

Wellness and the Music Teacher

by Dennis F. Tupman

Hello, Alberta music teachers. It is good to visit you again. I was in your province frequently recently. I always feel at home and welcomed in your province.

I have been asked to write a little on what has become a very important topic these days for everyone. Wellness.

Promoting good physical, mental, and spiritual health has become a growth industry. Magazine, newspaper articles, and books abound on how to keep fit in these areas. News broadcasts regularly feature a section on all kinds of pertinent health topics. The Romanou Report on the health system is being acted on. There are alarming reports coming out regularly from the Canadian Health and Mental Health Association about the need to make changes. Everyone lately seems to be saying how stressed they have become.

I hear frequently from music teachers how stressed they are. How the bounce is often going out of their teaching. How stress is weighing them down. How they are counting the days to retirement. How their personal well is running dry. All of these symptoms are an indication that one's sense of well being is being compromised.

I attended the OMEA conference last year and the

What are some possibly some contributing factors? Impossible timetables and teaching loads (especially for some itinerant band and orchestra teachers), stress at home caused by double income earners and all that entails, trying to handle too much information, too many changes in the curriculum and the educational scene generally, too many nights out at rehearsals and meetings – all these and more.

In short, perhaps we are living far too complicated lives for our own good. Many of us seem out of control. External are controlling our lives.

As music teachers we also have a built-in challenge, and that is dealing with the enthusiasm of our students. While this is a good problem in a way, demanding and turned-on students can sometimes lead us astray when they say something like this: “Mr. Jones, can we have a junior jazz band too, and, oh yes, can we put on another musical like the one we did last year. That was fun. And hey, are we going to make a trip this year?”

“Yeah sure,” I can hear the frazzled teacher saying, “ I am already working nearly every hour off the regular time table as well. Where do I get the time? Ah yes, maybe Sunday night!”

And let us not forget the job actions and fights with the government over funding and working conditions. Imagine a teacher who wants to be able to work off the timetable, and says that he/she needs to in order for the music program to survive! Imagine that!

You know, folks, there is also another challenge we face as music teachers. We are by nature perfectionists. In our work we are usually trying to “get it right”. Note perfect. Our art form dictates this, and so this attitude may transfer to our personal lives where we are trying to “get ourselves right, even perfect.”

Often as perfectionists we are never satisfied. We worry a lot when we face our inadequacies, when we become vulnerable. We are filled with what I call "shouldas and oughtas." I should do this. I ought to do this.

Soon this can carry over to our personal assessment : I should and ought to *be* this and that. This approach can result in a lot of pressure caused by guilt. We feel guilty because we do not measure up somehow. And so on.

Carl Jung, the great psychologist, called this object relatedness – that is trying to live up to the external world. Externals instead of the internals of our life dictate what we do and how, as well as who we become and how. We are trying to please everyone, and this can take us out of balance. It sucks the energy right out of one after awhile. We are never good enough. We are not rowing our own boat.

You notice here that I have not really yet talked about what one so often sees in wellness articles, and that is discussion about exercise, rest, and diet, usually treated as separate and unrelated issues.

Sure these issues are extremely important, but I feel that it is in our spirits and souls that the solutions will come to these basic questions:

- When I really know in my heart what I need to do to keep well and balanced, why am I not living that way?
- While information proliferates “out there” on what to eat, why is obesity on the rise for both our students and us as adults?
- Why is it when we know that exercise is beneficial and necessary to good health we do not exercise enough?
- We know that we need more sleep to be effective and alert, so then why do we not sleep enough?
- We have heard that we should drink more water as music teachers – probably about 8 glasses a day - then why don't we?

And so on.

Is it information overload?

I have my theory about what may be one cause of this information overload – it is in many instances information about *parts* of our being, and not about our *whole* being. We, furthermore, are often dealing in treating symptoms and not focussing on our whole system.

Maybe as well we need an overall aim - a comprehensive vision of where we are going in life and to what end.

I would suggest that adopting that age-old wisdom of addressing the body, mind and spirit in total might help in achieving an overall vision of wellness. Perhaps we become less material, live more simply, and emphasize more spiritual values.

To achieve balance we must then acknowledge that if any one of these elements is being short changed then the other two will also fail. The key word here is balance. If we are out of balance on any one of these three elements - body, mind or spirit - then we will be out of whack on everything.

Now this is a huge topic, but I am going to list a few points that I have found helpful over the years. I should mention, as I approach my seventh decade in life, that I have had to learn these the hard way, as a person who nearly died on two occasions from health-related issues, most caused from overwork and stress.

I am also one who has to think about breathing every minute of my life as a chronic asthmatic.

1. Take time out of your busy lives to pray and meditate. In these times listen to your body. Let it talk to you. Get in touch with your inner landscape. It will tell you what it needs if you take this time. As far as prayer is concerned, it is not just folk wisdom that prayer is beneficial, it is proven scientifically that it helps us achieve more in life. As the old saying goes: “More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.” We are not alone.

Here’s one for you: “*The Musician’s Serenity Prayer*”

*God grant me the **Serenity** to start each day on a joyful note,
Courage to sing the song of my soul,
And **Wisdom** to trust you always accompany me.*

I find that I have to say frequently the famous 12-steps prayer used in AA.

*God grant me **serenity** to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can, and the*

wisdom to know the difference.

2. Make a check list of your priorities in life. Yes, in life. Make sure that you are addressing and being attentive to them. Make adjustments where necessary. What do you want to be said of you on your report card when you finally cash it in?

Maybe your family is a priority. Then one has to spend some time on this as a priority. Failure to do this will gradually wear you down and will lead to burn out and dissatisfaction.

3. Commit now to eating, resting, and exercising well and to keep these areas in balance. You know, we are taught that when we start to work, the first 10% of our income should be to paid to ourselves, to commit to savings and the like. Well, the same goes with our personal lives. We must commit adequate time and intention to the basics of living or we will eventually pay for it some day.

I wish that some one had spoken strongly to me early on in my career about this. I might have avoided a near fatal illness which was caused by immune system breakdown due to overwork and overstress.

4. Take sabbaticals. Each day. Each week. Each year. We need that time of refreshment where we take a walk in nature, where we give our minds, bodies and spirits a break.
5. Cut down on your TV watching, especially the news. We are as a people suffering from a now recognized condition called Information Overload Syndrome. Technology has been major contributor to this: cell phones, emails, fax machines, remote controls, etc. Make staff room time and talk pleasant or leave it.
6. In our teaching try as far as possible to “keep it simple”. Try asking these questions: What can I delegate? Am I trying to take on my shoulders all the responsibility for what is happening in my teaching? Am I forcing or leading?
7. Laugh a lot.

These are but a few points.

Before I leave I would like to mention one other point.

I have coined what I think is a “new age”, that is after the “post-information age”. What is it? “**The Age of Discernment**”. This age discerns what information do I attend to. This age is inner directed rather than outer. This age knows what information to deal with to be wise. This age of discernment also addresses those fundamental questions of

what it takes to be a full dimension human being: spirit and soul in all of their dimensions.

So to wrap up – wellness means balancing the body, mind, and spirit. This takes intention, care of self, and commitment.

The time to begin?

Now.

Dennis F. Tupman is now “retired”, living on a wilderness lake, and working as an independent arts consultant after having spent over 45 years in education. He continues to serve music education. dtupman@bcinternet.net He would be glad to hear from you.