

The gift of song

Jill Rakusen reflects on how living with ME drew her into a new relationship with music.

I had no idea about the profound impact a song could have. The sheer power of it to effect such significant change within me; the possibility of being able to 'meet', and draw on, this power; to grow into becoming 'one' with it.

The reason I discovered it? I became ill. My world changed beyond recognition. It was bewildering, shattering, challenging beyond measure. A familiar story, eh?

My ability to cope with all this was pretty limited. I kept trying, and failing, to get back to work. My employers were very understanding, but ultimately I had to leave my job.

Living with the possibility, and then the actuality, of long-term illness can

lead to a huge sense of loss, including a kind of loss of identity. This often involves a journey. Was mine a journey into becoming someone else? Or was it a journey towards a truer me? I eventually felt just brave enough to gravitate towards the latter. Because of ME.

Being with a song

ME propelled me towards a new relationship with music, and with song in particular. While I'd already rediscovered singing, and I was fortunate that it was still possible (at times), this was something else. For instance, I came to know how I could be with a song: 'just' me and 'just' the song, without others, or even a recording (so often, sensitivity to sound made listening to anything out of the question).

In this way, I could have all-consuming musical experiences, even when my world was limited by illness. Invariably the most profound experiences occurred when I wasn't singing at all – exhaustion could easily make singing too demanding to contemplate.

I found these discoveries revelatory as well as astonishing. They helped me grow. I could find buoyancy even whilst exhausted, and deeply nourish myself – thereby helping to rebuild my 'energy bank account'.

Songs I engaged with came from many parts of the world. Soon I amazed myself by starting to create songs. And I was equally astonished at others' responses once I dared to

share my first.

My songs quickly became trusty companions. They came not as succour, or hope for happier days, but rather to illuminate a deeper reality and help me open up to it, find compassion for the faltering self, build strength, and embrace as much ease as possible.

As I engaged with a song, new facets might be revealed – of the song, of myself, of the world. I discovered the power that I had – to find peace within. Joy, too. And I didn't need to sing, or listen to, a note! It was gratifying and humbling to discover such possibilities.

Yet at times I could easily feel abandoned, including by song. This meant I could forget its enormous power (and that of myself). However, I was acutely aware how negativity flourishing within me fuels misery and even exhaustion, and this could provide the impetus needed to look beyond it, often prompting the emergence of new songs, such as one called *I See Beauty*.

Sharing my discoveries

After a while I tentatively began to explore if others might be interested in this way of being-with-song. To cut a long story short, it became known as *Giving Voice (GV)* and the *GV Process*. An early group I ran was called the *GV Experiential Research Group*. What a mouthful! To my initial amazement, people began to make discoveries themselves, largely on their own between the sessions.



Jill Rakusen with her book

Often, like it was for me, their most significant experiences occurred in silence.

GV has continued ever since, appealing to a range of people – some who sing, some who believe they can't; some who are unwell, or their carers; some who simply wish to learn, to grow, to 'become'. Eventually I produced a book to help others 'unlock' the power of song. Since Covid, I run occasional events online.

While I've gained enormously through the personal gift of song, being able to introduce this approach to others has itself been a huge gift: hearing how people have used it in their lives – even when exhausted (so important!), or witnessing others' depth of experience, particularly when they have not 'known' themselves as musical beings.

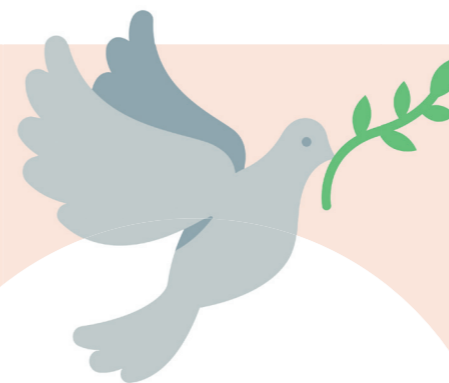
Of course, because of my ongoing condition, it can be challenging to run events, but I've been fortunate to have assistance, in all sorts of ways. I'm eternally grateful to the many organisations and countless people who've helped over the years.

I've been spurred on by all who've shared the benefits of the process including members and trustees of the National Foundation for Giving Voice, a charity that was set up to take this work forward, and my dear colleagues, Rachel Healey and Caroline Thorpe, who sought to learn from me how to facilitate this process. Doing it is a labour of love for the three of us.

Action for ME was particularly helpful to me in the early days. It would so warm my heart if any readers were to find my experiences helpful too.

The Giving Voice Foundation aims to illuminate the relationship between music and health and wellbeing. The charity is very kindly giving away five copies of Jill's book, *Unlocking the Power of Song: A Companion for Challenging Times*, to *InterAction* readers. The book shares more about her journey and how her approach can be drawn on by others.

To be in with a chance to receive a copy please email interaction@actionforme.org.uk, or write to the address on p 2, with the title 'Gift of Song' by **Monday 6 January 2025**. More information can be found at www.givingvoicefoundation.org.uk



Jill's song for the season

I've chosen *Silent Night* for several reasons: because of the profound nurturing restfulness it can engender (which all of us touched by ME probably need in spades), because of its history, and because it touches on something deeply universal.

By Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber, *Silent Night* was born in Austria out of immense suffering, after 12 gruelling years of war in Europe which ended in 1818. Almost a century later, near the beginning of World War I, a German officer began singing it on Christmas Eve, first in German, then in English, leading to 'enemy' soldiers joining in and sharing other carols.

Given our present-day wars, including in Europe, and in the Middle East, 'cradle' of the world's three Abrahamic religions, I feel it's a song so needed now: not a saccharine version that can appear on the airwaves, rather a version that can be deeply held in the intimacy of our hearts, as we link with all who've suffered in the past, through to the present day.

I was moved to tears recently on coming across a video of some Muslim girls singing it in Arabic – in Beirut – in 2017. I pray that they and their loved ones have found safety, and can take succour from it amidst the current ongoing destruction ... And I trust that holding them in our awareness, and all who are suffering, will support them, and contribute to peace throughout the world as we connect with it deeply in our hearts.

The video mentioned above can be found here: tinyurl.com/SilentNightBeirut

Other renditions of *Silent Night* that Jill holds dear will be listed on www.givingvoicefoundation.org.uk, together with additional links. Contact Jill at the Foundation if you want to join her online as she shares *Silent Night* during the Christmas period.

