

Chaos

Karen V. Lee
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, B.C.

Abstract

The author writes an autobiographical reflection after attending a hand drumming concert. The rhythmic grooves liberate her mind and body while she reflects on a major transition in her life. Writing helps her reflect on how the concert becomes a pedagogical context for the emotional and intellectual chaos. In the end, autobiography moves her to gain a deeper understanding about how the pedagogical aspect from the concert enables change.

Prologue

Traditional African village life involves music that encourages rituals, celebrations, and social conflict as music is used to rhythmically pace daily chores. Cudjoe (2006) states, “there is no activity which does not have music appropriate to it; weaver, farmer, fisherman, each sings in perfect time to the rhythmic movement of his craft. Apart from individual music making, there is great social music that accompanies religious, festive and ceremonial occasions” (p. 280). The depth of music’s integration into almost all the various aspects of African social life is an indication that music helps to provide an appropriate framework through which people may relate to each other when they pursue activities they judge to be important (Chernoff, 1979, p. 154). Often, musical events serve as a unifying force between artists, children, dancers, parents, grandparents, and musicians.

Since drumming is an integral part of the African value system, master drummers are highly revered leaders in communities who teach rhythms that are part of their

culture. Master drummers are regarded to have excellent listening skills, a sense of rhythm, excellent memories, and a sharp eye for observation. Thus, master drummers have the ability to transform participants and audiences.

The psychological and physiological benefits from hand drumming have been researched by Kaplan (1999). His research involved dividing 304 drummers into six groups and compared their mood changes and social interactions. Overall, he discovered that drummers were less depressed, more elated, more cohesive, and had more energy and confidence after drumming sessions.

Friedman (2000) found health benefits from the popular activity of hand drumming as it helped people attain psychological, physiological and spiritual well-being. From a multidimensional perspective, he researched the drum's ability to create joy, release anger, induce trances, and create empowerment with at-risk adolescents, Vietnam veterans, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Multiple Sclerosis patients.

Bittman (2004) examined the impact of recreational music making on first year nursing students. 75 students participated in 6 sessions that assessed burnout and mood dimensions. He discovered hand drumming reversed the trend of burnout and mood dimensions while projecting cost effective measures in nursing students.

Overall, drumming and drum circles have become popular activities among social groups. While some play for pleasure, others play for celebrations, festivities, healing, stress-reduction, self-empowerment, and for overall enjoyment. In this article, I use autobiography as a tool for inquiry and reflection. Autobiography provides an avenue for

researchers to continue “encouraging and supporting the exploration of autobiographical themes of individual students” (Murray, 1991, p.9). By blending autobiography and pedagogy, I discover narratives to be transformative as the process of writing is a “process of self-construction and then reconstruction. . . These memories were reconstructed through an interior dialogue [and] a meaningful reality was created out of this interpretive process” (Denzin, 2002, p. 255).

I draw on the narrative account of my experience at a hand drumming concert facilitated by Milton, a teacher, master drummer, and clinician, Milton uses, “African and Brazilian drum, dance, song, call and response patterns of blues, samba, and country swing music (via blues) which can be traced back to the linguistic nature of African drumming. His workshops begin by teaching the ‘universal break’ pattern,” (Lee, 2006, p. 50). As university supervisor/instructor, I discover that the concert helps me examine the emotional and intellectual turmoil during a major transition in my life. The rhythmic grooves transform my mind and body and become a pedagogical context that enables change. Feld (1988) studied groove from an ethnomusicological perspective and defines it as “an unspecifiable but ordered sense of something that is sustained in a distinctive, regular, and attractive way, working to draw the listener in,” (Feld, 1988, p. 74) The statement that a performance achieves a groove usually means it somehow compels the body to move (Grove, 2007). The purpose of article is to reflect on my own research practice by raising discussion about the transformative process of autobiographical inquiry.

Chaos

“This is the universal break!” plays Milton. Eighty students hit their drums once. There is silence. I feel a pulse but do not move. But there is much energy in the room. Milton throws his right hand in the air and yells, “chaos!” Students go crazy hitting their drums. My daughter pounds her drum.

Milton wiggles his rear end in the middle of the gym. Students laugh. Suddenly, there is a mass of younger students entering the gym. They organize into rows and grades. Picture a June afternoon in the gymnasium of an elementary school. Students and teachers gather to hear a concert by hand drummers. There are no music scores or music stands. Milton has taught them by rote. The side door is open; heat comes from sunshine outside. Concerts signal the beginning of summer as the days get longer. Though I have attended many of Milton’s workshops, my daughter and I decide to attend this end-of-school-year concert since he just hired me to edit his upcoming books.

“Welcome to the performance,” Milton says into the microphone. It is 2:15 p.m. Students fall silent when he speaks. A moment before, a teacher reminded a student to take his hat off. We sit in chairs with djembes which is an African drum played with bare hands. As students focus, Milton gives the downbeat. I feel the groove, it is loud and energizing. My daughter smiles and pounds her drum. Facial expressions abound with focus, laughter, seriousness, and perplexity. One boy in the front row taps his foot. A girl behind nods her head. The smallest student claps his hands but cannot be heard. It was enough to get me going. A teacher at the side moves his arms up and down. I did not anticipate the intensity.

Playing the hand drum is so instructive. Yet, I cannot imagine how I could feel better than participating in this performance. The connection during this music making is amazing. To rebel against music is sometimes understandable since the profound connection can be unbearable. Thanks to Milton, I started drumming during the summer of 1995. I attended his classes and fell in love with the groove. I recall being enveloped by rhythms. In class, every organ in my body, my system, conspired to become the perfect drummer. My heartbeat murmured a melody, counterpoint to the grooves.

I let my body move forward. The momentum carries me across and up to another side; the unbearable lightness of drumming. Kundera (1984) says, “the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant” (p.5). I fly into the sky and leave life. There is power to act or speak or think without external constraints. I have immunity from obligations. There is liberty to remove oppression. If one has no feeling for music, would they be human?

I sift through memories and look at new beginnings. My head is full of clutter: a doctoral dissertation, my oral defense, graduation, teaching students, lesson plans, assessment, supervision reports, and helping students find teaching positions. I cannot reconcile all these facts without hoping the inertia of everything stops the planet from turning. There is something about the bright smiles of children making music. There is something about the bright smile of my daughter. The pivotal events that pinpoint my transition from childhood to adulthood involve unlocked moments of music. As I feel in and out of the groove, the free-fall of my body becomes a pleasure that adds buoyancy to the moment.

I spent ten years nourished and treasured beneath the university walls. “Spoiled in academia. Research, theorists, philosophers, and psychologists. Intellectual rush. Read everything I wanted. The library an exotic dim sum,” (Lee, 2006, p. 939). Now, here is the shadow to put beside those books; the beautiful wisdom of hand drumming. Tiny heartbeats flutter in my head. I wrap my hands around the sides of the chair. There are tears. I shake my head and repeat, “chaos.” When I look up, everything is gone. I wipe my face with my hand. There are other snippets of memories: stuffed animals, grocery receipts, piano lessons, CD’s, my father’s death, a remarriage, an adoption, separation, a serious illness, and many empty bottles of wine.

So, I am all grownup. I own my scale, composer of notes for myself and music. My piano teacher used to begin each lesson with four fast octave scales. Sometimes major, sometimes minor, depending on his mood. Major scales would frolic up and down like waterfalls. Minor scales would rise and fall with darker shadows of sound. G minor scale was born to play from E flat and F sharp with a gap in the middle. This gap caused tension in my fingers. But no matter what wrong notes I played, I was reminded I was a scale soaring with freedom and closure.

I know the signs of a beginning. It brings back memories. The feeling of change embedded in chaos. I wish to cry out loud yet have faith I will get somewhere. I know I can drive my Mazda down any road. There are roadmaps to anywhere I want. The rules are specific: no one can tell me which way to turn. And the rule to end all rules: if I do not like the road I am on, I can turn and take another road. But, I do get lost. Though I manage to arrive at my destinations, I take many roads and many directions. To me,

there is never one way to get somewhere. What I secretly long for is a way to try all roads in order to decide which way to go without the passage of time.

So university is over. I hang out with my daughter. Read, sudoku, play the piano, and do crosswords. It is strange the anticipation of life, which I love, engenders chaos. I improvise, but being predominantly left-handed, I play a single line most of the time. I try to solo with my left hand, comp with my right, and put the two together but it never works. But a jazz musician might say keep it simple, for people who can hear know there is more in the music. There is the subtlety.

Looking at Milton, my daughter and the drummers, I have no idea whether I am calm or hysterical. But I know what I do not know is natural. Living a life means I have no comparison to previous ones so it is better to live life as it comes without huge amounts of warning. What would life be like if music rehearsals repeated over and over. Take this moment. I say it has been confusing yet there is peace inside. I smile and sing full blast the last groove as I round the next corner into chaos.

“This is the universal break!” plays Milton. Eighty students hit their drums once. There is silence. I feel a pulse but do not move. But there is much energy in the room. Milton throws his right hand in the air and yells, “chaos!” Students go crazy hitting their drums. My daughter pounds her drum.

Conclusion

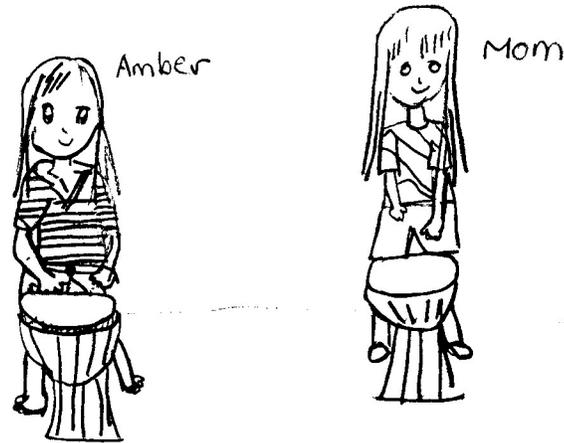
The opportunity to experience drumming as a healing tool was transformative as it created a meaningful and memorable moment with others that celebrated a transitional

phase. Participating in a drumming journey encompassed many different feelings of hope, grief, healing and celebration. The session had solos and good vibrations that were meditative as everyone held affirmations in their minds. “The most remarkable aspect of hand drumming is the high degree of repetition and sustained participation that offer students opportunities to internalize knowledge. Repetitive rhythms can teach in immediate and powerful ways” (Lee, 2006, p. 50). There was a sense of peace, harmony, collaboration, and belonging from respective levels of abilities where communication could occur without words as strangers could share innate musical sensibilities. Overall, drumming is accessible to all, regardless of previous experience or lack thereof as skill levels can participate simultaneously without modifying levels.

Epilogue

This narrative examined how autobiography transformed my experience at a hand drumming concert. I provide a heightened awareness about the process of autobiographical reflection as my experience becomes text for what I do and who I become as writer, musician, researcher, teacher educator. Hence, the complex emotional and intellectual issues of social change reflected from the verisimilitude of the narrative. The reflexive and poignant illustration of “being there” (Geertz, 1988, p.6) allows the reader to enter the story and vicariously experience the events portrayed (Bruner, 1990). I encourage researchers to explore “the importance of allowing ourselves to explore the questions that itch our lives” (Murray, 1991, p.9). This autobiographical reflection

highlighted the importance of social change. By blending autobiography and pedagogy, researchers can develop a deeper understanding about themselves and others.



Sketching by Amber, 10 years old

References

Bittman, B. (2004). Recreational Music Making: An Integrative Group Intervention For Reducing Burnout and Improving Mood States in First Year Associate Degree Nursing Students: Insights and Economical Impact. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship* 1(1), 1-26.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chernoff, J. (1979). *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Cudjoe, S. D. (2006). The Techniques of Ewe drumming and the Social Importance of Music in Africa. *Phylon* (1940 – 1956): 14(3), p. 280-291. Retrieved March 22, 2006 from JSTOR database.

Denzin, N. K. 2002. Cowboys and Indians. *Symbolic Interaction* 25:251-261.

Ellis, C. & Bochner, A.P. (1996). *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

Feld, S. (1988). "Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, or 'Lift-up-over Sounding': Getting into the Kaluli Groove," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, xx (1988), 74

Friedman, R. L. (2000). *The Healing Power of the Drum*. White Cliffs Media.

Geertz, C. (1988). *Work and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Cambridge, UK: Policy.

Grove Music Online (2007). <http://www.grovemusic.com/index.html>

Kaplan, C.D. (1999). *The Effects of Small Group Hand Drumming on Mood State and Group Cohesiveness: Organizational Applications for Group Rhythm* (Doctoral Dissertation-edited version, currently in press). University of Connecticut.

Kundera, M. (1984). *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.

Lee, K. V. (2006). Drumming Math. *Canadian Music Educator Journal*. 48(2), 50-51.

Lee, K. V. (2005). Spoiled in Academia. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 11(6), 939-940.

Murray, D. (1991). All Writing Is Autobiography. *College Composition and Communication*, 42(1), p. 66-74.