

# Drum, Voice, and Breath ~ Three Paths to Wholeness

By Lindsay Passmore

*A few years ago, I signed up for a drum class and learned a great secret: playing drums turns out to be a pathway to deep inner presence. Drumming is not an activity of the brain. To hold onto the beat and listen to many rhythms being played at the same time, you let the body take over. Once my hands learned a few basics, I found out why so many people love creating rhythms with others. Free from the chatter of my mind, I found a place of deep inner stillness underneath.*

*I fell into drumming around the same time I started another activity: being with hospice patients near their time of death and singing very softly to escort them along their journey. Apart from these experiences, I had also begun a meditation practice based on consciously connecting my breath. All of these things began working on me in surprising ways. More in tune with the joyful presence within, I began releasing emotional habits that had burdened me in the past. Here is my attempt to describe that opening at the time.*

I am starting to understand a new way of being, a way of sitting more deeply within myself. At times, I am able to meet others in this place, too. There is aliveness and joy in this way of being that is different from anything I have known. For me, it is a precious place. I think of it as a sacred place.

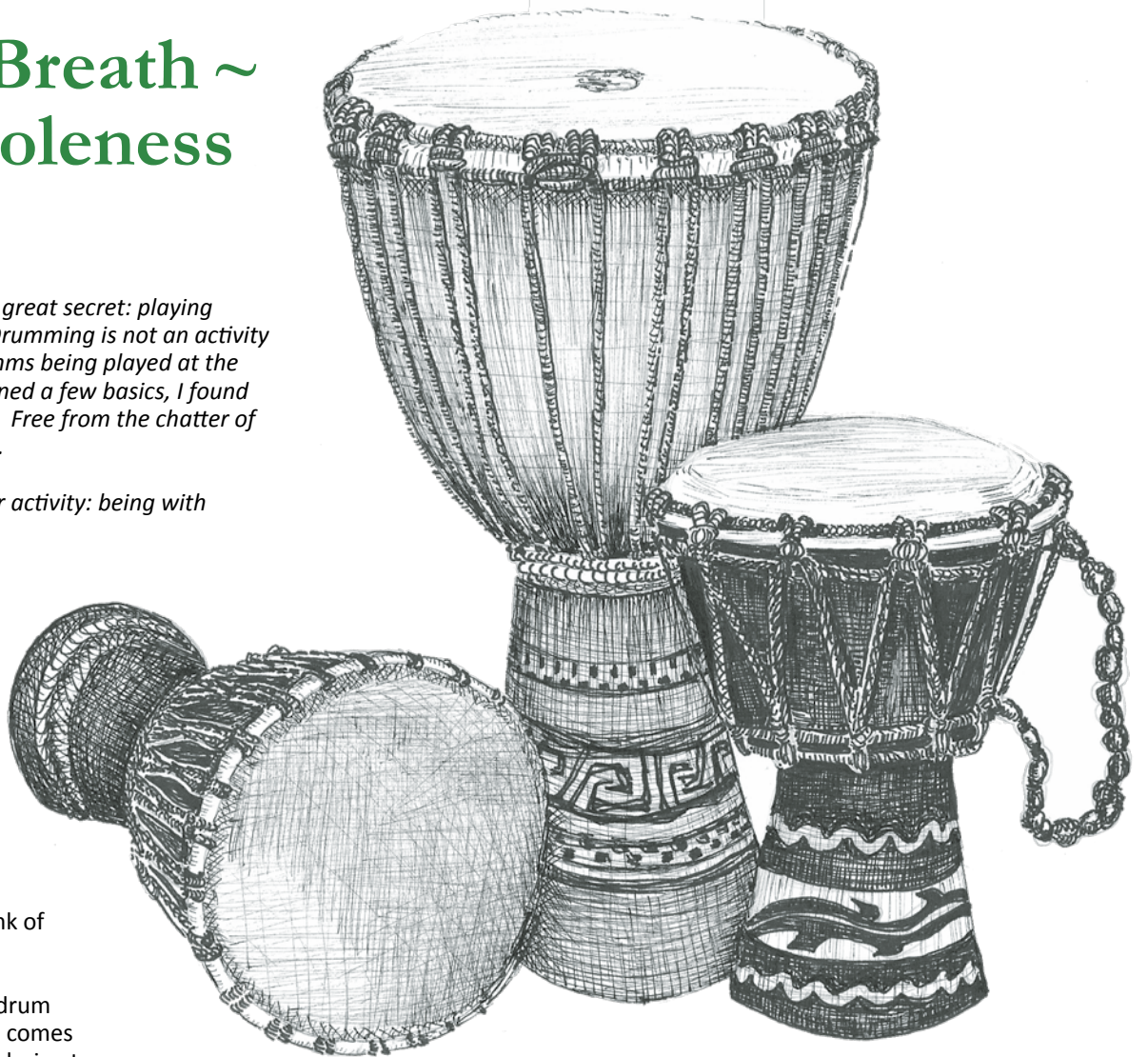
Music is one way I find this connection to deep being. My drum teacher, Paul, described it perfectly. The aliveness, he said, comes from dwelling in your center while at the same time surrendering to the complex rhythms of the drum. Your arms and hands are creating all this movement, and your body is receiving a whole matrix of vibrations; and if you are drumming in a circle, there is the added dimension of weaving your own rhythms with those of the other drummers. And yet within yourself, you can be silent, you can be grounded. You can be in a still place. When the mind and body are able to both create and receive the vibrations, and yet underneath hold onto the stillness, there is an expansion, a quality of joyful spaciousness. There is a way of being united with everything that exists in the present moment, and riding that moment into the next one, and into the next one, and into the next. Paul calls it "drum awakening."

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I first noticed how music can take me to this joyous state of inner expansion a few years ago when I started singing with some friends on a weekly basis. Even something as childlike as singing in rounds can evoke it. As with drumming, I love hearing my own part while fully opening up to the rich layers of other voices. The more complex the song, the wider I have to expand to experience the stillness of my own voice within the larger tapestry of harmonies. Sitting inside a place of inner quiet while creating with my voice feels something like playing in a drum circle. It stretches me into a vast and beautiful interior space.

When I am able to bring this spacious embrace to situations involving emotional pain, the expansion is deeper still, and healing can take place. I think this must be what any good therapist or priest practices regularly. I get to practice it in the Threshold Choir, singing at bedsides with a couple of other women to people who are struggling and often at the threshold of death. When we are at a bedside, we sing very, very softly, re-creating the gentleness that we may have experienced as babies being sung to by our mothers if we were lucky. We do not try to "send" healing, but strive rather to embrace what is, moment by moment. Each song we offer contains a universal truth that is sung over and over like a lullaby, getting softer and softer, and slower and slower, so that its message can gradually sink in. We choose songs that fit the belief system and personal circumstances of the person to whom we are singing. If we sense that it is right, we add some softly layered harmonies. Our words, music, and intentions work together to open access to a field of deep peace and safety, a loving place where the dying person and loved ones can be however they need to be.

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Artwork by  
Dianne Austin

Settling into the emotional space of a bedside, it is possible to fully hold the fear or sorrow of the people in the room, yet sing, at the same time, to their absolute wholeness. There is something heartbreakingly sweet about this. This sweetness is so vast that my heart swells and swells – I have to open wide to contain it. It isn't at all like having sympathy for someone. There is no judgment here about whether what is happening *should* be happening. There is just a radical acceptance of what is, a complete container for all that exists in the present moment. The music, offered in this way, opens a doorway for release.

When Threshold Choir members are not singing at bedsides, we rehearse songs and open ourselves to that field of healing vibrations by singing to one another. We have a reclining chair, and anyone who is struggling with anything can lie in the chair in the middle of our circle and be sung to. Sometimes I have kept my eyes open and looked at my dear friends while they tenderly sang to the truest part of my being. I don't know which touches me more deeply, the giving or receiving of this loving gift. We always allow a moment of silence after a song ends. In the quiet, I often feel shivers down my back. I feel changed.

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I have had precious experiences in solitude of bringing this fullness of being to my own fear or sorrow. These experiences are imprinted on my soul as episodes of grace, healing moments that brought back to life aspects of my self that I buried long ago. They have occurred during my own meditative practice in which attention to the breath is used to focus awareness in the present moment. When you breathe without pausing, like babies and animals do, the breath begins to move old, unintegrated emotional experiences to the surface. It is challenging, but possible, to breathe through episodes of resurfacing pain, while at the same time offering unconditional love and tenderness to the aspect of your being that originally buried it.

Allowing myself to completely re-experience such raw emotions, while simultaneously bringing forth another part of my being that can wholly welcome and embrace my suffering self, is a bit like playing drums or singing at bedsides, but infinitely sweeter. It stretches me into a well of love that is so pure and so deep, I can hardly believe it exists inside me. I do not believe this quality of love is something I can manufacture myself. But I can *open* to it. Resting in that place of healing, where I can be fully myself in the presence of such sweetness, the old pain can reach a state of completion. It is allowed to be, without judgment... and then it is finished. And where there was once a missing fragment of my being, there is joyous reunion. There is freedom. There is peace. There is overwhelming gratitude.

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