

Healing: To the Beat of an Inner Drummer

Dr. Barry Bittman

“I think I’ve had enough,” he replied in a calm yet somber tone as our heads seemed to drop in unison. “Nothing seems to be working. After six surgeries in less than a year, I don’t think I’ll let them operate again to send chemotherapy directly to my brain.” He hadn’t said much previously. Tears streamed down his mother’s face.

I wasn’t about to argue the point just expressed by a young man who turned 22 during our Insights for Living Beyond Cancer retreat. Our group didn’t counter either. Cancer survivors and support persons alike, they collectively traveled thousands of miles to join us, yet no one was about to challenge him to go another step. In our hearts, each one of us felt that perhaps we would not have mustered the courage to have gone that far.

Everyone was especially touched by his willingness to share what for most of us is the unthinkable until the time is right and our last ounce of energy is spent. Knowing that such crossroads could appear any time in our future, we respected his melancholy decision to finally give in.

Yet in my heart I hoped something would change. For I sensed more than just a resignation to let nature take its course. His tone echoed the painful agony of failure that somehow seemed inconsistent with his extraordinary will to survive. After all, not only did he triumph over the challenges of several surgeries and months of rehabilitation and physical therapy, he actually learned to walk independently again after facing a seemingly insurmountable bout of paralysis. His dedication and drive must have been furious.

At least he got it off his chest, I thought. Perhaps he opened a door.

Rather than guiding him in one direction or another, something inside told me to let him discover his own way. For even in the darkest moments, a flicker of hope exists. I knew real magic surfaced several times each day in the group. Sometimes it was just a smile that seemed to break down the boundaries of despair. At others it happened when a couple held hands or expressed feelings of love for each other during a counseling session. Often it surfaced with tears that flowed

abundantly in the sorrow of the moment or in the joy of revelation.

That evening it happened in another way.

When that special moment presented itself, a part of me recognized it immediately. It happened during a music-making session. All I had to do was turn our drum circle over to him. It was simply meant to be.

For when his hands touched the drum, there was a special beat, an unrelenting expression of celebration and a commanding presence that surprised all of us. It was as if he was the perfect conduit, the ultimate instrument upon which the rhythm of life was destined to flow. His musical expression was so deep—it had survived what no scalpel could ever reach.

Everyone immediately saw and heard the Light. With infectious energy, his intense beat kindled our will to survive, to flourish and to express ourselves despite any obstacle that could ever appear in our path. We played with intensity and joy as a sense of camaraderie literally joined us together as one. And we drummed beyond our limits, beyond our fatigue, beyond our limitations.

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That night I slept more soundly than I had in months. The following morning I felt renewed as if every ounce of tension had been erased and before me was a fresh slate upon which a new day would be written.

As I gazed upon the sunlight streaking through the canopy of trees that separated us from the mountain, his mother's words began to fill that slate as she spoke excitedly, "Dr. Bittman, did you see my son this morning? He awoke without a complaint and is walking better than he has in months. He seems different!"

And he was—there was a bounce in his step, he was more positive, far more interactive and he wore a smile of certainty that touched and changed all of us. I'll never forget his words that morning when I asked each participant to tell us what they would do with the last five minutes of their lives. He was the last to respond. "I will continue to learn," he said in a deliberate tone that resounded with clarity of purpose and a zest for living beyond cancer.

Our tears flowed abundantly. He simply smiled with a knowing that was ever-present.

As our ECaP retreat came to a close, and each person parted on an individual healing path, I felt closer to all of them—especially the young drummer who taught me so much about life, courage and the power of music. Yet somehow I wished I knew more about him.

My prayer was answered with a note from his mother a few days later. She wrote, "When we got off the plane on Sunday, he announced to his step dad that he is a new person. I guess we both are." A spinal tap performed shortly after the retreat showed for the first time that his new chemotherapy was working.

While one cannot clearly explain the rationale for his improvement, I know something extraordinary happened in our midst. Deep within the essence of who I am, a part of me healed through the beat of this drummer. His rhythm and his smile are forever etched within my being. For whenever extraordinary courage is needed to take a seemingly insurmountable step, I'm confident his rhythm will guide my way—Mind Over Matter!

Great appreciation is extended to Ted Leslie and his mother, Naomi Haugen for sharing a remarkable survival lesson with all of us.

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Barry Bittman, MD is a neurologist, author, international speaker, award-winning producer/director and inventor. As CEO and Medical Director of the Mind-Body Wellness Center, a comprehensive, interdisciplinary outpatient medical facility in Meadville, PA., Dr. Bittman has pioneered a new paradigm for treating the "whole person." Based upon extensive research, he developed Insights for Living Beyond Cancer with Bernie Siegel, MD, a program that integrates the power of mind, body and spirit with conventional medical care. Dr. Bittman has also created similar programs for individuals facing the challenges of asthma, cardiovascular disease, chronic lung disease and diabetes. In 1995 Dr. Bittman began TouchStar Productions, a company dedicated to providing evidence-based resources to help individuals harness their inner healing potential as a complementary approach to traditional healthcare. The company's emphasis is on Psychoneuroimmunology, the medical discipline that studies the interaction between emotions, nervous system, endocrine system and immune system function.

Dr. Bittman's latest research, a 2-phase study demonstrated for the first time that playing a musical instrument reverses multiple elements of the human stress response on the genomic level (Medical Science Monitor, February 2005). His team included researchers from Loma Linda University School of Medicine and Applied Biosystems, the developer of the original technology that led to the successful mapping of the human genome announced in June 2000. Stress-reduction was far greater for individuals participating in their first group keyboard lesson (Yamaha's Clavinova Connection) than for subjects who simply relaxed and read newspapers and magazines. In addition, the researchers introduced the concept of individualized genomic stress induction signatures, which uniquely demonstrate biological diversity in action. For more on Dr. Bittman's research see www.mind-body.org.