

The Network for Peace through Dialogue
in cooperation with **Marymount Manhattan College**

Presents

Dialogue In/As Action
Achieving Transformation: Dialogue through Music



Jessica Roemischer Riverbrook Residence for Women

Jessica Roemischer is a music therapist at the Riverbrook Residence for Women in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Riverbrook is home to 23 women with developmental disabilities.

To begin our discussion, we watched a short video of a performance which took place six months ago. In each performance, Jessica plays a duet at the piano with one of the residents. At the piano, Jessica listens carefully and takes cues from the women she is engaged with. There is a lot of improvisation, and the result was a series of beautiful, moving pieces of music.

We continued our discussion of what we'd seen and of music/art/performance as active dialogue. When Jessica began her work at Riverbrook, she had musical training but no background working with individuals who have developmental disabilities. She found that music and beauty transcend disability, and that beauty can be a powerful means of expression. In her work, trust is crucial, and the pervading atmosphere of trust and respect fostered by Riverbrook's Director has been invaluable. The women of Riverbrook live in a safe, trust-filled environment which frees them to express themselves and is crucial for dialogue.

Through music and beauty, our spirits are affirmed. Jessica was particularly struck by Geraldine Ferraro's remarks about the power of Schindler's List to open up dialogue with other United Nations representatives.

In dialogue, two people are able to experience each other's feelings, and there is a dialogic connection between two people as they play a single instrument. The piano is a place where communication is possible.

In these piano-bench dialogues, Jessica plays a supportive role; she is an active, empathic listener. When she lets go of technical pianistic perfection, the encounter bears extraordinary fruit. She is listening for something deeper than technicality, letting go of what is unimportant and focusing on what matters in the engagement. This co-creation of music is dialogue as action-- the dialogue is between the two players, and the action is the making of something that sounds beautiful. In the dialogue, creating something that sounds beautiful is the shared goal/interest.

In the duet/dialogue, the player knows she is being heard-- through this artistic performance, a person becomes sharable. This is particularly important in Jessica's work, as many of the women she works with have difficulty communicating verbally. Music has also helped the women of Riverbrook have deeper relationships with each other.

The session concluded with a demonstration in which Jessica played an improvised duet with a session attendee, Marjorie Ihrig.

www.riverbrook.org