

An autistic man's wonderful sound journey

by Birgit Sundermeier

...what started out as agitation in Michael gave way to an increasingly noticeable state of calmness. (caption)

Michael (*real name has been changed) first came to me in my sound room with his parents in June 2008. He is a 35-year-old autistic man with brain damage.

While I was introducing his mother to my work with sound instruments, I gently played a pelvis bowl. Michael reacted with a quick glance and I continued to play. He became noticeably calmer and I switched instruments. The shaman drum brought him so much joy that he clapped his hands and laughed. I offered him various singing bowls and a gong to find out how he reacted to each of the different instruments.

After this first encounter, I discussed with Michael's mother how we should proceed and explained that nothing that happens in my sound room would be useless to her son.

My youngest daughter always says, "I'm the one who sets the pace!"

That's exactly how it goes. The client sets the pace and rhythm of whatever happens and, in this case, that was Michael.

At the next session, Michael came with one of his caregivers. This time I began with a gong and what started out as agitation in Michael gave way to an increasingly noticeable state of calmness. When I played a large heart bowl, he tried to get up, and it was apparent that he didn't like that one. However, his reaction changed immediately when I switched it for a small heart bowl. By experimenting like this, I slowly learned which tones were appealing to him and which ones weren't, at least for the time being.



He found pleasure in the sound of the drum and would stomp along with his feet. After some initial uneasiness, this 14-day series of sessions started to take a peaceful course.

Calming nerves through sound

I started and ended each session with a Fen gong to make sure Michael felt secure with his surroundings. What started to change as we continued was how much faster he fell into a relaxed state with each successive session. I then added a Peter Hess® Bengali singing bowl into the mix. After just a few minutes, Michael closed his eyes,

his head slowly dropped to his chest, and his caregiver told me in astonishment that until now he had seldom seen Michael in such a state. Usually, Michael had only been able to achieve this level of complete stillness while he was asleep.

Since Michael spent his whole day in a constant state of movement, which must have required an enormous amount of effort for him, I continued to play the Bengali bowl to give him a few more minutes of rest. To end, I used the cymbal to bring him back from his place of relaxation. He was immediately aware, had red cheeks,



- Michael can relax more quickly and easily.
- He is more tolerant of stressful situations.
- It is easier for him to be patient and remain calm.
- The severe sweating on his palms and abdominal area has decreased.
- He handles being in unfamiliar places better.
- During situations that agitate him nonetheless, it is considerably easier to calm him down and he is quickly able to return to his normal, cheerful self.

Along with his sound sessions, Michael also goes to physical therapy, Shiatsu, and speech therapy.

All of this proves to us that we are heading in the right direction and I look forward to seeing what happens over the course of the next year.

Last but not least, I would like to give thanks for two major gifts I have received.

- The first is the wonderful gift of sound that I have acquired over the past few years and that I can now give to others.
- The second gift is Michael, a wonderful person full of sound whom I, with much happiness and enthusiasm, have the privilege of providing guidance to.

and appeared to be very awake and calm. Michael's parents and his caregiver decided then and there that they wanted him to have these sound sessions every week. I was delighted with their decision and Michael's progress started to become very recognizable.

The sessions that followed went similarly, yet each one was totally different. Michael's caregiver noticed that Michael became so animated when listening to the various sounds that he also started to make new sounds himself.

I was encouraged by his progress and curious to see if Michael might enjoy physical contact with the bowls. I chose to use the Universal bowl, warmed it up, and slowly began to run it up and down his lower leg.

I gave him enough time to get used to this new way of interacting with the sounds then I proceeded to his shoulder and back area. After some initial uncertainty, he became very relaxed and was able to continue enjoying the sounds with his eyes closed. And that's how he experienced his very first little sound massage.

By that time, we had all agreed that he should also have a session on the therapy couch at some point – not today, not tomorrow...but maybe the day after tomorrow.

Salutogenesis through sound

It has been one year since then and Michael has been able to fully relax while lying down on the couch for a few weeks now. Since he prefers to lie on his side, I place various bowls around him and he goes along with it for the most part. After that, I begin by using a bell since its sound relaxes him rather quickly, and I always play the bowls to the same rhythm. Michael quickly closes his eyes; however, he remains attentive and present. Every so often, his mischievous side will come out. He'll start to chuckle and, without hesitating, will take my original setup and rearrange the bowls however he wants.

A few days ago, I received a brief update on the current progress Michael is making from his caregiver that I'd like to share here.



Contact

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