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Prayer Songs: Therapy That Aided a People's Survival

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This paper proposes a parallelism between existential psychotherapy and the psychospiritual healing function Negro Spirituals had for enslaved people in the United States. The songs' beauty and profundity are asserted as having high value in their therapeutic function. The courage and wisdom enslaved people employed to resist psychic domination are discussed in conjunction with examples of their ways of maintaining hope, which is viewed as a prerequisite for their restorative use of the Spirituals. The attributes of sound and music are discussed with descriptions of how they have been used to substantiate the power of the Spirituals as distinct expressions of sound healing. The songs' comparability to existentialist psychotherapy is demonstrated with an analysis of their therapeutic content.

Keywords: *existential psychotherapy, Spirituals, African American musical history, transformative singing*

This paper emerged from three areas of work with the history of enslaved African Americans and their cultural production. In the 1980s, as a performing artist who portrayed historical figures, I began studying the social environment and everyday life of African American women from the beginning of their transport from Africa into the twentieth century. A focus on the Spirituals was included, as I was also, at that time, a voice student at Sherwood Conservatory of Music, and had many Spirituals in my repertory. In studying the history surrounding the Spirituals from an anthropological and transformative studies perspective, I became aware of enslaved people's therapeutic use of the songs for healing.

For two years, from January 2013 through April 2015, I used Spirituals to facilitate psychospiritual self-healing groups for women recovering from trauma, substance use, and severe health conditions in a women's center located in the Tenderloin community of San Francisco, CA. In that work, I witnessed how the songs stimulated participants to probe the underlying sources of their anxiety, despair, grief, and loneliness. I realized that the songs' meaning places attention on subjective concerns similarly to the way existential psychotherapy directs attention to fundamental concerns of lived experience. This article is the outcome of experiential understanding of the Spirituals as therapeutic instruments comparable

to those of existential psychology. It initiates an analysis of enslaved people's purposeful therapeutic use of Spirituals to manage the circumstances of their existence. Managing their circumstances included preserving the integrity of their selfhood despite being subjected to forced labor and innumerable indignities.

The involuntary toil of enslaved people fueled the industrial revolution with agricultural products, cotton in particular, and set in gear the evolution of mechanical production, capitalism, and the increase of wealth in the Western world. A view into the way those workers used their inherent means of maintaining spiritual balance through the comparison between the Spirituals and existential psychology as they lived and worked under heavy physical and psychic stress increases understanding of human inventiveness and capacity for survival. It also informs of the people's wisdom and the endowment of wisdom in the cultural elements they drew upon to relieve themselves from the stress of subjugation. The high importance of the spiritual realm in African American culture is proposed as an outcome of enslaved ancestors' rescuing engagement with non-material powers.

The calming and joy inducing that the Spirituals evoke is widely known and addressed in scholarly treatises on the songs' development, their function as codes in escape messages for enslaved

people seeking freedom, as instruments of worship, and as musical compositions. Those attributes have received studied attention that has been well articulated and disseminated (Cone, 1992; Dett, 1927; Frazier, 1974; Harris, 1992; Jones, 1967; Locke, 1969; Lovell, 1972; Southern, 1971; Thurman, 1969; Walker, 1979). However, neither the intricacy of the songs' therapeutic resources relative to the specific way that they helped resolve enslaved peoples' inner conflict, nor the song makers' intentional composing and use of the songs for therapy, has been given attention in the scholarly literature.

The aesthetic quality of the Spirituals is a pivotal element in this discussion that has as a major objective comparison of the therapeutic force of the songs with that of existential psychology. Aesthetic quality is premised as having an essential role in the songs' effectiveness as a therapeutic system of healing for enslaved people in the United States. Given that premise, it seems fitting to begin the discussion with a historical account of the music's development, description, and with accounts of the wonderment that the beauty of the music inspired. Reassessment of the singular characteristic of sorrow with which Spirituals have been identified, and the link between enslaved people's cultural production and development of other songs, are also addressed. Discussion of the adaptive mechanisms of resistance that enslaved people used is followed by description of the affects of sounds and music on human bodies; this leads to a final section on the songs' functioning in a way that is comparable to existential psychology.

New Songs in a New Land

Negro Spirituals attracted serious attention from the beginning of their sounding in the quarters of enslaved people in North American colonies around 1760 (Walker, 1979; Jones, 1967). Large numbers of enslaved people became acquainted with Biblical scriptures and were converted to Christianity between 1730 and 1770; this was one of several intense periods of evangelical activity in the colonies known as the first Great Awakening. Creating songs based on Bible stories and passages became one of enslaved people's favorite uses for their interpretation of scriptures (Blassingame, 1979; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Walker, 1979). Thus, the songs enslaved people referred to as Spirituals emerged from their religious experiences and were prominent in

their secret religious worship and in the development of the Black church, which Wyatt Walker (1979) referred to as "the central and dominant force in the affairs of Black people" (p. 16). However, enslaved people drew lyrical imagery for their Spirituals from nature and from personal experience as well (Walker, 1979). Spirituals such as *I've Been 'Buked and I've been Scorned* and *Yonder Comes Morning* give evidence of enslaved people's conception of spiritual matters as encompassing all aspects of life—religious as well as commonplace concerns. Lack of differentiation of secular from sacred is common in the worldview shared by the various African cultures (Mbiti, 1999), from which enslaved people came. That worldview and the harsh circumstances in which they lived are undoubtedly the sources that promoted expression of all life concerns in the Spirituals.

It important to note that the term *Spiritual* had been used to refer to different types of songs inspired by Biblical scripture long before it was used to refer to the specific corpus of music created by enslaved people of African descent. Eileen Southern (1997) demonstrated the commonality of the term by comparing the first hymnal Richard Allen compiled in 1801 for the African Methodist Episcopalian (AME) church, titled *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs from various Authors by Richard Allen, African Minister*, with another hymnal "printed in 1651 with the title *The Psalm, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Old and New Testaments*" (p. 76). Southern explained:

It is not known when the term spiritual was first used to apply to the religious folksongs of the black American. Obviously, the term points back to the three species of sacred song early set up in the history of Protestantism—psalms, hymns, and spirituals—which, in turn, points to the Scriptures. (Southern, 1997, pp. 180–181)

This may explain the need of the frequently accompanying word, Negro, as a clarifier in references to the sacred music created by enslaved people of African descent. Another difficulty in distinguishing Negro Spirituals from other songs referred to as spirituals in early 19th century songbooks is that the melodies of songs were not fixed, and until later in the century, songs were often printed only as text. For example, Southern (1977) informed of this practice in discussing Richard Allen's production of his 1801 and 1816 hymnals as follows:

It may be assumed that tunes consistently linked with specific hymns in other hymnals were used for the singing of those hymns by Allen's congregation. The tune *Newark*, for example is associated with the text *Now begins the heav'nly theme* (No. 31 in Allen's hymnal) in several collections published during the years 1776-1805, and it was undoubtedly used by the Bethelites [members of Allen's church]. On the other hand, there is strong evidence to support an assumption that Bethel drew upon popular songs of the period as a source of tunes, or composed its own tunes.

This had been a common practice among Protestants ever since the origin of their religion—some of Martin Luther's best choral melodies were borrowed from German folksong or popular song. (Southern, 1977, p. 78)

Allen's first two editions of hymns did not include music scores; therefore, as Southern (1997) explained, melodies were not fixed. Nevertheless, it seems clear from her explanation that among the ten spirituals that Richard Allen included in his 1801 hymnal, songs from the corpus of Negro Spirituals were among them. Southern reported: "verses of some of the songs in the *Slave Songs* collection [published by Allen, Ware, & McKim-Garrison in 1867] can be traced back to Richard Allen's historic hymnal of 1801 and Watson's [hymnal] of 1819" (Southern, 1977, p. 181).

Wyatt Walker's (1979) description of the character of the content and compositional modalities of Negro Spirituals includes:

Eternality of Message ... [that] speaks not only to the Black condition out of which it was born but also... to the human condition at many points, giving a quality of universality...

Rhythmic ... the fundamental characteristic of African music, so is rhythm the fundamental characteristic of Afro-American Spirituals... Some are slow and plaintive; others are driving and pulsating; still others possess a beat of jubilation...

Given to Improvisation ... The Spiritual form lent itself to... spontaneous and situational creation of lyrics...

Antiphonal or Call and Response ... This quality is... strong evidence of an African survival in the New World.

Double, or coded, Meaning ... another Africanism identifiable in the Afro-American Spiritual...

Repetitive... pattern or patterns... in a melodic line, which repeats with only slight variation...

Unique Imagery ... Often tinged with humor or satire. (Walker, 1979, pp. 54–59)

The complex task of writing, with precision, musical scores with the above characteristics was presented to the publishers of *Slave Songs of the United States*, who located ex-enslaved singers of the Spirituals and transcribed the words and music of songs as they sang. Southern (1997) quoted Lucy McKim Garrison, one of the collectors and publishers of *Slave Songs of the United States*, on the difficulty she encountered:

It is difficult to express the entire character of these negro ballads by mere musical notes and signs. The odd turns made in the throat, and the curious rhythmic effect produced by single voices chiming in at different irregular intervals, seem almost as impossible to place on the score as the singing of birds or the tones of an Aeolian Harp. (Garrison, 1867, as cited in Southern, 1997, pp. 192-193)

The perplexity Garrison expressed is understandable given the list of distinctive features that characterizes African American music. Samuel Floyd (1995) explained Sterling Stucky's thesis (in Stucky's 1987 book *Slave Culture*) regarding the ring shout as "a distinctive cultural ritual in which music and dance were merged and fused" and the source of enslaved Africans' recognition of their common values despite their cultural diversity (Floyd, 1995, p. 16). Floyd (1995) referred to the list of elements promoting the recognition of "the characterizing and foundational elements of African American music" as:

Call, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythm, heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions, hums, moans, grunts, vocables and other rhythmic-oral declamations, interjections, and punctuations; off-beat melodic phrasings and parallel intervals and chords; constant repletion of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and vamps would be derived); timbral distortions of various kinds; musical individuality within collectivity; game rivalry; hand clapping, foot

patting, and approximation thereof; apart-playing; and the metronomic pulse that underlies all African American music. (Floyd, 1995, p. 16)

This list helps to explain the difficulty Garrison faced in 1867, before features of African-derived music were defined in writing. Singers' timbral distinctions and embellishments, such important expressive elements in the songs that attracted, held, and affected listeners and the singers themselves so profoundly, remain difficult to render in writing.

Spirituals were admired for their ability to stir the inner being of listeners deeply with what James Weldon Johnson (1922) referred to in his poem, *O Black and Unknown Bards*, as "that subtle undertone, that note in music not heard with the ears...the elusive reed so seldom blown, which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears" (p. 73). Spirituals stirred the soul of listeners as well as the imagination of composers such as Antonin Dvořák, who drew upon melodies from the Spirituals for his 1893 composition, *New World Symphony*, of which he stated:

I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them. (Gutman, 2001, n.p.)

I doubt that Dvořák envisioned the extent to which his prophetic commentary would actualize.

In 1871, the Jubilee Singers from Fisk University began traveling the world singing Spirituals. However, the art song arrangements of the Spirituals that the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang mimicked white musical standards and were, as Michael Harris (1992) described, "more straight," with "emphasis on harmony instead of rhythm" and the "qualities of folk musicianship, namely quarter-tones, slurring, and unusual harmonies" were lost (pp. 111-113). However, the songs retained their distinctive aesthetic and soul touching power because it is inherent in the songs' melodies. In the opinion of J. B. T. Mash (1875), "many who heard the songs [the Jubilee Singers sang] could not understand the reason for enjoying [the songs] so thoroughly, as almost everyone did [enjoy] these simple unpretending songs"

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(p. 69). There is no doubt that the world of 1871 or of December 16, 1893 (date of the premiere of Dvořák's symphony at Carnegie Hall) could not have conceived of the present situation of popular world culture being derived from the cultural production of enslaved people of African descent. African American music, in its various idiomatic expressions, is the meme now replicated in popular music around the world.

Lament and Catharsis

The absorbing quality of the Spirituals' melodies and the expressions of sorrow in some of the songs led to the notion that pathos was the primary generator of the Spirituals. Overall knowledge of the multiple uses and messages that the songs had, such as their role in building and sustaining the invisible church and as lyrical maps of the underground routes to freedom, was unavailable to those who viewed the producers as half barbarous and simple minded, as was given in the general consensus view of enslaved Africans (Allen et al., 1867). Consequently, the label *sorrow songs* has remained as an identifier for the Spirituals even though the frequent singing of the song makers resulted in them being designated as *happy slaves* (Blassingame, 1979).

Even W. E. B. Dubois (1903/1994), who expressed deep appreciation for the Spirituals, was apparently too close to the pain of slavery to appreciate the multiplicity of the songs' expression and purpose, as his reference to them reveals: "The Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas" (pp. 155). As brilliant and positively positioned as Dubois was in sounding an inclusive defending voice for people of African descent, he was not immune to hierarchical ideas about human beings prevalent in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Throughout *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903/1994), Dubois showed his "twoness" toward Black lifeways' distance from European American standards. In describing the awe of Northerners of European descent in their first encounter with Gullah/GeeChee people singing Spirituals, he offered:

The Sea Islands of the Carolinas, where they met, were filled with a black folk of *primitive type*, touched and moulded less by the world about them than any others outside the Black Belt. *Their appearance was uncouth, their language funny, but their hearts were*

human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power. (DuBois, 1903/1994, p.157, emphasis added)

These expressions of benign classism from DuBois, who frequently and superbly articulated the maddening torment of structural racism and the equally mad reasoning underlying it (see the collection of his writings in Foner, 1970), demonstrate how dominant values seep into the views even of those opposed to domination. It informs of the force exerted by systemically promulgated ideals, even self-negating ones, in disrupting critical discernment, as well as people's vulnerability to standards of acceptability and the entrenchment and resiliency of notions of superiority. Moreover, it supports the importance of retrospective considerations of intuitive based self-sufficiency that enslaved people used to maintain sanity and survive. Reconsiderations, as Floyd (1995) described, can "ignite cultural memory" that may have been dormant for a long while but "confirms the validity of new knowledge and new ideas as no amount of rational thought will or can" (p. 16).

It is known from the narratives of ex-enlaved individuals that *happy* did not characterize how they felt about the state of their lives as enslaved persons (Lester, 1968). But sorrow was not the only motivation for their singing either. Spirituals actually lifted enslaved people out of sorrow and helped them attain a sense of peace. Then too, enslaved people composed and used singing of other types of songs for various purposes co-extensively with the Spirituals. Lawrence Levine (1977) in his treatise, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, explained enslaved peoples' use of verbal art to address social and personal needs:

In their songs, as in their tales, aphorisms, proverbs, anecdotes and jokes, Afro-American slaves, following the practices of the African cultures they had been forced to leave behind them, assigned a central role to the spoken arts, encouraged and rewarded verbal improvisation, maintained the participatory nature of their expressive culture, and utilized the spoken arts to voice criticism as well as to uphold traditional values and group cohesion. (Levine, 1977, p. 6)

Levine described the ubiquitous character of enslaved people's secular song composing and singing

with slice-of-life descriptions of their singing for various purposes in various locations:

Slaves, then had frequent recourse to their music and they used it in almost every conceivable setting for almost every possible purpose. The accounts of contemporaries, white and black, and the numerous interviews with former slaves are filled with evidence that the variety of nonreligious songs in the slaves' repertory was wide. There were songs of in-group and out-group satire, songs of nostalgia, nonsense songs, children's songs, lullabies, songs of play and work and love. (Levine, 1977, p. 15)

The Spirituals' emergence out of religious practices facilitated high usage, broad familiarity, and social acceptability. Those features, as well as the exposure the songs received from touring African American choirs beginning in 1871, gave them prominence over other types of songs enslaved people sang. A principal example is the Spirituals' contrast with the Blues. The Blues, as a corpus of music that also served to release pent-up emotions, never attained social acceptability among the African American leading class, as it emerged from secular songs enslaved people sang and dealt primarily with personal issues. However, the Blues thrived as an important foundational aspect of African American music and culture (Jones, 1965).

Resistance to Psychic Domination and Depression

Resistance to psychic domination by any means necessary was an attitudinal stance that became collective among the enslaved (Blassingame, 1979; Lester, 1968; Raboteau, 2004). The apparent reasoning underlying that stance was that even if one's body is dominated, the spirit does not have to be relinquished (Blassingame, 1979; Lester, 1968). However, when individuals engage they can feel the strength of each others' wills as expressions of consciousness. The deep subjectivity that makes experience and awareness possible is felt transitively, because consciousness, as John Nelson (1994) stated "is the *within* of us, our essence, the basic felt vibration underlying each experience, the receptive self onto which the senses project their worldly data, the I who observes the I who observes" (p. 7). Consequently, American enslavers gave a lot of energy and time to beating, burning, shackling, dragging, pulling, and to other means

of torturing enslaved people to break their wills and achieve total dominance over them.

On the other side, one important activity of the enslaved was devising indirect and inconspicuous ways of obstructing total domination, and many of their productive tactics involved creative sound and movement (Lester, 1968). The following testimony of John Little, (1940) an ex-enslaved person, informs of the way music and dance was used to resist domination, maintain sanity, sustain personal identity, support the sanity and safety of the community, and hold an indomitable will:

They say slaves are happy, because they laugh, and are merry. I myself and three or four others, have received two hundred lashes in the day and had our feet in fetters; yet, at night, we would sing and dance, and make others laugh at the rattling of our chains. Happy men we much have been! We did it to keep down trouble, and to keep our hearts from being completely broken: that is as true as gospel! Just look at it,—must not we have been happy? Yet I have done it myself—I have cut capers in chains. (Little, 1940, p. 82)

Battles of the will are primarily internal fights. To win the frequent assaults on their subjectivity, enslaved people connected to the mysterious sustaining power of tone, melody, rhythm, and movement to engender calm and strength within themselves.

James Jones's (2003) TRIOS theory provides a more incisive account of John Little's use of song and dance described above. Jones explained that "TRIOS... an acronym for the psychological elements of a cultural system of time, rhythm, improvisation, orality, and spirituality" (2003, p. 219) pertains to the responses of people of African descent living with daily threats stemming from dominant forces. Jones argued that both self-protecting and self-enhancing processes are prompted in responses to racist threats, and "may occur at either the individual level ... or in concert with others in the stigmatized group ... [and that] self-enhancing mechanisms are aided by a psychological community of others whose positive responses affirm self-worth" (p. 221).

Jones also explained that "one mechanism by which Black self-esteem can be maintained is by decoupling self-worth from outcomes in domains perceived to offer low probabilities of self-affirmation"

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(2003, p. 222). As such, singing and dancing in chains after being whipped with two hundred lashes clearly offered John Little more respect from his community and greater self-respect than a whimpering expression of defeat would have given. TRIOS, Jones stated, "proposes a worldview that organizes the meaning of behavior, and charts strategies for navigating the universal context of racism toward positive psychological well-being" (2003, p. 222). Jones also proposed that TRIOS "reflects the core African cultural ethos" (2003, p. 223). From that view, John Little's singing and dancing can be seen as a process of decoupling his self-worth from his enslavers' attempts to destroy it. As such, this was one of enslaved people's most powerful self-protective and self-enhancing adaptive mechanisms. Jones discussed the source of African American adaptive mechanisms:

The abject loss of freedom resulting from enslavement generated a primary psycho-cultural motivational system designed to gain control over one's body and over one's life. As a result, claiming psychological freedom in any and every form possible can be seen as a consistent pattern of [African American] psychological adaptation and a cardinal goal of [their] social psychological development. (Jones, 2003, p. 223)

From the elements of time, rhythm, improvisation, orality, and spirituality, enslaved people organized sound into songs with power to mesmerize and transform. Hazrat Inayat Khan (1991) described those effects as intoxication. The intoxication of music, he said:

Touches the deepest part of man's being. Music reaches father than any other impression from the external world can reach. The beauty of music is that it is the source of creation and the means of absorbing it When it intoxicates those who hear it, how much more must it intoxicate those who play or sing it themselves! And how much more must it intoxicate those who have touched the perfection of music, and those who have contemplated upon it for years and years! It gives them an even greater joy and exaltation than a king feels sitting on his throne (Khan, 1991, p. 5).

Khan was a mystic and his knowledge of the power of sound and music was attained through intuitive wisdom and experience as a spiritually inspired musician. Yet, today, personal accounts of the power of sound and

music and the benefits received from using it for healing substantiate the attributes of music that Khan described, adding to what is known about human characteristics and the properties of sound. Lynda Arnold (2013), an educator and musician focused on the science of sound and sound healing explained the primacy of hearing in the chronology of human physical development as “the first sense to develop in the womb” (para. 8). She stated that “The vagus nerve connects our ears to every organ and muscle system in our body...[and that] sound also permeates us quickly because 70% of our bodies are made of water” (Arnold, 2013, para. 8).

Sound is known to be formed by waves of pressure that move through mediums of air, liquids, and solids including the human body, and sound waves have force (Acoustics/Physics, 2015). The power of harmful acoustic force is demonstrated by the Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), a device now used by police and the military that is capable of inducing sonic pain through tones over longer distances than are sent on normal loud speakers (LRAD Corporation, 2016).

However, in opposition to the harmful use of sonic power, ages old traditions of using music for healing from cultures throughout the world now have prominence in Western spiritual and medical practices aimed at inducing psychological and physical balance. Dr. Mitchell L. Gaynor, an oncologist and clinical assistant professor of medicine at Weill Medical College of Cornell University in New York uses chanting and plays Tibetan singing bowls in bi-weekly sessions for his patients. One of Dr. Gaynor’s patients who began participating in the sessions after being diagnosed with stage four cancer was surviving seven years later (Rosenbloom, 2005).

There are now many other studies, methods, and practices that announce the power of sound and music, and the healing attributes of sound and music are now recognized as established knowledge. But, the fact that enslaved people knew how to use that power, and that they were able to do so to channel peace of mind and sacred connection under such dreadful conditions is the remarkable information.

Spiritually Informed Existential Engagement

The Spirituals evidently carry, within their intoxicating tones, all of the characteristics described above for balancing energy levels and promoting

wellbeing, as well as deeply felt spiritual content. A view of the songs’ developmental foundation informs of their capacity to serve as modes of psychospiritual healing and as actualizations of the slaves’ existential engagement within the restricted social circumstance of slavery. Enslaved people’s existential engagement was an extraordinary quality of their lives and the Spirituals are evident expressions of their allegiance to faith and creativity in everyday life. Cornel West (1993) defined existential engagement as it applies to Black life as experienced in his own life, as follows:

Existential engagement [is] a profound commitment to what I call a prophetic vision and practice primarily based on a distinctly black tragic sense of life. On the one hand, this commitment looks the inescapable facts of death, disease and despair in the face and affirms moral agency and action in our everyday, commonplace circumstances. On the other hand, it is rooted in a certain view of the Christian tradition that is so skeptical about our capacity to know the ultimate truths about our existence that leaps of faith are promoted and enacted because they make sense out of seemingly absurd conditions. (West, 1993, pp. x-xi)

While this definition holds generally for the mode of life engagement people of African descent have had to embrace across the time spans of residence in North America, it is exceedingly appropriate to the time of slavery and the way in which the enslaved had to manage their lives. The existential engagement of the enslaved entailed doing what was necessary to avoid being put to death at the whim of enslavers and, at the same time, oppositionally, under cover, maintaining their own view of the world and making a way to practice the dictates of their own viewpoint. Their beliefs, logic, attitude of mind, perception, and communal social action were continuous with those that had guided their lives and those of their predecessors in Africa. There, according to John Mbiti (1999), “traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between spiritual and the material areas of life” (p. 2). Then too, individuals are not at center in traditional African religions, which are inscribed into community. Being a member of a particular group meant belonging to the religion of the group. Mbiti stated the following conditions, operative during the

period of slavery and beyond, that necessitated Africans belonging to the religion of their particular ethnic group:

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the belief, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinship, and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. (Mbiti, 1999, p. 2)

Christian missionary work and that of other religions, of course, changed the “cannot detach” rule during the centuries intervening 1526 or 1619 (variant official starting dates of slavery in the United States) and the present. Uprooting of people from their specific African traditions, separating them, and forcing commingling among those from various ethnic groups in enslaved communities attenuated individuals’ traditions. The racial basis of slavery served as the identity bond among displaced enslaved Africans that ethnicity and traditions had previously fostered, especially among those born outside of Africa. Nevertheless, remembered African traditions were passed on to subsequent generations along with other ways of being that developed in response to the exigencies of bondage as presented above in Jones’ (2003) TRIOS theory, and as Raboteau (2004) explained:

In the New World slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African culture because of their power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel. Nevertheless, African beliefs and customs persisted and were transmitted by slaves to their descendants. Shaped and modified by a new environment, elements of African folklore, music, language, and religion were transplanted in the New World by the African diaspora. (p. 4)

Conversion to Christianity supported communal values that enslaved people retained from African traditions, and that support provided a valid outlet for their practice of the African tradition of singing about the trials and triumphs of life. The cover of recognizability that Christianity lent to that practice provided a viable substructure for their development of the Spirituals as a therapeutic modality.

However, some slaveholders did not allow slaves to sing or pray. Raboteau (2004) reported the ex-slave Gus

Clark speaking about that rule: “My Boss didn’t low us to go to church, er to pray, er sing. Iffen he ketched us praying or singing he whupped us . . . He didn’t care fer nothing ‘cept farming (p. 214). Another ex-slave, Henry Bibb, was referenced in Raboteau’s report as having been “threatened with 500 lashes on the naked back for attending a prayer meeting conducted by enslaved people on a neighboring plantation, because he had no permission to do so” (p. 214). It seems clear that development of the Spirituals as the collective creative output of enslaved communities was not without obstacles. Willingness to risk harm to participate in collective worship and invention of ways to circumvent obstacles reflect the commitment enslaved people had to a collective spiritual life and resistance to total domination. Resistance was their existential engagement; holding on to selfhood made it possible for them to create the Spirituals as corridors to a healing place within, and the beautiful sounds they created made internal travel desirous and frequent.

Enslaved people also retained belief and practice in magic of several kinds, including conjuring, the most prominent method of knowledge and control they used for explaining what Raboteau (2004) referred to as “crucial phenomena, such as illness, misfortune, and evil . . . [and for] the control which comes from the capacity to act effectively” (p. 286). Conjuring, fortune telling, and root working were practices (and are still) for interrogating and healing ills of all types. It is important to note that even though enslaved people held and practiced those beliefs, none of those systems became as prominent as the Spirituals for psychospiritual healing. Believing in the possibility of resolutions eventuating from a system of power while at the same time being aware of the possibility of ineffectual results may have been a useful contrast to the sure results of catharsis and resolution received from singing the Spirituals. Also, conjuring and other magical practices were not equally participatory; they operated through specialists for clients. So, as systems, they may have held enslaved people’s attention, but they did not provide opportunities for everyone to practice as singing did. Mbiti (1999) explained the importance of music and dancing in African people’s lives: “Music, singing and dancing reach deep into the innermost parts of African peoples, and many things come to the surface under musical inspiration which otherwise may not be readily revealed” (p. 67).

The importance of music to African people made singing about the major concerns of their lives the

most accessible modality for psychospiritual processing and healing; singing out what was inside was a familiar way of living, and this is perhaps the underlying basis of comparability between the Spirituals as instruments of psychotherapeutic healing and existential psychology. Significant aspects of enslaved people's prophetic vision (leaps of faith) are expressed in the lyrics of the songs they composed as statements of the hard facts of living. Those statements reflected awareness of their existential engagement and were simultaneously enactments of it. Several examples of those lyrics are considered relative to existential psychology in the discussion that follows.

Existential Psychology

Existential psychology is closely related to existential philosophy with its focus on the role of freedom, choice, and responsibility in human existence. Rollo May and Irvin Yalom (1989) offered the following explanation of existential psychology:

Existential psychotherapy is not a specific technical approach that presents a new set of rules for therapy. It asks deep questions about the nature of the human being and the nature of anxiety, despair, grief, loneliness, isolation, and anomie. It also deals centrally with the questions of creativity and love. Out of the understanding of the meaning of these human experiences, existential psychotherapists have devised methods of therapy that do not fall into the common error of distorting human beings in the very effort of trying to help them. (p. 1)

Yalom (1980) organized, in *Existential Psychology*, explanation of four aspects of life that give rise to conflict all humans must face. Those four aspects are the bases of this comparison of enslaved people's therapeutic use of Spirituals with existential psychology. Yalom referred to those aspects of existence as the four givens. He also explained existential psychodynamics as the conscious and unconscious fears and driving forces engendered by individuals' conflict with the actuality of existence. Existential psychotherapy is a dynamic approach for addressing those concerns (Yalom, 1980, p. 6).

The first, and perhaps the one of the *four givens* that presents individuals with the greatest source of inner conflict, is death. Death is viewed as the source of a core existential conflict, as awareness of the certainty of death and humans' desire to continue living is a major clash of desire and opposing eventuality to which everyone has

to become reconciled or live in fear and disquiet (Yalom 1980, p. 8).

Freedom, the second given, entails the conflict of taking responsibility for the totality of one's life in the absence of certainty and solid foundations, as Yalom (1980) stated:

Contrary to everyday experience, the human being does not enter and leave a well-structured universe that has an inherent design. Rather the individual... is the author of his or her own world, life design, choices, and actions. "Freedom" in this sense has a terrifying implication; it means that beneath us there is no ground—nothing, a void, an abyss. A key existential dynamic, then, is our wish for ground and structure. (Yalom, 1980, p. 8)

Freedom involves choosing—to stay, to go; to embrace, to let go, and where to go without assurance of outcome. The unknowable aspect is the bottomlessness of freedom and the source of its terrifying proposition.

The third source of existential conflict is isolation. Existential isolation does not refer to interpersonal disconnection from others as in loneliness, or intrapersonal isolation where parts of one's self seem sealed off. It refers to a deeper elemental isolation from life and world. Yalom (1980) explained this ultimate concern by directing attention to what is known from experiencing self as separate from others:

No matter how close each of us becomes to another, there remains a final unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and we must depart alone. The existential conflict is thus the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish for contact, for protection, our wish to be part of a larger whole. (Yalom, 1980, p. 9)

Existential isolation is a condition of our physical and conscious individuality that bars support from others with the everyday, minute-by-minute, step-by-step necessity of decision-making. Responsibility for this ongoing necessity, as well as our inability to fully share our inner life, renders us ultimately alone.

Meaninglessness, the fourth ultimate concern, is, from my perspective, an outcome of the other three, as shown in the questions Yalom (1980) posed to establish the existential definition of meaninglessness:

If we must die, if we individually constitute our own world, if each of us is ultimately alone in an

indifferent world, then what meaning does life have? Why do we live? How should we live? If there is no preordained design for us, then each of us must construct our own meaning in life. Yet can a meaning of one's own creation be sturdy enough to bear one's life? (Yalom, 1980, p. 9)

These are the ultimate concerns that all humans, for all time, have to deal with and come to terms with to live a rewarding life. These givens form the basis of existential psychotherapy, as they compose the framework in which an existential therapist conceptualizes a client's problems in order to develop an approach for treatment.

Examination of the force of the four ultimate concerns within the therapy that enslaved people established using the Spirituals to remain sane under the harsh circumstances of enslavement is addressed in the following section. Each of the four givens is considered relative to the conditions of enslavement with questions similar to those Yalom poses.

Negro Spirituals as Psychotherapy

This comparison of existential psychology and enslaved people's therapeutic use of the Spirituals begin with consideration of the categorical overlay of social circumstances onto the existential givens identified in existential psychology. The actuality of enslaved people's circumstances prohibited them from experiencing choice in the authorship of their own lives. Attempts to do so risked death, mutilation, starvation, or some other horrible punishment. Consequently, enslaved persons did not have the privilege of experiencing the bottomlessness described as an aspect of freedom in Yalom's four givens. Bottomlessness was rather an aspect of their hopelessness. Fear of harm and desire for escape is a more probable assessment of the conflict the enslaved suffered relative to freedom.

It is important to note that the Spirituals were composed collectively and passed down orally from generation to generation. Consequently, the lyrics of Spirituals of the same title vary. Many of the lyrics used here are recalled from memory to illustrate how the content of the ultimate concerns of existential psychology is encoded in the Spiritual and they vary from those in the three published collections of Spirituals recommended, but the messages remain steadfast across minor lyrical variations.

Prayer Songs

The creative instruments of enslaved Africans in the United States were voice and movement. Stripped of all material possessions, they only had what they carried somatically for creative use. They used the power of voice and movement, singing, hollering, chanting, hand clapping, foot patting, body percussion, and dancing, to "look the inescapable facts of death, disease and despair in the face and affirms moral agency and action in [their] everyday, commonplace circumstances" (West, 1979, pp. x-xi).

Their songs brought the fact of death, the first given of existential psychology, into singers' and listeners' faces for them to fear; then, accept the inevitability of it rather than denying its looming presence. That process corresponds to the dynamic therapeutic approach of existential psychology. The Spirituals were composed with lyrical steps from dread to acceptance of the inevitability of death, as shown below in the following lyrics:

I mourned and mourned just like you. I mourned
till I got through.

I bless the Lord I'm going to die. I'm going to
judgment by and by.

A semantic extension of the lyrics relative to the second person singular "you," to whom the message is addressed, identifies it as instructional. It explains to the novice, "Yes, facing life's end can be tormenting, an excruciating emotional process that can place every person in mourning, until finished." Meaning: "There is an end point for mourning." The singer speaks to listeners and reminds self, as well, with the matter of fact point of the lyric's message: "You will finish with the thrashing and tossing about when you accept impermanence as a fact of life, as I did." It would be difficult to avoid taking in messages from songs like this. Aided by the song's rhythm and repetition, the eternality of the lyrics flows into consciousness easily. Repetition in Spirituals has the function of settling messages into thought and memory. That effect is convergent with the objectives of existential psychotherapy.

Many Spirituals were developed with lyrics that promoted acceptance of death, which is one of the reasons they became known as sorrow songs. Although, it is known from testimonies of ex-enslaved persons (Lester, 1968) that many enslaved individuals who wished to be released from slavery through death, were

not sorrowful about dying, and released themselves through suicide. Yet, at the same time many were gladdened, emotionally renewed from singing songs about dying, and did not choose suicide as a finale to their singing. It is still possible to see, today, in Black churches, how congregates' singing Spirituals about the forthcoming of death brings a sense of peace, calm, and fellowship throughout the assembly.

Enslaved Africans took responsibility for being free in every way, and accepting the inevitability of death was one of the ways they chose to be free internally. They were creative in claiming subjective freedom as an everyday way of being; they sought external freedom at every chance, as well, and used the Spirituals to aid both channels to freedom. They sang, as a meditation:

Hold on. Hold on. Keep your hand on that plow!
Hold on.
Noah, Noah, let me come in. Doors all fastened an'
de winder pinned.
Hold on. Hold on. Keep your hand on that plow!
Hold on.
Noah said, you done lost yo' track. Can't plow
straight an' keep a-lookin' back.

This song is an example of the enslaved promoting "leaps of faith that make sense out of seemingly absurd conditions" that Cornel West (1979) referenced. It implores singers/listeners to be present, while looking straight ahead at future possibilities rather than looking back at pain suffered, and to hold on to faith in the possibility of freedom emerging at any time from unknown circumstances. Accepting responsibility for freedom in the context of enslavement was holding on to one's mental stability to be able to take advantage of opportunities for flight.

Other interpretations would refer to the *holding on* as a plea from the community for a listener to control the maddening rage that surged in many enslaved individuals after years of deference and compliance to demands as they witnessed the moral deficiencies of those they served. From this view the Spirituals were "rooted in a Black life-style that was desperately trying to cope with poor social conditions, [and] there was never acceptance of these poor conditions because hope was always the Spirituals' central theme" (Whalum, 1972, as cited in Walker, 1979, pp. 45-46).

Rage is a serious state that physically affects oppressed people and requires strong management efforts and powerful release sources. William Grier and Price Cobbs (1992), the two Black psychiatrists who wrote *Black Rage*, gave a description of rage as "aggression [that] leaps from wounds inflicted and ambitions spiked. It grows out of oppression and capricious cruelty. It is logical and predictable if we know the soil from which it comes" (pp. 3-4). Thus, the above "hold on" lyrics can be understood as a call for managing rage stemming from discouragement, which is an aspect of the conditions of existence. The objective of the message is to prevent the conditions of existence from blocking psychological freedom, the cardinal goal of enslaved people's psychological development, as discussed in Jones's (2003) TRIOS theory above.

Earlier in the discussion, reasons for the Spirituals being referred to as *sorrow songs* were briefly touched on to point out the contradiction between the name and the hopeful engagement with which the enslaved created and used the songs. Walker (1979) addressed the issue as follows:

The religious form of the Black sacred folk song may induce the naïve and uninformed to believe that the hope for "Canaan" or the "Promised Land" was only resignation to a release by death. There is solid evidence that interspersed in the biblical language was the code meaning with specific reference to the Underground Railroad and the route and risk of the freedom trail. (Walker, 1979, p. 46)

Enslaved peoples' intense desire for freedom mediated the burden of freedom as an existential weight, as described in existential psychology, because the responsibility of getting free was so intense and valued. Without the experience of freedom there could be no experience of its existential demands. This means that social conditions influence the weight and susceptibility of touching bottom on all four existential givens. As can be seen, issues of freedom are interwoven with all of the concerns under consideration. However, the level of a concern, existential or social, responsible for a people's disturbance, other than concerns related to death, would be expressive of particular people's lived actuality.

Many enslavers, as noted above, did not allow the enslaved to pray or sing at all, whether together, or

in the absence of patrols or authorized ministers who preached the goodness of slave obedience, hard work, and sinfulness of stealing from the enslavers. So enslaved women and men with children slipped away at night into woods and swamps to create and participate in their own religious rituals. Rituals in those invisible churches according to one study were “mass catharsis: a purifying explosion of emotions that eclipsed the harshness of reality... and [left] both preacher and congregation drained in a moment of spiritual ecstasy” (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 6). Bush harbor worship or invisible churches served as locations for the collective development of the Spirituals (Walker, 1979; Raboteau, 2004).

Many enslaved people were willing to take beatings without great loss for attending a meeting, rather than risk life and torture for attempting complete escape. The fact that enslaved people risked beatings and injury to participate in secret sacred meetings reflects the commitment they had to spiritual freedom as well as their assumption of responsibility for their own spiritual needs. More importantly, it reflects their determination not to be totally dominated, and that was a way of taking responsibility for freedom. According to Walker (1979), “the most crucial aspect of social change and development for the New World Africans was the resistance they demonstrated to total dehumanization... The primary representation of the Spirituals must be seen as the implicit tenacious insistence of the slaves’ humanity” (pp. 45-46). Their “tenacious insistence of humanity” was the logical basis for resistance. It was a conscious assertion of self-recognition, and perhaps the underlying source of the beauty and power of the Spirituals.

It seems most certain that enslaved people could have easily suffered from meaninglessness, given the dearth of rewarding experiences slavery afforded. Meaninglessness, in my opinion, refers to the condition of being dulled to the reoccurring newness of life as a result of being over-full of unsatisfying life experiences, and enslaved people certainly had an excess of those experiences. But their highest life-need was to get free; that was what was most meaningful to them. Deep consistent involvement with creating meaning, even for a few hours in a secret meeting, was an opposition to the force that detracted meaning from their lives. Viewed from that perspective, desire for freedom may have blocked enslaved people’s

experiences of existential meaninglessness as well. Thus, a similar inverse situation, as discussed above regarding the existential weight of freedom having been mediated by the people’s lack of it, seems to apply to meaninglessness, as well.

In addition, communal activity continuous with the African worldview may have prevented experiences of existential meaninglessness, as we do not have clear understanding of how worldview affects the psyche. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) stated: “In Africa the destiny of the individual was linked to that of the tribe or the community in an intensely interconnected security system” (p. 7). Replication of direct and immediate person-to-person engagement common to African cultures, where mutual assessments among new acquaintances are rapidly accomplished and bonding either is or is not established, must have had many uses in enslaved communities in the New World, as it is still operative in African American culture. This linking of individuals’ lives with the collectivity may have been an act of traditional wisdom that guarded against desperate individualization especially in spaces that isolated people as solitary units for sale. Strong will, braced with direct and immediate person-to-person engagement among the enslaved, may have attenuated focus on existential isolation. They sang:

Let us break bread together on our knees. When I
fall on my knees,
With my face to the rising sun, oh Lord Have mercy
on me.

Joining psychic energy together within a focus on an ultimate force of power responds to existential isolation with a felt connection that may have provided remove from the depths of isolation. The following and final lyrics are among my favorites, as they state the simplicity of spiritual need:

I want Jesus to walk with me all along life’s pilgrim
journey.
I want Jesus to walk with me in my trials along life’s
journey.

The desire expressed is for heightened awareness of the sacred, for the companionship of sacred awareness through the long travels of life, and within the routines of everyday life. These lyrics reflect understanding of how sacred awareness makes the issues of living less weighty, even if one is enslaved.

Summary

Enslaved composers and singers of the Spirituals used the songs to address and resolve conflict related to death, the first of the four existential givens to which awareness is directed in existential psychology. They did so with songs that brought death and awareness of responsibility for the inner content of their lives fully into the consciousness of singers and listeners. That process approximates the objectives of existential psychotherapy in making the givens observable so that denial is less possible and responsibilities relative to the givens of existence can be assumed. Enslaved people used Spirituals to resolve inner conflict that was largely socially produced, but cognate with three of the four existential givens of existential psychology (freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness, Yalom, 1980). African American music continues to carry this therapeutic investment and it infects even those who have avowed detachment from the religious aspects of the culture. Consequently, the songs are as important and useful today as they were previously for therapeutically assisting resolution of issues with the givens or their social cognates, especially since many of the same issues of oppression that African Americans experienced while enslaved are presently resurgent. However, the larger message to be taken from this account includes the meaning given with the rich legacy of medicine music left by people, bereft of material possessions, that is available anytime for self-healing. Knowing that we have within ourselves the resources we need for healing is medicine for the mind.

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