

The key to healing and wellness is, most agree, a combination of mind-body dynamics and, perhaps spirit. How the three interact and what happens when they do is the subject of studies and surmise, hard fact and anecdote. I have no doubt that when an individual is actively engaged in their own wellness and healing, when they have hope, power and joy in life itself, then they will be better able to cope with whatever comes. That may be poor health, aging, or death.

There is something akin to magic when a person recognizes his or her own power. This is magic, not as an ‘illusion,’ but rather as being able to truly overcome fears and grief by transforming the experience into something positive. I call it “Personal Magic,” a term that evolved over my experiences during years in the theatre arts, arts in healthcare, and, most recently, the study of Shamanism. This article will introduce you to *Performing Wellness*™, an arts-in-healthcare program that I developed, and to its roots in storytelling and, as I discovered later, Shamanism, which address our intrinsic need for spiritual health as a means for physical/emotional health.

Performing Wellness™ was born in Portland, Oregon nearly nine years ago. While working as the Education/Outreach Director at a small professional theatre company, I conceived the idea of real people with cancer writing and producing their own stories for theatrical performance. As a result, seven individuals with experience of living with cancer came together weekly for 14 weeks of writing workshops. Then, for two weekends, their words were performed on stage, by actors, before a live audience. Not one play, but many; not one voice, but many; all coming together in one collective experience. The effect on all—writers, performers, and audience—was profoundly transformative and empowering in many ways.

The structure of *Performing Wellness*™ (PW) involves a text-based writing process for a small group of individuals who are ready to share their experience with a shared illness or trauma. Taking three to four months, the process culminates in a public theatre performance by professional actors. Guided imagery, art, and music support and facilitate the writer-artists’ growth and play. Each individual writes their own story; the ‘games’ and exercises provided by the program are simply tools for the artist.

Grounded in the belief that every person is an artist and has a story to tell, and that the process of artistic discovery and expression facilitates wellness, *PW* operates on the principal of artistic collaboration, rather than the therapeutic relationship. *PW* includes:

- bringing together a group
- facilitating a writing process
- pairing actors and other artists with writers
- mounting and producing a public performance
- evaluating the program

Each stage of the *PW* creative process attempts to help an individual identify his or her own voice and ultimately to manifest that voice in the form of a theatrical piece through:

(1) Writing games that encourage working from the heart and the gut, and assist the individual with learning to trust his or her personal voice and let it speak. Individuals learn to employ all the senses, without reference to adult logic, fairness, or hindsight. The shared traumatic experience is not necessarily the topic of the arts activities here.

(2) Writing with reference to the shared experience. Here a series of exercises are provided for each individual to use as jumping-off points, as tools for their own writing.

(3) Working with actors, who then join us in the creative process and for the first time someone independent from the writer reads his or her words. Writer/actor teams work together and, with the facilitator's input, apply the theatrical medium to the writing.

(4) Then in the theatre, adding music, props, and images to complement/accompany the words in a brief technical rehearsal. The final form includes poetry, dialogues or monologues, or a combination of all. Each writer has a unique story, a unique voice and all together these voices create a complete evening of theatre. Programs are created, tickets are sold, and a series of public performances are offered.

In closure after the final performance, all participants, writers and actors, are given a book that includes each other's writing and photos. Evaluations are collected, and the group officially closes.

PW is also workable in a shorter workshop form, including facilitated writing and sharing out aloud in the group. It can be a useful format for caregivers and families as well as patients.

The following quotes selected from written evaluations from various *PW* projects over a period of five years show the positive impact of the program on writers.

“Writing is always therapeutic as it makes one objective when you review what you've written—but the totally new experience of collaborating with a professional actor was very profound. . . . It pulled me along with it into the recognition that my voice is valuable and I can and should have more self-respect and can experience a productive self-reliance.”

“This writing project allowed me to step out of the role of 'patient' into the creative role of 'writer.' [After months of not being able to walk, etc.] . . . after just a few weeks of writing I was walking further distances, my balance was better, and I was getting out more (to movies and dinner with friends).”

“I have a lot more respect and admiration for myself for surviving.”

"The project as a result did make me feel whole again."

It is hardly surprising that *PW* was so successful, given the plethora of studies indicating expressive writing as a technique and role of support groups in improving recovery from illness and trauma. The following two studies are specifically relevant to the *PW* work.

Pennebaker in a psychological study showed the significant physical and mental health improvements that can occur through writing about emotional experiences.¹ These changes have been demonstrated in a variety of populations, ranging from senior professionals to maximum-security prisoners, and these results seem to be independent of such demographic variables as gender, age, education level, ethnicity or language, negative affect, or level of inhibition. Petrie et al. randomly assigned 37 HIV-infected patients to two writing conditions focusing on emotional or control topics.² The study found that those assigned to the emotional writing condition not only rated their essays as more personal and valuable than those in the control condition, but also showed increases in CD4+ lymphocyte helper cell counts after the intervention.

Mary Rockwood, RN, PhD and Michael Samuels, MD in *Creative Healing* summarize this succinctly and simply:

Scientific studies tell us that art heals by changing a person's body physiology and mental attitude... from one of stress to one of deep relaxation, from one of fear to one of creativity and inspiration. Art and music put a person in a different brain wave pattern... affect a person's autonomic nervous system, hormonal balance and brain transmitters.... that changes the immune system and blood flow to all organs. ³

David B. Morris in the chapter, "The Plot of Suffering," in *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* draws on the illness, AIDS, as a prime example of how the biology of human illness intersects with cultural practices.⁴ He comments that biomedicine, overall, does not deal with the issue of suffering and that awareness of suffering is one of those measures by which we know we are human.

By Morris' definition, suffering is not simple pain, but it has an emotional and psychological quality whereby we comprehend our existence before the suffering, what appears to be the cause of the suffering, and its impact on others as well as ourselves. However, despite our knowledge of the suffering, we often cannot see the way out. The measure of real healing includes the role of suffering, to place value on it, to draw strength from it and to own its part in the dis-ease, the illness, the "cure," and the process of dying. As medical practitioners, as family and friends, as community, and as those affected, we must tell that story as well—not just the physiological and pharmacological version.

In addition to the scientific evidence, the basis for this form of healing has deep cultural and historical roots. When I facilitated *PW* with veterans of war suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), I read *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character* by Vietnam-era counselor Jonathan Shay.⁵ The book discussed the treatment of warriors in ancient Greece, where personal stories of battles were taken back to the warriors' communities by professional storytellers and told through song,

prose, poetry and even theatre. Entire communities owned the story, faced the warriors and participated in the healing.

However, after the Vietnam War, those stories were hidden from the public. Warriors/soldiers were separated from the community by their experience and were even asked to forget it. It is said that the Vietnam War was fought very publicly, the first televised war. However, live face-to-face interaction with the stories was missing. The voices of the warriors themselves were muted, the audience spared the details of broken hearts, minds and spirits.

Jonathan Shay noted that it is only in the sharing of the trauma with the community, (which, in turn, must recognize itself in the tale) that we can be healed. He was writing specifically about war-related PTSD, but I think it applies to all stories of great change, loss, pain and suffering. Years working with a variety of groups, including those with experience of multiple sclerosis, HIV/AIDS and sexual assault, have illustrated to me that any real change in or attack upon our bodily or emotional health will, to some extent, causes emotional trauma that requires healing.

PW offers a process to tell these personal stories, through a one-to-one collaboration of writer and actor to create the performance and a live audience to hear it. In short, the storytellers tell the story to the community, which in turn participates in the healing. In this way, *PW* makes a distinction between the storytelling of live theater and that of film, in that live theater is more effective than the use of film. The fact that theatre is LIVE, that both the actors and the audience are alive at the same time, in the same place, allows real interaction and healing to occur.

Beyond the experience for the story teller, sharing these stories live in a raw, simple manner, goes a long way to reconnect with those early days at the fire. Human beings have always told stories. Perhaps stories began with the cave dweller's describing the day's hunt. Later, we know that Shamans led group activities and rituals for acknowledging pain and suffering. Through these arts, where everyone participated, there was healing from the hurt and fear of the mundane and of life itself. Awareness of the richness of living infused communities with life-affirming energy.

It is not always comfortable to be in the presence of these traumatic stories in a small theatre. However the prevalence of the reality TV shows, with the urge to display all of our dirty laundry on talk shows, indicates that, as a culture, we are hungry for stories that will place us once again in the Shaman's circle and create a shared communal energy. We simply don't know how to do it very well.

As a result of my experiences with *PW* and my own studies of Shamanism, I came to understand the actor's role as akin to that of the Shaman. I knew that the Shaman was the healer in the community, that he/she did it through stories and often led the community in participatory events designed to bring out the hidden story. I understood that the Shaman didn't make up the story, so much as reveal it.

And just as with the Shaman, in theatre, the writer creates the story, and the actors, with the director and others engaged in production, interpret or reveal it. The results are much the same—truth is revealed. Truth spoken simply from the heart/soul, no matter how metaphorically, with or without music and lights, in poetry, dialogue or prose, one actor or more, a dancer or an acrobat, that truth touches all who hear it. It may be an intellectual “knowing” or it may simply resonate in the heart/soul of another.

This “knowing,” or acknowledgement of truth that permits healing, relates to the basic Shamanic principal of the intangible universal Spirit, all around us all the time, and its connection to the Soul. Think of a sound wave without the sound. When that Spirit comes in contact with the Soul (unique to each individual) it will resonate in such a way that its presence is fully available to the conscious mind. Now we have Sound. And that Awareness can then manifest into tangible everyday reality. This is the Body-Mind-Spirit connection.

In Shamanism, the Spirit is always whole; so the root of the individual is never in need of fixing. However, a traumatic experience can damage that connection of mind/body to the Soul and Spirit, causing the individual to live in a constant state of searching and dislocation—of dis-ease. Most of us have experienced some kind of soul-destroying event. When we are hurt, that damage is carried within us unless we take time to focus awareness on healing. We may have been able to overcome it and ‘move on,’ we may still recall that pain every day, or we may be at the mercy of trigger events. Current economic times alone are enough to trigger old injuries.

Throughout time, it has been known that one key to reclaiming the connection to your Spirit is creativity. In the creative state, you are unmoved by the physical world around you, guided by intuition in the moment, neither seeking the future, nor criticizing the creation as it unfolds. In Shamanism, such an individual is functioning in Spirit, in Awareness of the present moment, the Now—not in the past or the future.

We use the word “magic” to describe something inexplicable that happens and makes us feel happy, full of wonder, joyful. ‘It was magical.’ There has been a transformation of experience out of the day-to-day reality. Magic happens when you relax into the moment of discovery. It is simply being in the awareness of NOW. You are operating at a spiritual level. A creative experience can be magical, and Shamanism takes us, with intention, into that alternate world.

Magic is not so much about *changing what is* as it is about adjusting how we perceive, understand and experience life. The brainwave patterns associated with both creativity and meditative states are similar. And in those states, we achieve distance from the emotional impact of life, because we are experiencing our story in the present, the Now. Essentially, healing is a matter of transmuting the negative into the positive. You face the illness, fear, grief, rage, or whatever the negative emotional experience, squarely and without anxiety or anticipation, just in awareness. The individual then takes steps to re-shape it into something else.

Spirituality is widely regarded as vital to healing and contributing to good health and longevity. People have always asked for a representative of their faith or religion to be present in times of great distress. The spiritual is recognized as somehow integral to the peace of mind and smooth passage in death and loss. Shamanism, storytelling, and creativity provide the means to heal the spiritual so that the physical may thrive.

So, like the Shaman, *Performing Wellness* provides an artistic process, from creation to production. Each writer becomes a creator, an artist, rather than a victim or a sick person. Therefore, each writer is the creator and owner of the work and holds the power of his/her story. Through this process, I have witnessed writers make the shift from fearfulness, sadness, anger, and helplessness into hope, determination, joy and the appreciation of life that comes with the creative act. I have seen the audience connect to the stories regardless of their personal experience of the given subject.

In *PW*, the writer shifts out of the role of the victim of a terrible event into a story teller who *owns* the event. It becomes a gift to give and share with others. Then, the power that story had over the writer is diminished. The writer undergoes a re-visioning of self from sick victim needing “fixing” and looking outward for that healing, to an empowered individual aware of his/her own voice and wisdom. Individual members of the audience, when open to that moment, will experience within their own soul a ripple of recognition as the story played out before them resonates with their own experience. Hence another aspect of the Shamanic tradition is embodied, as wisdom and healing spreads beyond the individual to others in presence of that journey.

The welter of material that identifies the importance of the arts in healing, the themes of mind-body connection, of attitude, self awareness, belief and of the role of community, run like rivers to the delta. The Shaman as well once embodied these modalities of healing, and vastly different societies throughout the world have embraced these dimensions for a healthy community.

The effect of the creative arts on health and wellbeing, as the healing impact of *Performing Wellness* reveals, can be explained and understood as a spiritual journey, expressive writing therapy, a form of group support and a method for connecting with the greater community. The positive effect on the participants and the audience, however, speak most strongly of the power of these modalities in healing. As an audience member once expressed to me following a performance created by individuals living with multiple sclerosis (MS):

Had it not been for the ... performances, I would have been unaware of the need for an emotional release. With the internet, computers, drugs, MRI scanners and so on, it is all too easy to see ourselves as machines needing repair. The performers helped to bring home the very human, life-altering impact MS has on the diagnosed and their families, and the importance of coming to some sort of terms with it...

As for what it actually does beyond the visible expression of wellbeing, I think we need to turn to the spiritual to begin to understand that. For me, the Shamanic paradigm works very well. Regardless of what it actually does or doesn't do, I will continue to offer the artistic and spiritual support, recognizing "Personal Magic" in everyone, as a means for better health and wellbeing through all of life's passages.

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Notes

1. James W. Pennebaker, "Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process." *Psychological Science* (1997), 8(3):162-6.

2. Keith J. Petrie, PhD, Iris Fontanilla, MSc, Mark G. Thomas, MD, Roger J. Booth, PhD and James W. Pennebaker, PhD, "Effect of written emotional expression on immune function in patients with human immunodeficiency virus infection: a randomized trial." *Psychosomatic Medicine* (2004), 66(2):272-5.

3. Mary Rockwood Lane, R.N., M.S.N., and Michael Samuels, M.D., *Creative Healing - How to Heal Yourself by Tapping Into Your Hidden Creativity* (HarperCollins: Canada Limited, 1998).

4. David B. Morris, *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

5. Jonathan Shay, M.D., PH.D., *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994).

Shamanic Websites:

Foundation for Shamanic Studies: <http://www.shamanism.org>

Shaman's Light by Marti Spiegelman: <http://www.martispiegelman.org>

The Power Path: <https://thepowerpath.com/>