

Good grief! — *An experience of VAHT*

by Jan Cauffman

Last November, I eagerly attended the Vibroacoustic Harp Therapy (VAHT) Training Course® run by Sarajane Williams. Six of us came from diverse areas of the United States, plus Canada and Germany. As an RN with a master's degree in Community Mental Health Nursing, all of my formal training has been in institutions of western medicine. Though somewhat familiar with many complementary medicine practices, vibrational medicine was completely new to me.

I have been playing the lever harp for 16 years — and actually purchased my Salvi Livia harp from Sarajane and Ted's Planet Harp store when it was located in Bethlehem, Pa., about 12 years ago. Meeting Sarajane again in September was a fun reunion, and I was intrigued by the VAHT program she would be running two months later. I HAD to do this. You all know how it is!

When it came time for each of us to experience receiving VAHT, I was curious, intrigued and nervous. I was slightly afraid of the answer to the question, "What might be revealed?" Sarajane played the solitary notes and I felt each one in a different area of my body. I became aware of deeper areas — internal organs it seemed — where I had never noticed physical sensations before. The notes seemed to be plucking my spinal nerves until suddenly, a solitary note touched my lumbar spine area (the small of my back) and I suddenly burst into tears! No one was more surprised than I!

It had suddenly come to my full attention how much I missed my mother who had died in September of 2002. The location the note had awakened was identical to the location of the metastasis of her cancer that had recurred after an almost 30 year remission. I was able to explain all this to Sarajane right away. (I had developed an inflamed disk in that same spot about a year after her death and was aware of the similarity to her cancer recurrence location at the time. It occasionally flared up when I was trying to do too much.) During the time of her final illness, my husband and I were in the thick of raising our two elementary school aged sons who were both a delight and a handful. I was so caught up in caring for my young family, that I may not have fully processed the impact of her death at the time. A contemplative at heart, I was just beginning to deepen my spiritual practice of daily centering prayer and meditation on Bible passages which was very helpful during this period of bereavement.

I often described the grief experience as corresponding to having a virtual "bladder of tears" that would gradually fill. When it was full, you had to let it out. This happened through my crying. When I was finished crying I'd feel better and could move on. Inevitably, the sorrow would refill the virtual bladder and it would be time to release it again. Over time, the frequency of sad periods would decrease and the time between crying spells would lengthen. So, I thought I'd "done it" — worked it out and gotten past it. Life continued.

After my words ceased, Sarajane asked if I wanted to continue. I agreed and she played J. S. Bach's *Sheep May Safely Graze*. I felt more sensations move in different areas. Most unusual, it seemed at the time, I felt tingling in my calves, in that lower back area, and further up my spine. The image that came to me was of being twisted in the way you would wring out a towel. I felt a funny S-like sensation, like a snake wriggling around and up my spine that almost tickled! As she was finishing the piece, I just HAD to move my hands up along my sides, and then up over my head as I leaned my head back and opened my mouth with a huge sense of release!

As I lay there, it was as if the dots were being connected between memories and their possible meanings related so many things together. It occurred to me that my work in cancer nursing, palliative care, pain management and hospice kept me

continually in situations of grief. It was a milieu in which I was both comfortable and familiar. What was with THAT?

Everyone has a "loss history," but my mother's was particularly poignant and overwhelming. Her baby sister died suddenly when my mother was three years old. Her mother (my grandmother) died two years later. Within a few months, her baby brother also died with little forewarning. She had lost half of her family by the time she was five years old. Her family of origin was divided precisely in half leaving her, her father and her other young brother. Where there would have been six, there were three. When we were clearing out my mother's apartment after her death, I found the baby albums that had been made by her mother and the letters of raw grief written by their extended family and her father (my grandfather). I had read some of the letters at that time — but couldn't get through them all. It was too painful on top of my own immediate bereavement. She married soon after college — to a man who died within a year of their marriage. (They knew he was terminally ill, but wanted to marry anyway.) A widow for 10 years, she met my father and they had three children, myself being the middle child. Dad developed Alzheimer's disease when I was about 15 years old and she seemed to shelter herself with iron-clad denial over the next 12 years, as we lost him piece by piece.

The image that came to me as my body experienced the sensation of being twisted — was exactly that of a wet towel being wrung out. Yes, that was it. A towel soaked with tears was being wrung out. It was as if I were carrying all the unshed tears of my mother and her family — unable to completely resolve the overwhelming experience of such crucial



losses. And for my mother, these were sudden losses at an age

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when developmentally, it would have been very difficult to understand what was happening and to cope in a way that could build a healthy foundation for the future grief work that life can bring.

Had I inherited the unresolved grief work of my ancestors? Was it MY sorrow — or theirs? Recognizing that there could be a difference, I saw that I had a choice. I could be a sponge (or towel) and absorb their grief, carrying it throughout my life, or I could see their losses as belonging to their life experiences, and my personal losses in the course of my life as mine to deal with. That insight brought relief. I didn't have to carry their grief anymore! I was free!

This is critical for me because I currently work as a parish nurse and will be offering VAHT for people with chronic pain, fibromyalgia, stress, depression, etc. If I absorb their pain, I know by experience that I will be burdened by it and will burn out. To be an effective healer, I'll need perspective and objectivity. From that place, I hope to offer a deep well of compassion without draining my energy completely and being of no use to the next person.

I have learned that grief is a healing journey. Individuals perceive and experience their multiple losses in a variety of ways over time. There really is no universal schedule for how and when the process will unfold for someone. There are countless reasons for this variety in how people cope. Temperament, age, suddenness or anticipated nature of the loss, circumstances under which a death or loss occurred, significance of the relationship, the impact or magnitude of the loss(es) and the repertoire of coping skills the person has developed — all have a hand in shaping their bereavement experience. It is not uncommon for grief to remain dormant or incomplete — especially when there are unresolved issues with the deceased such as a need for forgiveness or unanswered questions in the relationship. VAHT appears capable of bringing these issues to the surface. Be prepared for tears, insights and healing as you play gently for those

who entrust themselves to your care and skill. Know yourself and remain focused on your intention for healing. Stay grounded in your faith.

I'd also like to point to the following resource for further study; "The Grief Recovery Handbook" by John W. James and Russell Friedman, ©2009 expanded 20th Anniversary Edition.

I welcome your thoughts and experiences about the painful, yet healing aspects of bereavement. Let's start a conversation and share our accumulated wisdom via the harp therapy forum at: www.planetharp.com. ♥

Currently serving as a parish nurse at the Main Line Unitarian Church in Devon, Pa., Jan Cauffman has been offering VAHT at Primary Chiropractic in Berwyn, Pa., since March. Jan has a BS in Nursing from Syracuse University and an MS in Community Mental Health Nursing from the University of Pennsylvania. Her professional background includes over 20 years in oncology nursing, palliative care and hospice work. You may contact her at jcauffman@verizon.net (or through the harptherapy.com forum).

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