

A new impulse for hospice care

Sailing the Sound Boat before and after death

Elmar Vogt, music therapist and instrument maker, talks about the healing impact of his “Sound Boat” at the end of life. The interview was conducted by Christian Bergmann (former coordinator at the Lazarus Hospice, Berlin).



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How can we imagine a “Sound Boat” or a “Sound Boat journey” to be like?

Sound Boat consists of the words “Sound” and “Boat”. A boat makes us think of a journey, a cruise. A boat on a shore invites us to enter and set sail. The side plates of the boat offer protection and a sense of security.

Twenty strings are strung to the bottom of the boat, all tuned to the same note. When these strings are played, a harmonic web of overtones develops on the basis of a very stable basic note. The sound is very natural. It reminds us of the sound of waves on a beach, for example.

The third element is movement. The Sound Boat can be suspended to swing freely, almost like a cradle.

The patient lies in the Sound Boat. The companion sits next to it and makes the strings resonate. What kind of effect does this have on the person in the Sound Boat?

When the patient lies in the boat, he or she becomes part of the whole sounding body. The vibrations of the strings are immediately transmitted to the person’s body. The stable basic note and the security in the boat help the patient to calm down in the situation of approaching death, which is often insecure and makes him or her vulnerable. At the

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same time, the many overtones create a sense of an expanse, an open space.

Why are the areas of hospice and palliative care especially suitable for the use of the Sound Boat?

Many cultures have images and myths of a final journey by boat.

At the end of life, when quietude arises, filling the space and often making it difficult for all who are involved, sound



We are all in the same boat.

can begin to envelop this quietude. It creates a healing space beyond all words, where everyone – patients, family and friends, and the employees of the institution – may experience that they are safe and sheltered.

I remember an event from the time when I was a music therapist at a hospital ward for children with severe multiple disabilities. I had known Jochen since he was born, having accompanied him once a week for five years. He died, unexpectedly for all of us, during an attempt to reanimate him. Afterwards, his body seemed to be agitated and tense, just as all the doctors and nurses involved. We decided together to have him journey the Sound Boat one last time. My colleague and myself played for him for several hours. This process created a space of healing and attentiveness where everyone was able to say farewell to him. It was touching to see how his face relaxed more and more, and a tangible stillness and calm ensued.

Is it possible to play the Sound Boat if you are not a trained musician?

Yes, everyone can just begin, according to his or her abilities. The strings are played so that their whole length resonates. Neither fingerings nor any other technical skills are required, not like, for example, when you play violin or guitar. The essential prerequisites are an attentive attitude, empathy and intuition. To support this process I offer introductory workshops and further training where playing and working with the Sound Boat can be explored in all its variety.

How should a hospice or a palliative care ward proceed if the institution is interested in acquiring a Sound Boat?

The first step is a conversation where the general conditions and needs of the respective institution are clarified. On this basis I am able to offer several solutions: There are either the already existing Sound Boat models, or a special Sound Boat can be designed to meet the requirements of that particular institution. A new option is to hire a Sound Boat.

A special new development for hospices and palliative care is the flexible Sound Boat, which can even be rested on trestles and therefore be used directly in the patient's room. The removable side panels make it easier to place the patient into the now barrier-free Sound Boat.

A helpful step on the path to acquiring a Sound Boat can be an information evening for all interested employees, friends, supporters and media representatives. This creates a wide, supportive foundation and sends the signal: "we are all in the same boat."

(Published in: Bundes-Hospiz-Anzeiger, Ausgabe 2 2015)

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