots, pills, and missed joys of “normal childhood” that my peers enjoyed. As I was about to leave my childhood and enter into my teen years, the almost nonstop presence of the chronic illnesses continued (minus the yearly one-to-three-month-long hospitalizations). After age ten or eleven, the various opportunistic illnesses that plagued me could largely be managed on an outpatient basis without the need

for yearly hospitalizations. These various and sundry conditions did, however, require that I stay on some form of medication to combat them for weeks at a time on an average of eight to ten months out of every year. Unfortunately, the cumulative effects of this type of iatrogenic regimen resulted in yet another complicating factor that arose as a direct result of this intensive schedule...a seemingly uncontrolled weight gain due to the malfunction of my metabolism as a result of the years and diversity of medications upon which I'd been placed and illnesses I had suffered during my childhood years. By the time this heinous trend leveled itself out around the age of fourteen, the result was an individual 5 feet 10 inches in height weighing in at almost two-hundred-thirty pounds. This was accompanied by a waistline that held at somewhere between forty-four to forty-six inches in circumference. In addition, this weight gain appeared to be irrespective of what I ate, what time of day or night I ate, how much (or little) I ate, or how often I ate (or not). Since age seven or eight, my need to eat regular meals as the rest of the normal population did had been reduced to eating two meals daily (i.e., lunch and dinner). By the time I was ten or eleven, however, my metabolism had slowed to the degree that I was only eating one meal daily, which was the dinnertime meal. Despite these dietary changes, my weight remained in a stable, overweight pattern by age fourteen, refusing to be moderated by diet or exercise. Despite numerous attempts to reduce my body mass and shape to more average numbers, my weight steadfastly remained between two-hundred-twenty-five and two-hundred-thirty pounds. This new development led to further debilitating effects on my already damaged ego, having long since come to view myself as "different" in not a good

way. Since this also led to the death knell on any sports I might have participated in, my entire being and identity became equated with my skills as an artist and my prowess in academics. Being already two grades ahead of my peers as a result of my being placed in an accelerated “gifted” program at a very early age, this advanced academic placement was both a blessing and a curse. While some tried to befriend me, many of the other older students in my grades saw me as an “interloper” or the kid who thought he was “hot stuff”. This was in no small part due to my self-imposed isolation and almost total selective mutism (unless first approached or asked a direct question) out of shame and disgust over my physical condition. Despite repeated attempts on some of the older students’ parts to befriend me, I usually was not very receptive or simply thanked them for their kindness (but never made too many efforts at follow-up on their offers to hang out or do the other activities more commonly enjoyed by my peer group). Understandably, after several overtures without success, the vast majority of those who attempted to welcome me into the fold gave up. There were only one or two with whom I felt “safe” to befriend and whom I felt weren’t “just being nice” out of pity for my condition. Little did the majority of other students know that my mantra of being incommunicado and self-isolated was due to a hugely faltering self-concept, rather than a grossly overvalued self-image that they imagined that I possessed. Coupled with these extraordinary pitfalls with which I was already dealing came the usual hazards that often accompany one’s teen years. Despite the best efforts of my parents’ support, my artistic skills, and the academic accomplishments I had accrued, the end of childhood and the fast approaching teen years added more stressors that the

sources of uplifts in my life seemed able to keep at bay. By the time early adolescence hit, I was quickly developing into a deeply angry, anxious, and depressed person. It wasn't until much later in my life when I healed myself from the plethora of polymorphous pathologies that had befallen me that I realized just how emotionally and existentially dysfunctional I was at the time. These various conditions were also likely being telegraphed to others in my behaviors and physical demeanor, making others even less likely to approach me or want to get to know me better to see the person mired in the quicksand of cacophony. Thankfully, the one dubious "coping tool" that so many dysfunctional teens appear to fall into (e.g., the use of various illicit substances to moderate their moods) was never an option for me. Having had more than my fill of gastrointestinal-disrupting pills, disgusting liquids, and invasive needles, the last thing I wanted to do was to take more drugs that had potentially physical and/or emotional negative consequences. No matter how existentially miserable I became, I instinctively knew that taking something outside of myself to cure a problem that was clearly and firmly seated within my being wasn't the answer. Besides, addictions ran rampant in both sides of my family...a trend I had witnessed many times at various family gatherings, much to my chagrin. The one immense favor that these poor souls of my extended biological family did for me, largely unknowingly to them, was to provide me with "inverse"/negative role models as to how I never wanted to become. These events became further statistical evidence for my analytic mind as to why I never wanted to go down the deceptive path of using some exogenous substance that was ultimately bad for me as a temporary mood enhancer. The "cutesy" phrase I've developed for

this dubious and ultimately self-destructive approach to affect management that I often share with the substance dependent and abusing persons with whom I work is “short term gains for long term pains”.

It was about this time in my development that I was introduced to the world of music and popular musicians. My maternal uncle had, for a time, been a practicing and touring bassist and saxophonist with several well-known jazz musicians of his day, which opened up a window of interest for me as I was headed for the years that G. Stanley Hall has described as “storm and stress”. While I had always enjoyed music as a background medium to put me in the right frame of mind while doing my other artistic ventures and as a dissociation tool to distance me from the pain of my various physical ailments, the role that it played in my life up to that point was relegated to just that. As I look back on it now, I’m unclear as to the exact mechanism that transpired that allowed this “coping tool” to develop and flourish into a prominent role in my life and one of the largest sources of existential joy that I was to know. Certainly, hearing my uncle talk about some of his experiences at family functions peaked an interest in me. However it happened, I remember becoming more and more impressed by the myriad of rock musicians who were getting increased attention for their prowess on their instruments, regardless of their cognitive skills (or in many case, their seeming lack thereof), prior socioeconomic status, or appearance. This was a skill that I could learn to do while in bed with whatever latest version of respiratory and gastrointestinal assaults on my body that were occurring at the time. I could learn and practice my art in private,

as I had done my other art forms and academics, without relying on others' cooperation, presence, scrutiny, participation, or approval.

So it came to pass that the Christmas of my eleventh year on earth, I asked for an electric guitar that my parents got for me (with the assistance of my uncle and some of his former musical contacts). Not wanting to appear weaker than I already felt, I decided to teach myself to play. This method also afforded me the luxury of going at my own pace and, sadly, allowed me to languish in my own self-exile without having to interact significantly with others. Given that this was in the days of "BC" ("before computers" and their proliferation in our society), this task was largely accomplished by listening to others playing and watching them on television, listening to various recordings that I began to accrue, and talking to the few friends I did have (some of whom were amateur musicians). As my skills developed and grew over the next two years, I discovered I had a "good ear" for music and was able to "hear" notes by merely listening to a song (albeit I had no clue what keys were involved or the actual technical mechanics of what I was doing). I merely allowed my fingers to "do the walking", and they rarely failed me. This skill landed me in bands as the lead guitarist within a few years, which solved my social isolation problem and, to some degree, my self-esteem issue. It was for me a "pseudo intimacy" indoctrination, because while I appeared to be "social" by playing on stage, I was actually dissociating and "getting into the music" in my head. This did become, however, a more "gentle entrée" into socializing with others, albeit on a superficial and somewhat "mass" level. Being fluent on an instrument was all that mattered to the band members or the audience. My overweight appearance, lack of

athletic abilities (somehow, I don't think Chuck Berry duck-walks across the stage qualify as an athletic or Olympic event), or academic "nerdness" didn't matter. When my classmates came to see the bands in which I was a member, they saw me in a completely different and positive light. It wasn't too long before I became known, both in and out of scholastic circles, as "that fat kid who could really play". It was a positive self-identity that I could easily live with and build upon, despite my disdain for my size and physical condition. My newfound identity also had positive "carry over" effects, as I found people at school I didn't even know existed coming up to me randomly to congratulate me on my performance and to say how surprised they were at my level of musicality (or that I even played music). It also allowed me to evade the usual dating (and mating) rituals in high school, as rock musicians are often highly desired objects of affection (however fleeting, superficial, and pedantic) for many fans and concertgoers.

Finally, as I continued to explore, investigate, and become fluent in holistic approaches to stop my physical illnesses (having been largely written off by the medical profession as being relegated to a life of being "sick and fat" for the remainder of my years), one of the side-effects of my not being sick eight to ten months out of every year was the gradual reverse of the heinous weight gain that had occurred during my "sick years". Over the next seven years using a combination of vitamins, herbs, protein shakes, and working out in a local gym that I had joined at the urging of one of my body builder friends, the weight gradually came off and my body was reduced to the shape and size that which it likely would have been in my earlier years had I not been so physically challenged...a condition that I

thankfully maintain to this day. As it had through my “sick years”, the music I played through the headphones of my portable tape player (remember boys and girls, this was in the days before iPods) during my workouts allowed me to dissociate from the pain of working out and focus on the nuances of the music. Often times, I’d imagine myself as a drummer playing in a famous rock band that was performing at a large open-air concert. This internal focus kept my mind and body on task without giving up prematurely as a result of the rigors of the workouts or my own lack of persistence in the early days. After all, drummers playing for thousands of concert attendees can’t just throw their sticks down, apologize to the audience, say they’re tired, and take a break in the middle of a show!

Through all of these various changes in my life, music was deepening its impact upon, role within, and value for me as an identity, emotional catharsis, and existential expression tool. As time progressed, it wasn’t long before I started writing and arranging my own material. This progression led to an interest in song arrangement, music production, and recording studio methods. I began writing, performing, and recording my own material, as well as assisting others in the studio performing various tasks for them (i.e., musician, producer, arranger). This led me to expand my music horizons in terms of the styles of music and the types of instruments played. In addition to the electric six-string guitar that was my original introduction to being an aspiring musician, I taught myself to play a variety of other stringed instruments along the way (i.e., acoustic guitar, twelve-string guitar, sitar, acoustic and electric basses, slide guitar). Seeing the instruments themselves as art forms, pieces of history, and as tools that allowed me to connect with my true

spiritual being, I began to collect miscellaneous instruments of my art form that were considered to be “one of a kind”, limited run, and/or artist signature models. Now as in then, each of these instruments is special to me. Each allows me to access a different aspect or dimension of my persona and express my inner self in unique ways that would be impossible without these “royal roads to the unconscious” (as Jung might say) to assist me. They have been recently whimsically dubbed by a musician with whom I play as my “babies”. I suspect that isn’t too far from the truth. So as to honor, protect, and preserve them from the elements, I’m in the process of creating a special, climate-controlled space in my home where they can be on display for all to see and enjoy. As with all other works of art, it is my contention that these instruments should be available to be seen and enjoyed by all. This same, previously mentioned musician has dubbed this space my “nursery”.

It has been many years since I was that “fat kid” struggling to fit in, find my place in the universe, and compensate for both perceived and real shortcomings. For the past 25 years, my health has been stellar with only minor, short-lived disease states inhabiting my body. Most of these have been handled efficaciously using holistic methods. It has been over 20 years since the weight came off, and my body has remained stable at around one-hundred-forty-five pounds. Over the years, writing and performing music has benefitted me more than I might have realized or appreciated at the time. Countless peak experience moments have been experienced during recording sessions, live performances, jamming with others, and/or merely practicing alone in my home. Writing songs and lyrics has allowed me to express my angst, physical and emotional struggles, joys, and philosophical insights obtained

through the different developmental periods of my life journey. Performing the pieces I write allows me to share my joys, sorrows, pains, struggles, and successes with literally thousands of others in an almost universal group therapy-like experiential session. The trance-like altered states of consciousness I experience regularly seem far greater than I could imagine that any substance-induced dissociative mind state might possibly induce. The enhanced, deepening communications occurring with my inner self and with what I consider to be “the Devine” are beyond description, as are the insights I seem to gain during these periods of willful dissociation. Always when I finish one of these “sessions”, I walk away with a renewed sense of purpose and an inner peace that appear similar to those with whom I’ve spoken who regularly practice meditation, tai chi, yoga, or other forms of existential grounding.

For me personally, the beauty and benefits of using music in this manner are many and wondrous. They include that this process is internally driven, happens without life-limiting side effects, costs nothing, embodies techniques that I can pass on to my patients and friends, requires no preconceived religious orientation to occur (but that can accommodate whatever religious affiliation an individual may have), has the potential to positively impact others’ lives, requires no special apparatus or others’ assistance to occur, enables me to refocus on what is genuinely important in my life, can happen whenever I chose to put myself in the moment, distracts me momentarily from whatever untoward events are currently occurring, and helps spiritually heal whatever it is that troubles me in the moment by reconnecting me with the Devine within and the heretofore momentarily forgotten

lessons learned through my life journey. It's times such as these that I remember the lyrics of a song by one of my favorite acoustic artists, Cat Stevens:

"I listen to the wind, to the wind of my soul.

Where I'll end up, well I think only God really knows...

I listen to my words, but they fall far below.

I let my music take me where my heart wants to go".

It is my hope and fervent desire that the energy and wisdom represented in these lyrics will continue to permeate my being for the rest of the days of my existence. In this way, not only will I experience the joy, peace, and comfort that the music brings me, but I will also be able to share these experiences with others in the hopes of improving their lives and perhaps showing them a way to reconnect with the Divine within.