

Reflection

Music Imagery Beyond a Cancer DiagnosisLouise Dimicel-Mitran¹¹*Rhythms Within LLC, Chicago, USA*

Thirteen years ago in the midst of my worst moments during chemo, nothing felt safe in my world; the sense that my cells were dying in droves put me into a constant hypervigilance so intense that I could not sleep or concentrate. Although I was exhausted, the steroids from the anti-nausea drugs made sleep as fleeting as my inability to eat most of the time. A therapist-friend was giving me sessions using The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music; a powerful therapeutic technique we had both been trained in. In the Bonny Method, the client listens to carefully selected classical music in a relaxed state; the music evokes imagery by opening up the psyche to bring out unique images which may be visual, auditory, olfactory, kinesthetic, spiritual, transpersonal or based on memories. To the sounds of Vaughan Williams' *Preludio* from Symphony #5 and then his *Lark Ascending*, I travelled down into an imaginary rainforest-like underworld, lush with plants and teeming with life. It was there I decided to leave the seeds of my future plans because in my present condition they didn't seem safe. I wanted to protect them from the onslaught of drugs, side effects and depression that hit me every time I had chemo. As a therapist, I had treated those who were depressed but never realized the extreme loss of self that it caused. Leaving my future in that place was akin to putting a beloved child on a boat sailing away from my burning island.

After recovering from treatment months later, I realized my future had dared to emerge once again, with a force of life that almost took my breath away.

Later in treatment I told another therapist friend about the heavy chemical taste in my throat all the time, she told me I needed to get an image to go with it or, in her words, "cancer wins". I created the image of myself as a she-dragon with a chemical breath that roared out as fire, a symbol of my strength and power which came to me every time with the taste after that moment. What a change in outlook it provided, especially when paired with Orff's *Carmina Burana*!

PRODUCTION NOTES: Address correspondence to:

Louise Dimicel-Mitran, MT-BC, LCPC, FAMI E-mail: louise@mitran.com | COI statement: The author declared that no financial support was given for the writing of this article. The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

I used music and imagery daily to calm myself, imagine the healing and pull myself through the trauma of it all. In this way, I battled the emotional and physical ravages of my predicament and my treatment.

Over the past 10 years of working with groups and individuals diagnosed with cancer as a music therapist/oncology specialist using music and imagery, I have guided many through healing experiences that emphasized their strengths and eased anxiety. In this reflection, I will highlight the imagery that has seemed most helpful to those facing the unique challenges of living beyond a cancer diagnosis with the unknown as a companion and the fleeting sweetness of life in the headlights.

The first imagery experience most patients seek (and are referred for) is one that might help them to relax, maybe for the first time in their lives. They give clues on what may work when being asked about where they'd rather be in the moment instead of receiving treatment. One Italian woman told me she'd rather be at home with someone cooking red sauce for her. With her permission I narrated this loving aroma through her body while playing a gentle guitar improvisation and could see the effects of the relaxation response as her facial muscles softened while she fell fast asleep in the chemo recliner. Often I offer a choice between imagining a relaxing light with a color moving through their bodies or connecting to the grounded energy of the earth beneath them. One patient said he'd rather be in a rowboat floating down a river; I narrated that scene for him over quiet guitar picking which helped him feel the gentle rocking of the boat and the peace he sought. He asked me for this type of imagery over and over again during his treatment and hospitalizations for lung cancer and stated that he often used it at home as well.

An effective road to relaxation with a purpose is to ask what the patient wants the chemo or radiation to do in her body. After the initial response of getting rid of the cancer, I ask for more since she had chosen to take the treatment. That concept of treatment being a choice can be very powerful in and of itself and often seems to instill a sense of agency. Her answer was, of course, to kill the cancer to which I replied "how do you imagine that happening?"

The most popular answer was that pacman was traveling into the body with the treatment and eating up the cancer cells. Of course the pacman leaves the healthy cells untouched!

I bring this up during the relaxation to support the concept and to have the patient imagine it more in detail. One man in his 40's had a plastic bag of GI Joes on his side table;

his image was that the GI Joes were shooting all his cancer cells. Other imaginative scenes involved lasers, cleansing lights and sending love or God's love to the cancer cells so whatever they were multiplying against to protect themselves from would no longer feel like a threat.

One patient favorite in my weekly stress reduction groups is the image of a waterfall. After focusing on her own breathing for a bit with the sounds of the gentle guitar to help, I suggest that the person imagine being near a waterfall, to smell the air there, hear the sounds and choose the water temperature that would be most relaxing to her. I also ask her to decide on the rate at which the water is falling which can be as gentle or intense as desired. After this is in place, I narrate the image of the water moving over and often through the body head to foot, flowing through each area picking up anything mental or physical that she no longer wants and carrying it out of her body (usually through the fingertips, toes or base of the spine) and carrying it far downstream away from her.

In this way, she can focus on relaxing as well as letting go of negative feelings, cancer cells, pain or anything she can imagine flowing out and away from her body.

O. Carl Simonton in his book *The Healing Journey* encourages patients to create an image of a healthy self. When guided through this concept, my group members have come up with images of themselves on the top of a mountain with the wind blowing their power cape to intricate visions of their immune systems working perfectly. There is no limit to the imagination and in this way, anything is possible!

Sometimes the simple act of imagining the sun on your face or a gentle breeze caressing your body is the most powerful anxiolytic possible. A grant from Genentech allowed a budget to reproduce 2000 copies of *Consciously Creating Wellness*, a relaxation & guided imagery CD, to be given free to oncology patients at our hospital. On the CD, I narrate a lightalong with a relaxing color (chosen by the listener) through the body. Patients have reported deep relaxation, better sleep and a reduction of anxiety from its use [1].

In working with pain, describing its color and/or temperature can be helpful by then having the patient come up with an opposite color and temperature to narrate through the pain location. For instance if the patient describes the pain as red and hot, perhaps they would choose to run a mint green color and a cool temperature through the area.

Over the guitar, I would narrate this imagery through the body and then perhaps improvise a quiet vocalize over the chords to give them time with the image to develop it or let it work.

Many patients have reported relief from this type of imagery experience. Encouragement to use it on their own instills the possibility for a daily practice to emerge as self-care imagery skills are developed.

Recently, I have been adapting neuropsychologist Dan

Siegel's *Wheel of Awareness* [2] practice to my group members' guided imagery toolbox, over music of course! This exercise creates an inner "hub" of peacefulness with long exhales supporting deep relaxation. From that inner hub, I guide the group to follow a "spoke" of the wheel out to experience their feelings in their family on the outer rim, acknowledge the feelings, and return to the peaceful, safe hub they created. Subsequent journeys include spokes out to their work environment, doctor's office, community and world in general. Many report practicing this meditation by themselves as it provides them with a sense of having some control over how their feelings may impact them [3].

The imagination is a powerful tool in reducing stress and using it actively may help patients to develop some resources and types of daily practice to ground their healing experiences which in turn may help them to cope with treatment. It also teaches them skills they can use to support wellness after treatment is finished.

Pairing music with imagery adds power; the music provides the entrainment the body and mind need to slow down and open to the image the patient chooses to focus on. It acts as a gentle partner with which to move inside oneself and explore inner resources which many are unfamiliar with. The music is a steady, dependable and nurturing companion chosen carefully to maintain the patient's attention on the imagery; it sets the pace for the therapist's narration and the patient's transformation. In this way, the music helps direct the experience, acts as a safe emotional container, provides structure through its elements, gives continuity to the inner exploration and lends the overall aesthetic of beauty to the practice.

References

1. Dimiceli-Mitran L. www.cdbaby.com/m/louisedimicelimitran Accessed April 26th 2016.
2. Siegel, D. http://www.drdansiegel.com/resources/wheel_of_awareness/ Accessed April 26th 2016.
3. Siegel, D. www.drdansiegel.com. Accessed April 26th 2016.

Biographical Statement

Louise Dimicel-Mitran, MT-BC, LCPC, FAMI, is the owner of Rhythms Within LLC, and is also a Counselor and Music Psychotherapist.