

Drumming and Spirituality – An Exploration

By Lyle Povah

An opening note of thanks: It is important when sharing the gifts of another culture to honour that culture for its generosity, which in this case, is the African culture. I am truly blessed to have visited Africa, and to continue to work with the amazing gift that is rhythm.

.....and so begins a journey into the potential link between rhythm, the African drum, and the realm of spirituality.....

In their closing session remarks at a week long residential retreat, participants are speaking of the African drumming component, using words such as "awesome", "exhilarating", "incredible".....understandably so considering the powerful medium of the drum. Much less expected however, are the references to "God" and "love", especially since this is a retreat for executives called "Meeting the Leadership Challenge" at the Sauder School of Business at UBC. Connection received, even in this rather unlikely context.

Why is drumming part of the program at a business retreat? The benefit for leaders is "team building", but in addition and indeed what initially attracted me, is that imbedded within the sound is the age old tradition of using drumming to access spirituality. (not to mention that it is exquisite fun and a most fertile ground for learning).

I have taken the drum to hospitals, schools, churches, senior and community centres, libraries, retreat centres, summer camps and music festivals. Speaking to the flexibility of the art form, in the last decade the drum has also created opportunities in these more unexpected areas - corporate board rooms, eating disorder clinics, youth at risk programs, cancer agencies, conferences, jails, and the outdoor adventure industry.

This article is presented in five parts. In PART ONE, I will share ideas and observations about how the drum over time has pointed me to a continually deepening spiritual life. PART TWO contains some background information, outlines the goals and benefits of group drumming, and provides a drum circle description and preparation notes for the workshop. PART THREE is a mini workshop and will present specific rhythms, games, and techniques that can be utilized by congregation leaders and others for "playsops", drum circles, intergenerational celebrations, to integrate into sermons or church services, and as rhythmical support for existing music times. PART FOUR is a biography about me and my work. PART FIVE is the bibliography and recommended resources.

Part One: A Beginning

In 1995, I spent four months in Ghana, West Africa studying rhythm culture. I observed a depth of faith and devotion that was truly inspiring, and exciting to me since it almost always involved drumming, singing and dancing. People literally spill out onto the streets from the churches which are "full to the rafters". I saw an unbridled willingness to participate in social interaction and celebration, and a vibrant sense of community such that I had yet to experience in the West.

I have been a musician for over 40 years, beginning at nine years of age as a "kit" drummer. I now play the guitar as well and have at various times throughout my life and in different parts of the world made my living in music. It was only after discovering the African hand drum called the "djembe" (pronounced: "GEM-bay") that I began to see that music was my path, my vocation in life. The direct "skin to skin" contact, my skin and the animal skin, was like a completion of the circuit, which up to that point was somehow indirect when using drum sticks on a synthetic skin.

African drums have been used since the beginning of time to celebrate human beings connection to God. Over the years, I have experienced a deepening of my faith, brought about as a result of the creativity and passion available in the drum. Norman Fischer said that "the spiritual path leads us to places we were meant to go". Drumming has steered me toward health, opened my eyes to a larger vista of possibility, allowed me to express deep emotion, coaxed me out of my isolation, ignited my passion and creativity, and taught me about building community. It also allowed me to predict future work with world leaders on peace initiatives (I heard myself saying this at a recent event).

How does all this work? How is drumming connected to God? For me, God was in the sound, although that realization came later as an ever evolving process. When I first came in contact with the deep resonant bass sound of the djembe, I was smitten. Within months, my family and I flew to Ghana, one of the "source points", where perhaps the roots of rhythm began. My friends Martin and Sue put it this way: "if the intent is unity and connection to God, then the resultant drumming will have at its foundation a profound respect for other....blending in harmonious synchronization with one's fellow participants. The experience is pre-verbal, transcends the ego, intellect, sectarianism, race, creed, and colour. It is fundamental vibration....and anyone can do it". The uniting of self, other and God.

When I am drumming with a group and the sound is "on", I feel "connected" in the largest sense of the word, to my body, to others, to nature, to God, as if the pieces of the puzzle now fit together. In describing sacred music, I once wrote "...the musical landscape has been laid open, there is synchronicity without words, guidance without a guide, and for a time, there is no time....". There is also no effort or thought required - the body, mind and spirit feel nourished and supported, and sometimes it seems as though someone other than me is making the sound.

Clinical psychologist George Leonard, when speaking of drumming as being a key factor for invocation of spirit says: "Drumming breaks up the ordinary habit patterns of the brain and opens up the possibility of alternative patterns emerging". When different patterns emerge the result is creativity, the word that for me is most synonymous with God. I have heard it said that our purpose in life is to remember and re-create who we are, the idea that no additions are required, only that what is already there is recognized and celebrated. The drum reverberates through our whole multi-dimensional being, an ancient call to bring us back to God, and with that a creative, passionate and vibrant life. The drum and rhythm have become my instruments for remembering. I hope it speaks to you as well.

Part Two: Background To Workshop

It should be noted that while all reasonable attempts have been made in this condensed format to make directions clear and understandable, some of the activities will assume a level of musical/rhythmical experience. If necessary, simply move to the next activity or seek assistance from a musical friend. African drumming teachers can be found in all major cities. (check the internet)

Providing drums and percussion instruments for all participants is wonderful. However, an exciting experience is still possible with "found sounds" from the home, garage, thrift store, etc (see the video "Stomp Out Loud" for ideas; there are many great books/videos available at the library about making simple drums and percussion instruments). Any drum rhythm or percussion part can be adapted to the body or to the voice. In addition, you need not be a musician to pass on an experience of rhythm. A good sense of timing, enthusiastic intent, and the belief that you can do it will serve you well.

GOALS/BENEFITS

* to get in touch with the body and its internal rhythms * to entrain with the energy of God * to honour yourself and others * to work as a team * to experience music making within community * to think "out of the box" * to learn to listen * research findings suggest drumming can strengthen the immune system, relieve stress, improve mood, lower heart rate, blood pressure and anxiety level and balance biological rhythms (a willingness to engage the activity is key) * can evoke dreams of forgotten vocations (and vacations), remembrance of times when life was passionate, and the recollection that relationship can be about being in love and having fun.

DRUM CIRCLE DESCRIPTION

A drum circle refers to a rhythm based event where people come together in a circle configuration, to express themselves using drums and percussion instruments. A facilitator guides the session, providing encouragement, and supporting people to reconnect with their innate sense of rhythm. One of the key components is inclusiveness, that people of all skill levels, background, mobility and age can participate in a non verbal activity where each person has a musical voice. The circle has potential to teach us about community, spirituality and faith, intergenerational learning, creativity, team building, gender equality, literacy, non violent communication, living in peace and tolerance, mentoring, wellness, and respect for other cultures. As a model for our world family, all participants in the circle directly or indirectly take responsibility for the safety, protection and nurturing of our young people, where elders and seniors are honored for the time they've walked this planet, for the experience they bring and for forging the last enduring link that completes the circle.

FACILITATOR SIGNALS: see "Drum Circle Spirit" by Arthur Hull for further tips

* Volume - For variety in volume (rhythm circles can tend to want to get loud and stay loud), mime to the group to play quieter...outstretched hands lowering to

the floor...hands rising up to increase volume.

* Stop - To stop the group while playing, get their attention (samba or other kind of whistle works), call out READY TO STOP then count on the beat 1 2 3 4 STOP! There may be some stragglers on counts 5 6 etc. With children, my survival strategy of choice is to call for a drum or instrument roll, then shout READY FOR HANDS UP a----n----d H-A-N-D-S UP! (sometimes you have to get those hands as far away from the drums as possible)

* Listen - Pull on your ear. Experiment with mime. It is a great expressive tool and it will save your voice.

Rhythm leaders need rhythmical friends, especially if you are leading larger or intergenerational groups. I will explore this topic in some detail as it can be a survival tactic for novice musical leaders. Try to organize in advance 1 or 2 or more people known to you who have a good steady sense of timing and sound sensitivity (if you wish, of course, you could switch back and forth from leader to support person). They become your timekeepers, people who like being in support and who can maintain a simple steady pulse without losing focus, speeding up or slowing down. Perhaps you can rehearse beforehand - it can appear easier than it is. You want to choose people who "like to have a good time while keeping good time". They are instructed to play slightly louder than the collective group sound so that they are always heard as a reference point for those who get lost (or felt by those who are not listening!). Their participation is important because it frees you up to lead in other areas once the group has "found the groove". Budget allowing, they could be playing the barrel shaped African drum called a "dundun". These drums are similar to a bass drum, which works just as well. They would typically play a consistent pulse. For a rhythm in 4, perhaps on the counts of 1 and 3. If a second large drum is available, on the counts 1, 2, and 3. If bass drums of some sort are not available, no matter. Your rhythm friends can play the same instruments as everyone else, but they can be identified as people to watch and listen to if you lose the beat. As you build your skill and repertoire of activities/rhythms, you'll feel comfortable leading on your own.

OPENING INSTRUCTIONS (for children or adults or both)

* Keep it simple! ...at least until people entrain with the sound * Listen * Balance your sound with the group sound * Take good care of your hands and body * Take good care of the instruments * Vision how you would like your life to be and send it out into the world on the sound waves * You may wish to choose a prayer, theme or intention, either shared with the group or silently to yourself. Holly Blue Hawkins in her book "The Heart of the Circle" suggests using a "seed" word to anchor the drumming. "...For example, I might say the word "shovel" to signify that I want to dig up an old buried something-or-other and turn it from garbage into compost.

Part Three – Mini Workshop

An option to open your session - with eyes closed, firmly cover your ears with both hands as you breathe quietly; listen for your heartbeat and to the symphony of vibration and rhythm; sense your body from the tip of your toes to the top of your head; this can signal an intention to explore the inner terrain. You can prearrange to signal the end of the exercise by playing your drum or percussion instrument.

THE DRUM - two basic sounds

Low Bass Sound - while seated comfortably, drum held between your knees, tilted slightly away from you to free the sound hole; with a flat and relaxed hand, find the exact centre of your drum, bouncing your hand up and down, contacting the skin just long enough to produce a deep sustained bass sound.

High Treble Sound - sometimes called an "open tone"; place your hand on the drum skin in the bass position, begin tapping the drum while slowly bringing your hand back toward your body, listening carefully to the sound until you don't hear any bass in the sound. This is the open tone position.

* Rock game - each person brings two rocks with them to the playshop (or the facilitator provides all the rocks); have people pair up with one rock in each hand, one person standing as part of an inner circle and one as part of an outer circle; I stand facing my partner, close enough so that we can our four rocks together (watch the fingers!); using this sample rhythm with a steady count of 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 , I tap my two rocks together on the counts of 1, 2, and 3 of the first "bar" and then both of us tap our four rocks together on the counts of 1 and 3 of the second bar. Repeat continuously.

You can demonstrate beforehand, count the group in slowly to start, use different rhythms, stop and start "on the go", do one (or however many) cycle(s) then have the inside or outside circle shift over one person, speed up if you wish; split the group in half right down the centre of both circles, have one half begin the rhythm, you'll bring in the second half at the beginning of the second bar, this will put the two halves into "call and response" mode. Experiment!

* Begin by setting a quiet, steady and consistent beat on the bass drums or any instrument - with two rhythm sticks per person (or twigs from a dead tree or doweling) for tapping together, instruct participants to make up a simple repeating rhythm in their head first; then when they are ready, softly begin to play it. Children may jump in immediately, but encourage the quiet creativity before playing it.

Leader can demo examples of simple rhythms, group can stand up walking on the beat while tapping, change to tapping on the floor, can highlight certain participants' beats, bringing the whole group to that beat.....

* The "We Will Rock You" beat - most people and certainly children will recognize this rhythm when it is played on the drum....this recognition means that on some level it is already integrated into the body, which is a facilitator's ally (in this "heady" society, it is a great gift to offer rhythms that bring awareness to the body...in fact, participants will entrain much quicker if your sessions begin with body percussion - clapping, tapping, slapping, beating, rubbing).

Begin by demonstrating two foot stomps (right and left) on the 1 and 2 count, followed immediately by a hand clap on the 3 count, the 4 count is silent, repeat. (160 beats per minute is about the right tempo) Again a "call and response" feel can be accomplished by starting the second group's foot stomps on the 3 and 4 count, with the clap on the 1 count.

Transfer now to drums if you have them: play two right hand bass sounds on the 1 and 2 count, with an open tone sound on the count of 3; call and response can be done like with body percussion above; a further step splits the group into 4 parts, having group one start on the 1 count, group 2 on the 2 count, group 3 on 3, and 4 on 4. This is fun but takes some preplanning, skilled leading and group listening.

* This activity is perhaps more for adults, however it will work for children too under certain circumstances. Play with the nuance of how to present this. Go around the circle and have each person in order designate themselves "alpha" or "beta". The betas create a "healing groove" for the alphas, later switching roles. The betas' intent is to actively offer healing sounds and good wishes to the alphas, who can either simply remain in their chair or lay on the floor if mats are provided. Their role is to simply receive. Note: it is often a more powerful experience to receive the sound from the centre of the circle.

* An energizer - the breath can be used to great effect rhythmically - you can bring a cadence to both the in and out breath. Preplan and experiment beforehand to create breath rhythms that can be demonstrated and then layered one over the other. Participants can create their own....anything goes - mouth clicks, wind whistling, whoosh sounds, etc.

Some closing ideas:

* Designate the next rhythms/sounds as an opportunity to reside with God * Add simple affirmations to any rhythm * Read a favorite poem to the steady beat of the drum

Part Four - Biography

Lyle is a percussionist/singer/guitarist, recording artist, writer, educator and children's entertainer with a special interest in African drumming. He has performed and studied worldwide, specializing in community and healing drum circles, faith formation and spirituality, intergenerational learning, corporate team building and sound therapy. One day a week for the past 15 years, Lyle has shared music and drumming with kids at B.C.'s Children's Hospital and has also led the longest running (8 years) weekly "drop-in" Community Drum Circle in Vancouver (and perhaps all of Canada - you are all invited!). Lyle has facilitated the week long intergenerational "Spirit Drum" summer program for six years at the United Church's Naramata Centre, works at Zajac Ranch, Canada's first full time summer camp for children with life threatening illness and works regularly at the Bridgepoint Centre for Eating Disorders in Saskatchewan. Recently, he presented a workshop called "Drumming into Health - a Dynamic Prescription for Wellness" at the international conference for the Society for the Arts in Healthcare (SAH), in Edmonton Alberta. Lyle has two recordings, "Just Kidding, After All These Years" for kids and "Peace Through Music" for adults, and has a private practice in sound therapy in Vancouver, British Columbia.

RECOMMENDATIONS/BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "The Healing Drum Kit" - Christine Stevens, Sounds True, 2005
- "The Silent Pulse" - book by George Leonard, E.P. Dutton, 1986
- "The New Conga Joy" - book by Bill Matthews, available on the internet
- "Have Fun Playing Drums" - video by Brad Dutz, Interworld Music, 1995
- "World Music Drumming" - video by Will Schmid, Hal Leonard Corp. 1998
- Lyle Povah and MusicWorks www.LylePovah.com • info@lylepovah.com