

## VAHT demonstration lightens the load for a cancer survivor

by Sarajane Williams

*In July, a brief demonstration of Vibroacoustic Harp Therapy (VAHT) during my presentation at the Somerset Folk Harp Festival in Parsippany, N.J., relieved pain and percolated dormant emotions to the surface in a woman who is a cancer survivor.*

*"Jane," the second volunteer during the presentation, was a lovely, thin, middle-aged woman who appeared to be bright and sensitive, with eyes that probably had endured sadness and struggle. When we began the five-minute VAHT demonstration, she privately whispered to me that she was a cancer survivor, so I relayed to the group that she had 'generalized pain.' I cautiously proceeded, playing individual notes on the harp, to determine what frequencies might bring her some comfort. After briefly improvising with the appropriate notes, I played a short rendition of "Wind," from my Nature Suite. By that time, her eyes appeared watery and she again whispered that she felt like some emotions were coming up, so that was 'enough.' I asked her to wait for me after the presentation was done, to discuss her reactions. She went back to her seat, the presentation concluded 10 minutes later and as soon as the room had cleared, I sat down with Jane to talk. She sobbed deeply for approximately 10 minutes and then we were able to discuss her VAHT experience.*

*Later, she kindly contacted me via email with the following brief summary and insightful answers to subsequent questions that I posed.*

Six years ago I was diagnosed and treated for a blood cancer. I was the quintessential struggling single mother, having raised my children most of their lives. They were in college when I was diagnosed and treated and I didn't want my situation to interfere with their college years, a time they had worked so hard for. My father had had the same illness when I was younger than my own children were during mine, and I was/am profoundly sad to bring that experience to them. I tried to be strong for everyone. People were scared by what they saw.

The treatment was difficult and many times I was put away in a sealed-off room because my immune system was so suppressed. By the end of the treatment, the illness was gone, and so was everything else: friends, some family, well-being, job, finances. I spent the following years trying to put my life back together. There was not much left, and the treatments had left me weakened and frightened that I might get sick again.

Out of curiosity, I sat with Sarajane for a short VAHT session. My body was racked with aches from soft tissue scar tissue, much of it in the upper left shoulder and clavicle area that formed from the chemotherapy, and my legs burned with pain. It was par for the course. Sarajane played several notes. I liked the high ones, but the low ones, which I felt in my lower body, spoke to something deep. She played her harp and I wanted to cry. Afterwards, I sat and waited until the end of her presentation. It felt like a strong, slow-moving wave was winding up and down the back of my body and I did my best not to cry. She spoke with me later and made it safe to cry. Afterwards, I felt much lighter and I did not notice the pain in my legs and scar tissue. Thinking back on the session makes me feel better, and I am thankful.

### **1. Are you a harpist? If so, what brought you to the harp? Does playing it provide any beneficial effects? Are you a therapeutic musician?**

I have been playing harp for two-and-a-half years. When I was in hospital, I was visited by a certified music practitioner (CMP) who wanted to come into my room with TV cameras. Of course, I declined. This was a personal and difficult moment in my life — not one for the news! I looked forward to the music, but felt like I was



the audience at a recital, since the focus was on the player, not on the situation at hand. I felt people deserved better. My treatment led to nerve damage in my hands and feet and a couple of years later, I was able to do things but still not well enough, so I took up harp because, one — it was on my bucket list and two — it would help improve fine motor skills.

Playing is meditative for me and I love the vibration against my chest. I am studying to be a CMP because the music is so beautiful, it should be shared. I have also met some tremendous people in the Music for Healing and Transition Program.

### **2. As a cancer survivor, what could you suggest to therapeutic harpists, so that they might become better providers of this service (and friends) for patients with cancer? What would you have liked or what did you need the most while in treatment?**

Great question. I extend myself to others with a similar diagnosis to help understand some of the effects of the treatment and the emotional issues that come up. Working with other survivors

## VAHT, from page 11

at the same point in recovery was/is useful too. For most people who are being treated, their world has changed and there's no looking back. I liken it to sending a young person off to war. You know that when they come back, they may look fine, they may be injured or even missing some parts. But they will see life through a different lens, and they won't be able to relate that frame of mind well to anyone except others who went through the same experience — and they are glad that most people haven't had to know what they do. I guess that's dramatic. After treatment, people are scared about recurrence. My doctors told me people 'cocoon,' which makes sense to me. You want time to sort things out and most importantly, time with your loved ones. A few years ago, my children were at the site of a mass shooting but thankfully, were unharmed — but confused by the violence as well as by their own survival. From my experience as a cancer survivor, I felt the best thing to say to them was, 'I am sorry this happened to you, but I am glad you are here.' Maybe those are words everyone needs to hear once in a while.

During treatment, I don't know what I could've asked for. It was going to be difficult, there was no way of reframing that. I was grateful for the respect of my clinical caregivers. The situation made the people I loved sad, but if it hadn't, that would have been disturbing too. It's a vortex of things you just can't avoid. Hearing that people are 'glad you are here' would be helpful, being encouraged to 'fight' may be not so helpful. It's not a war, really, it's a misalignment. Your health has jumped tracks and you just want to get things sorted out, back in harmony. Everyone knows it's a difficult situation. At the time, I didn't want to be too stimulated and did a lot of accepting along the way, so maybe that addresses the type of music that might be appropriate for some people. And of course, you are frightened and in pain. Your playing brought grace.

### 3. If I remember correctly, you mentioned to me that you're a psychologist. Would you be interested in explaining what you believe happened during your VAHT experience from a clinician's standpoint?

My background is in cognition, so I look at how the brain works and processes information and factor that into learning and learning environments. I think the VAHT experience broke through peripheral adaptive schemas and reached into things repressed and left behind.

In cognitive psychology, we talk about long-term, short-term and working memories. Long term is different for everyone, based on experiences, how they relate to those experiences, and the context in which they perceive them. So everyone has a different idea of what the color red means, for instance. As more information comes in every day, we experience it in our short term memory. In the working memory, we relate the new information to what we already know in our long term memory, and then let long term memory take over and file it away where it makes sense to us. Schemas become frames of reference within our long term memory, a network that nests and connects different experiences or information together. An adaptive schema would be a network of behaviors, responses and perceptions someone puts together to relate and respond to a situation that is challenging. For instance, someone who loses a limb is of course, unhappy for a while, but after time, usually moves on and adapts both physically, cognitively and emotionally. In cognitive psychology, this reflects a reorganization of schemas to adapt to the new situation. So a peripheral adaptive schema discussed above, I guess, is a way of describing a protective strategy for dealing with traumatic feelings.

### 4. How long did the relief from your pain last after the VAHT demonstration? Have you noticed any long-term changes in your pain and scar tissue since the session? I think you said that was the first time you were able to cry since you

**received your diagnosis? Have you had any further emotional release since the session? Has anything else provided pain relief for you, if so, how does it compare to VAHT?**

The relief lasted several days and I am still more at peace from the VAHT session. Thank you.

Yes, I had not cried since telling my children of my diagnosis. The diagnosis was not the worst day of my life — telling my children was.

I stay away from pain medications. Advil is my drug of choice. After treatment, my oncologist wanted me to go on antidepressants, since clinical depression is often a side effect of the treatment, not to mention the experience. I declined, figuring that the water was going to be cold whenever I decided to jump in, so now was as good a time as any. Not to say that it was easy.

VAHT unscrambled things and put everything together again in a way that was harmonious or simply okay.

### 5. How has your life changed? What did you do before and what are you doing now?

I would say that before the diagnosis, I was struggling with trying to make a good life for my family in a hostile world and felt very invalidated. The illness brought clinical people into my life who demonstrated that my life, no matter how small, mattered. The hard work has been afterwards: The rebuilding and being okay with what is. I now don't waste my time on appeasing or contributing to anything that gets in the way of the greater good, and egos, including my own, are a waste of time. We're here for a short time, it's not easy for anyone, so smile at a stranger when you can to let them know they're okay too. ♥

