

FREEING THE VOICE WITHIN: the Healing Art of Songwriting with Elders Diagnosed with Dementia, Alzheimer's Disease, and Cognitive Disorders.

--Judith-Kate Friedman, Founding Director, Songwriting Works™

Author's note: While this article is written specifically about my work with those who have cognitive disorders, the benefits of composing and performing music are equally evident in the work I've done with active, well older adults, and, indeed, with all ages. – JKF

"You help humanity to be themselves by putting a lilt on it."--D.H., age 87

Songwriting with elders diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, is one of the most rewarding and surprising musical adventures I've experienced in my twenty year career as a performing songwriter. As founding director of Songwriting Works,* I have collaborated with hundreds of elders from across the spectra of physical and mental ability, cultural origin, educational background, and economic means. We've composed dozens of songs and have had the good fortune of singing them, in live performances, on recordings, and on film, for international audiences.** Music unifies us. We come together to share our love of song and discover what is possible when individuals find and lift their creative voices in community.

• It is a spring day at an Alzheimer's Day Center. Twelve elders are gathered for a songwriting session, seated opposite a large chalkboard. I'm in the middle, colored markers in hand, guitar at the ready, facilitating discussion. As we reminisce about holidays, family vacations, honeymoons, and adventures, the conversation turns to Hawai'i. "Ah," one woman says, her face lighting up. She has been quiet and apparently disoriented for most of the hour and is speaking for the first time. She talks of the beauty of that place; how much she loves it. I pick up my guitar and sing her words back to her. Listening intently, she breaks into a grin. "I don't know who said that" she says, "but I sure do feel that way." We sing together with the group, weaving the chorus, and threading our stories into verse.

THE POWER OF SONG

The voice is humanity's original instrument. Everyone has a song to sing. Composing music, and sharing one's song, comes as freely to children as it does to birds. However, in most consumer-oriented cultures, those whose gifts appear exceptional at an early age are encouraged, while creative expression for the majority goes untapped. We are divided into lauded specialists and appreciative listeners, "serious" performers and "dabblers" who carry their early love for music-making deep inside, despite accumulated hurts or resentments about not "having what it takes to make it." The good news is that the voice within is rarely stilled. It pops out in the car, hums in our ears, sings in the shower, and chimes in any place where it is given permission and made welcome. Creativity and

musicality persist as we age. In fact, just as a fine wine becomes more flavorful, and hand-crafted guitars 'open up,' with time, so the depth of character, meaning, and healing can be for elders who discover the power of making their own music.

"What have I learned? Can you put a count on a sunset? I've been more aware of my desire to put things into words. I have a renewed interest in people and more room to focus...I was delighted to find I could talk. This is very important to people like me, in places like this. Someone is interested in you from the world outside."

--J. D., age 75

FROM SINGING TO SONGWRITING

As all who have had the pleasure of singing with elders know, favorite songs can enliven us and open treasure troves of memories. Singing awakens the body, engaging breath, heartbeat, and all the senses. It connects us, through vibration, to all that is, as sound travels inward on a cellular level, and out into the universe on infinite waves. Songs are integral to social movements, spiritual life, creative play, and the transmission of knowledge. They reflect and help to sustain us. They can be lifelines in troubled times, and a means to celebrate joys as well as sorrows. In my experience, the benefits of making music increase when the songs one sings are one's own. So, in 1990, when I was asked to develop music programs for adult day and residential care centers, I was eager to transcend the well-documented realm of sing-alongs and give elders access to the powerful experience of composing and performing their own memorable songs.

"I've never sung before in my life and now I'm singing." - E.N. age 90

Productive artistic collaboration with any age group begins with respect for each other's intelligence and a premise that the participating partners have creative gifts that are of mutual value. When working with elders, demonstrating one's belief in their value and creativity is healing in itself. Respectful facilitation, guided by principles of inclusion and full access, creates a "level playing field" upon which all can have fun and contribute as equal players.

Songwriting Works' initial programs were designed to serve groups of twenty to thirty frail adults with diverse physical, mental, and cultural needs. English speakers and immigrants, life-long singers and musical novices, mentally alert folks and elders diagnosed with early and mid-stage Alzheimer's disease were invited to swap stories, improvise music, and voice their truths for an hour each week. The model proved successful and works equally well with active seniors, psychiatric patients, social workers, and intergenerational groups (ages 4-100+).

RECIPES FOR SUCCESS

Modeling respect, and beaming enthusiasm, the ideal Songwriting Works facilitator is an outgoing, multi-tasking musician, skilled in improvisation and consensus building, who enjoys group processes. S/he engages participants hands-on, assesses their musicianship, fields ideas, and coaches them in song structure, rhyme, and melody, while listening, and pointing out the gems and cadences in their speech. S/he draws out the quieter individuals, and encourages leadership and patience from the raconteurs. Most importantly, s/he takes nothing for granted. The core principal of success for anyone working with this population is to use every conversation as an opportunity to see and affirm elders' creative vitality, and counter the commonplace dismissal, and internalized self-dismissal, that they too often face.

- *On the psychiatric care unit at the Jewish Home in San Francisco, a song about the Coney Island and Santa Cruz boardwalks, leads an elder man to reminisce about the Long Beach pike, an amusement park from his childhood. "Pike? What are you talking about the beach?" says a man, originally from England. "A pike is a spear, like the guards carry at the Tower of London!" "Huh? A spear?" a woman, over the age of 100, laughs. "Pike is a fish! White fish. You use in making gefilte fish!" So begins a series of sessions in which we gather and argue over proper recipes for the Jewish delicacy. One of the most buoyant elders composes the chorus: "Gefilte fish, gefilte fish -- There is no dish quite like it. If I could wish for any wish, I'd wish for some -- gefilte fish!" The song becomes a "hit" throughout the Home (and later on a CD and film***). As significant, however, is a nurse's comment that the songwriting process has brought two elders, who normally have difficulty being in the same room, into the same conversation.*

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RESPECT AND HUMOR

When a joke or a singable line hits home, everyone feels it. But aside from hearty singing, spontaneous laughter, or evident agitation, cues to success in songwriting are almost entirely non-verbal. A trained facilitator learns to accurately gauge group response, capture meaningful moments, and repeat them. Repetition--a key element of popular song structure--is essential, re-assuring, and never boring for elders with dementia. Keeping a steady rhythm on a chording instrument (guitar, piano) helps them entrain to the music as they come up with lyrics. In contrast to alert seniors, for whom quick retorts and teases can work like charms, people with dementia appreciate straightforward and compassionate interactions that affirm their presence. Their loss of ability to communicate in a linear way requires patience from participants and artist alike, yet their diminished defenses and reduced self-consciousness can increase their willingness to participate. One does well to be gracious and genuinely interested, taking care to be clear, to not overuse abstract concepts, demand conformity, nor make offhand, potentially humiliating, remarks.

This said, humor is key, and honesty is refreshing. The mood of entire groups can switch from gloom to laughter when someone candidly acknowledges their situation.

• *At the start of a group on the Alzheimer's Unit, a staff member is apologizing to an agitated participant for making a mistake. As they end their conversation, I play a rhythmic blues progression to get the group started and echo her words: "I made a mistake." An elder answers "So what!" Another, a former school teacher, adds "That's what erasers are for!" I say, "We all make mistakes." "Big deal!" says another. And a fourth adds (in Yiddish) "Oy, oy, oy, oy vey (Woe is me!)" They continue: "I forgot to do something. Big deal.... I went for a walk, and didn't find my way. I kept right on going. Ha, Ha, Ha! Not once, twice, ten times, it's true. I've made mistakes, haven't you?"*
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THE HITS KEEP COMING

From radio, to dance floor, to campfire circle, hit songs are built on "hooky" choruses, memorable melody lines, strong rhythms, and meaningful words. When these elements come together in songs composed by elders diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease the results are powerful. With weekly exposure, even those with short-term memory deficits remember their "theme" songs and sing them with gusto, correctly supplying missing words and strings of notes (i.e. when the song leader intentionally omits them.) Over time, these original songs appear to lodge in the same part of the brain as the old favorites. (Songwriting Works hopes to participate in research on this phenomenon.)

For a professional songwriter, the opportunity to explore rhythm, melody, and language in the service of elders with dementia is a gift, and an intensive training ground. Collaborating in the context of non-linear communication presents challenges for even the most imaginative artist. The experience of combining songwriting with access for the disabled may be an emotional and spiritual stretch for those unaccustomed to this work, but it is precisely here, at the transcending of barriers, that creativity flourishes and transformational healing takes place.****

"You do a beautiful job of bringing the deeper, more worthwhile things out." -D.H., age 87

When we invite and value elders' input, we open to receiving creativity and connection in their purest form. Like the woman who reminisced about Hawai'i, our co-writers may not recognize themselves as authors and contributors of their own words and music, nor have the apparent need, or ability, to identify as such. (We can, and must give them credit, regardless.) However, as they trust us, and as we open to awareness, they may reveal the reality of their situations with heartbreaking poignancy, disarming humor, and great insight. And help us to recognize the essence of what is important to them.

We all have much to learn in this somewhat uncharted territory. The courage that goes into improvisation and performance serves us, even when familiar signposts disappear. It is an honor to work so closely with, and be a student of, elders who, witting or unwittingly, are such fine teachers. To learn, by their example, about living in each moment. To listen, and help to create opportunities for meaningful collaboration. And to remember the value of kindness, and music, in the preciousness of each day.

• *It is the morning after the bombing starts in Iraq. On the acute care unit, at the Jewish Home, it is unusually quiet. Although most of these elders have limited verbal ability, there is often a buzz of words and sounds, in English, Yiddish and Russian. Today, it is silent. The somberness, palpable. Careful not to project my own perceptions onto them, I notice that even those who are normally agitated sit still. I wonder what they're feeling, how cognizant they are of the world outside. I strum soft guitar chords, and circle the large dining room, playing for each elder, then sit with the most animated woman on the unit. She begins talking in "word salad," in English, yet making no intelligible sense. I sit close by, listening, and continue to play. In the midst of a mish-mash sentence she turns to me intently and says: "And every life is precious in this world." I sing the line back to her. She adds, "Every day...." We sing back and forth as she embellishes, "It's a wonderful world..." I add, "Peace will find a way." She seems to like that. Later that day, on the Alzheimer's unit, I ask if anything is missing or needed in the lyric. "Be thankful" someone says, and many agree. We now have the chorus. "Every life is precious in this world. Every day. Every day. In this very wonderful world, peace will find a way. Be thankful.... Be thankful every day. Be thankful.... Peace will find a way."*

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Parts of this article, in an earlier version, appeared in the Reform Jewish Nurses Network Newsletter (Summer 2003, UAHC press). Thanks to Alisa Fineman for her song 'Better with Time' from which the image of the guitar is drawn. All song lyrics copyright, words and music by Judith-Kate Friedman/Songwriting Works/Jewish Home, as noted. Reprinted with permission.

Footnotes:

**Songwriting Works is a non-profit organization that provides avenues for elders and professional songwriters to compose and perform original songs. More than 1800 elders have participated since the project began in 1990 as part of Judith-Kate Friedman's California Arts Council artist-in-residence at Artworks/San Francisco Institute on Aging. For more information about the programs and publications of Songwriting Works, please visit: www.songwritingworks.org or contact: Judith-Kate Friedman, founding director, Songwriting Works, PMB 606, 2625 Alcatraz Avenue, Berkeley, California 94705 USA 510/548-3655.*

** The “Singers and Songwriters of the Jewish Home in San Francisco,” average age 87, perform original songs composed by elders at all levels of care, with Judith-Kate Friedman and special guests on their debut CD “Island on a Hill” and in Nathan Friedkin’s documentary film “A ‘Specially Wonderful Affair.” To hear samples of “Island on a Hill” please visit www.cdbaby.com/cd/judithkate3 . For more information on the Jewish Home in San Francisco, visit: www.jhsf.org

***Nathan Friedkin's documentary film "A 'Specially Wonderful Affair" tells the story of the making of the Jewish Home elders' CD during the week of 9/11/01. It has screened at the San Francisco, Montreal, and Barcelona Int'l Jewish Film Festivals and on San Francisco's PBS affiliate KQED-TV. For more information contact: www.fdigital.net

****Songwriting Works is part of a growing international movement to raise awareness of the value of creativity and the arts for everyone, as we age. A recent study by Dr. Gene Cohen affirms the benefits of hands-on participation in the arts for older adults, contact: National Center for Creative Aging, Susan Perlstein, Executive Director, www.creativeaging.org Faith-based initiatives to engage elders more thoroughly in community life and intergenerational activity are emerging. For one example, contact: the Sacred Aging project of the Union of Reform Judaism (US), Rabbi Richard Address, Department of Family Concerns, www.urj.org

About the Author:

Judith-Kate Friedman is an award-winning vocalist, songwriter, and recording artist. She began composing songs with elders in 1990 as California Arts Council artist-in-residence with Artworks (then part of the San Francisco Institute on Aging at Mt. Zion hospital) and founded Songwriting Works in 1997 to expand upon this work. She has worked extensively with elders in long-term care facilities and community settings, including those with diagnoses of Alzheimer's Disease, dementia, and other cognitive disorders, as well as with inter-generational groups (age 4-106), and with active seniors. In 2002, she produced "Island on a Hill" the debut CD by elder Singers & Songwriters of the Jewish Home (average age 87). She performs with them on the recording and in the documentary film "A 'Specially Wonderful Affair." Judith-Kate speaks and performs internationally. She lives in Berkeley, California. For more info please visit: www.judithkate.com

[As printed in the National Health Service of Wales, UK publication: Signposts: for Older Adults with Mental Health Matters, Spring 2004](#)

[An abridged version of this article also appeared in Aging Today, Nov 2004.](#)