Musical Odyssey: From Pain To Recovery

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Most days our mind wanders, races about, but life hums along with our routines until it doesn’t. With a snap of the back everything changes, safe ground swept away.

I am riding the roller coaster of fear and worry anticipating the next nosedive, chest heaving, heart pounding, breath in my throat tightening, throbbing, searing, spasming sciatica pain colonizing my body-mind monopolizing days-nights.

When daily meditation isn’t enough I’m home calling doctors, writing emails, waiting for callbacks, replies – that don’t come or arrive too late – my primary care doc MIA. Calls from PA’s, RN’s, assistants trickle in leaving me waiting 6 weeks until I’m seen for vertigo.

How can I help you? the Chief of Internal Medicine asks. I can give you oxycodone, cortisone, gabapentin, meclizine, Ativan…. “So easy to get hooked,” re-plays in my head. “No… no drugs,” this “noncompliant” patient responds. After 10 minutes he’s typing an email to the physiatrist who performs a lumbar epidural that fails to relieve. I find a surgeon.

Another kind of doctor gives me a goal and prescription: perform Puccini’s Messa Di Gloria, Bach, and Pergolesi’s The Magnificat, my medicine to be practiced daily alone, weekly with others seeking spiritual and social health. My mind now is anchored in the present with a purpose: every day learning bar by bar, line by line, page by page the Latin lyrics, notes, rests, rhythms transformed into mighty melodies. No time to water seeds and roots of fear, negativity, I’m too busy focusing my brain making new connections bringing pleasure, new memories growing positivity.

With my surgeon’s blessings 4 weeks after a micro-discectomy I’m on stage with an orchestra and 150 fellow choristers. Making music we transcend becoming heavenly beings flying with faith, hearts soaring, singing above the strings, horns, timpani – KY-ri-e e-le-i-son, CHRI-ste, e-le-i-son… Qui tol-lis pec-ca-ta, pec-ca-ta mun-di.

Our doctor conducting the last piece, Bach’s Dona Nobis Pacem, Grant us peace, brings everyone back to earth in community giving us music the best medicine for now.

Biographical Statement

Marjorie Jacobs (MA in Social Change with a CAGS in Integrative Holistic Health Studies) is a psychiatric rehabilitation clinician at the Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation where she designs and teaches promising group interventions for adults diagnosed with a serious mental illness based on the applications of mindfulness practice (meditation, cognitive reframing, music listening, singing, dancing, and poetry), positive psychology, and neuroscience with the goals of developing stress resilience and facilitating mental health recovery.

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PRODUCTION NOTES: Address correspondence to: Marjorie Jacobs | Address: BU Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 940 Commonwealth Ave. West, Boston, MA 02215, (617)353-3562 | E-mail: mljacobs@bu.edu | COI statement: The authors declared that no financial support was given for the writing of this article. The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.