

## WHY ARE WE HERE?

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*(This talk began with a song with motions, Funga Alafia)*

It feels appropriate to begin the proceedings with a song, this one from the Hausa people of Nigeria extending a welcome. Words of welcome are, of course, conventional and expected, but taken on a different power when lifted into song. This is the great beauty of our chosen field— sending the message directly to the nervous system, the blood, the muscles, no interpreters necessary. To sing together is to welcome each other and feel welcomed and create a sense of shared belonging. Secondly, we welcome each other through the meaning of the text— ‘Lafia is a casual greeting amongst the Hausa, Ashay, a deeper more spiritual greeting also found among the Yoruba people and people who practice capoeira in Brazil. Thirdly, the meaning is amplified by the gestures— I indeed welcome you with my thoughts, which now must be carried in my words and spoken with the language of the heart. And there is nothing up my sleeve here in terms of trying to convert you or sell you something, not even my own point of view. I simply want to say a few things that can open important conversations, conversations within each of us and between each of us. And so we begin.

First, let me say that it is such a pleasure to be back in the land of good health care, regulations on assault weapons, schools that still prefer education over testing and great-hearted, intelligent and good-looking people. Most impressive of all, it is great to be in a country with an armed forces that can play some hot jazz! I was so impressed by last night’s performance and visualized the new armed conflict— send in the Canadian forces and as soon as they start swingin’ on their instruments, the enemy puts down their weapons and joins in on the jam! I hope that you all will consider giving aid to one of the developing countries most in need—especially that big one just south of the border where I come from.

Of course, we are all developing countries, developing cultures, developing people. One of my favorite quotes comes from the Zen Master Suzuki-Roshi: “*You are perfect as you are—but we all could stand a little improvement.*” And I imagine that’s why most of us are here— to find some affirmation for what we’re doing and challenge ourselves to do it yet better.

I come to you in my 33<sup>rd</sup> year teaching music to children from three years old through grade eight, all at the same school. (Many people marvel at the statistic, never thinking that the reason might be that I can’t get a job anywhere else!) And I can happily report that I’m as delighted to be working with children now as I was when I first began—in truth, much more so, since now I know a little bit more about what I’m doing and not faking it as drastically as I used to. And one of the things I imagine a lot of you love about working with children as much as I do is those pearls of wisdom that drop from their mouths. One of my favorites comes from my colleague, James Harding. In his first year of teaching music to children, he went to meet the three year olds down at their classroom. He led them down the long hall down to the music room, entered the room, brought them into a circle and sat them down. Just as he was poised to begin the first activity, one of these tender young souls looked up at him with great dismay and a few tears and said in his plaintive voice, “*Why are we here?!!*” James was speechless, struck by the profundity of the question. Why, indeed, are we here?

At the beginning of any venture, this is always a good question to ask. What drew us here? What do we hope for? Will we leave a slightly different person than when we came— and by different I mean one inch more clear about our purpose, one inch more of understanding in our field, one inch more connected to our colleagues? So turn to your neighbor and give the shortest explanation you can muster about why you are here, what you hope to learn. (*Audience talks amongst themselves*) Let’s hear five answers.

What I suspected were many layers. At the top layer would be things like

- *My school district requires it.*
- *I needed time off from the kids or family or everyday workaday world.*
- *It's a beautiful place and there's a great restaurant on the way.*

No comments need be made about these.

In the next layer.

- *To reconnect with my colleagues.*

Music teaching is one of the loneliest and most isolated jobs in the schools. Classroom teachers can gather in the teacher's room and share their excitement about the books their kids are reading or the science experiments they just did, but music teachers tend to be alone in their work. We are hungry for colleagues who understand what we are doing and conferences like these are essential to remind us that we are not alone.

- *To improve my musicianship.*

A tax accountant may arrive at the end of his or her field, but a musician, from your 6 year old student to Yo Yo Ma, Bobby McFerrin and Wynton Marsalis never reaches the end of musical mastery.

- *To get new material.*

This is the bread and butter of the profession, keeping on the alert for the next new arrangement for choir, band, orchestra or Orff ensemble. Many of us, especially general music teachers, have to create our own repertoire and curriculum and gathering new material is essential to our craft.

- *To get new ideas.*

Rehearsal techniques, strategies for student involvement, a detailed process for teaching a lesson— most of us realize that it is not enough to know our discipline and choose the repertoire, but we also must know how to communicate, motivate, engage and develop

our student's promise. This is true of all aspects of music teaching and is one great contribution the so-called alternative approaches to music education—Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze—have to offer; attention to the process of developing a musical idea or lesson with the children. *How* you teach is as important—and indeed, possibly more important—than *what* you teach.

- *To stretch beyond my own discipline.*

This is one that probably didn't make your list and I invite you all to consider it. At some point, we all have to choose where to pitch our tent in this vast world of music and music education. I'm in the Orff field because I happen to like the view and the particular wildflowers that grow there. I thank Orff and his colleagues for leading me to this spot on the mountain, but I know full well (and so did he) that no one spot has the whole view. And so I take many day hikes to other camps and always return refreshed. We are long overdue to go beyond the polarizing and debilitating effects of "I'm a choral teacher, I'm a band teacher, I'm an early childhood teacher, I'm a Kodaly teacher." Those are but the places we lay our heads at night, but during the day, we better get up and walk around if we want to be a complete music teacher. We need each other. I hope that we all spend some time this conference going to a workshop outside our immediate discipline and talking to our colleagues camped on the other side of the mountain.

- *To get refreshed and renew my vows.*

Why are we here? Not only why did we come to this conference, but also why were we called to music and why we chose to teach it. John Dewey once said, "*We learn by experience—but only if we reflect on our experience.*" In our day-to-day life, we are constantly walking amongst the trees and it is a rare moment when we telescope out to see the whole forest. Here in this lovely setting, apart from the push-and-pull of our daily schedule, it is a good time to reflect on what we're doing and why we're doing it. We can argue for hours about whether phonetics works better than whole language methods, whether 6/8 should be introduced before 3/4 or whether zone defense is better than man-to-man (or person-to-person) and forget the purpose behind it all. It is the rare teacher

that constantly reminds students why they are spending their precious hours wrestling with numbers, words, shapes, notes or moves on the basketball court.

My hope is that all your reasons for attending are met by your experiences here, but what would serve us all the most—and more importantly, what would serve the children we teach— is to pause and climb up to a lookout and think about what we have been doing and how we can do it better. And return to the workaday world with renewed vigor and vision.

Why are we here? After taking a workshop from me, a participant wrote:

*In all my years of taking piano lessons, and playing the recorder in college and beyond, NO ONE pointed out that music was there for expression. I think I understood that it was about beauty, but not that that had anything to do with me personally.*

In evaluations written by my Conservatory students, several have made comments like, “*Before taking this class, I never knew that music could be fun.*” This is what happens when music is plucked out of the field and lay on the dissecting table, with students dutifully labeling its parts. When we treat music as a specialized subject, reduce it to deciphering black dots on papers and obediently reproducing what others have created, we lose its inherent connection with the body, with movement, with gesture, with speech, with spontaneous and disciplined communication, with expression of the thoughts and feelings that can’t be said in mere words. In short, we lose our three-year old relationship with music as the most natural of human experiences. That’s why I think every teacher in every discipline should be required to teach three-year olds—so they can remember the marvelous whole way in which we used to be before we divided the world up into that weird thing called “school subjects.”

Because I see children over an eleven year span, one of my markers of success is to note if that three- year old enthusiasm for music remains intact as the children mature and move into the more technical aspects of music-making. Those Conservatory students who had to recover their sense that music could be fun had lost that connection. But it appears

that the students in our program do not. Because they not only play, but also sing and dance over those eleven years, because they not only learn existing music, but create their own and improvise every step of the way, because they are asked to continually reflect and analyze and express their thoughts, because they are not mere players in their teacher's plan, but co-participants in the discovery of what each activity might offer, they really get it! Listen to the comments these two grade seven kids wrote when asked by my colleague Sofia Lopez-Ibor why music was important to them. Imagine that one of these children was the same three-year old who asked "Why are we here?" and answered his own question at the other end of his music education at our school. (He wasn't, but sometimes fiction is truer than fact.)

*"Music is very important to me. Why? Because it can fill in your blanks. It's flexible the way you are. You can always find music that fits your mood. You know that saying "misery loves company?" Well, music is a perfect proof of that. When you're sad, you can play sad music. It makes you feel like you have company—you know there is someone else out there who feels the same way you do. Music can share your pain and build your spirits. Music fills those bare silences. Music is like colorful emotion that spreads over the room whenever it is played.*

*Being able to play music is amazing. You fill yourself with color and emotion. You get that exciting, amazing feeling when you play it correctly, when you hit the right note.*

*Everyone should be allowed or able to feel that color, that emotion as it flows through them. "* — Morgan Cundiff

*"Music isn't just notes written on paper or different frequencies you hear music, music isn't a "thing" to me. Music is a way of life, you can live through music. You can feed on it, you can find relief in it. I use music as a passage and the passage can go wherever I want it to. Jazz, classical, rock 'n' roll, the different passageways of music. Music brings you to a new dimension. Perhaps it's an Ab major dimension or a Techno dimension, whatever that dimension is, it's the one you want." —Jackson Vanfleet-Brown*

The one you want—and the one you need. The larger your experience is of music, the more possibilities you have of finding just what you need at the moment. A jazz ballad to soothe you, a salsa piece to pump you up, a Chopin nocturne to slow you down, a spiritual to help you bear your grief, Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> to sing your joy. Music is one of the most powerful of human creations because, as we noted earlier, it works directly on your nervous system—it can change your breathing, change your musculature, change your brain waves, literally transform you so that at the end of listening to or playing music, you are a different person than you were before. And if the music has done its job well, you feel more connected—to your body, to your heart, to your mind, to your fellow human beings.

At least until the next piece of music. Sadly, these changes aren't permanent. Anyone who has worked in a music group knows that music does NOT solve our constant difficulties with ourselves and with each other. But it does give us at least some moments where everything makes sense, where we blend into a whole greater than ourselves and feel elevated, exalted, inspired. And I suggest that a daily habit of good music-making is not a bad way to develop closer to that mystery we all hope to be—a whole human being.

It helps to speak these things out loud. But words will just be empty air if not backed up by the experiences that indeed awaken the slumbering soul. We cannot tell children that music is important and beautiful if we teach in a way that only cares about winning the competition or passing the test. We cannot shout at them to feel joyful or yell at them to take a risk. We cannot have them scrape away at scales mechanically and hope that it will magically transform to expressive music. We cannot let them simply decipher black dots on paper without hearing or understanding profoundly what they are doing. We cannot leave them with the idea that being musical means playing a particular instrument. (My friend Stephen Gbolonyo from Ghana says he is always confused when he tells people he's a musician and they immediately ask, "What instrument do you play?" He repeats, "I'm a musician. That means I can figure out how to play any instrument.") We cannot convince them that music is for everyone if we treat it as a rarified subject reserved for

the talented. In short, we cannot teach music unmusically, simply talking at kids, shouting at kids, rehearsing in disconnected fragments, just moving our fingers over keys without being able to sing or dance what we play. We have to revision the teaching of music as a musical practice in itself, where there is a constant flow, a development between all the themes, a sense of an inviting beginning to the class, a connected middle and a satisfying ending. There needs to be room for our students to contribute, whether it's an improvised solo, an idea of how to develop a piece, a chance for them to lead an echo rhythm exercise or a chance for them to reflect and discuss what we did and what worked and what didn't.

Why are we here? We can say over and over that art is important, but how do we bring that down into the gut? Well, I know one way. I just spent six months saying goodbye to an 88- year old man at the other end of life. After triple bypass surgery, he struggled to recover until finally giving up. For the last ten weeks of his life, he never left his bed and didn't eat a bite of food, subsisting on diet Pepsi and water. He was my father.

And how did we pass those ten weeks together? Did we sit admiring the watch his company gave him when he retired? Reading his old report cards? Doing math sheets? When the great matter of life and death came down to the bare essentials, what was important? I think you can guess. We sat listening to music—all of Beethoven's symphonies, Schubert's Unfinished, the tape I made of his own piano compositions. I sang songs to him, played accordion and watched him drift into that place of pure peace and contentment, those moments when "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world"—as long as the music is playing. He recited the *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* to me that he had learned in school some 75 years earlier and almost had it perfectly. He talked to me about the paintings he had made and which were his favorites and why. We even watched some of the old classic movies—*Grand Hotel*. *Some Like It Hot*. *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. In short, suddenly art in all its myriad faces was revealed as the essential thing it is in the face of the wonder and terror of human life and death. And I was here teaching in Toronto when he finally passed away and there are people in



this audience who helped me so much in my grief simply by singing the songs we were going to sing anyway, but now amplified with greater meaning and beauty.

And I couldn't help but wonder: what will today's children turn to on their death beds in the years to come? Will they be comforted by the Britney Spears song or the 50 Cent rap? Will they ask to play just once more the Mortal Kombat video game they spent their childhood mastering? Will they request a laptop so they can re-enter their favorite chat-room? What music will comfort them? What poetry will give them courage? What art will sustain them in the face of their mortality?

I'd like to think that they will sing or listen to or play the beautiful music that they learned from a very important person in their life— you. They'll request that swinging Ellington tune, that goosebump choral piece, that stirring string setting, that elemental Orff arrangement, that old folk song or sweet lullaby that they learned in your class. Think about that when you choose what to teach and how to teach it and remind yourself that you can be the most powerful person in that child's life in ways that you simply can't imagine now.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why we are here.

## **WHY STUDY MUSIC? A NOTE FROM DOUG GOODKIN TO HIS GRADUATING GRADE EIGHT CLASS— © Doug Goodkin 2007**

*(Note: Some of these students had been with Doug since they were three years old—eleven marvelous years together! Some had only come in to the school in Middle School and spent three years. Our last year together was spent studying jazz. This letter was included in the OMEA Conference materials as an addendum to the above speech.)*

Dear 8<sup>th</sup> graders,

The goodbyes have been said, the tears have been shed, you're sleeping late in bed and "summer is a coming in." It was a beautiful graduation, a great ending to an elaborate piece of music, complete with drum roll, cymbal crash and a Satchmo "Oh yeah!" finale. (Or was it "cha-cha-cha?") It's hard for me to accept that the music is over, so I'm sending this little coda to say just a few more things that I didn't get to say.

I was so moved when one of you wrote me a note saying that you didn't like jazz that much before the class and now can enjoy a little bit. Understanding really does help appreciation and you guys know enough to at least figure out whether the piece is a blues, an AABA form or a jazz composition with its own form. And of course, my goal is not to convert you to lifelong jazz fans (well, maybe it is!), but to at least make you aware of music that you will not easily find on the radio dial. And the reason for it all is to have the tools to help you walk through the complexity of all the emotions we human beings can feel.

When you are so overwhelmed with feeling that you feel you could scream, lie down on the floor with some good headphones and let Coltrane do it for you in A Love Supreme. When you think that the world is aglow with unquenchable happiness, listen to Louis sing about it in It's a Wonderful World. Heck, listen to Louis sing anything and you'll feel your joy double. When it's a gloomy Sunday, let Billie Holiday help you sink into it and then come out the other side. Looking for romance? Try a Miles Davis ballad. Restless? Let Bird and Diz get your feet moving and your spirit soaring. Need to clear your mind? Let Ella's crystal voice do it for you and send you be-boppin' into the next thing you have to do. Feeling quirky? Do a limpy tap-dance on the keys with Thelonious Monk. In the mood for fireworks? Follow Art Tatum note for note and watch the sky light up.

And of course, there are lots of feelings you'll have that even Louis and Duke can't touch. For that, you'll need a mouthful of Mozart, a bit of Beethoven, a dip into Debussy. And right where their notes end are a few other universes that you've already peeked into—gamelan, samba, South African harmony. And don't forget those 150 American folk songs some of you learned in elementary. The emotional palette is so much broader than the primary colors of happy and sad and there's a style of music for every shade under the sun—and a thousand more songs inside each style to get even more specific.

And, by the way, there are also places that music can't reach and you'll have to turn to some poetry or painting or plays. Not one of you needs to be convinced that the arts are important, but you'll go on to places where people think you can choose whether you want them in your life or not and meet people that think that it's enough to read the newspaper and watch the news on TV. The poet William Carlos Williams once wrote, "*It is difficult to get the news from poems, but men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.*"

Here I'm talking about listening to music, reading poetry, looking at art, watching plays. That is absolutely part of a balanced life. But then when you are *playing* music, *reciting* poetry, *making* art, *acting* in plays, *dancing* dances, then art's healing powers go a few inches deeper. That's what we've taught you at school, from three years old on—learn about music by making music, about poetry by writing some yourself and so forth. The old Buddhist saying, "Painted cakes don't satisfy hunger," is a cardinal principle of all of education.

And then the final level, the one that goes the furthest in keeping you alive and vibrant and eager to wake up in the morning is creating art yourself. Composing music, improvising blues or raps, writing poetry, songs, stories, painting pictures, sculpting sculptures, choreographing dances, directing films—well, the list goes on. If you're lucky, you'll be in classes where teachers continue to invite your voice to speak through the creative process. If not, you'll have to keep that habit going yourself—start a garage band, keep a journal, close the door to your room and dance away to your favorite music.

And finally, one promise I want to you to make to me. When you grow up and have children of your own, make sure they have a quality music program in their school! For every child at every age and at least two days a week. If they don't, start one! Or teach it yourself (we have summer courses to give you the training). Don't let a school get away with thinking that arts are a sugary icing on the side of the main course. Okay?

Now forget about all of this and go out and have a great summer.

Love always,

Doug

