



The Forum

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The Healing Power of Music in Bereavement

By Albert Lee Strickland

For the human heart and mind, music is a gift that brings hope and comfort through even the darkest times. In the midnight hour of the soul, when we feel most besieged by grief and alone in sorrow, music offers solace in the recognition that, although the rhythms of our lives fluctuate between joy and despair, the song remains.

Music's power to offer healing in bereavement is exemplified in the memorial service held on February 4, 2003, to honor seven astronauts who died tragically during re-entry failure of the space shuttle *Columbia*. Music was enlisted to provide emotional first-aid to the 14,000 bereaved family members, friends, and colleagues who gathered at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, as well as to millions of broadcast viewers who collectively formed what news anchor Tom Brokaw characterized as an "ecumenical parish" united in grief.

Gathered mourners joined voices with the U.S. Air Force Band in singing *God of Our Fathers*, an old hymn whose words nicely fit the occasion, even though it was written in 1876 by Daniel C. Roberts for a centennial Fourth of July celebration. Based on a biblical passage taken from Second Chronicles 20:6, the hymn's opening stanza echoes emotions likely to be familiar to celestial adventurers whose gaze is characteristically turned heavenward:

*"God of our fathers, whose almighty hand
Leads forth in beauty all the starry band
Of shining worlds in splendor through the skies
Our grateful songs before Thy throne arise."*

The lyrics of this hymn recalled to mind the sense of awe and enthusiasm shared by the seven astronauts as they spoke, individually and collectively, about their love for space travel in interviews that were broadcast widely after the *Columbia's* demise.

The service also included a stirring rendition of the "Navy Hymn," *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*, performed by the U.S. Navy Band's Sea Chanters. Composed in 1861 by William Whiting of Winchester, England, as a poem for a student who was about to sail for the United States, the "Navy Hymn" was a favorite of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and was sung at his funeral in Hyde Park, New York, in April 1945. It was also

played by the Navy Band in 1963 as President John F. Kennedy's body was carried up the steps of the U.S. Capitol to lie in state. The hymn reflects the prayers of sailors who bravely venture upon sometimes unforgiving seas, as well as of their family and friends who wait anxiously on the shore:

*“Eternal father, strong to save
Whose arm bound the restless wave,
Who bidd’st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!”*

Over the years, new verses have been composed that extend the metaphor of the imperiled mariner. Those who face danger in the course of aero-nautical journeys are the focus of Mary Hamilton's 1915 verse:

*“Lord, guard and guide the men who fly
Through the great spaces in the sky
Be with them always in the air;
In darkening storms or sunlight fair;
Oh, hear us when we lift our prayer,
For those in peril in the air!”*

And space flight itself was the impetus for J. E. Volonte's 1961 verse:

*“Eternal father, King of birth
Who didst create the heaven and earth,
And bid the planets and the sun
Their own appointed orbits run;
Oh hear us when we seek thy grace
For those who soar through outer space.”*

Musical Lamentations

In the context of mourning rites like the memorial held for the astronauts, hymns like these take on the nature of laments, which both mourn the dead and enact ritual leave-taking as an essential component of grief. The ancient Greeks made a distinction between the *epikedeion* over the dead body and the *threnos* in memory of the dead, although the two styles can merge (Porter, 2003). Laments are a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead, as well as an “invitation to mourn” that reinforces bonds between survivors in their collective grief.

Musical lamentations draw on a wide range of styles and genres that vary from culture to culture, just as funeral rites themselves vary from one region or social group to another. Laments range from improvised wailing to carefully constructed poetic tributes. Vocally, the characteristic lament is termed *keening*, an emotional expression of loss and longing. Keening is associated with Irish mourning customs, traditionally being performed over the body while it is in the house, during the procession to the graveyard, and at the burial

itself. In Scotland, where traditional keening was opposed by the Reformation, the bagpipe became a surrogate for the human voice (Porter, 2003).

A careful listener discovers themes of loss and grief expressed in music of all types. The impact of AIDS was the impetus for a composition by John Corigliano. Epic in scope and formal in structure, Corigliano's symphony has no real finale; rather, it just stops, a musical statement of the fact that, thus far, there is no real resolution to this devastating disease. A companion piece, a choral work entitled *Of Rage and Remembrance*, was inspired partly by the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt (Page, 1995).

Blues Music

Blues music is known for its predominant themes of loss and longing, trials and tribulations, separations and death. In *See That My Grave Is Kept Clean*, Blind Lemon Jefferson expresses a universal desire to be remembered kindly after death. Son House's *Death Letter* expresses regret in the wake of a loved one's unexpected death. In his song, *I Feel Like Going Home*, Muddy Waters reminds us that death may bring relief from overwhelming pain. Such examples could be repeated many times over. It is important to note

that, even though blues lyrics typically speak of regret and sadness, the overall blues musical style tends to convey a sense of ultimate well-being, a musical testimony to the inherent capacity of human beings to cope with even the most painful tragedies.

Gospel Music

Traditional gospel music, which can be viewed as the "flip side" of the blues, also contains powerful images of loss and grief (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2002). Here are just a few examples: *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* (death of family members), *Oh, Mary Don't You Weep* (mourning), *This May Be the Last Time* (impermanence of life), *Known Only to Him* (facing death), *When the Saints Go Marching In* (afterlife), *If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again* (parent's death), and *Precious Memories* (adjustment to loss and continuing bonds with the deceased). Gospel songs like these speak of overcoming adversity, of maintaining hope despite despair. Faith in an eventual triumph over earthly pain is a hallmark of gospel music. Such songs of solace and hope sustain and encourage people through emotionally

difficult times. Faced with intense sorrow, confused about how to go on when life no longer seems worth living, gospel songs like Charles Albert Tindley's *We'll Understand It Better By and By* promise the bereaved that a time will surely come when the dark night has passed, it is once again "morning," and we'll be able to "tell the story of how we've overcome." In keeping to its spiritual roots, gospel music refuses to abandon the bereaved to hopelessness. After all, the very meaning of *gospel* is "good news."

Reflection

As we cope with the losses that beset us throughout life, certain songs and musical works bring to mind poignant memories that refresh our grief. Whether Mozart's *Requiem* or a Top 40 tune, music has the capacity to cue the recall of happy moments shared with loved ones whose death left us bereft. At other times, a lyric or melody sets us thinking about our own mortality. In listening to music of various styles and genres, it is

interesting to pay close attention to any references to death, and ask yourself: What messages are being conveyed? What attitudes are being expressed? For the ancient Greeks, the music of lamentation was intended to both praise the deceased and provide an emotional release for the bereaved (Chew & Mathiesen, 2003). Music was also considered to be a means of moderating extreme passion by means of melody. Characterized down through the ages as the purest form of communication, music offers many priceless gifts, not least of which are those that apply to the journey of grief.

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