

Musical encounters with dying: Stories and lessons, by Islene Runningdeer, foreword by Diana Peirce, London and Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2013, 158 pp., £17.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781849059367

Islene Runningdeer is a music therapist working as part of the Advanced Illness Care Team at Gifford Medical Centre in Randolph, Vermont. This is a book for music therapy students, practitioners and indeed health care staff working within palliative care teams who wish to discover and understand more deeply the rich therapeutic connection between music therapist and client in end of life care. It is not a text laden with theoretical practice but rather very honest and deeply personal reflections on the work of a music therapist with individuals nearing end of life. It is both compelling and at times very moving, as Runningdeer describes through the use of various case examples moments of human relating and expression. Throughout the book, one is presented with opportunities to connect with the core question this text urges one to consider – how can the music therapist best work with clients approaching end of life?

In the opening page, Runningdeer introduces the reader to Mavis, an older adult in the final stage of life. Mavis was all too familiar with the concept of loss having lived through the untimely passing of six of her eight children. An important component in each music therapy session with Mavis was the incorporation of the song 'You are my Sunshine' (Davis, Mitchell, 1939). Runningdeer notes how Mavis held very strong eye contact with her as they sang this song, assuming a child like facial expression when singing the line “you'll never know dear how much I love you, please don't take my sunshine away” (Davis, Mitchell, 1939). Although it may not be clear what Mavis was feeling during these moments, this song made it possible for her to experience these emotions in a deep and powerful way in the presence of another who was fully engaged in that moment with her. Runningdeer refers to this as Mavis' “death song” due to the manner in which it “repeatedly delivered her to a deep, inner place of remembering and love and loss” (p. 22). Here, in the opening page and a half, we are introduced in a most captivating and intimate way to the relationship between music and dying.

The concept of the death song is central in this book and Runningdeer tracks its history back to Native American culture when such songs were used to quiet the fear of death and as a prayer for the soul of the dying person. Death songs have appeared in other cultures too, including Buddhism and western Christian culture, and examples are provided in each. However, what interests me most is how relevant the death song is in our modern world, as in the case of Mavis and so many other examples presented in this book. As individuals approach the end of their life, many do so concerned with the need to appear okay for family and loved ones. Yet, a wide range of emotions may be suppressed within that individual. Music helps us to access these feelings and in doing so unlocks our inner song at a time when words may be lost or seem unable to aptly express our thoughts and emotions. The death song not only honours a person's life but creates a vessel where one can unload and share their deepest emotions. In this way, it offers peace to the dying person and allows them to live out their remaining life in a way that is meaningful to them. As a music therapist with some experience in palliative care, this is the hope I hold for my clients.

Central to the work of any therapist is the therapeutic relationship. Runningdeer begins her discussion on the topic by introducing us to a music therapy student she was supervising. Having observed her first session, she posed a question: “how do you do it? How do you just walk in, so calm and assured, unafraid?” (p. 35). This question of “how to be” with another in a therapeutic relationship is possibly one of the most important things we as creative arts therapists learn and the inclusion of this piece in the book serves to draw us closer to the practice we engage in. Here the concept of “human love”, also referred to as “inner disarmament”, appears as Runningdeer describes the process of freeing the mind of fears and

expectations and entering the therapeutic relationship with a sense of calm, an open heart and a willingness to enter into the world of the client (p. 36).

An important chapter in this book addresses the issue of working through difficult emotions in the therapeutic relationship and provides several case examples which demonstrate how anger can be used as an alternative for deeper, more complex emotions. One of the most compelling cases of this kind is that of Agnus, an older adult who lost her husband very early in life and had no family to speak of. Agnus was reputed by staff as being “an aggressive bully” and Runningdeer utilised a very direct approach with this client, simply stating “Agnus I’ve been told you are a very angry person” (p. 81). Although I was somewhat perplexed by this statement, it prompted a conversation which later resulted in Agnus leaving her room and attending a music therapy session in the communal area. Staff helped Agnus choose a special outfit for the session. In a way, this signifies a wonderful coming together of staff and service user as Agnus actively stepped back into the community of the residential unit through her involvement in music therapy. A therapeutic relationship blossomed and in turn Agnus’ attitude towards the team improved.

Music therapy offered Agnus the opportunity to reconnect with others and Runningdeer suggests this may have been an important part of her dying process. The concept of actively participating in the process of dying is discussed extensively in this book with one of the core needs being to complete a life review. Other individuals need to actively engage in normal, daily activities until they pass away, whilst others again simply need the time to do nothing. Whatever the needs of the person in the final stages of life, the music therapist can use music and their relationship to promote a sense of togetherness so that the client knows they do not have to leave this world alone.

One of the final chapters in this book discusses the importance of self care in the music therapy profession. Here Runningdeer writes about the needs of the therapist and the importance of leaving time in your life to engage in activities other than work which bring you joy. This chapter is filled with practical advice on maintaining good health and serves as a reminder to therapists to engage in healthy self care practice.

This is a powerful, captivating book which draws you in and urges you to think deeply about your own music therapy practice. Runningdeer's ability to express so honestly her experiences lead to a deep understanding of the text which urge the reader to reflect on the privileged position of working with individuals in the final stage of life.

Alison Sweeney
Music Therapist alisonsweeneymt@gmail.com

References

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Alison Sweeney is a music therapist specialising in paediatric rehabilitation, intellectual disability and care of older adults.