

Soothing the Beast

Written by Katherine Tandy Brown

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You're likely familiar with the quote: "Music has charms to soothe a savage beast." Shakespeare, right? Wrong! Fellow English poet and playwright William Congreve actually said that. But no matter, for nothing has changed in the ensuing years. There's still no shortage of beasts to soothe, be they real or imagined. Though your chances of facing a fire-breathing dragon are slim, thank goodness, if a situation or emotion *feels* real, it's definitely in the "beast" category. And music can be your knight in shining armor.

Modern-day beasts can include temporary or chronic physical pain, relationship issues, illness, depression, overloaded calendar syndrome, and life-changing decision-making. And, of course, those pesky twins, stress and anxiety. Feel free to add your own. Music can at least add a "Maybe I can do this" dimension to a problem.

Beloved '60's folksinger Pete Seeger even used music to influence changes in civil rights, world peace, and environmental issues.

One December I witnessed music's calming power when I was in the emergency room for an infusion. An elderly woman was wheeled into the cubicle next to mine, moaning and crying nonstop. The ER doc couldn't calm her down enough to find out the source of her discomfort. When another emergency demanded his immediate attention, he asked two nurses if they could give it a try, and left. They had no more success than he had...until they began to sing Christmas carols to her, and she quieted right down.

Many hospitals now offer music therapy, i.e. patients listening to, and/or participating in, music. Some 5,000-plus registered musical therapists practice in the U.S. Research validates its use for improving outcomes and quality of life in operating and recovery rooms, thus lowering

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amounts of pain-relieving drugs needed. Music can help restore speech after a stroke or traumatic brain injury, can reduce the side effects of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and can improve day-to-day life for dementia patients by increasing memory recall, reducing agitation, and improving physical coordination.

Studies have shown that a good set of tunes can give your immune system a much-needed boost and can improve performance during exercise. Want to up your reps at the gym? Download whatever motivates you – whether it's Aerosmith or Elvis – and pump away.

Music can even make a groaner of a task into a doable one. I'm not big on house-cleaning, but when impending company forces my hand, I reach back to my 'roots and the rooms soon reverberate with James Brown, "the Wicked Pickett," the Kinks, and the 'Stones. Though I may be a bit hoarse afterwards from warbling along, housework becomes a breeze.

If you're looking for a musical connection beyond your home electronics, your car sound system and your earbuds, Beaufort is live with opportunities for every taste.

A treasure imparted on the Lowcountry in 1979, the USCB Chamber Music Series brings in world-class musicians led by charming cellist Edward Aaron. Google him and prepare to have your socks knocked off by his creds. His fellow performers are of the same caliber. Attend a concert and prepare to embrace a fresh perspective on the chamber music genre. This is the real deal.

As are the Beaufort Symphony Orchestra and its charismatic conductor Fred Devyatkin, who perform in their "new" home, Sea Island Presbyterian Church, where wide windows frame views of live oaks, palms, and afternoon sunshine. Sort of like a ground-floor treehouse. Fred introduces each piece with enthusiastic, informative chat. The audience can then tap their toes or chill, eyes-closed even, to exciting, lovely, and/or inspiring strains from talented musicians.

If you'd rather *make* music, add your shower singing voice to your church choir or dust off your high-school sax and rock'n'roll with the OLLI-sponsored Lowcountry Community Concert Band. Try out for the Lowcountry Chorale, or one of two barbershop singing groups, the Beaufort Belles for ladies and Harbormasters for men.

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Another option offering a much-needed service is always looking for new singers. Lowcountry Threshold Choir sings at bedside for people who are nearing life's end or need cheering up. The group can bring their peace-filled music anywhere – from the Hospice Floor or Infusion Room of Beaufort Memorial Hospital, to a private home. And there's no fee for the visit.

As a member of this choir, I've watched folks in their last stages of life who were lying still when Threshold arrived, eventually sing along or at least "mouth" the words of a favorite hymn.

Years ago, my dad suffered a series of strokes in his 70's that left him blind and quite hard of hearing and landed him in a nursing home. For a time I sadly assumed we'd never be able to communicate again, until one day the facility owner, a kind woman who'd been my father's office nurse, set me straight.

"Your dad's mind is fine. Just talk slowly and loud enough, and he'll hear you." And as he'd been a physician *and* a musician, she added, "You might try singing to him."

So I chose his favorite hymn, "In the Garden." You probably know it. Initially, my alto was nervous, but grew stronger. And when I began the chorus, "And he walks with me and he talks with me..." suddenly his quiet but clear tenor joined in, "And he tells me I am his own." As we sang together – I, through tears of joy – his voice strengthened, and we finished the second verse together, just like old times.

That experience soothed my own savage beast of loss and grief for quite some time.

No matter what your beast of the day may be – whether it's embracing a midlife career change, trying to make sense out of world politics, struggling to get over a case of the flu, or coercing your family into sitting down to dinner together – remember to slide a little music into your life and allow yourself to groove a bit. It won't change your circumstances but it'll definitely ease your mind.

Katherine Tandy Brown has traveled the world as a freelance writer for 25 years. She teaches

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memoir, travel writing and writing practice in USCB's OLLI Continuing Ed program and in her downtown cottage. A certified writing coach, she is penning her first novel, One to Go: An Equine Thriller.

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