

## The Spoken Word and Emotion in Communication

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**Abstract:** The spoken word, and the emotional qualities of communication within this have always been paramount in my life. I put this down to two vital points: my artistic ability, and my disability. I am an artist first, a children's book author and poet, a singer and actor, writing much of my material myself; songs, children's rhymes for recitation and plays. This is my love and passion, and it keeps me focused and well, despite my disability. But it is my disability that enables me to express myself so well, and allows me to be so passionate.

**Key words:** Art, performance, self-expression, advocacy, disability

To view the video & transcript click here: <http://www.rds.hawaii.edu/its-not-easy-being-green/>

### The Spoken Word and Emotion in Communication.

The spoken word, and the emotional qualities of communication that characterize spoken word, have always been paramount in my life. I understand this as informed by my artistic ability, and my disability. I am not bound by my disability, but rather I focus on the positive attributes I possess. I see myself as an artist first, a children's book author and poet, a singer and actor, writing much of my material myself: songs, children's rhymes for recitation and plays. This is my love and passion, and it keeps me focused and well. But it is my disability that enables me to express myself so well, and allows me to be so passionate. You see, I have bipolar 1 disorder. This is a mental illness manifesting itself in the form of mood symptoms, manic and depressive, to be exact. It involves experiences of great peaks and troughs in temperament, and can also include psychotic symptoms. The highs and lows I have encountered throughout my life have been accompanied by a myriad of emotions that the spoken word has helped me to express. I started writing and singing songs when I was five years old, and reciting poetry about the same age. I have gone on to perform jazz and blues around the world, original songs, and cabaret shows; all of which have provided important creative outlets to express myself. I must communicate my emotions to deal with the disorder. I most often do this through my art form, but sometimes it is just in conversation. My father teases me, saying I use my hands too much when I speak. I say it's just the Mediterranean in me...but then again, I'm only half Greek, so I suppose I should only be using one hand, shouldn't I?

Whatever the case, I am extremely expressive and emotional, and this is communicated through spoken word, in everyday situations, and in my professional art. This may be an amalgamation of being talented, bipolar and Mediterranean, perhaps! When people listen to the words of my songs, they often comment, "I can really relate to that", or, "You've made me realize something". Although it is not the only, nor the best medium of communication, the spoken word can be powerful. It can move people with emotion. Since I've experienced disability, I've needed a way to express the emotions I feel, and to touch other people with my journey. My music and poetry, and most recently a play I've written, seemed the best way to express myself and entertain others at the same time.

After recovering from 20 years of severe episodes of bipolar disorder, I wanted to express my emotional journey of finding my place in this world. The road to stability can be difficult to reach, and hard to find if you don't know what steps to take. What should one do? Without the appropriate guidance, it is easy to get lost along the way. I wanted to help others, to reach out to both fellow sufferers and those in the general public who might not understand the experience of mental illness, and what mental wellness means within the context of this experience.

But how to communicate this? For me the answer was obvious. There is no more powerful way to reach people than through theatre or music. Getting an audience to laugh or to cry, moving them, will evoke a response that simply giving stale information will not. So I embarked on the process of writing a play, a cabaret, about my experiences of maintaining wellness with a mental illness. The cabaret is called "It's Not Easy Being Green", was a reflection on the struggles that can shape experiences of mental illness. It was performed in June 2015 at Queensland Theatre Company's Billy Brown studios in Australia, for the Undercover Artists Festival. It was an opportunity for people from all different areas of society to view the show at the festival, and gain insight from its content. This work demonstrated how spoken word and emotion in communication can have a positive effect in both educating and entertaining people on important self and social issues. It was funded by Queensland's Access Arts Incorporated, a disability organization for the arts, and the show itself was directed by leading Queensland actor/ director Sandro Colarelli. I performed in the cabaret with vision impaired pianist, Jeff Usher.

The message that is communicated by the text in the play is one I wish to send to those both directly affected by mental illness and those in the general public. All this is done by scenes filled with some sad and happy scenes and scenarios....some even a bit sexy and saucy! Like the seduction scene, where I go to bed with an invisible Internet date...don't know how he unhooks my bra! With a lot of paraphernalia, I can tell you! Each story in the play has an emotional reflection, and communicates this to try and get the point across about contentious issues related to mental health and illness with the spoken word, which is accomplished by relating various poignant points in the text of the show.

I wrote most of the music in the show. Writing songs offers another way to communicate with spoken word, bringing important messages of social and personal content in the lyrics. Music translates beautifully to tell stories, captivate feelings, and just simply let things out. In my cabaret, each song reflects a poignant point in the play, and the power of emotion evoked by these tunes instills meaning toward what is being portrayed.

I would now like to discuss the importance of emotion and communication as spoken word in terms of youth in today's society, and also the vital role that spoken word plays in emotion and communication for people experiencing disability. Theatre and music as spoken word provide an important avenue for self-expression, and when one experiences a disability, that expression becomes even more poignant. The words in a song or in a play are full of meaning and depth of content, and relay stories and emotion that can have a profound impact on audiences. Even the expression for those with a disability who are unable to speak can be executed using words to communicate their emotions effectively, through speech translators or sign language. Words are a powerful tool of advocacy, release and therapy, which make it possible to communicate lived experiences on an emotional level. The spoken word, particularly in a creative context, such as music and theatre, allows for this expression of self

that gives people an outlet to release feelings they may have about life, society or themselves. This is so important for those experiencing disability, as in many cases we need to express much more than the average non-disabled person. People experiencing disability can be extremely artistic also, and words, and indeed the spoken word, can be an excellent way to outlet that creativity. Occupational therapy is often used in psychiatric hospitals and disability units these days, with theatre and music as integral parts of their programs. Spoken word is a huge part of the accessibility to these artistic outlets, and allows people the freedom to express themselves vocally.

The organization I am a member of named *Access Arts* was created for people experiencing disability and/or disadvantage. Through this organization, I was involved in a project called "Sound Circles" to encourage people to express themselves vocally. Through spoken word and sound, they would relate meaning in their life about what they were experiencing every day, their thoughts, feelings and ideas and what was important to them. Spoken word served as a vehicle to communicate emotion. Sound Circles was a part of World Expo 88 and Access Arts toured it to Japan. We traveled from regional Queensland right up to far north Queensland in Cairns doing workshops involving people experiencing disability. It gave these people freedom to express the truths and hurts and joys and pains and wonders of life. It brought people together from all different communities in spoken word to communicate emotion.

You begin with a single sound. This develops into a word. This is repeated, turning into a series of words that develop into a sentence. From this you build into a song, or a poem or a chant. Movement is incorporated into the sounds intoned by the words, and a whole theatrical piece is structured. But it is organic and free. Freedom is essential, as is a sense of unity. Creating words crafted into an ensemble of soulful musical sounds, or sensitive rhymes or rhythmic beats. One time we developed an entire film called "Douge's Not So Peaceful Dream" which we acted out and staged. This amalgamation of personalities and different perspectives in voice was a wonderful experience for all involved, and gave people the opportunity to put concepts of emotion into words.

Another chance I had to utilize the spoken word and emotion in communication was through music therapy with the Cerebral Palsy League of Australia. I worked at Springfield Space, a day care centre, and did interactive karaoke sessions with the clients there. Through the power of music and the expression of self with spoken word in this form, people were able to communicate their feelings and inner passions with songs. Some people who barely spoke much at all in everyday situations would unleash in a song and just let go. The emotion conversed through the connection of feeling the music and words together was incredible....they just transformed into diligent linguists, masters of the spoken word. The therapy was incredibly successful in drawing people out of themselves and into a relationship with others. It brought down barriers, and built up interactions within the group.

We also filmed at the Cerebral Palsy League, making disability action awareness videos for internal distribution. These followed the Disability Awareness Standards, and the clients acted out the procedures. They loved using dramatic situations to depict the different scenarios- again, spoken word and emotion in communication used in a theatrical sense. They were expressive and generous in showing their feelings, and this gave tremendous weight to the film.

I was also asked to represent Australia at the Wataboshi Festival in Johor Baru in Malaysia in 2007 for a coming together of all persons disabled to perform music together in celebration. This communication of emotion through spoken word was extraordinary as language barriers were transgressed and cultures were brought together in an amalgamation of song. I sang my original song, "Society's Blues", a social statement about the world we are living in. It means a great deal to me, this piece, and stirs up enormous feeling within. When I sing it, this impacts on my performance, and this is translated to the audience. At Wataboshi, all the songs performed were originals of incredible talent by artists experiencing disability who had valuable life stories to tell. The festival provided insight into other creative people's outlets of expression and also the different ways cultures feature music. It was an amazing experience for me.

In this changing world of technology, so much social contact is lost through social media and smart devices. People don't connect so much with each other; they text the spoken word and the emotional meaning gets lost in the message; they face time each other and don't speak in real company; emails have replaced a coffee down the road; Face book means no one has to meet up in person anymore. The younger generation in particular lives in a virtual world, existing of computers, i-pads and mobile phones. For heaven's sake, they're not even getting up to nooky in person anymore...they're sexting! Now really, where's the fun in that? Two together has GOT to be better than you and your phone..

Off the subject of sex...it always comes up in a speech, doesn't it...and back on track! What is so wonderful about live theatre and music is that people experience a "tactile" appreciation of each other for a set amount of time, enjoying the opportunity to interact together. They feed off each other's emotions as dictated by the performance, and react accordingly. They appreciate what is being presented for its emotional meaning as communicated by the language content, and are moved in a positive or negative manner thus words move them as a whole unit - an audience - they react and applaud and laugh and cry and are affected by their emotions.

In my own experience, working with youth on spoken word and emotion in communication in theater and music is again a powerful tool. In 2013 I wrote two children's plays for the Metro Arts Theatre in Brisbane. The first was called "Maryanne the Chameleon", and was for younger children, around six to twelve years of age. We performed and rehearsed it in a workshop environment, doing a reading of the script and improvisation of the characters. There was also music involved with songs I had written. The play was about difference issues, and war and peace.

The children reacted very strongly to being able to vocalize their views to the content in the play, and to then perform it. They were positive in their responses, interactive, involved and receptive. They understood the messages being conveyed by being associated with the theatrical piece, and when exposed to the music, became animated with the beat and rhythm and sang along with much enjoyment. Theatre and music as spoken word evoked much emotion in them, and allowed them to communicate these feelings. There were responses of sadness and fear to the aspects of war, happiness and joy to the inclusion facets surrounding the chameleon and her color difference, and understanding traits reflected in their appreciation of the reigning of peace and tolerance that was evident in the moral of the story. All emotion communicated through spoken word, both in dramatic context and in discussion of the text.

The second play I had written was “Casey the Cockatoo” aimed at an older teenage audience. It dealt with issues of aboriginal incarceration and a situation in Australia called the “Stolen Generation”, where young aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their parents and placed in white families for the purposes of assimilation. Some were reduced to slavery. The play was meant to be directed at fueling more serious discussion. The director and I got a group of young actors in to expose them to the material. They absorbed themselves in the text, becoming the characters and being moved by the story. It was about a cockatoo having its chicks taken away from her, and then being caged in a zoo. The power of spoken word brought such emotion to this youth, they came up with an incredible portrayal of the events and depicted scenes from the play in moving and innovative ways. We staged the piece with movement done to the spoken text, and as it was in a poetry form, this became like a rhythmical masterpiece. Original music that I had written accompanied it, and this too added to the performance. All these elements of spoken word reached deeply into the emotions of the actors on stage, and likewise touched audiences in watching.

I am now delivering my cabaret on mental wellness to open the minds of youth to topics that are essential for them to gain insight to, to understand and to broaden their horizons. The music, as well as the theatrical content of the cabaret, brings messages of a lived experience of mental wellness. It encourages prosperity, and trying to find the best possible outcomes of everyday life through communicating emotions, feelings and true to life situations through spoken word.

I have touched on the reasons why theatre and music are vital in the role as spoken word and emotion in communication. They open up avenues of opportunity to access theatre, music and the arts by engaging those experiencing disability and the younger generation allowing them to communicate emotions through spoken word in a variety of ways. This is accomplished by viewing and listening to theatre and music as they are made available; by creating the art forms themselves, and thus contributing to the works being made in society; by encouraging others to do both these activities; by maintaining an appreciation of creativity that allows them to be open to these emotions through spoken word communication for the rest of their lives.

I ask you to engage more in these forms of creative spoken word, and to allow your emotions to flow freely as they are communicated to you from the art form. Whether it be your local theatre group, the opera company, a music gig down at the pub, or a school concert, get involved and open your senses. It is good for the heart and soul, wonderful for the body and mind, and essential for us all as emotional beings as we try to communicate. Maybe even try to sing a song to your friend next time you see them! Or say a line out of a play with a bit of emotion! Communicate emotion through spoken word. It’s fun! And it’s essential.

Thank you.