



## Initiations into the infinite, a calling to Music-Thanatology:

*Abigail Robinson*

Music-Thanatology is the use of live music, prescribed for the individual, sung and accompanied by the harp in response to the rhythm of the breath to ease pain and provide a visceral experience of the infinite at the end of life. In order to describe my personal calling to Music-Thanatology, I need to look at myself, as Rilke puts it, 'tall and against a wide sky.' In this way the events of my life exist as a reality, without the burden of judgement but carrying the richness of meaning.

Physical and sexual abuse led to a terrifying loss of boundaries, the feeling of losing my skin and then my entire physical body, one of many initiations into the infinite. I came to know death as a power that draws the soul towards it. I found hope, safety and rest in invisible realms. I know death as something more than loss, resignation or the end of pain. I know it as a timeless realm of love.

When I first heard the harp, I felt a sense of coming home as its tones touched my heart with this bodily knowing of the infinite. Now conveying this through my presence and in my music, I call those who are dying to their own knowledge of spirit as home.

When I read about the training of Music-Thanatologists in the USA. I felt my soul expand and separate from my enmeshment with my family. I had the sense that if I did not follow this call I would die. As a student intern in the presence of a patient dying in terror, I found to my surprise that I was not afraid of their fear or even my own. Indeed it was my experience of having lived with so much fear that enabled me to simply hold them in love, accepting the powerlessness of not knowing if I could help them:

After being with a dying middle-aged woman with schizophrenia who appeared to be birthing an archetypal terror in her dying, but whose eyes just for a few moments seemed to register some peace, I wrote: 'I felt the

golden light essence of this visionleader come through all of us, through our touch and eyes as well as sound. I continued cradling L. with my hands and opening to earth and sky energies that were beyond and far greater than my own, holding the image of humanity as an axis mundi'.

My experiences of vigils has proved to be spiritual rather than religious experiences. I found myself in a role that felt archetypal; my sense of personal self was subsumed by clarity about my infinite nature, and the sense that this position of holding the threshold at death has been happening since humanity's inception and throughout all cultures. It felt to be an always-necessary part of human existence and the nourishment of the world's soul to have witnesses to the end of life and that ultimate communion with the divine. The proximity to someone dying calls forth the infinite. Presence and loving attention become palpable and are articulated through the music.

The light of this love tunnels into darkness. This is the love that sees and does not turn away. It embraces all fear and pain. It is there in the songs I sing to comfort myself that become praise songs for the gift of infinite presence.

The *axis mundi*, as anthropologist Mercea Eliade describes them, is a 'place of dynamic union where beings of quite different natures come together or pass into one another. ...(It) defines reality, for it marks the place where being is most fully manifest'.

Such subtle shifts in experience are potent in the intensification of

living that occurs at the end of life. Roles and identities are stripped away. As we die we are confronted with the existential truth of the aloneness of our being and our relationships, or lack of them. One man who often seemed to come to the edge of death before coming back described the music in this way: 'He felt love coming from the world (into him) and back out (of him) and into the world.'

A. said that 'the music was beautiful, and the image I had of him in front of me became liquid. The space opened out horizontally and vertically and I had the impression of being on a vast ocean, the breath of me became liquid. The space opened out horizontally and vertically and I had the impression of being on a vast ocean, the breath of me became liquid. A. seemed to relax and the colour in his eyes returned and with it light. For a while the pain seemed to be subdued in the presence of vibrant intimacy and reverent tenderness'.

My own experience of vigils was that often the sense of time and space in the hospital room would alter. I went to see a man who was breathing on a ventilator and unconscious, and yet his spirit seemed abundantly present in the room.

'Looking into your eyes  
I cannot see you  
Only the opening of the prairie  
The wind storming lifting us all  
up  
The breath of God,  
Great Spirit liltng through your  
soul strong in music  
I keep looking up half expecting  
rain  
The room is lush with  
constructed ecosystems,  
machines drip with your fluids,  
And the wind that blows  
currents of a river going  
nowhere, everywhere eternally.'

Death is a place most of us fear to go. The infinite proportions of time and space frightened me in a dream near the completion of my training, and yet in the same dream was the word 'initiation'. It is this awesome possibility of entering Utopia (literally meaning not of time, not of place) that is such a privilege to experience.

Writing about vigils is a necessary part of the clinical aspect of our work as we provide narratives for the hospitals and care facilities where we work. For myself it was also an essential place to ground the experience of touching the infinite, and to honour its sacredness through attempting its articulation. Writing is an opportunity to process the emotional intensity of the interactions between myself, the patients and their families as well as part of the essential grounding of soul experience in the physical world so necessary to self-care.

There are difficulties in developing this work in the UK, which seem to be partly due to the decline in spiritual care generally as political and economic pressures focus end of

life health care on basic physical care and pain management. This happens even within the hospice movement where spiritual care was originally championed. But my experience is that American culture, whatever its shadow, is supportive of using what works without the endless need to prove how and why. They are also not so afraid of the word 'spiritual' and do not compartmentalise spirituality as only appropriate when provided by the Chaplaincy.

Transitus and the Martinsey Isle trust are both organisations dedicated to networking and supporting professionals in the field of death and dying and the continuation of consciousness, and have been enormously supportive in enabling me to share this work with other professionals in the UK. It is my hope that through providing opportunities for training for those already working in this field, Music-Thanatology may yet enter our hospitals and hospices, even if it is by the back door.

**Abigail Robinson**, Music-Thanatologist, is trained in an intensive synthesis of music, medicine and spiritual psychology widely used in end of life care in the United States. Her work prior to this was in sound-healing. She now offers workshops and individual sessions that provide tools to reconnect and stay present in the body whilst feeling a relationship to that which is timeless. These are available in different forms to anyone needing to feel more nourished and enlivened, while knowing deep peace. The requirement is a willingness to go into the depths. For further information, email: [abigailr\\_uk@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:abigailr_uk@yahoo.co.uk) or phone 07969 703130.