

Drumming Up Peace

by Christine Stevens

*“When you play from your heart,
all of a sudden there’s no gravity.
You don’t feel the weight of the world.
Instead of problems, you get possibilities.”*
-Carlos Santana

If the whole world was a song, what would it sound like?

I imagine a strong rhythm emanating from Africa, Brazil, Japan, and Cuba, mixed with the simple pulse of the Native American rhythm. Upon this rhythm is harmony and even a glorious new melody as South Africa celebrates the ten-year anniversary of the end of apartheid. Yet, some dissonant chords linger, from places like Iraq, Israel, and the former Soviet Union. There is global unrest in many parts of the world, inspiring ongoing demonstrations for peace around the world, often led by a new breed of *artists* – activists using artistic medium to communicate a political message – creatively communicating their cry for peace.

I truly believe that music can unite people despite incredible differences. I have seen it in diversity trainings, and experienced it in my travels around the world. I’ve been inspired by the writings of M Scott Peck, Kokomon Clotey, and Malidoma Some. Within this context, I’d like to share a story of how drumming created the beginnings of peace between young women from countries at war.

Camp Common Ground

A few years ago, I was invited by an organization called Common Ground to lead a drum circle for a group of Palestinian and Israeli girls, aged 15-17, at a one-week camp in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Camp Common Ground was founded to create dialogue among young girls from both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The concept was brilliant: to fly victims of the fighting – on both sides – to a neutral place in the USA, surrounded by the peaceful beauty of the mountains. The program included hiking, playing, dialogue and the use of the arts as a means for expressing emotions and building bonds.

The drum circle had a rather lofty goal: to serve as a vehicle for connecting the girls at a non-verbal level. I have to admit that I was nervous. I drove with a car-full of drums, doubts and nervousness to the camp to offer the drum circle on the second evening of the camp experience.

Once I arrived, I didn’t have much time

to think or worry. As I brought in the drums, some girls immediately started picking them up and showing off an Arabic rhythm, while others sat quietly in the corner, afraid to tap into the deep emotions that music can express. More cliques formed as some played loudly and disjointed. It sounded like a fight. I sensed the problems that they had listening to one another, and their feelings of difficulty at being heard. You could hear the pain and the rage in these young women, so close to the surface that it could not help but be expressed on the drum.

I signaled the girls to stop drumming. They understood my body language and immediately responded to some fun, interactive body percussion games to get everyone laughing and cooperating. Now the girls were more prepared to drum together. After reviewing the drum circle cues – stopping, starting, playing loud and soft – we re-introduced the drums. A rhythm emerged from one strong player, and everyone followed. It was loud, maybe even evocative of rage, but it was remarkably together. With everyone following a common beat, the energy seemed to build and build. Some girls

danced in the center of the circle. Finally, I cued us to stop. 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – BOOM! Silence.

I could see the expressions of joy, surprise, and happiness on each of the girls’ faces. I asked them to share one word for what they released in the drumming. “Anger, military, fighting, gunshots, pain, sorrow, loss.” In sharing their feelings, the girls discovered that they shared more than they realized. One girl finally broke the long silence and said, “This is the most I have felt like we can work together so far at the camp. I felt like we were one.”

Oneness

There is a growing need in our world for remembering our oneness. Drummers refer to the “one” as the downbeat in the rhythm. It is the pulse of the music, the place of coming together of the ensemble. Similarly, in our efforts to create peace, the “one” is the opportunity to re-connect on a non-verbal level: heart to heart.

I continue to visualize more music, more drumming, and more opportunities to bring diverse groups together without using words, and heal our differences.

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