

Sharon Stoll - from Tampa, Florida

What a beautiful article on Sharon and her work!

Harpist provides chords of comfort to the dying

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Harpist Sharon Stoll enters a patient's room at LifePath's Melech Hospice House in Temple Terrace.

"I think everything is vibration and sound," she says.

TAMPA - Sharon Stoll steps down the hallway of the LifePath Hospice house with a portable harp pressed against her chest. She's petite, 5 feet tall. Her eyes are blue, and her hair is so blond it's almost white. But no one has ever told her she looks like an angel. • All around are the sounds of hospice: the muffled televisions, the chatter of nurses, the occasional loud cough. She walks up to a nurse's station and asks if anyone might benefit from hearing her play. The woman in Room 6, she is told, but don't expect a response. • "She still hears," Stoll says.

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Stoll, 62, is a harp practitioner. She searches for a resonant tone, that precise note vibration that hits a patient in just the right way to make him or her relax. Sometimes it's what dying people need to finally let go.

She enters Room 6. Claire McCarthy is 65 and has 18 hours to live. Once, she was a Carmelite nun who cared for the aged and infirm. She sang in a choir. She prayed with people as they died. But cancer invaded her breasts, then her liver, then her bones. Now her eyes are closed. Her mouth is open. She wears a scapular around her neck, inscribed with a promise of salvation.

Less is more when it comes to harp therapy. Music is soft. Combinations are simple. At this stage, the brain can process only so much. Stoll stands at her bedside and strokes the strings, playing no particular song, trying to mimic the rhythm of the woman's breaths.

The nun's muscles relax. Her right foot moves, then her left. This is what Stoll wants to see. And for reasons her audiences will never know, this is what Stoll needs.

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Sharon Stoll was 17 when the trembling began. She couldn't control it. Her arms shook. Sometimes her head did, too. Doctors told her she had essential tremors, a neurological disorder sometimes confused with Parkinson's disease, but one that doesn't progress as severely. To Stoll, it was more embarrassing than anything.

One day, she saw a report that said playing the harp was physically therapeutic. She made an appointment for a class. That first time she held the harp's sound board up to her chest and stroked the strings, it was as if the vibrations resonated through her.

She wanted to feel that again.

Eighteen months later, she enrolled in the International Harp Therapy Program and traveled to San Diego to train. She found herself in the room of a woman who was dying. Stoll searched her strings for that resonant tone, but the woman was unresponsive. Until she hit a G.

The woman let out a big, loud moan. Oh, my goodness, Stoll thought. I've killed her. But then she saw the woman's bones settle into her bed. The moan, she realized, was a release. The nurses told her they'd been waiting for the woman to die. Two hours later, she let go.

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A 2002 study: A group of 17 post-operative heart patients at Orlando Regional Hospital were monitored during a single 20-minute session of live harp music. Patients reported decreased pain and anxiety, and visual analog scales recorded physiological differences in blood pressure and oxygen saturation.

A 2008 study: Eight stable premature infants were divided into groups in a study approved by the Wake Forest University School of Medicine. Four received usual care. Two were placed in quiet rooms. Two listened to a live harpist. Those who listened gained weight.

A 2006 study: Scientists with the University of Utah observed and measured the vital signs of 65 patients in palliative care after harp sessions and determined that patients experienced decreased levels of agitation and wakefulness while breathing more slowly and deeply with less effort.

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Stoll has her own stories. Her grandson's birth was expected to be difficult, but she played, and the delivery went smoothly.

She entered an intensive care unit for premature babies, a place polluted by hospital noise like beeping machines and ringing phones. When she played, the baby monitors leveled off.

Then there was the man with Alzheimer's disease. He didn't recognize his wife, didn't even know who he was. But he recognized the song she played. Every time he heard Amazing Grace, he shouted, "Mercy, mercy, mercy!"

Some people don't understand what Stoll does. She'll walk into a nursing home with her harp, only to learn that staffers have filled a room with wheelchairs of people anticipating a show.

She's not an entertainer, she tells them. She does this to get outside herself, to focus on another person's illness, to forget about her own.

She considers hospice work her calling. She will play for people as they take their last breaths, and she won't stop after they die. Somehow, she feels that the sound still reaches them.

"I think everything is vibration and sound," she says, "and how that all works out, only God knows."