

Culture Matters – in illness, health, life and death

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INTRODUCTION:

26 years ago, a 14-yo boy found himself in the midst of the horrors of war in Bosnia. This little boy was I.

Amongst the most striking memories from this period in my life are those 56 days that my mother and I have spent in one of many infamous concentration camps. Try to imagine the emotional turmoil that a 14-yo child must have felt in such circumstances. With nights came beatings, rapes and killings. So I feared the night. We all did. But each night, as I would lay my head down to the blanket covered hard floor, trying to trick fear and get some sleep, I'd hear this angelic voice, almost like whispering, singing the most beautiful of melodies... slow, sad and yet comforting melodies of traditional Bosnian music, also known as "sevdah". That was my mother, singing into my ear, soothing my scared and torn young soul – breathing the life back into my emptied lungs. Since then and to this day, music was always at the core of everything I am, configurating my identity... breathing life into my lungs.

I know that music saved my life – the same way it has done many times again ever since. In times when I would feel tired of living a life on the run. Times when a rescue in a refuge felt like a blowfish in my throat. Times when nights brought the nightmares; haunting memories of old losses. Also painful encounters with the new ones and all other things that my doctors would refer to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I know that music saved my life. It is what it still does, every day. Every. Day.

ONE MORE TIME WITH FEELING:

Now fast-forward 26 years. This is a photo of Nick Cave, acclaimed Australian artist, poet, songwriter, lecturer and an iconic figure in alternative rock scene for more than three decades. This photo is from the shooting of a documentary called *One More Time With Feeling*. So, what is so special about this film? Well it's the first sign of life that Cave has shown to the

public since the tragic death of his son in an accident, two years prior to the release of this film, only 15 years old. Honestly, when I first heard about the film, I was ambivalent. I suspected he was about to commodify and sell the death of his own son to earn money and gain publicity. A dreadful thought. However, at the same time, knowing Cave and his strong sense of integrity, I somewhere believed that he could never do such thing. And so I went to the movies and I saw the film. And it was nothing close to what I expected. A contrasting combination of that vintage film noir flavor and modern 3D technology provided this sense of being stuck between a forever gone past and an eternally proximate future... a visualized liminality, neither-here-nor-there... betwixt-and-between the two worlds... camera angles made me feel as a secret observer – a voyeuristic peep into the most private chambers of a heartbroke artist’s soul. I realized that this was his healing ritual; his attempt at attending to those sore dimensions of his human self that conventional medicine simply could not. And not only the film, but the album and the world tour that followed were all a part of a series of rituals – expressions of loss and suffering and monuments of the universal humanity within him.

COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE

This is a short clip of a show from this very tour. I shot it myself so I apologize for pure video and audio quality but I really want to share this with you because something extraordinary is happening here... [PLAY THE FILM]

This is what sociologist Emile Durkheim has termed “collective effervescence” [DISPLAY TEXT] – which refers to when large number of people come together and participate in the same action and simultaneously express and communicate the same sentiment. Now, this show was played at Ericsson Globe venue in Stockholm. Approximately 8.000-9.000 people attended the show – and no, they did not all lose their sons two years ago. However, the deep sensibility communicated through the primal force of art made it possible for all of them to RELATE – to recognize their own losses in Nick Cave’s loss and also in each other’s losses, to heal through mirroring their own suffering in Nick Cave’s suffering and also in each other’s suffering. The shared sentiment was so thick you could almost touch it: *I-know-that-you-know-that-I-know-that-you-know*. This is what we medical anthropologists have often referred to as “*understanding and bonding in human suffering*” – that unmistakable gut-level

feeling of mutual recognition that provides comfort and relief not by running away from the pain but by social act of acknowledging it.

PRIVATE MALADY

This is where a private malady...

COLLECTIVE CONCERN

...is transformed into a collective concern. That night, the crowd wept together as one about their loss, pain and suffering. But these people also celebrated their humanity, manifested through this deeply felt *understanding and bonding in each other's suffering* – something that gave strength and restored sense of meaning.

And one more thing, I don't know if you could notice but there is no stage barrier – which is always in place at larger rock shows. There is literally NOTHING separating Cave and the audience. And interesting thing is that he does his best to really get the most out of this absence of boundaries, this limitlessness. He invites hundreds of people to join him on stage. He leans onto the stretched out arms allowing their hands to touch and hold him. He repeatedly dives into the sea of crowd and disappears for a couple of moments before he gets back or appears on the other side of the venue – persistently tearing down all those culturally constructed firewalls that might hinder the mutual understanding and bonding.

At one particular moment, I felt taken up by a reminiscence of some other events from my past. Namely, nearly a decade ago, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a hospital amongst the people treated for life-threatening heart conditions. I spent almost one year there. Throughout this whole period, I identified strongly with the patients – and it was because of my experience of war and my life as a refugee. The structure of our life narratives felt very similar: life-loss-life. Now, again, something rang a bell for me... I felt in a similar way – I could identify with Nick Cave's loss and with other people assembled in this ritual. Just as the heart patients, these people all had their lives, dreams and hopes before it was all suddenly disrupted by a tragic course of things. Cave's way of portraying his tragic event mirrored my own tragedy and of all those patients. What we all shared was this deeply felt crisis brought by the disruption of a life narrative due to something bad, something unimaginable. We were

all butterflies caught in a diving bell, neither here nor there, with one life forever gone and the other one forever out of reach.

I really want to emphasize here that this sharing is only made possible through the conceptualization and mediation enabled by art. All art forms – be it literature, performing or visual arts – have this innate ability to communicate, that is **to speak of and to speak to**, those existential elements of being human. It is in and through arts that we can give form and substance to deep sensibilities, our emotional lives and complex thoughts in ways compared to which any other documentation or account comes across as rather feeble.

HISTORY – PAINTINGS

Now rewind back some 40.000 years. The importance of culture and arts for health and wellbeing is, of course, not only a contemporary phenomenon. The earliest known examples of art being used to amplify the senses and awareness are the wall paintings of Ice Age cave dwellers. Since its prehistoric use art has stayed both an expression but also an indispensable nutrient of human culture. Every human society has used arts to express its ideas and to make sense of the world. Art educates us, inspires us, and beautifies us. There is no world as limitless as that of imagination; and it is its captivating use that marks us out from other earthly creatures.

[IMAGE] Cave of forgotten dreams

HISTORY – PAINTINGS 2

Now fast-forward to the the early modern period and Renaissance, during this period belief in the transformational power of images was strong. Paintings were understood to have intense effects on the imaginations and bodies of viewers and to affect their health and emotional balance – even their children – and to make them behave according to civic and moral values. By the 1620s, an increasing number of paintings portrayed saints employing medical treatments in their cures.

[IMAGE]: A female saint represented as the recipient of a medical intervention by Saint Peter, guided by an angel who prepares to apply an unguent to her torn flesh (Giovanni

Lanfranco, Saint Agatha Visited in prison by Saint Peter and the Angel, ca. 1613-14. Oil on canvas Galleria Nazionale, Parma.)

HISTORY – MUSIC

Now rewind back again to 8th century BC and let us get back to music. We read, however, about healing incantations already in the Odyssey. While on a hunting expedition in his youth, Odysseus was gored by a wild boar, which left the scar on his thigh.

HISTORY – MUSIC 2

His companions healed his wound and stopped its bleeding with an incantation.

HISTORY – MUSIC 3

The truth is that all known cultures have used and enjoyed music in a wide variety of ways. However, the therapeutic properties of music were not always commonly mentioned. In fifth century Athens, Pythagoras, allegedly an excellent lyre player, used to play and sing paeans – joyous songs – to his disciples so as to bring them into a serene mood. He used music to purify the souls – the ancient musical psychotherapy and first documented steps towards what today is known as music therapy.

HISTORY – MUSIC 4

Plato's pupil, Xenocrates of Chalcedon, head of the Academy from 339 to 314, practiced music therapy and was described having used *instrumental* music to cure hysterics.

VALUE OF ARTS

Instead of going to great lengths in listing scientific arguments from a variety of scientific traditions for how valuable culture and arts are for our health I would like to mention a recent report that had caught my eye. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing in UK launched a report in July 2017 called "Creative Health: the Arts for Health and

Wellbeing”. The report provides an overview of current practice around the UK and includes descriptions of a wide range of artistic and creative activities, as well as pulling together evidence for the contributions that the arts can make to people’s experience of health and wellbeing. As it often happens, also this report puts an emphasis on cost-effectiveness when discussing the value of arts for health.

VALUE OF ARTS 2

Artlift, for instance, is an arts-on-prescription scheme targeting the patients with a wide range of conditions – chronic pain, stroke, anxiety and depression – to take part in activities led by professional artist working in poetry, ceramics, drawing, mosaic or painting. A cost benefit analysis of Artlift from 2009 to 2012 showed that, after six months of working with an artist, people had 37 percent less demand for GP appointments and their need for hospital admissions dropped by 27 percent. Setting reductions in costs to the NHS against the cost of Artlift interventions, there was a net saving of £216 per patient.

VALUE OF ARTS 3

In Wales, a mental health recovery center, co-designed by its users, saves National Health Services £300k each year

VALUE OF ARTS 4

A social return on investment of between £4 and £11 has been calculated for every £1 invested in arts on prescription.

VALUE OF ARTS 5

The use of live music in neonatal intensive care leads to considerably reduced hospital stays.

VALUE OF ARTS 6

Medical training – inclusion of the arts in the formation and professional development of health and social care professionals. Within the NHS, some 10 million working days are lost to sick leave every year, costing £2.4bn. Arts engagement helps health and care staff to improve their own health and wellbeing and that of their patients.

VALUE OF ARTS 7

“When considering the value of the arts in health and wellbeing, it should be borne in mind that successful participatory arts projects are of much greater value to the individuals that take part than the economic benefits they may represent for health or other agencies. In other words, **the difference that arts participation makes to people’s lives often transcends economic value.**”

IMPACT OF ARTS

Engaging with arts enable us to get in touch with our existential selves, enhance our own subjectivity and ensure sense of dignity and self-worth.

IMPACT OF MUSIC

Music is an important source of enjoyment, learning, and well-being in life as well as a rich, powerful, and versatile stimulus for the brain. With the advance of modern neuroimaging techniques during the past decades, we are now beginning to better understand what goes on in the healthy brain when we listen, play, think, and feel music and how the structure and function of the brain can change as a result of musical training and expertise.

IMPACT OF MUSIC 2

In a recent study at Aalborg University, Denmark, 14,265 people participated and were able to answer questions about their health and their music habits. The researchers saw a clear pattern between good health and attendance at live music shows. People attending concerts regularly had better health than those who did not. "The study confirms: actively participating in

cultural events and music activities are benefiting our health," Lars Ole Bonde, professor of music therapy at Aalborg University

SUMMARY

An analysis of our aesthetic lives might reveal a great deal both about our culture but also about our existential needs. The aesthetic ways in which we build houses, roads, organize villages or big cities, the aesthetic ways in which we talk about life and death, weather and politics, how we walk, how we act, how we engage in social life and so on is a direct reflection of our pre-semantic visceral selves. We need both form and substance to understand the meaning of being human. The form is "what". The substance is "how". Hence, what we do – we manage illness, health, life and death – is the form. But how we do it – how we manage illness, health, life and death – is the substance.

I've met many sceptics saying that impact of arts and culture on our health and wellbeing is an unexplored field, hard to measure and that there's just not enough evidence to support this theory. My gut-felt response to this is: "Oh, but you're wrong! I know it for a fact!!" But the more I learned about culture and health the more I have become diplomatic about it and nowadays I usually borrow the response of my colleague, professor Gunnar Bjursell, a physician and professor in molecular biology, whose brilliant answer to whether there is any scientific evidence to support the claim that culture promotes health: "Take a pen, a notebook and have a seat – this might take a while!".

Again, I could use this opportunity to mention hundreds of recent scientific studies from a variety of academic traditions from nursing studies through music therapy, medical anthropology, psychology, philosophy, to neurosciences and many more – but it would take too long time and I don't really like the game of name-dropping so I reckoned I'll do something else. There is an abundance of scientific evidence and there's more flooding in as we speak, continuously. For those interested in impact of arts and culture on our health – it is easily found. Sceptics are sceptics and remain sceptics because they have been trained to avoid these facts, socialized into a certain way of thinking where not-easily-quantifiable dimensions of being human are viewed as a threat to good knowledge. However, the sceptics

have the same aim as any of us – and this is what we all have in common: we all share a genuine concern for people and want to protect what’s best for all of us. We all want to promote health, to ensure the good quality of healthcare, to ensure good quality of life filled with meaning and marked by dignity. So we’re all on the same side here. However, we do need to remind ourselves of that regularly. Why? Well because once we really manage to come together in a broadened approach to promoting health and dealing with pain and suffering – that is also when we will be breaking new ground for the ways in which we recognize and treat people not only as physical and biological bodies but also as thinking and feeling subjects. And we are already halfway there, right on the verge of a dawn of a new paradigm.

Thank you!

Haris Agic