

Beating Back the Heart - The Ecology of Drumming for Transformation

by Zoë Palmer

"The credit belongs to the drum, the magical, sacred drum, which has the extraordinary power to touch something deep within us all" (Friedman, 2000).

1. The Head, heart and hand of drum circles

"In the drum circle...people empower each other in the act of celebrating community and life through rhythm and music" (Hull in Bittman, 2001).

"The art of music has been especially considered divine because it is the exact miniature of the law working through the whole universe" (Khan 1991:3).

For many years, in communities across the globe, people have gathered together on a weekly basis to drum; for the sheer joy of doing so. Banned by the Christianized Roman Empire for being "licentious" and "mischievous" (Lone Wolf Circles, 1993), the power of the drum to re-connect people with each other, themselves, and the earth is finally being re-embraced and celebrated by Western society. Sufi music therapist Barry Bernstein claims that this is because:

"we've become an increasingly isolated culture. People today are hungry for connection with other people, and the drum offers an immediate avenue for that" (Bernstein in Thompson, 2001)

In his vision of 'drum circle consciousness' facilitator Arthur Hull brings to life the ecological principles that are played out in a community drum circle:

"a community is far more than the sum of its parts and functions best when an evolving sense of order and self-regulation is encouraged, and it becomes predictably effective when people are willing to work together" (Hull in Bittman, 2001)

These principles are echoed throughout the literature on drum circles, which suggests that in striving to create healthy human communities we are choosing methods that reflect the workings of the non-human worldⁱ.

1.1 Entrainment

Described as “one of the great organising principles of the world” (Redmond 1997:174), entrainment is the rhythmic unity that takes place when people drum together. It refers specifically to the physical alignment of brainwaves to the rhythm of the group, resulting in a shared brainwave state between drummers (Ibid p.42). This creates a powerful sense of communion amongst members of the circle.

1.2 Synergy

“Drumming demonstrates our capacity to build unity and synergy when we learn to express the essence of rhythms within us” (Hull in Bittman, 2001).

By opening ourselves up to the power of rhythms in our bodies and our environment, drumming encourages synergy. Aware of this, the drum was used in the Middle Ages by “wizards of the massage of the drum skin” (Hamel 1978:165) to open up vents for evil spirits to pass through. Similar use of the drum to access healing power is seen in shamanic traditions throughout the world and will be explored further in section 2.2.

1.3 Emergent properties

As individuals we do not achieve the same psychological or physiological health benefits as people drumming in groups. According to Christine Stevens it is “the process of participation that creates change” (Stevens, 2000). People empower themselves and each other through the quality of relationships they create in the circle which results in a sense that “you become part of a whole which is more than the sum of its parts” (Hull, 2006).ⁱⁱ

Because they are designed for musicians and non-musicians alike, crossing boundaries of race, gender, age and ability, drum circles become a musical expression of unity in diversity. By entering into rhythm with our community we are able to foster a relationship of interdependence and co-operation which enables personal and collective transformation to begin. As a result, the community drum circle can become:

“a living breathing entity, expressing timeless joy, passion and release through the power of rhythm”
(Hull in Bittman, 2001)

The hand, or practical aspect of setting up and facilitating a drum circle plays a crucial role in ensuring that people feel that they are equal parts of a greater rhythm. The shape of the circle itself establishes a sense of unity and equality amongst participants, encouraging regular eye-contact by replacing traditional, hierarchical ways of working with a more inclusive formⁱⁱⁱ. The style of leadership that had been adopted is in keeping with these principles. People who run drum circles are referred to as facilitators rather than leaders and, in my limited experience I have found that they display a wonderful fusion of energy, humour and sensitivity in the way they hold the sessions. As Arthur Hull has observed, they tend to embody the suggestion that:

“drumming...is a joyful bliss that transcends the boundaries separating us from each other”
(Hull in Bittman, 2001)

In recent years there has been a proliferation of writing on group drumming as a ‘joyful bliss’ which enables healing on both a personal and a collective level. Indeed, it has been said that: “the application of rhythm and its ability to heal the body, mind and soul is boundless” (Friedman, 2000)- I shall now consider this suggestion in greater depth.

2. The Drum, The Doctor – rhythm and healing

“When our hands connect with a drum that vibrates with our energy, vitality, emotion, exhilaration, hope, sensitivity, giving, sharing and unity, we become whole again” (Bittman, 2000).

“Group drumming tunes our biology, orchestrates our immunity, and enables healing to begin”
(Ibid)

It has been said that when we fall in love with someone, we are essentially falling in rhythm with them. Indeed our whole lives are governed by rhythmic cycles: days, lunar phases, our internal biological rhythms, the rhythms of pulse and breath, of seasons, rivers and oceans. Rhythm allows us to sequence time and a conscious return to rhythm is nothing less than “a return to nature” (Lone Wolf Circles, 1993).

In his work on developing music as a vehicle of awareness, Lone Wolf Circles suggests that drumming functions as a shamanic, deep ecological tool (Ibid); and in language which is similar to that used by Arthur Hull, but with a bias towards deep ecology, he argues that we are nothing less than:

“an aural part of the earth...held together by the fluid principles of music and the constant mitigations of rhythm” (Ibid).

Because of our aural nature, rhythm has the capacity to deepen our sense of felt connection with the world and, as such, it provides us with a musical tool for healing and awakening. The power of the drum to call us back to our essential, whole and connected selves has been recognised and used by shamans for thousands of years. I shall explore shamanic use of drums for community healing further in section 2.2. For now I wish to explore in greater depth the physiological and psychological effects of group drumming, in an attempt to illuminate the scientific rationale which underpins drum circle consciousness.

“Health is a perfect condition of rhythm and tone”
(Khan 1991:103)

2.1 Dr Barry Bitmann: The Physiological effects of group drumming

Health care professionals have known for a long time that group drumming has a therapeutic affect on patients. In her paper ‘Beating chronic illness; drumming offers a sound addition to modern efforts to ease pain’ (2001) April Thompson outlines the ways in which drumming is

used to relieve pain in cancer patients, recover speech in stroke victims and focus the attention of people with Alzheimer's (Ibid). However, until recently, very little empirical data had been collected on the subject, with many therapists working on their intuition and knowledge of archaic methods of healing (rooted in the practices of shamanism).

This changed in 2000 when, in a wonderful and rare display of corporate insight, American drum manufacturers Remo® funded scientific research into the health benefits of drumming. Under the direction of neurologist Dr. Barry Bittman the research team found that:

"a specific form of group drumming significantly increased the disease fighting activity of circulating white blood cells (natural killer cells) that seek out and destroy cancer cells and virally infected cells" (Belli, 2006)

The implications of this for the treatment of cancer and viruses such as HIV are huge. As Dr. Bittman himself acknowledged this study was, "the first of its kind to show a biological reversal of the stress response in healthy people using drums" (Bittman in Belli, Ibid). As a result of this research a number of medical centres under his guidance now incorporate drumming into the treatment of a range of diseases. Although research into the physiological effects of group drumming is still in its infancy, this information has given the medical industry an illuminating glimpse of the healing power of rhythm.

In The Healing Power of the Drum (2000) psychotherapist Robert L. Friedman makes an important contribution to the literature on drumming and healing which links the physiological benefits of group drumming with emotional and spiritual well-being. Friedman cites the work of scientist Dr. Andrew Neher for his insights into the effects of drumming on brain function and how it brings about feelings of relaxation through the synchronization of the left and right spheres of the brain (Ibid p.44). This can shift people out of negative states of mind and may account for the collective feelings of joy that are often expressed during drum circles.

Tom Morley of Instant Teamwork describes how brain synchronization links people to an expanded state of consciousness:

“the mind becomes sharper, more lucid, synthesizing much more rapidly than normal, and emotions are easier to understand and transform. The conscious and unconscious levels of the mind interface and integrate more easily. Insight quickens and creative intuition flourishes, giving one the ability to visualize and bring into manifestation ideas more easily. An expanded, more complete and integrated state of consciousness comes into existence. Scientists believe that hemispheric synchronization may be the neurological basis of transcendent states of consciousness.”(Morley, 2005)

Aware of the power of drums to promote individual and collective healing, drum circle facilitator and writer Christine Stevens asks: should drums be sold in pharmacies? (Stevens, 2000) Stevens suggests that we take a recommended daily allowance, or R.D.A., of rhythm to help keep our immune systems and communities functioning healthily. Also integral to this process is the relationship between drumming and spirituality and Stevens looks towards the traditional healing methods practised by shamans for guidance:

“shamans rode on the rhythms of their drums to the invisible worlds to bring back antidotes and totems for healing. *Doctor and drummer were one and the same*” (Ibid, my italics).

2.2 Shamanic use of the drum

By looking at the role of drumming in shamanic traditions across the globe, we find that the drum has been used for centuries as an “ancient tool for community health” (Ibid). In the shamanic worldview the notion of community includes the natural world; the principles of shamanic healing, therefore, express a deeply ecological awareness of an individual’s health in relation to the environment she/he inhabits and allow: “the interconnections of the cosmos to be accessed and expressed in music” (Boyce-Tillman 2000:199).

June Boyce-Tillman emphasises the spiritual power of the drum in the shamanic worldview:

“the drum can be assimilated to the shamanic tree with its notches up which the shaman climbs to the sky...the drum depicts a microcosm with its three zones - sky, earth, underworld – at the same time it indicates a means by which the shaman accomplishes a breakthrough from plane to plane and establishes communication with the world above and the world below” (Ibid p.150).

We see from this description that the drum is the central point of focus in shamanic healing ceremonies. It provides a channel for the shaman to drum up the spirits and bring about the transformation of an individual. The community has an important function during such ceremonies, often providing a musical ‘container’ or drumbeat in which the healer can work (Ibid p.135). As a result there develops a sacred trinity between the spirits of the land, the drum and the community.

To what extent, then, could it be stated that drum circles offer a secular alternative for spiritual expression and healing in communities today? Christine Stevens is certain that: “drum circles contribute to the lives of many thirsty people looking to enhance their mind, body and spirit through music” (Stevens, 2000).

3. Drum circles and community building

“The drum is fast becoming an instrument used by people of every age for personal transformation, psychological and physiological healing, and creating community.” (Friedman 2000:3)

As Friedman suggests, one of the joys of using drums for transformation work is that they transcend differences of age, gender, race and ability. For this reason they provide a versatile means of uniting otherwise disparate groups of people. Friedman himself has worked in many different settings; from schools to prisons to hospitals and multinational corporations, his beats know no boundaries. However, the man cited as

the father of the drum circle movement is Arthur Hull. His contribution to the development of 'drum circle consciousness' which views drumming as a shamanic, deep ecological tool, has provided the practical methodology through which facilitators can work with communities to bring about transformation.

3.1 Arthur Hull: RhythmaCulture

"The drum is a tool for unity. It grounds us in our primal relationship with each other, mother earth and the natural laws which govern the universe"
(Hull, 2006)

Arthur Hull has been described as a "unique and eccentric community architect" (Bittman, 2001) whose:

"protocols are basic methodologies for enabling community, and [whose] tools are the foundational implements for building societal bridges"
(Ibid).

At times, reading through Hull's writing on drum circle facilitation is akin to reading the work of deep ecologist Joanna Macy or literature which has sprung from the non-violent communication movement. Hull places a huge emphasis on the quality of listening in drum circles. The power of deep listening is that it demands our presence, our utmost attention to the moment.^{iv} Listening also creates a space for our hearts open to the rhythms of the people around us, so that we can experience the synergy and synchronization which results from our interconnection.

The presence of humour and playfulness is also central to Hull's method for working in community. Humour allows people to play *through* music by banishing any underlying concerns people might carry about not being good enough, creating instead a childlike sense of awe at the magical power of the drum to tickle us into play.

Rhythmaculture is the term developed by Hull to describe his approach to building community through rhythm. His work has taken him around the world, training potential facilitators and demonstrating the transformative

effects of group drumming when it allows joyful 'playing' to take place. He describes his vision of rhythmaculture thus:

"to foster a deep and enduring sense of community through creative musical expression...and to re-establish group drumming as an effective tool for unity."
(Hull in Bittman, 2001)

In recent years the community building capacity of group drumming has been embraced by the corporate world. Operating on highly individualistic principles of personal targets and gain, corporations have become increasingly isolated places where people compete with one another on a daily basis for profit and power. As a result, there are high levels of burnout and depression. With its focus on connection as opposed to isolation, and a non-competitive, non-violent approach to communication, group drumming is slowly beating the heart back into the corporate world.

4 Conclusion: is drumming becoming a social movement for personal and collective growth?

By asking: can drumming be used as a tool to build community and foster personal and collective growth, one of the things I am questioning is the nature of transformation. In section 1.3 I used the principles of systems theory to highlight the co-operative nature of communities and how a microcosm of this relationship can be seen in the dynamics of drum circles. The essence of community is relationship, and transformation cannot take place outside of this; therefore it is almost impossible to engage in personal processes of transformation independently of the community, or whole. Founded in 1997 in the favelas (slums) of Rio, the Afroreggae movement embraced a desire for community transformation by using drumming to unite people around a common, participatory event. In doing so they confront issues of social and environmental justice – challenging the government to improve living conditions in the area and counteracting the violence of the drug industry and ensuing police interventions. People find personal power and recovery through the collective act of music making. Both the drum and the rhythms that

spring from it act as a leveller, promoting unity across age, race and class boundaries.

Q: how can drumming be used to build community and facilitate personal and collective growth?

ⁱ I am framing my analysis in systems theory and subsequent ecological paradigms in which the power of communities is the result of parts functioning together to create a whole.

ⁱⁱ Drawing heavily on systems theory, deep ecologist and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy likens this process to *paticca samuppada* or dependent co-arising. This is based on the premise that our lives subsist in a web of mutual causality.

ⁱⁱⁱ ⁱⁱⁱ In Training for Transformation () Hope and Timmel stress the importance of workshop set-up when working in communities. A similar process is seen in techniques of non-violent communication which place an emphasis on the importance of eye-contact and deep listening when doing group work.

^{iv} In 'Tell me more on the fine art of listening' Brenda Ueland says, "when we are listened to it creates us. It makes us expand' (Ueland, 2005)