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There is a chance

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There is a Chance: Songwriting for Hope as Critical Qualitative Research

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Abstract

How to sustain hope amidst loss during repressive times? It may not be enough to voice the words “there is a chance”. But can the act of writing a song, of singing that song, of making a noise, constitute a commitment towards ensuring that there is a chance?

Keywords

critical arts-based research, hope, loss, performance autoethnography, songwriting

Sharing a Song: May 21, 2020

A Zoom online gathering in place of the 16th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, cancelled for coronavirus

We cremated my father yesterday. I am reverberating from his death, its suddenness, its happening during COVID-19 lockdown, his hospitalisation with no visitors for 10 days, him allowed home to die 3 days later. Although I don't yet understand how, I am also reverberating from the experience of his funeral yesterday ... restricted to nine family and friends ... broadcast online for others who could not be there ... including my brother and my father's young grandchildren in Zimbabwe, unable to travel to the UK.

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I feel depleted yet want to contribute to this gathering of autoethnographers and performers. I feel I must, it matters, something in me *needs* to. This does not feel like a time to theorise. It feels like the time to play music. I am pulled to once again sing a song I'd written 6 years before, titled *There is a Chance*.

Before playing the song, I search out an appropriate way to introduce it today. I settle on something like this:

At first, I thought I was writing this song for my nephew, on the occasion of his birth. I also knew I was writing it for my mother, to celebrate her first grandchild. Then, later, I sang this song for my boyfriend, who was at the time revisiting some challenging issues from his youth. At some point, I started introducing it as a song for queer kids everywhere, whatever their age. And recently, as I've struggled for hope and optimism myself, I've discovered that I also need to sing this song for me. Today, I offer it to you – to *us* – to acknowledge our community, and as a gesture of hope for better times.

A Song: “There is a Chance”

(Sung to an insistent, percussive acoustic guitar accompaniment played in a major key)

There is a chance of a new frontier
 There is a chance of building bridges
 But we walk on and on
 Making the same mistakes

There is a place of peace and hope
 There is a way, surrounded by good folk
 In the cold of the night and the heat of the sun
 They're with you, they'll keep you safe

I will walk to the water holding your hand
 We might sleep by the water, dogs stretched out in the sand
 Any time you're with me, you can be anything you please
 You're alright with me

You bring a chance of a new frontier
 You bring a chance of building bridges
 Of turning around
 And making tomorrow great

I will walk to the water holding your hand
 We might sleep by the water, dogs stretched out in the sand

Any time you're with me, you can be anything you please
 You're alright with me¹

Ingredients of a Song: April 1, 2014

My brother and I — are we making the same mistakes? Mistakes my father handed down, that were perhaps handed down to him by his father, and his father before. Will my brother hand them down to his newly born son? Will I, as uncle, hand them down to my nephew? I don't want to. I will not. These mistakes will end here, with me. *How can I make sure that they do?*

I write this song on the first day of the month. I write for my newborn nephew, who I am yet to meet. I write because my mother asked me to, because she wanted a new song to celebrate her grandson's life.

As I write, I have in my mind the country of his birth: Zimbabwe. I have in my mind political unrest. News reports of a corrupt government. Military. Police force. Documented human rights abuses towards the LGBTQ community. Sanctioned by the government. In a land where it is illegal for two men to hold hands or kiss, much less live together as lovers. I have in my mind my boyfriend. Our life together. Our relative freedoms. Hard-won rights for LGBT people in the UK in 2014. Only last month, the UK government granted us the right by law to marry. That single law change made a big difference, I could feel it.

I try to imagine a place of safety in Zimbabwe for queer youth. A safe space for my nephew, should he explore a queer identity in the future. What might that space look like? Who will create it? I try to picture a safe space there for me, too, where I could be with my nephew without fear of discrimination or prejudice. I imagine a safe space for all LGBTQ people. Can I help make that space? If so, how? What do I need to do? I write and sing to try to create it, to conjure it into being:

I will walk to the water holding your hand

We might sleep by the water, dogs stretched out in the sand

Any time you're with me, you can be anything you please

You're alright with me

I write to tell my nephew, my brother and my partner: *There is a chance*. I write to remind myself: *There is a chance*. I do not just tell them — and myself — that there is a chance through voicing the words. That would not be enough. The act of writing music, of playing the music that is written, of making a noise, in itself constitutes a commitment to making sure that there *will be* a chance. An insistence. By playing and singing, I take a stand. In making a noise, I *make* a chance. It is there in the sound that emanates from my body and the body of my guitar, driving, relentless, insistent. *Life!* Energies put into action. A sound that originates from the points of contact between

my fingers and the phosphor bronze strings. A sound amplified and projected out into the world by the body of my guitar. Alongside a human voice, driven to sing. Anyone can hear it. Anyone can feel it. The fact that it exists at all is proof that there *is* a chance.

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Note

1. Lyrics Copyright © David Carless, 2016. Used with permission.

Author Biography

David Carless is a researcher-writer-musician immersed in interdisciplinary projects across social science, health and education using narrative, songwriting, filmmaking and live performance approaches. His multimedia collaborations are available online and have been published as journal articles and book chapters. David is a Reader in Physical Activity and Health at the University of the West of Scotland and a Visiting Research Professor in the Centre for Creative Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh.