

# Final Moments

By Maryann Burrows

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When I tell people that I am a music therapist, I'm often met with a look of confusion and uncertainty as to what that means. Even when people have a general understanding of the profession, they are still unaware of the vastness and power of music as therapy. Reflecting upon an experience I had this morning, I feel that maybe even I was not fully aware of the power of music therapy.

"Pat" is a resident I work with in my dementia focused practice. She lives in one of the secure units of a care facility, and can often be seen wandering around carrying handfuls of random things – I've never known anyone more in need of a purse than Pat! Pat connects to music during my sing along groups subtly, mostly by listening. To the naked eye, it may appear as though the experience is passing her by, but she always sits close to me with her eyes ready to meet mine as I'm singing.

A week ago, I was informed that Pat had gone into a palliative state, so I began one to one sessions with her. This morning I sat by Pat's bedside while she struggled to capture each breath in her coma. Musically, I rocked back and forth between two open chords, vocalizing softly over top of them. Pat began to vocalize as well, so I joined her in both tone and length during each expression. During this process the nurse entered the room and sat with us but left soon after, telling me later she had left because she felt overwhelmed by the beauty of the experience. When we were alone again, Pat's vocalizations

stopped and I started to sing Amazing Grace. At some point during the song, I noticed that Pat had become still and breathless and by the time I was finished, Pat was gone.

This was a new experience for me; being alone with a dying person, with music the primary support as a resident dies. I felt many things in that moment, nervousness, sadness, even excitement as I recognized what a pivotal moment of my music therapy journey this was. However, my prevailing feeling was one of awe and amazement at the role music had played in Pat's final moments. In those last moments while Pat was still alive, an energy and life had emerged between us and had filled the room. An energy that was filled with acceptance, understanding, support and peace had surrounded us without one spoken word, just music.

I have spent my day in an undeniably reflective state about this experience. It has provoked me to think about every factor in Pat's death, mainly the role of the music and the role of myself as the music therapist. It is possible that Pat would have died in that moment regardless of the music, but of course as a music therapist, I believe in the safe spaces that music creates, and I believe that Pat could feel it too, enabling her to let go at that particular moment.

I have been a music therapist for just two years, and I'm well aware of the years ahead of me that will be filled with growth and similar meaningful experiences. By having experiences that invite us to reflect as music therapists, it leaves us no choice but to grow and become better at what we do. For me personally, my reflective experiences breathe life into my work, and allow me to fall into a state of deeper understanding, once again, about our amazing profession.