

# Vumani Bo! Align Yourself!

## Post-task: Music, Healing and Embodiment

As you might imagine, growing up in a family like the one Geoff grew up in has had a tremendous impact on his musicality. To him it seemed inevitable that he would follow in the direction of his father and grandfather, especially when it came to performing music. However, there was a major turning point for him when he felt the calling to become a sangoma. The call to become a traditional healer is often accompanied by its own 'sacred sickness', ukuthwasa, which often results in a radical change in one's lifestyle, to facilitate the new life path to becoming a healer. The thwasa is different for different people. In Geoff's case it was the onset of a painful condition known as fibromyalgia, which badly affects the body's joints, muscles, and ligaments. The pain and fatigue that came with fibromyalgia put an end to any thoughts Geoff had of becoming a full-time performing musician since he could no longer sustain the energy required for it. But the thwasa also forced him to start on his own healing journey and he has learned to live with his symptoms and to understand his body better, as well as to empathise with the pain of others.

In his work, Geoff tries to address the traumas of the past on a personal and on an interpersonal level. This involves acknowledging where someone may have emotional pain or trauma, as well as celebrating the beauty and humanity of that person. It is our experience of life, both painful and joyful, that shapes us and make us unique. It also connects us to others. From this we can see that, if we actively address our pain and build a relationship with it, it can teach us something about ourselves and, from there we can grow as individuals. Similarly, we need to address our collective pain, too, so that we may grow as a community. In this way, the personal and the communal are intertwined and interdependent.

An important part of Geoff's approach to music making and workshop facilitation is the concept of 'embodiment'. The idea of embodiment is closely related to other ideas about music performance, such as 'flow state' or 'trance state', where one can let go of the thinking mind and give oneself over completely to the music. In Geoff's work it means, in that moment, giving priority to the way someone's body experiences and expresses the music and dance, over the way the mind might count, analyse and anticipate the music because of preconceived notions about key or time signature. The emphasis is on feeling the music and dance, rather than thinking about it. Geoff describes how this can be very challenging, especially for classically trained musicians. They have learned to compose and perform music within very strict aesthetic codes that limit their freedom of expression. In the context of ritual, the free-form quality of embodiment is vital for participating fully. Then one may silence the mind enough to receive messages from ancestors, to then share with the wider community or to let

emotions pour out of people, without the mind preventing that release.

Combining music education and emotional healing, drawing on the rich traditions of his sangoma training, Geoff's work involves conducting workshops that can undo harmful narratives of self-doubt about one's musical ability. Often we receive criticism from others, maybe from parents, other family members or from our teachers and peers. We often then also take them on as negative self-beliefs. These hinder our abilities to express ourselves creatively, whether in visual art, music or other forms of performance. So we often believe those deemed to be 'more talented', 'more skilled' or 'more musical' and we undermine the value of our own unique expressions as individuals and as a community. To Geoff it seems that the distinction between 'performer' and 'audience' is not as clearly defined as modern society and many indigenous cultures suppose. He believes that everyone is innately capable of expressing themselves meaningfully through music and dance, even if they're not trained.

Here again we see the need for people to get out of their heads and into their bodies, to experience themselves as creative beings. They are beings inherently worthy of expressing themselves, beyond any negative self-beliefs inherited from society. In this work and in the ritual work of the sangoma, we might hear the healer's call, "vumani bo!" commanding us to align with the support of our community, our ancestors and with our true nature. For we are spiritual beings capable and worthy of love, no matter what we've been through.

## **Now for some exercises:**

1) Where the word 'ngoma' refers to sacred dance and song, a 'sangoma' is one who is 'of dance or song'. This suggests that music has been considered an essential part of divination and healing in indigenous southern African cultures for a long time. There are many ways to think about healing and well being, be they physical, emotional, spiritual and even cultural or communal.

- What does the word 'healing' mean to you?
- Do you think music can be healing? If so, how?
- Have you felt music to be a healing force in your own life?
- What do you think of the thwasa, 'the sacred sickness', and what it says about becoming a healer?

### ***Activity: Embodiment***

In this activity, you're going to move to a piece of music of your choosing referably not shorter than three minutes. Tip: Settle on a song before you start the exercise.

### ***Step 1: Noting:***

Take a moment to note how you are feeling, both in your body and your mind. Are you tired or are you energised? How do you feel emotionally? Are your breaths deep or shallow, fast or slow? If you want to, you can write this down. We'll come back to it after the movement.

### ***Step 2: Movement:***

Now, move physically to the song you have selected! You can do this completely privately or with friends, and your dance doesn't have to be "good" or "on the beat". It might not even look like anything you would normally consider dance. You can make noises or be completely silent, you can jump around or only move your arms. It can be slow, fast, serious, silly, but it mustn't be a set of pre-rehearsed movements. Don't worry about what it looks like. It's not about choreographing a beautiful dance. The point is to let go of your thinking mind and just be in your body, to be led by your heart rather than your brain.

### ***Step 3: Reflection:***

Once you are done, take a moment to note how you are feeling again, as in step 1. How does this compare to what you were feeling before? What changed? What stayed the same? What kinds of movements did you make? Were there any kinds of movements you've never tried before?

### ***Bonus:***

Try the same task again with a different piece of music, again noting how you feel afterwards. How does this compare to the first song? Did this new music ask for a different kind of movement?