

CHAPTER EIGHT

Songs as sustenance: Reinvigorating folk culture as a response to trauma

'Whenever new ideas emerge, songs soon follow and before long the songs are leading.' (Holly Near quoted in Nancy, 2002 p.71)

Something very strange has happened within western culture.¹ At some point, it came to be that if a person had experienced trauma they would seek help from a professional stranger (counsellor/therapist/psychologist/psychiatrist) to communicate about this in the spoken word. For some reason, it was also decided that this stranger, this professional, would learn a whole canon of new knowledge (professional knowledge) and would leave outside their professional office any connection to local folk culture. They would exclude considerations of art, music, books and characters, film, video, dance, theatre, rituals, parties, sports, spiritual practices ... these were all consigned as irrelevant to professional responses to trauma.

This does not make sense to me. In my life, at times of profound sorrow, it has been music that has provided the greatest sustenance. It has been songs that have carried me through. And I know for many others, local folk culture provides rich meaning, comfort, celebration and solace.

As I imagine you, the reader, I wonder if you are interested in the written word, in writing, reading and books; or if you are connected in some way to the musical realm. Perhaps you feel at home in melody and song. Similarly, I wonder whether you might have a connection with forms of visual expression, art, drawing, photography. What about handicrafts, the making of quilts? What about theatre, drama, performance? What about video and film? What about rituals, collective ceremonies, or creating really good celebrations?

Perhaps one or more of these realms is of interest to you. It seems to me that all these mediums of expression are vitally relevant to collective narrative practice. If you have an interest in any of them, I would encourage you to find ways to include this in your work.

This chapter is an invitation to expand the boundaries of responses to trauma. A collective written document (such as those discussed in chapter two) can so easily become a video document. It can also become a song. It can also become a painting. It can become a radio show. Or it can be translated into a theatrical performance. And, of course, a written document can also be beautifully presented, or published, with a cover, with pictures, photographs. The possibilities are endless.

Collaboratively making documents, songs, videos, dances, theatre from the skills and knowledges of those who come to meet with us can be thoroughly enjoyable. But it is more significant than this. As I mentioned, somewhere along the line, western psychology decided to split professional responses to trauma from the world of folk culture. We can play a part in redressing this.

Michael White (2001) invited therapists and psychologists to consider ‘folk psychology’ – the local meanings, preferences and ways of understanding life – that people bring to the counselling room. Following his lead, it is possible to build links between the realms of ‘healing’ and the realms of folk culture. Of course, in many parts of the world these links still exist. In much of the world, local people continue to make and remake folk culture out of their own stories, struggles and hopes. What I wish to propose here is that, as we use collective narrative practices to richly describe people’s responses to trauma, we can return the task of ‘healing’ to the realm of making and remaking folk culture.²

Music and song

The medium within which I am most comfortable is that of music, melody and harmony. I realise this is not true for everyone. Others are more at home in the spoken word, or in the visual arts, or in physical movement, and so on. While this chapter focuses primarily on music and song and its potential uses within collective narrative practice, it would be quite possible to write a similar chapter in relation to drama, visual arts, physical theatre, and so on. And I hope similar chapters on these topics will one day be written.³

For now though, I wish to focus on how music and song can accompany or enhance therapeutic and community practice. I wish to speculate about the possibilities that arise when narrative ideas and melodies merge.

Songlines

For many of us, song and melody accompany us through life. Certain songs are associated with particular events, relationships, moments, friends: those still with us and those who are long gone.

For most of us, I imagine it would be possible to trace a history of our lives according to song and melody. During our infancy, perhaps particular lullabies ushered us to sleep. I can still recall from early childhood: ‘sleep while the winds are sighing’. I’m sure many of you can also recall the songs that your mothers, fathers, carers or older siblings sang to comfort you as children. During childhood car trips, perhaps certain songs accompanied the journey. For me, that song was ‘A strapping young stockman lay dying, a saddle supporting his head ...’ And, to this

day, whenever my father and I climb to the top of a mountain or a hill, we burst into song: 'I'm on top of the world, looking down on creation ...' My guess is that many of you would have songs which provide similar associations.

During teenage years, music and song became very significant to me. This is the time when many of us start to seek out certain songs, certain landscapes in which to travel. Certainly for me, within a pair of headphones, I could be transported many worlds away. What I could not find words for during my teenage years, others had put to song, story and melody. At social events, my friends and I would loudly broadcast certain songs that we identified with. Music and song was a critical element in shaping our identities as young people. Many of us identified far more strongly with music from a far away place, played by some obscure rock band, than we did with our immediate circumstances. And we could visit these lands of song as we pleased, stay a while within them.

Of course, we give meaning to songs. We play them at certain times, think of certain things. We are active in how music and song shapes our lives. But it is not as simple as this. Songs can have a power over us too. If a certain song comes over the radio, associations over which we have little choice may come into our minds. Some of us have needed to deliberately exclude certain songs from our lives. In my life, there was a time when I needed to pack away much of the music with which I was familiar and start again. Build new associations, new songlines.

Music, melody and songs in some way shape our identities, who we are in the world. And I don't just mean as individuals. This is also true for groups of people and for communities. From the theme songs of sporting teams, to official and unofficial national anthems, to certain songs that are associated with social movements, songs and their performance provide meaning and solidarity.

If you look around and listen, you will notice that music and song accompanies many people through large parts of their day and night. This may be through actively listening to it, or through it being played in public settings, or it may be that we have a soundtrack running through our minds of various songs and melodies. With music and song so pervasive in people's lives, perhaps it can play a key role in responses to trauma and hardship.

Songs as a response to hardship

In my own life, particular songs have offered company, sustenance and memory. Certain songs describe various experiences of my life far better than I

could ever articulate in a conversation. They offer a representation of experience that resonates more powerfully than any other interaction or conversation. To listen to these songs with others can enable a form of communion that is different from any other.

There are other songs that I can turn to when my spirit is daunted or shaken. I can press repeat on my CD player and be bathed by their melodies and words time and again. Certain well-crafted lyrics represent particular philosophies of life. During times when cynicism threatens to visit, it can be significantly replenishing to be immersed in the hopeful philosophies of some of my favourite lyricists and songwriters.

In fact, so significant have certain songs been in my life during times of hardship that there is no other word to describe my relationship with them other than friendship. Certain songs are the bearers of memory, just like a good friend. If I take out one of my old tapes, the minute I press play I am whisked back in time. Teenage sensations are suddenly in the present tense! I have been writing and recording my own songs since I was fourteen, so perhaps the experiences I am describing are more vivid for me than for others. But I am confident that many people have had the sensation of a particular song being a bearer of memory.

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge again that, for some people, music is not a significant factor in their lives; it's not a major influence. For others, it may have been a negative factor in their lives. They may have deliberately turned away from music and song. I don't have a romantic view of music. For most of us, there are songs and melodies with positive associations, and others that make us tremble.

However, I am interested in how music and song can be relevant in contributing to rich story development in people's lives – in honouring their special skills and knowledges in dealing with hardship and trauma. I am interested in how alternative songlines can be co-authored, just as alternative storylines are co-authored within narrative practice.

Talking about songs of sustenance

There are many options available for counsellors, psychosocial workers and community practitioners who wish to include music and song more in their work. This is true even if you never envisage playing, singing or writing a single song

yourself! A starting point is simply to start enquiring into how music and song may already be playing a sustaining role in people's lives. There are many forms of enquiry we can initiate:

- Has a particular song ever resonated for you in relation to these hopes and dreams?
- Are there any songs that come to mind when you talk about these steps you have been taking?
- In the past, when dealing with similar difficulties, have music or song ever offered company or sustenance?
- Are there any songs that currently offer you company, support or sustenance?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, then further opportunities may arise:

- to listen to this particular song together;
- to discuss *what* this song offers them in their lives, and which particular aspects of the song are significant (melody, lyrics, sentiment, rhythm, etc.);
- to talk more about *why* this song resonates, what images it sets off in their mind;
- to discuss *when* the person listens to the song, and what effects this has;
- to explore the skills they have developed in relation to turning to the song at certain times;
- to ask the person if they'd be happy to share the song with others who are facing similar predicaments and discuss how it has been helpful to them;
- to speculate about the songwriter's hopes for this song, and what the songwriter might think of how it is being drawn upon;
- in some circumstances it may even be possible to write to the songwriter.

Once these explorations begin, we can ask the person if this song reminds them of other songs or other times when music has been significantly healing to them. Tracing the history of songs that have been particularly meaningful to them can provide a 'songline' through their life. It may even be possible to gather recordings of all these songs onto one CD or mp3 player.

Furthermore, ceremonies (concerts) can be held in which these significant songs are performed. Practitioners can also develop libraries of songs that people have recommended to them and then share these, and the stories of how people have used them during hardship, with others who are going through similar difficulties.

The possibilities are endless! These sorts of explorations can simply accompany our regular work with individuals, couples, groups, and communities. There is a whole world of music and song that is already being drawn upon by individuals and communities. Tapping into this music, or tapping along with it, seems to me to provide unlimited options for making new meanings, new storylines, and new songlines.

Creating songs in response to trauma and grief

Over the last fifteen years, I have worked as a community songwriter in a range of different contexts. This has involved meeting with individuals, groups and communities to create songs out of their words about the ways in which they are responding to trauma/injustice. These are songs that are informed by narrative principles in that they are ‘double-storied’ (White, 2004). They seek to convey in words and melody both the effects of hardship and an alternative storyline of dignity, skills, values, and local knowledge. I have written about the process of collaborative community songwriting elsewhere (Denborough, 2002b) and will not describe it in detail here.

Instead, I’d like to simply include the lyrics of two songs which I played a part in co-writing with community members. Recordings of these songs can be heard at: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/songs.htm These two songs relate to special local knowledge about grieving and ways of honouring those who are dying or have died. People’s understandings about grief are extraordinarily varied. Our ways of dealing with it are exquisitely diverse. And sometimes it is possible for people’s words and knowledge about grief to be turned into melodies and song.

The lyrics of the first song are from the Narrandera Aboriginal Community in New South Wales. This song was written during a community gathering informed by narrative practice. During the gathering, participants spoke of some of the difficulties they were having in being with and grieving for their dying loved ones in the local hospital. Aboriginal cultural ways were not fitting easily with white Australian hospital practices.

We remember those who've left us

No-one drinks before a funeral
 As death comes near
 We still gather around
 The staff may complain
 But we're here to stay
 We won't let our loved ones down

Do they need to rest?
 Well we don't think so
 We need to talk
 About the good they've done
 We'll make noise
 Raise the roof with laughter
 The walls of the hospital
 Might just fall down

What is grief about?
 Honour, integrity
 A place to fall over and sit down

We remember those who've left us

Left us with their memories
 Left us with their songs and stories

Aren't they beautiful words? The verse that states: 'What is grief about? Honour, integrity, a place to fall over and sit down' was spoken as one phrase during the gathering. It is the sort of phrase that is already lyrical, all that it requires is a melody for it to be sung. These lyrics represent local, particular, artistic expression of the multilayered meanings of grief. Throughout the song, the community's lyrics have multiple meanings, multiple expressions: loved ones have left us, we are grieving their loss *and* they have left us with memories, songs and stories. In this way, the song acts as a rich collective acknowledgement of experiences of loss

and at the same time it provides comfort and sustenance through the layering of multiple storylines. It honours both what is lost and what is left behind: legacies bequeathed and treasured.

The second example I wish to offer is a song written to words by Duma Kumalo. Duma was one of the Sharpeville Six who was sentenced to death in South Africa for crimes he did not commit. He spent three years on death row and was reprieved only fifteen hours prior to his execution. This song was written to his words during a gathering related to the 'Healing of Memories' on Robben Island in South Africa (see Denborough, 2004).

It is our duty to share their story

*Living in a graveyard
Means you are already dead
Just waiting for someone
To push you into the grave
There are some things
We will never forget
I remember my two left shoes
I remember the feeling of no escape*

*We died many times
On the row of death
There we were condemned
In our dreams we flew away
But then the morning came*

*Hope came through spirit or politics
Through being a collective
We found ways to turn it all around
Laughter is a beautiful sound*

*What drives me today
Is to tell the story
Maybe their soul is in me*

*When I open my mouth they do the talking
Through me they can be free*

*My mother was a maid somewhere in town
She'd steal food for us and bring it home
On the weekends the clothes she cleaned
Would become our own*

*We lost so many
We see them clearly
It is our duty to share their story*

Again, multiple storylines run through this song, just as multiple melody lines appear as harmonies in the collective live recording. Duma's words vividly convey not only the experience of 'living in a graveyard', but also the ways in which he and others responded to the injustice of their imprisonment, and the histories of care and dignity that informed this. In Duma's case, he traced his history of resistance and dignity to his mother's actions. In circumstances where people have survived when so many others have died, they may be haunted by the memories of those who have been lost. Through a song like this, an individual experience of this haunting can become a shared experience. Others can join in the singing, can join in the duty to share their story.

Nothing about the writing, singing or recording of these sorts of songs is about perfection. Instead, this process is about inclusion and the generation of songs that are resonant with people's experiences of life. Significantly, these songs convey more than one sentiment. These are songs that don't only emphasise a sentiment of hardship. They accompany descriptions of hardship with a second story of value, knowledge, hopes, or dreams. Songs that carry this dual sentiment provide the possibility for grief to be about more than sorrow. This is significant because grief is always about more than sorrow. It is also about honouring what has been lost or what has changed (White, 2000). In the two songs I have shared here, grief was also about laughter, honour, integrity, memory and duty.

Once songs like these have been co-written, they can then be shared, sung and recorded, and each of these processes can evoke rich associations and imagery.

Some songs, every time they are played, transport you back to the time when you first heard them. Songs recorded collectively therefore enable participants to be transported back to the group, to the time they were joined with others in generating the song. With each hearing, participants are re-linked with others around important themes. In this way, recordings of these songs can be like a private doorway back to a collective experience. When you play the song in your headphones, or in your car stereo, you are linked back to those whose voices are surrounding you in harmony. This can make it possible to be grieving together even when one is physically alone.

Reinvigorating the language of inner life

In my experience of community songwriting with people who have endured significant trauma, there is something else going on when people listen to their own words in melody and harmony that I find difficult to describe. When words and melodies are resonant, when they evoke images that are associated with storylines of dignity and endurance, and when these songs validate what it is that people give value to, then this, I believe, can play a part in reinvigorating a ‘language of inner life’.

Drawing upon the work of William James (1892), Lev Vygotsky (1962) and Gaston Bachelard (1958/1969), Michael White tried to describe this ‘language of inner life’ or ‘stream of consciousness’ that contributes to people’s sense of self:

For most of us, this stream of consciousness is ever-present as a background to our daily encounter with life. It is in states of reverie, in which we have stepped back from tasks of living and from our immediate social and relational contexts, that we experience immersion in this stream of consciousness. At such times we become aware of the roaming and wandering form of this inner language, of the ebbs and flows that characterise it, and of the images and themes that are associated with it. At these times we also experience the phenomena of reverberation and resonance – the images and themes associated with this inner language have the potential to set off reverberations that reach into the history of our lived experience, and, in response to these reverberations, we experience the resonance of specific memories of our past. (White, 2004, pp.83–84)

When people have experienced significant trauma, this can have the effect of shutting down this stream of consciousness, of silencing this language of inner life: ‘With the dissolution of the stream of consciousness, people will feel a loss of substance, an emptiness, a sense of personal weightlessness and desolation’ (White, 2004, p.74).

Personally, throughout my life, it has been the interplay of melody and lyric that has brought me out of experiences of desolation. And in my work, when a person’s words become lyrics, when these are richly double-storied, and when a melody is found to match, this process of collaboration can set off vivid reverberations. I recall the story I told in chapter one in which, after Paul heard the song of his words, ‘Nine years old, nine years young’, he suddenly recalled a vivid memory from age twelve. This memory, this image of standing up to the Deputy Superintendent, fitted with a storyline of agency and dignity. There are many such examples of how song and other artistic mediums (in conjunction with narrative practice) can contribute to experiences of reverie, and in turn revitalise the ‘language of inner life’ and repopulate desolate internal landscapes with images and harmony.

This can be a deeply personal experience, as it was for Paul, but it can also be a collective one. When a group of people who have experienced hardship is able to give voice and imagery to *what* they have endured, *how* they endured it, and the histories and traditions they are drawing upon, then the reverberations can become more than personal.

A song of survival

While I was working within prisons, some of the most memorable conversations occurred with transgender folk. It was hard for me to fully comprehend what it would be like to live within a maximum security men’s prison while looking like and identifying as a ‘woman’. For a time I facilitated a group for transgender prisoners in which people shared stories of surviving prison and sexual and physical violence. From the words that were spoken in those groups we made a song. It was called simply: ‘A song of survival’.⁴ Here are its words:

A song of survival

*I've seen things
That no woman should ever see
I've felt things that no person should feel*

*My spirit within these walls will live forever more
And in the hearts of those who truly love me
I'll be forever free*

*This is a song of survival
Sure some of them don't treat us like royalty
But some of us know how to act like queens
And will forever be*

This is a song of survival

She knows where the strength comes from

These lyrics combined the words of different participants. Alongside the acknowledgement that they have 'felt things no person should feel' sits the defiance and humour of 'some of us know how to act like queens'. The line: 'she knows where the strength comes from' acts as a reminder of the conversations we shared about the histories of their strength, dignity and survival which were often linked to family members, mothers and grandmothers.

We recorded this song so that it could be played and replayed privately in people's cells. But equally significant, an opportunity arose in which it could be publicly performed. World AIDS Day is commemorated in prisons as it is in the wider community. One year, some of the transgender folks suggested that their song could be played at the World AIDS Day event at which all the prisoners would attend. I can still vividly remember this event. In that context, the performance of this song represented an expression of dignity, defiance and reclamation. This was a definitional ceremony of sorts. It was also a form of social resistance or social action. It challenged the dominant conception of transgender people in the prison. It claimed a sense of pride amidst degradation.

This ‘song of survival’ evolved from conversations about trauma: sexual trauma, physical violence and discrimination faced by transgender folk who were imprisoned in a maximum security prison. The conversations we shared were ‘double-storied’. They explored not only the experiences of trauma but also the ways in which these were endured, how these were survived. Special skills and philosophies of survival were unearthed and the histories of these were traced. In the process, particular words and phrases came to richly signify what was most important to participants, and these were turned into lyrics. These lyrics were then found a melody.⁵ In the process, care was taken to ensure that the delicate relationship between lyrics and melody would create a song of resonance to participants, one that would contribute to revitalising a ‘language of inner life’.

From here, at the suggestion of the participants, the results of these private conversations became public. The song of survival was proudly broadcast in the hope of contributing to changing broader attitudes: attitudes of transgender folk about themselves, and attitudes of others about transgender folk. In this way, anguish was transformed to art and then to social contribution.

The remaking of folk culture

I sincerely believe that responding to trauma and the creation, sharing and performance of local folk culture, can work hand-in-hand. We can start small. We can discover people’s skills and knowledges in dealing with the hardships of their lives. We can identify *initiatives* that they are taking to redress some of the effects of whatever hardship they are facing. We can then enquire about the *history* of these initiatives, and about the particular *skills and knowledge* that these are based upon. We can also explore the *hopes, dreams and wishes* that are implicit within these initiatives.

This process of generating rich description provides material that can then be represented in the social world. We can link people’s skills and knowledge together in collective ways and represent these in the form of local folk culture, be this in song, film, video, written word, dance, theatre, and so on. These can then be shared with wider audiences through workshops, concerts, public rituals, art shows, demonstrations and, in doing so, we can enable those with whom we work to make a contribution to the lives of others.

In this way, collective narrative practice involves the making and remaking of local folk culture.⁶ There is no richer material for books, films, songs, quilts,

artworks, than the sorts of stories people bring to us. Together, collaboratively, we can play a part in transforming anguish to art, and then to contribution. This process returns the task of 'healing' to the realm of making and remaking folk culture. At the same time, it invites 'a restoration of art to life' (Horne, 1986, p.236).

Notes

1. See Donald Horne (1986).
2. There is an entire field of endeavour dedicated to what is called 'community cultural development' and it has a uniquely Australian history. For information about the debates, trends and conversations within this field in Australia, see Pitts & Watt (2001) and Binns (1991). See also: <http://www.ccd.net/> For information about the history of community cultural development outside Australia, see Adams & Goldbard (2005). For current international developments in community art, see: <http://www.communityarts.net/>
3. Even if we as practitioners do not relate to the genres of music that are resonant to those with whom we are working, it is still possible to invite people into rich conversations about the significance of this music to them. A perfect example is the story told in chapter five. I did not recognise the songs named by the young man in the New York prison, but the school boys in Australia who were creating their Teams of Life certainly did, in fact they not only started to hum these songs, but could also speak of the meanings implicit within them. The fact that I did not know this music did not deter me from exploring and appreciating the meanings this music carried for these young men in different parts of the world.
4. This song can be heard at: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/songs.htm
5. Recently, Barbara Wingard, Jeff Brownscombe and I spent time at the Mt Theo Program, which is based some hundreds of kilometres from Yeundemu, an Aboriginal community in central Australia. During our time at this remote location, one of the community members approached me with a specific request. She said, 'I think you can help me to find a song that I have been seeking'. I asked her about the sorts of words she thought this song would have and, after gathering some lyrics, guitar in hand, we went looking for the appropriate melody. Before long the song was written, or should I say found. Ever since then, I have become increasingly interested in this metaphor of 'finding' songs or melodies. The metaphor of 'finding' a melody seems to open more options for shared exploration and collaboration.
6. I am also looking forward to collaborations between those involved in collective narrative practice and those engaged in the field of community cultural development (Goldbard, 2006; Thornley, 2007).