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Songwriting and Transformation: The Subjective Experience of Sharing Self Through Song

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This qualitative heuristic study explored the subjective experience of transformation resulting from the practice of songwriting in nonclinical populations, through semi-structured interviews with 12 songwriters, 6 men and 6 women, aged 35-69. Thematic content analysis yielded 6 top-level themes: Connecting, Communicating, Wellbeing, Affirmation, Personal Growth, and Making A Difference. Subthemes of Connecting reflect a wide variety of transpersonal experiences. The Communicating subthemes capture ways in which songwriting afforded participants a language superior to speech for Expressing Feelings, Sharing Self, and Sending A Message. Participants reported Personal Growth, expressed through subthemes Processing Experience (making meaning of painful material) and Empowerment. Learning explicitly that one of their songs had had a significant impact on a listener was the mostly strongly articulated transformative experience for participants, described in Making A Difference. The findings support models of transformation in the expressive arts literature; through transpersonal encounters in liminality, both songwriter and listeners are transformed.

Keywords: *songwriting, expressive arts, psychospiritual transformation, intersubjectivity, cocreativity, spirituality, heuristic inquiry*

I began writing songs only recently and almost immediately discovered the power of this practice for transformation. While in an auto shop waiting room, lyrics for a song called, "I'll See You In The Future," about the painful rupture of my longest friendship, came to me out of the blue. I set them to music and performed the song for others. The song opened me to my feelings, helped me to experience the depth of my grief, accept what had happened, and held my hope for reconciliation. Breaking a yearlong silence, I e-mailed a recording of the song to that friend. She acknowledged it had moved her and responded with her perspective on what had caused the rift. We agreed to meet to begin rebuilding our connection. I believe the song aided us in taking these tentative steps toward each other. After experiencing such profound effects from my early efforts at songwriting, I wondered how more seasoned songwriters might experience transformation from this practice.

Art-Making and Transformation

Expressive arts researchers, practitioners, and therapists believe that art transforms and heals. Through welcoming and attending to the *images*—artistic representations in modalities, such as dance, music, visual art, or theatre—those creating art learn about their

deepest selves, because "art is a way of knowing what it is we actually believe" (Allen, 1995, p. 3). Allen explained that artistic expression is inherently transformative: "Making the image and living with it, with no other intervention, no assessment, no interpretation, catalyzes change and movement. ... Attention honors the image and begins the process of reclaiming whatever it represents" (pp. 197-198). McNiff (2004) likewise focused on attending to self through art:

I have consistently discovered that the core process of healing through art involves the cultivation and release of the creative spirit. If we can liberate the creative process in our lives, it will always find the way to whatever needs attention and transformation. (p. 5)

How does art transform? Knill, Levine, and Levine (2005) invoked the term *poesis* (Greek for *art-making*) to describe "the basic human capacity of shaping ... that forms both world and self" (p. 16). The artist accepts the given of a situation or experience—"a chaos of meanings which demands assistance in order to come-into-form" (p. 40)—and surrenders to the process of art-making and the unknown. Thus, the role of the artist in *poesis* is "not to impose a pre-existing form upon senseless

matter but to allow the material to find its own sense” (Knill et al., 2005, p. 40). Poesis has much in common with the liminal state in ritual processes (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960). Van Gennep’s (1960) model of societal rites of passage comprised a preliminal stage of the initiand’s separation from his or her previous identity; a liminal phase of transition, passing metaphorically over the threshold (*limen* in Latin) from the old to the new; and a postliminal stage of reintegration into society with a new identity. “Liminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be’” (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 3). In liminality, the chaos of the unknown is transformed into something new through the encounter, just as poesis leads to “the transformation of [the pre-existing] reality in accordance with the possibilities that emerge through our encounters with it” (Knill et al., 2005, p. 71). Dissanayake (1992) also explored the connection between ritual, liminality, transformation, and art-making. She argued that making art is an inherited behavioral tendency for humans, linked to survival, and suggested that it is not art per se but “making special” (p. 42) that is the evolutionarily important aspect of art-making. Cultural rituals have served to create an intentional context for making things special, in situations marking transitions, or having importance for the survival of the species. Art-making is present in many of these rituals and is thus integral to the transformation experienced in liminality.

“The transformative energy of art corresponds to, and possibly is, the energy of healing” (McNiff, 1989, p. 42). Turner (1969) used the term *communitas* to describe the feeling of shared humanity and connection experienced by those participating in ritual as they move together into the liminal state. As Schechner (1988) explained about artistic performances, “Aesthetic drama compels a transformation of the spectators’ view of the world by rubbing their senses against enactments of extreme events ... [providing a] reflection in liminal time during which the transformation of consciousness takes place” (p. 172). For those coming together in *communitas*, “the power of the arts is their capability to convey the images that unite us beyond our own constructs of self and our present worldviews” (Herman, 2013, p. 655). Thus, art-making transforms all who participate in the encounter. As an expressive art, the practice of songwriting would seem to hold the possibility of transformation through poesis and ritualistic liminality.

Songwriting and Transformation

My interest in songwriting was centered on the experience of the nonclinical population of individuals for whom songwriting is a self-initiated, ongoing practice. The therapeutic effects of songwriting have been well-researched in clinical populations. For example, songwriting has been used successfully in music therapy to address the psychological needs of cancer patients (O’Callaghan, 1997); substance abusers (Dingle, Gleadhill, & Baker, 2008; Freed, 1987; Gardstrom, Carlini, Josefczyk, & Love, 2013); those living with HIV seropositivity (Cordobés, 1997); and individuals with severe mental illness (Grocke, Bloch, & Castle, 2009). However, my search produced only two academic studies of the subjective experience of songwriting and its transformative aspects among nonclinical populations (Barba, 2005; Sena-Martinez, 2012).

Barba (2005) combined heuristic exploration of her own songwriting with phenomenologically informed analysis of unstructured interviews with eight songwriters aged 20-40. She sought to learn whether songwriting might offer therapeutic benefits, if conceptualized in terms of Jungian individuation and McNiff’s (1981) theories of arts-based psychotherapy. Songs, from these perspectives, are viewed as symbolic images from the realm of the unconscious in the service of healing. Barba experienced personal transformation through songwriting, reporting enhanced confidence in relationships, and that her life had become “far more bearable” (Barba, 2005, p. 173). Her analysis yielded transformative themes as well. The *Feelings* theme described participants’ experience of changes in emotional states before and after writing a song. Several mentioned catharsis and surprise at what emerged. *Sharing Songs* was also deemed important, both for the benefit of others who were moved by the songs and for the songwriter in finding expression. *Source: The Giver of Song* was related to the way in which a song came into being. All Barba’s participants reported “qualities of mystery, unpredictability and/or a sense of ‘otherness’” (Barba, 2005, p. 53) when reflecting on the origins of songs. She categorized a number of therapeutic benefits of songwriting, including the meaning-making that comes from reflection and review, as the songwriter continues to interact with the song and perform it.

Sena-Martinez (2012) explored how psychospiritual transformation might arise from songwriting using a heuristic inquiry method to investi-

gate her own songwriting process, along with semi-structured interviews with six adult singer-songwriters. Her research focused, in part, on “how each songwriter encounter[ed] inspiration” (Sena-Martinez, 2012, p. 19) for a song and how sharing songs affected the songwriter. Coresearchers submitted a recording of one original song. During the interview, they discussed how it had transformed them and reflected on inspiration in songwriting. Transcribed interviews were thematically analyzed. Since one inclusion criterion was that participants identified songwriting as a spiritual or transpersonal experience and had had an experience of psychospiritual transformation through songwriting, it is not surprising that Sena-Martinez identified transformation and spiritual experience in songwriting as core themes. However, her findings failed to offer much detail on the nature of the transformation experienced or the factors underlying it.

Sena-Martinez’s (2012) study reported two main results pertaining to psychospiritual transformation through songwriting. First, transformation was an ongoing process rather than a specific event, and, second, it “could be identified as a death and resurrection process or healing and renewing progression... [that] came as an internal, ongoing journey into the creative aspect of ones [*sic*] being” (Sena-Martinez, 2012, p. 147). She also found that “during the songwriting process, the songwriter grows in their [*sic*] understanding of the meaning behind their [*sic*] songs” (p. 133). In addition, the songwriter “finds an enhancement of his or her quality of life and feels as though he or she is connecting with others in a spiritual and deeply meaningful way” (Sena-Martinez, 2012, p. 134). For several coresearchers, the moment of inspiration was the most transformative. All coresearchers identified permanent change as a result of songwriting, which they described as seeing their world with new eyes, and experiencing greater freedom, resolution, joy, connection, and acceptance.

Transpersonal experiences while writing and performing songs, involving flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), peak experiences (Maslow, 1964), and connection with something beyond oneself have also been widely reported in the popular media, based on interviews with famous musicians (Boyd, 1992; Flanagan, 1986; Nash, 2002; Zollo, 2003). Boyd (1992) had a particular interest in songwriters’ views about creativity and spirituality. Many of her participants described rare experiences of writing songs that seemed to spring forth nearly

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completely formed, and attributed them to something deeply unconscious and/or transpersonal.

Theories pertaining to intersubjectivity (Buber, 1996; Ferrer, 2002; Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Stolorow, 1993) suggest that experience is cocreated through reciprocal, relational engagement among subjectivities and the life force (the mystery, the muse, God, or spirit). Cocreativity occurs in what is variously called the “intersubjective field” (Stolorow, 1993, p. 450), “the flesh” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139), “the chiasm” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 139), or “participatory knowing” (Ferrer, 2002, p. 3). Research concerned with relational aspects of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; May, 1975; Moustakas, 1977; Sawyer, 2003) integrates various conceptualizations of intersubjective experience. Researchers have also explored performance as a cocreative process. The processes of composition and performance are not necessarily distinct. A composition developed prior to performance may be conceptualized as a “script” (Schechner, 2003, p. 68) used to support the contextual unfolding or rendition of a piece of music, such that the interaction between live performers and the audience cocreates an original instance of that work in that moment (Lawson, 2002). Davidson and Salgado Correia (2001) stated that authentic performances are those in which “‘becoming’ occurs ... where the performers, exploring their metaphorical projections, end up reaching the bodily patterns of physical experience which, at a deep level, connect with or ‘meet’ the individual listeners” (p. 80).

Songwriters’ subjective reports have validated these ideas. For example, Joni Mitchell (as cited in Boyd, 1992) spoke of experiencing the state of “Zen no mind” (p. 86) in performance, in which “ego is the afterthought” (p. 86). Keith Strickland of the B-52’s (as quoted in Boyd, 1992) said that “When things are going really well on-stage, it’s almost like a meditation” (p. 97). Nancy Wilson of Heart (as cited in Boyd, 1992) commented that “You’re kind of yourself, but you’re also in the audience, so it’s like some kind of circular reciprocity” (p. 182). Ringo Starr of The Beatles (as quoted in Boyd, 1992) said, “Sometimes ... you would feel this presence together with the audience and the band ... you felt that you and the audience were actually one” (p. 183).

Method

The sparse literature on the subjective experience of songwriting offers limited insight into the nature of transformation arising from the practice and the

factors responsible for transformative outcomes. In order to expand and deepen the inquiry of songwriting as a transformative practice, I conducted a qualitative, exploratory study (Beech, 2014), to pursue the research question: *How do songwriters experience change in themselves and their lives as a result of composing, recording, and performing original popular songs?* I defined popular music as any music other than classical (art) music produced in contemporary industrial society that is actively distributed to the general public. I employed the heuristic inquiry method (Moustakas, 1990), which begins with an autobiographical connection to and dwelling on the research topic on the part of the researcher.

I then recruited 12 participants over 21 who were composing songs with lyrics in English. Participants had to have written at least 20 songs over their lifetime and to have recorded and performed their original songs. Their recordings had to be generally available through online sites or retail channels. Performance was defined as playing original songs before an audience of at least 10 people at least four times a year for at least a year. In addition, I asked participants to select a song whose writing and sharing had had significant personal impact. I excluded songwriters creating music primarily for spiritual practice, using sampled sounds, or writing for theatre or movies. I recruited my participants through a purposive process that included e-mail and Facebook invitations (7 participants), direct solicitation of artists (4 participants), and networking in songwriting circles (1 participant).

I conducted a 1- to 2-hour interview with each participant, using a semi-structured interview protocol. Questions covered participants' path to becoming songwriters; their songwriting process; the influence of others and of their spirituality on their songwriting; experiences of recording and performing their music; and discussion of the impact of the specific song they had selected. I transcribed the interviews and conducted thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participant Demographics

Purposive recruiting resulted in a sample with limited demographic diversity. I recruited six men and six women, aged 35-69. All participants lived in the United States (eight lived in northern California). Of the 12 participants, 9 were age 50 and over, and 10 of the 12 identified as White. Three quarters reported household income above the median for U.S. households and an

equal percentage had college degrees. Only 2 of the 12 participants identified an affiliation with a mainstream religion but all espoused some form of spirituality, a profile strongly divergent from the U.S. population as a whole (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). The songwriters in my study exhibited early engagement with musical activities and demonstration of musical abilities: starting to sing and beginning to play a first instrument typically occurred prior to or during elementary school. Participants had been writing songs for a mean of 36.3 years ($SD = 10.8$), and had written an average of 315 songs over their lifetime, with high variability in productivity ($SD = 329.7$). All wrote both lyrics and music.

Results

Thematic content analysis resulted in six primary themes to explain how songwriters experience transformation as a result of their practice (Table 1). I present highlights from the analysis here, including a sampling of supporting quotes. Complete participant demographics, biographies, selected song lyrics, and the full thematic analysis are available in Beech (2014).

Connecting

All participants alluded to one or more ways in which songwriting allows for establishing connection, whether with self, other, or spirit. The Connecting subthemes tease out a variety of connective relationships.

Table 1: Summary of Themes

Primary theme	Subthemes
Connecting	Connecting While Writing Solo Connecting With Cowriters Connecting With People In One's Life Connecting With Other Artists Connecting With Listeners Connecting With Emotions Songwriting And Spirituality Are Connected
Communicating	Sharing Self Sending A Message Expressing Feelings Song Themes: Song Thematic Content Song Thematic Qualities Song Theme Evolution
Wellbeing	
Affirmation	
Personal Growth	Healing Processing Experience Empowerment
Making A Difference	

Connecting while writing solo. Participants described their experience while composing alone as transcending ego, in language often associated with peak experiences (Maslow, 1964) and flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For example, JD said:

I enter a space where often time flies and I have no idea how long I've been there (pause). It's like I lose the ego part of myself or the part that's monitoring what's going on and just enter this space of what I call creativity. And again that's in relationship to ... the spiritual aspect of it, where ... I am connected to something that's (pause) not defined by my body or my experience particularly. (Personal communication, September 7, 2013)

Ten participants said that they had had experiences of songs coming to them essentially fully formed, as though offered by something beyond oneself, although these were rare. Jan recounted:

I got that song when we were on a vision quest I was very tuned in to ... Mother Earth, feminine face of the divine, and I got this song, like, "Pow!" It was, like, "Shut up and sit down and write this down, because this is what I want to say!" (Personal communication, October 6, 2013)

This happened to Russ, too: "It's called 'Dance 214.' ... 'Cause at 2:14 in the morning in a hotel, I woke up and the song was just there. The whole thing" (Personal communication, August 30, 2013).

Connecting with cowriters. Eleven participants had experiences of cowriting. Thea noted that these could vary greatly, with some being "amazingly difficult" (personal communication, August 27, 2013) and some transcendent: "It happens rarely It's like making love And we're just moving into this resonant frequency together where we are birthing a creation, literally, conceiving I'm really about cocreation" (personal communication, August 27, 2013). Jan offered this:

It's one of the most lovely, soul-connecting—to really find somebody you're connecting with on a soul level ... and you're at this very high level musically and lyrically and emotionally. It hardly gets any better than that. ... Well, it's kind of joy. ... You're cocreating ... you're creating something that wasn't there before, and you're doing it with someone else. (Personal communication, October 6, 2013)

Connecting with people in one's life. Ten participants reported instances of their songwriting process or their song content being influenced by people known to them, as well as strangers. More often than not this influence occurs when the person is not physically present. Nick held a very holistic view of this: "The relationships in my life ... inspire either a song about other people or a song where I'm looking inwards. So in some ways all the people that I love in my life are involved in my songwriting process" (personal communication, August 23, 2013). Don said, "All kinds of people influence my writing process. It can be a family member. It can be a friend. It can be somebody in the band" (personal communication, December 15, 2013).

Connecting with other artists. All participants acknowledged the influence of the musicians from whom they derived inspiration, who were not physically present at the time of creation of the song, but informed the songwriter's artistic expression. Hal actually quoted a line from his own song lyrics—"As I think of writing and singing songs for you, the faces of a thousand writers float before my view"—to explain this to me: "You're thinking about how other people write things, and can I be like them?" (personal communication, August 27, 2013).

Absorbing the lessons of other musicians came up often. Ariel shared: "I think we are like human sponges. It's a magical thing that we can actually listen to something and then it will come back out through a song" (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Jan described how a deceased musician influenced her writing:

But when you say other [influences], it's not really other. ... All of that is already moving in me. ... It's almost like having a little inner dialog, you see, different parts of myself, or different parts of what you'd maybe call higher power. ... It was, like, here comes Aaron Copland sitting on my shoulder, saying, "Don't get too fancy with these chord changes and use these intervals." (Personal communication, October 6, 2013)

Connecting with listeners. Participants expressed a motivation to connect with listeners as one reason they write songs. Dede described playing with her band: "I love performing! ... I'm looking at everybody. ... If someone's not looking at me, I'll stare at them until they look at me because I want to make a connection

with them” (personal communication, October 15, 2013). Jan also referenced a conscious intent to engage and invite connection:

It’s like having a conversation with someone, where there’s a give and take. ... I feel like it’s important to bring [the audience] in. ... It’s like we’re all part of this thing that’s being created, and it has to do with a back and forth. (Personal communication, October 6, 2013)

JD described a transpersonal quality to his experience of performing: “You get this broader sense of who you are and what’s possible and connection to people and to whatever the big idea is here” (personal communication, September 7, 2013). Nick characterized this as spiritual:

If I’m singing a song and I look out and see a bunch of people singing along with me—I feel a buzz just talking about that! ... That collective current, and energy, and feeling tapped in for me is a spiritual experience. (Personal communication, August 23, 2013)

Connecting with emotions. While all participants discussed emotions they experienced in their songwriting practice, seven spoke explicitly about ways in which songwriting led to a particular change in their emotional state. Nick said, “The act of songwriting and listening to my music—all of it brings me to a more heightened emotional, spiritual, psychological state” (personal communication, August 23, 2013). Performing or listening to a song can transport the songwriter back to the emotional state at the time of writing or of experiencing the material captured in the lyrics. For example, Monica said, “If I’m singing that song, I’m back to where I was. Generally, I feel that with most songs. I get taken to a certain place, and I feel what I felt” (personal communication, November 23, 2013). Several participants expressed or experienced being moved to tears by their songs. After listening to the playback of his song, JD said, “It feels very emotional to listen to [laughs], and often to sing the song. ... [It is] sometimes difficult to go through the whole song without getting that closed-throat feeling” (personal communication, September 7, 2013). While listening to his selected song, Gregory said: “And you can tell, I have the tears now. ... I’m still breaking up from this because I’m remembering that night” (personal communication, September 1, 2013).

Communicating

The Communicating theme is focused on the content of what is created and shared through song. The Sharing Self, Sending A Message, and Expressing Feelings subthemes capture general intent for communication, while the Song Themes subthemes derive from the content of participants’ catalogs.

Sharing self. One of the most frequently cited motivations for songwriting was the desire to share oneself with others. Ariel said, “When I sing ... I’m sharing a spiritual part of who I am that I don’t feel I really am able to share when I talk. I get to share a deeper part of myself” (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Participants highlighted the capacity to record and distribute their songs as a means to communicate with a global audience. Thea said about her recordings: “It’s like having a baby and wanting it to go out into the world, and do good work! (laughs) Being able to share myself with other people” (personal communication, August 27, 2013). Hal put it most succinctly: “Go directly to the recording device and then your audience is planetwide” (personal communication, August 21, 2013).

Sending a message. Another stated intention for songwriting was Communicating a specific message. Jan said, “The inspiration will come from my own experience, often something that I really feel is important to say” (personal communication, October 6, 2013). In discussing a song he wrote about senseless violence and an assault on his son, Gregory explained:

It’s a hateful world we live in and I think maybe I’m trying to get a message out to the people that there are other ways ... getting a message out there not only about peace and anti-violence, but also about what happened to him and why it’s so important to me. (Personal communication, September 1, 2013)

Hal, a former member of a band that had a No. 1 hit single, said:

I believe that a musician of my experience and my stature in the musical community has a very serious responsibility to reflect on what is around him at the present moment, and what has been, and send a message to the present audience as to where things are going. (Personal communication, August 21, 2013)

Expressing feelings. Several participants revealed that they found it difficult as a child to express their feelings. Combining lyrics and music in songs

afforded them a new language by which to communicate their emotions and to communicate more effectively as adults. It seems that something about the form of song allows for accessing and expressing emotions in ways that are not available through speech. Gregory said, “I was a very emotional child so I had a lot of things to get across that I couldn’t really say but I could sing” (personal communication, September 1, 2013). Thea expressed this, too: “There was a time in my life where I felt like I didn’t have a language for my emotions. ... The only place I could find to do that was through my songwriting” (personal communication, August 27, 2013). JD shared:

Sometimes I find words are really hard to come by when I’m speaking—it’s like the songs know better than I do (laughs). So it becomes a way of expressing myself that’s more elegant and more profound than I could possibly say in my own language. (Personal communication, September 7, 2013)

Song themes. I coded and analyzed all references by participants to specific songs they had written. I also asked how their song content had changed over time. The three subthemes presented below capture the topics, qualities, and evolution of participants’ output.

Song thematic content. I identified nine content categories through my analysis of participants’ selected songs and songs discussed in the interview: Relationships (romantic, sexual, family, other); My Life And Growth (content from songwriter’s life, without reference to relationships; self-reflection or learning from life experience); Inspiring Values (aspirations for a better society, such as reduced violence); Nature (images from the natural world); Social Issues (contemporary issues facing society, messages about societal conditions), Comedy Songs, Children’s Songs, Spirituality (religious/spiritual content, reflections about spirituality); and Miscellaneous. The songs participants had selected as having had significant personal impact fell under Relationships (58% of songs), Inspiring Values (50%), and My Life And Growth (42%). Multiple codes were possible.

Song thematic qualities. When discussing their songs’ thematic content, participants frequently described general qualities of their songs, which I identified as Inspirational, Universal, and Emotional. The Inspirational quality reflects ways in which participants intended their songs to inspire others or generate positive feelings. Ariel said, “My music very much tends, without

any control on my part, to venture into subjects of empowerment and inspiration and finding your voice” (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Jan said, “The music that I write is what I would call uplifting” (personal communication, October 6, 2013). Russ said, “The main theme for me is positive” (personal communication, August 30, 2013).

The Universal quality reflects participants’ aspirations to write songs with universal appeal. Sometimes, expressing personal experience unexpectedly produced such a song. Jan said she wrote about “universal themes. It’s spiritual, it’s universally emotional. ... If they ring true for me then hopefully they’ll ring true for somebody else” (personal communication, October 6, 2013). Monica said, “There’s kind of a macro-micro meaning in a lot of my songs, where it’s about something that is happening in society but it’s presented as something more personal, or vice versa” (personal communication, November 23, 2013). Russ said, “I want my songs to be your songs” (personal communication, August 30, 2013).

The Emotional quality captures ways in which participants described their songs’ thematic content as being about a particular feeling, such as loss, longing, and loneliness. Nick said his songs represented a “rollercoaster spectrum of my emotions,” including “regret and guilt and pain” (personal communication, August 23, 2013).

Song theme evolution. Seven participants indicated that the themes of their songs have been consistent throughout their writing career, while the rest reported an evolution. Evolution of thematic material seemed to parallel the personal growth or life experience of the writer. For example, Thea explained her songs are now “more spiritually inspiring and uplifting and not so cathartic” (personal communication, August 27, 2013). JD said, “I’d say around ’93 or something like that, I had what I would call a spiritual experience that began to change the direction of the songs” (personal communication, September 7, 2013). Nick observed, “One thing I watched grow over time is this theme of personal growth, individuation” (personal communication, August 23, 2013). Dede said, “If you put [my songs] from end to end they’d probably tell my life story” (personal communication, October 15, 2013). Gregory reported writing songs as a youth about things like depressing relationships. He then took a hiatus from writing and started again much later with themes focused on values like peace and nonviolence.

Wellbeing

Seven participants reported that songwriting had enhanced Wellbeing. Ariel said songwriting was a “positive force in my life” (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Don said, “It just makes you feel good” (personal communication, December 15, 2013). Dede noted: “If I’m happy and I’m playing, my stress level’s a lot lower” (personal communication, October 15, 2013). Hal said that songwriting “improves the wellbeing of the [songwriter]” (personal communication, August 21, 2013).

A commonly articulated benefit of Wellbeing was a calming or soothing effect. Gregory said, “It comforts me” (personal communication, September 1, 2013). Hal shared: “It clears out the useless chatter that’s in your mind” (personal communication, August 21, 2013). Rita said, “I’ve had a remarkable experience with... self-soothing through the writing of songs” (personal communication, August 24, 2013). Jan described using her inspiring songs to calm herself: “If I wake up freaked out in the middle of the night and I can remember one of those songs, if I can remember the words, it soothes me. It calms me down, and gets me centered and energized” (personal communication, October 6, 2013).

Affirmation

Ten participants reported experiences of recognition, validation, and affirmation from creating and sharing their original songs, as a result of some aspect of themselves being acknowledged, reflected, and positively valued. Affirmation had several foci: validation of musicianship and artistic authenticity; affirmation of identity as songwriter; recognition of and pride in songwriting abilities; and feeling understood. Rita said, “How [songwriting] changed me is that it gives me a lot of respect from people who know my work and praise me for it. ... It’s a very nice ego gratification” (personal communication, August 24, 2013). Thea spoke frankly: “That feedback is what keeps me going. I don’t like to think that I need so much affirmation and validation but I do!” (personal communication, August 27, 2013). Nick was similarly straightforward: “I do want feedback. I do want praise” (personal communication, August 23, 2013). Russ said:

I am really proud of the fact that I can do it. I didn’t know that I could do it. It’s like a surprise. ... I started writing songs, and I go, “OK, I can write songs, and they’re good!” ... And that [pause] I’m

just super proud of that. (Personal communication, August 30, 2013)

Feeling understood and accepted was another way in which writing and sharing songs was affirmative. JD said that when he performs his selected song he feels “like I’m being seen in some really transparent, profound way ... as my authentic self, being recognized, affirmed” (personal communication, September 7, 2013). Nick recounted his experience of writing his selected song:

The words came out of my mouth onto my paper and they almost spoke to me. It was almost like a dialog with myself. What I find is that sometimes I write lyrics and not even I totally understand exactly what I meant. And then I listen back and go, “Wow, I meant *this*.” ... And it’s sort of like a personal affirmation. (Personal communication, August 23, 2013)

Personal Growth

Participants experienced Personal Growth as a result of their songwriting practice. The subthemes of Healing, Processing Experience, and Empowerment capture the essential features of this transformative outcome.

Healing. Five participants explicitly used the words *therapy*, *therapeutic*, or *healing* in discussing the impact songwriting had had on them. Nick said, “I see how in some ways my songwriting has been a form of therapy for me” (personal communication, August 23, 2013). Hal said, “One of the reasons that I write these things is they are therapeutic for me” (personal communication, August 23, 2013). Ariel said: “I do this process as a therapeutic experience for myself because it’s like a processing. It’s like my own therapy. I think with every song I write, there’s a little healing that occurs” (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Thea said, “My music... has healed me, literally” (personal communication, August 27, 2013).

Processing experience. Nine participants spoke of some way in which processing their life experience through songwriting activities had allowed them to reach new awareness about themselves or situations they were facing. Externalizing painful emotions through writing song lyrics and giving these feelings musical expression is a primary motivation for some participants to write songs, and may relieve the suffering they experience. For example, Ariel explained: “I’m sort of like an audio journaler. It’s like my journaling and my processing

comes out at the piano” (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Noting that “songwriting has definitely existed for a main reason and that’s for myself, to process emotion,” she said, “I basically wrote my way through ... the challenges of high school,” because it offered “a way to reflect, and move through my emotions, and understand” (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Participants described making sense or meaning out of an experience as another benefit of Processing Experience through songwriting, at times deriving from active reflection, at others through the song revealing something previously unconscious. Meaning-making may lead to a sense of resolution, integration, or healing. For example, Monica said, “If I have something that needs to be processed ... I don’t necessarily know what I’m talking about when I start a song, but often its meaning comes alive as the song is getting written” (personal communication, November 28, 2013). Thea said that songwriting gives her access to her unconscious: “It has helped me to mine that archetypical realm. ... It’s a very archetypical process of meaning and symbology and metaphor” (personal communication, August 27, 2013).

Empowerment. The songwriting process leads to a sense of greater self-knowledge, personal strength, capacity, mastery, or ability to act in daily life. For Thea, songwriting “has taught me how powerful I really am” (personal communication, August 27, 2013). She said, “There’s [*sic*] many places in my life where I’ve become very depressed but I don’t think that I’ve ever gotten stuck anywhere in my life as a result of having this expression” (personal communication, August 27, 2013). For Rita, songwriting is equivalent to:

taking control. It’s going from feeling helpless, from being a victim of a situation... and you’re out of control and there’s nothing you can do about it. And then when you craft [a song], when you use your skill and your talent to craft it into a cohesive piece, it’s empowering. (Personal communication, August 24, 2013)

Overcoming shyness and developing confidence in oneself was another form of Empowerment described by participants: “In songwriting and in performing, I found myself. I was pretty shy” (Monica, personal communication, November 23, 2013). Russ explained: “The success of the songwriting and the success of the band has [*sic*] made me less shy and more outgoing” (personal communication, August 30, 2013).

Songwriting and Transformation

Making A Difference

The theme most forcefully articulated by all participants relates to the immense satisfaction they derived from receiving feedback about having made a positive difference in listeners’ lives through sharing their songs. Some had an explicit motivation to touch others with their music; for others, learning about the impact of a song was an unexpected positive outcome.

Participants discussed a number of ways in which they intended to make a contribution through their songs, from inspiration to service, from invoking feelings, to nourishing, to making a better world. JD said, “I would like to have some people feel like the songs that I write have made some sort of difference in their lives” (personal communication, September 7, 2013). Nick said, “I want to make my global contribution” (personal communication, August 23, 2013). Noting that she wanted “to be the solution and not the problem,” Jan described her goal: “To make a better world ... that’s always been my focus” (personal communication, October 6, 2013). Thea evoked spiritual language: “I feel like my music is a ministry and I’ve been ministering to myself through that expression, but it has also become a ministry that I bring out [to others]” (personal communication, August 27, 2013).

How do songs affect listeners and how does this affect the songwriter? Direct feedback allows participants to understand the impact of their songs. Thea noted:

The beauty of performing a song that you wrote is to see how it goes out and touches somebody. To then have them come up to you afterwards and say, “You made me cry, you changed my life, you rocked my world!” (Personal communication, August 27, 2013)

Several participants offered explicit anecdotes of a particular song’s effect on a listener. For example:

Russ: And she goes, “I just want to tell you that I was bedridden for the last year. I couldn’t get off my couch.” ... And she said, “The thing that kept me from being depressed was listening to your CDs. I would listen to your songs and it always gave me hope.” I’m just going, “Whoa! OK.”

Interviewer: What did that bring for you?

Russ: Tears. (Personal communication, August 30, 2013)

Ariel described how a particular listener had communicated the impact of her song: “[It] really connected to him and his process, and it became a really

important support for him through the process of his divorce. And just sitting in his truck crying, it helped him feel” (personal communication, August 19, 2013). Rita’s selected song affected far-flung listeners:

Rita: He was in the military and he wrote to me how he was in the Gulf War and he was in the trenches fearing for his life. And my little song started running around in his brain, and he felt like it saved his life.

Interviewer: What is the effect on you of people sharing those experiences?

Rita: Just very touched. Touched and appreciative that they let me know. Gratified that something I wrote could do that, and something I wrote in complete innocence without any intention to do that. (Personal communication, August 24, 2013)

JD reported his experience of Making A Difference:

The sense of satisfaction knowing that I have communicated what came through me and put it out there and then it comes back—there is really no more wonderful feeling than that, so I’m very grateful when that happens. (Personal communication, September 7, 2013)

Creative Synthesis and Discussion

The final step of the heuristic inquiry method (Moustakas, 1990) is to develop a creative synthesis, usually a narrative depiction of the phenomenon under study. I have chosen to integrate discussion of my findings with the creative synthesis. My results strongly resonate with the literature on art-making and transformation presented above, as well as validating and extending many elements of the studies of Barba (2005) and Sena-Martinez (2012).

Two fundamental properties of the songwriting practice—Connecting and Communicating—both enable transformation, as expressed in the themes of Wellbeing, Affirmation, Personal Growth, and Making A Difference, and are themselves transformative. For McNiff (2004), connection was fundamental to accessing the transformative power of creativity: “Relationships with others are the physical and spiritual basis of creative energy” (p. 217). Songwriters connect and engage through the intersubjective field (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992) with cowriters (Connecting With Cowriters) and audiences (Connecting With Listeners). They connect with spirit

while composing songs (Connecting While Writing Solo). They cocreate (Ferrer, 2002; Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Stolorow, 1993) in these various states of intersubjective Connecting. Songs may come fully formed to the songwriter, often experienced as something beyond oneself offering a song, as though for transcription. Some cocreative experiences involve transpersonal connection with influences not immediately present in the physical environment of the songwriter. Participants described listening to and learning from other musicians and knowing that their work was influenced and informed by those individuals (Connecting With Other Artists). This occurred through conscious invocation of a certain artist’s style during composition as well as unconsciously. Connecting With People In One’s Life captured experiences ranging from choosing to write about an individual to a general awareness that persons known to the songwriter were indirectly influencing the process in some way difficult to pinpoint.

Participants reported many examples of beyond-ego or transpersonal experiences—described as spiritual, meditative, peak, or flow—within the Connecting theme. They spoke excitedly of experiencing reciprocity and mutual building of energy among themselves and their audience while performing, with some describing this as a spiritual experience. Such experiences lend credence to the function of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) in ritual or performance (Herman, 2013; Schechner, 2003) and the capacity it offers to transform all who participate. “Art is communion of one soul to another, offered through the symbolic language of form and content” (Grey, 1998, p. 19). Ten of the 12 songwriters in my study saw a connection between songwriting and spirituality (Songwriting And Spirituality Are Connected). Two of them defined songwriting as their spiritual practice or religion. Crowe (2005) wrote, “Creativity as spirit is about expressing what is unique about ourselves and making that uniqueness manifest in the world. Songwriting is an organized, structured way to do this” (p. 301).

How does Connecting change or transform the songwriter? Temporary shifts in emotional state may occur when he or she composes, listens to, or performs a song (Connecting With Emotions). Transpersonal experiences of Connecting with cowriters, listeners, other influences, and spirit lead to many temporary changes of state. Whether these are transformative in terms of engendering a pervasive and persistent

reorganization of the person's psyche (Braud, Dufrechou, Raynolds, & Schroeter, 2000) is unknown, although profound spiritual experiences might be expected to have a significant long-term impact.

While Connecting is about a process of entering into a state of engagement with something beyond oneself, Communicating captures the faculty afforded songwriters for expressing content through the medium of song. Something about the nature of putting words to music opens up a new language for accessing and expressing aspects of the self not available through simple speech. Songwriters describe having a strong desire to share themselves with others (Sharing Self), and sharing themselves more deeply than they could otherwise because of the expressive capacity they find through song. As Crowe (2005) put it, "Writing music is about expressing a person's uniqueness and sharing that with others. ... Composition is about self-expression at its most basic level" (p. 89). For those who had difficulty in accessing their emotions as children, or whose family settings did not encourage emotional expression, songs have offered a vehicle for becoming aware of and externalizing feelings (Expressing Feelings). These results confirm several findings in Barba (2005) and Sena-Martinez (2012), whose themes seem to reflect a combination of my Communicating, Expressing Feelings and Personal Growth and Processing Experience themes. Songwriters also have a strong motivation to communicate explicit content through their songs (Sending A Message). Recordings permit the songwriter to extend him- or herself to a global audience. In sum, Communicating transforms the songwriter by supplying a new language for self-expression, whether for Sharing Self, Sending A Message, or Expressing Feelings.

Songwriters derive enhanced Wellbeing from their practice, including benefits such as feeling good, reduced stress, feeling pure, comfort, and a capacity to calm or soothe themselves. Such experiences may be episodic changes of state or pervasively transformative. Sena-Martinez (2012) also reported "an enhancement of [the songwriter's] quality of life" (p. 134). Songwriting results in Affirmation through validation of the songwriter's artistic identity and allowing him or her to feel understood. Participants' descriptions suggested these are persistent experiences of transformation of self-concept.

A very significant way in which songwriters are persistently and pervasively transformed by the practice of creating and sharing their original songs is

through Personal Growth. For some, songwriting is conceptualized as a therapeutic practice (Healing). Whether or not this is an explicit goal of the songwriter, songwriting effectively functions as a therapeutic method in nonclinical populations, by affording the opportunity to externalize and make meaning of painful material (Processing Experience), and to reach new self-awareness or a new way of relating to the material in the song. Through Communicating personally challenging material in the language of song (Expressing Feelings, Sharing Self, Song Thematic Content) and the Connecting experienced in the sharing of these songs with listeners, songwriters evolve and grow. They increase self-knowledge and make sense of these experiences through the songwriting practice, allowing for integration of difficult experiences or emotions, and reduction of the material's psychologically negative impact. They gain a sense of purpose or direction, move through obstacles, and find resolution. Songwriting also transforms through Empowerment, manifested in the songwriter as increased self-mastery, overcoming shyness, building confidence, and developing agency.

It is interesting to note that the songs that participants singled out to discuss in the interview as having had significant personal impact largely fell into the Song Thematic Content categories of Relationships and My Life And Growth, which are associated with working through personal material. Some songwriters' thematic content is broadly consistent over the course of their songwriting career (Song Theme Evolution). Others experience an evolution in their themes, typically a movement away from songs offering personal catharsis to more inspirational songs. For those participants, chronological personal development or spiritual growth seems to be paralleled in the evolution of song thematic content.

The final theme describing songwriters' transformative experience of creating and sharing their songs is that of Making A Difference. This theme was the most emphatically articulated and appears to derive its strength of impact from the combination of offering oneself to others through song coupled with an awareness on the part of the songwriter of being in service to others and providing others with possibilities for transformation. While the themes of Wellbeing, Affirmation, and Personal Growth reflect change and transformation accruing to participants, the Making A Difference theme explicitly references the transformative impact of the practice of songwriting on both writer

and listener. In this sense, Making A Difference may be thought of as the overarching outcome of the practice, and of these findings.

Songwriters achieve their frequently stated motivation of Making A Difference in the lives of others through Connecting With Listeners and Communicating. They desire to share what they have learned from their own life experience and personal or spiritual growth, or to exhort listeners to consider a current social issue or embrace values to better the planet (Sending A Message). They may wish to inspire, nourish, and uplift their audiences, or to help them to grow and transform. Herman (2013) explained how artists function as agents of change: “Art-makers and their works challenge established notions of what is possible to be and do, and inspire us to increase our capacities, embrace more inclusive paradigms, and invent new ways of living” (p. 652). One participant considered Making A Difference equivalent to ministering to others. This brings to mind Grey’s (1988) view that “*Mission ...* refers to the inner calling to creatively serve our physically and spiritually depleted world. The artist can be a spiritual emissary working in any medium in any part of the culture” (pp. 24-25).

One of the ways in which songwriters achieved their goal of touching others was through songs that had universal appeal (Song Thematic Qualities–Universal). Such Universal songs foster increased *communitas* (Turner, 1969) when shared, reinforcing the transformative potential for all. As Allen (1995) explained:

Patterns are universal. Besides the strictly personal level, there are image patterns that are shared by groups, cultures, and individuals who have had similar experiences. So images provide people with a means to communicate on a deep level with one another. (p. 198)

Grey (1998) also spoke to collective responses to an image:

The meaning of an artwork varies depending on who is considering it and how they are considering it. To the artist, the work may be a trace of ... the artist’s own awareness. ... To its viewers, the artwork fulfills a variety of private and collective meanings. (p. 104)

When songwriters learn of their song’s impact through feedback from their listeners, they are deeply moved. They experience gratitude, validation,

satisfaction, joy, and awe. Sharing Self through song, offering one’s uniqueness to others through the practice of songwriting, invites songwriter and listener alike into the intersubjective, transformative space. It confronts and challenges the perception of a split between self and other, opening the possibility of a transpersonal encounter, in which each touches the other in *communitas*, and all are transformed.

As a final point of discussion, it is informative to situate the primary themes of my analysis in the context of the three definitions of *transpersonal* derived by Hartelius, Caplan, and Rardin (2007) to shed light on how songwriting functions as a transpersonal process. The first definition, *Beyond Ego*, “focuses on the self as beyond ordinary ego separateness, recognizing the complex interconnectedness of self with all, including the cosmos as a whole” (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013, p. xxiv); it comprises states of consciousness beyond the ordinary, and paths that help to cultivate these. The second, *Pervading Personhood*, or “transpersonal as context” (Hartelius et al., 2007, p. 144), “focuses on integrative approaches through employing the most inclusive framework to comprehend self, emphasizing spiritual and transcendent qualities” (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013, p. xxiv); this considers the embodied and sociocultural contexts of the person. The third definition, *Changing Humanity*, or “transpersonal as catalyst” (Hartelius et al., 2007, p. 144), focuses on transformation of the self, as well as social transformation through application of the findings of transpersonal psychology. Many of the reported experiences of Connecting might be categorized under *Beyond-Ego*, transpersonal as content. Through Connecting and Communicating, participants engaged with their sociocultural milieu (including cowriters and audiences), which appears to fit with *Pervading Personhood*, or transpersonal as context. Finally, participants also experienced Affirmation, Wellbeing, Personal Growth, and Making A Difference. These outcomes exemplify *Changing Humanity*, or transpersonal as catalyst for transformation of self and society.

Limitations, Implications, and Future Research

The participants’ limited diversity constrains generalizability, particularly with regard to the impact of spiritual orientation. Several participants were explicitly committed to a positive outlook and to inspiring others, often linked with their spirituality, and the majority did not identify with mainstream religions. It is possible that the Making A Difference theme

might not have arisen with a more diverse sample and that participants may have reported more transpersonal experiences due to their spiritual orientation. In addition, professional songwriters may have different experiences from nonprofessionals, and this was not controlled for or explored.

In considering the potential of songwriting as a transformative practice for nonclinical populations, it is important to acknowledge that my participants had in common a high level of musical ability from childhood, which differentiates them from the population at large. However, if the focus of the practice were concerned less with the aesthetics or musical integrity of the song and more with the experience of creating and sharing it—which is in line with the approach of expressive arts therapies (Rubin, 2005)—songwriting might offer significant transformative benefits to those who are not skilled musicians. Ariel expressed this directly:

I think that everyone should try to write a song! Whether or not they think they have a voice to sing with. ... I truly feel like it's a great thing for each person to experience just one time taking something that's meaningful to them and making it into a song. ... I think that it is a contribution to getting to know ourselves and ... a way to be connected to the essence of who we are. (Personal communication, August 19, 2013)

The Expressing Feelings subtheme suggests that children might expand their capacities for self-expression through access to programs offering songwriting in schools or extracurricular settings.

Many participants wrote about Relationships (Song Thematic Content) and this was also the case for the personal anecdote shared at the start of this article. It would be interesting to investigate the transformative experience for the listener, when the song is addressed to him or her, or when that person is referenced in the lyrics. Making A Difference could also be further explored. How do songwriters experience this desire? When do they first have an awareness of this? Is it a conscious sense of calling? How does that change over the lifetime?

This study suggests that the practice of songwriting offers a wide scope of transformative potential. Through the transpersonal experiences of poesis, liminality, and cocreativity, and the sharing and receiving of song, both songwriter and listener are transformed.

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