

## **Music: Our Salve, Our Courage**

By Dennis Tupman

*“While engaging in material progress and taking care of physical well-being we need to pay equal attention to developing peace of mind and thus taking care of the internal aspect of our being.” (Dalai Lama’s New Millenium Message)*

*“Arts education is more than just arts activities or “events”. It is about thinking and making choices.” (David Reid, Superintendent of Halifax Regional School Board, October, 1999)*

*“Music...  
gives a soul to the universe,  
wings to the mind,  
flight to the imagination,  
and life to everything.” (Plato)*

Just after we returned to school this fall we were all shattered by the terrorism in Washington and New York.

Not only buildings came down; but also our illusions of safety, and even reverence of the myth of material and technological progress. We have lived through a life-changing experience. That is the purgative effect of war.

But there have also been opportunities for experiencing spirit and soul.

Like most of you, I obsessively watched on TV the events as they unfolded and were reported in agonizing detail, culminating in the day-of-mourning services.

In this period, how did we eventually give voice to our conflicting emotions of vengeance, anger, disbelief, hopelessness, doubt and despair on the one hand, while reaffirming a need for peace, joy, love, and faith on the other? Through music, of course.

On September 14, on the day of mourning for the death and destruction caused by the terrorist acts, my wife placed quietly on my desk a list of all the kinds of music we had heard on the various special services that day. Here is what we heard: vocal solos, choirs, vocal trios, trumpet solos, bagpipes, guitar, bands, orchestras, organs, pianos, group and congregational singing of hymns and other songs, bell carillons, drumming, and more.

In all of these acts there was an outpouring of the human spirit and grief, as well as joy, love and hope.

This volcano of emotion through music should be no surprise. Human beings have always done this since time began.

As we struggled to make meaning of these apparently senseless acts of terrorism, we turned to music to express and make meaning of our deepest feelings. It was through music that we came together as a people to express our grief. Through music we opened our very hearts and souls for all to see and share. It was through music that we largely healed and gained courage to carry on.

Will we ever forget these poignant images during this horrific time? On the steps of the United States Capitol building a bi-partisan choir singing “America the Beautiful”. During the service of mourning on the lawns of the legislature a lone bagpiper playing a mournful lament. The wonderful operatic soprano, Denyce Graves, singing the Lord’s Prayer in the National Cathedral in Washington. A single gentleman at an improvised shrine in New York pouring his heart out in unaccompanied song. The heavenly boys choir in St.Paul’s Cathedral in London. The congregation at St. Paul’s singing, of all songs, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”. The Air Force Band in Ottawa performing Elgar’s “Nimrod”. And again from Ottawa, indelible on our hearts and souls, that slow intoning of a single bell in five second-spaced heartbeats that seemed through its incessant gong to invite us to view eternity itself.

Grief and despair brought us as individuals to these services to mourn. Music brought us together as a people.

History books tell us what a people did and how they acted; the arts tell us how they truly felt. It is through expression of emotion that we uncover the soul of a people.

Let us remember that.

How ironically contradictory it was, then, to read a week before in the National Post the results of a survey of what Canadians apparently want from our education system. A poll conducted by COMPAS, Inc. (2001) said that more people feel that the main function of schools is to promote citizenship and character building (23%). Those polled seem to be less concerned with fostering inquiring minds, a desire for learning, and intellectual development (17 %).

The COMPAS poll also showed that parents want to focus on job training (33%) in an increasingly competitive workplace. It also found that parents want more emphasis on traditional subjects, especially math and English. Parents, according to this poll at least, want schools to offer more computer and technology training.

In this study the arts seemed to be less valued by those polled. Only 12% believe that music should be compulsory in high school.

Some commentators say that parents appear to be under the misconception of what constitutes a full value education. We are therefore in danger of creating a society of technocrats who are good at executing well some of the traditional subjects, but do not have a broad worldview and an appreciation of culture.

Why would something so central to our beings in moments of exquisite challenge such as we have seen be ignored in our schools and education? Why should it be?

Many illusions came tumbling down along with the towers that day. One was that the solutions to the world problems and challenges before us could be solved solely through progress in technology. Man cannot be healed at all, or even educated, by technology alone. We need aesthetic fitness. We need an understanding of cultures other than our own. We need a full understanding of what constitutes the human spirit and soul. We need a means to be able to express our deep feelings with appropriate skill and ease.

I would repeat what has been said many times before: it is through engaging in what we have come to know as the arts that we will substantially address these loftier issues of the human spirit and soul.

The National Post article had this to say: *“It may be that parents and educators are not aware of the growing body of research that shows involvement in arts education, as well as music classes, offer more than a diversion for children.”*

As a counterpoint to this poll, a Business Week/Harris Poll released last December put it this way:

*“Canadians, especially the young, are beginning to question the smaller-than-life civic ideals and singular commercial vision that have come to dominate the national agenda.*

*They know that great civilizations are marked by the search for something that transcends self-interest and stirs the human soul.”* (J. Richard Finlay, *Globe and Mail*, Dec.01, 2000).

Dr. Reginald Bibby, from Lethbridge University, in his new book, *“Canada’s Teens”*, came to essentially the same conclusion.

So taking a worldview one can see in these snapshots the inherent contradictions. On the one hand we have called upon music as an essential medium for our outpouring of human emotion, as ultimately a salve for our emotional wounds and a tool for courage to continue. On the other, some of us currently hold to the argument that school education should marginalize music and the arts.

This latter view just does not make sense to me given the affirming studies of the need for music and the arts; and indeed, as we have seen, the recent use of music to give us a voice to allow us to be humans, not machines. To manifest body, mind, and spirit, and not be robot clones.

I will give the last word to Adrienne Clarkson, our Governor General, who said this in a National Post article in March, 2000. In the context of what we have just experienced in the devastation, material and spiritual, caused by the recent terrorism, the arts and music are ever more relevant to give voice to our emotions, and to help us create visions of who we are as a people.

*“We need art. Those who deny this need deny society as a whole, its right to live and experience with every fibre as sentient beings. They deny the evolving humanity that makes society aspire to heights of perception. They deny the deep community that comes from sharing a vision.”*

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