

# Words of Comfort

BY G L E N N A M E T C A L F E

**Regardless of whether we have hymns memorized or not, they still have the words that provide comfort and healing when spoken or sung to us. We lift up through hymns the yearnings and joys of the human heart.**

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**O**ne Sunday evening when I was in the sixth grade, as I walked into our church sanctuary for worship, the organist, Frank Casebier, was sitting near the door. I stopped to talk to him and casually remarked that I would enjoy learning to play the organ. He took it as a challenge that evening to give of himself as my mentor, and so began our Sunday afternoon routine of organ lessons, ice cream, and visits with him and his wife, Betsey.

As I progressed in ability, he took me to other teachers in nearby cities for organ lessons. It was such a special time for me. He would pick me up at school and take me to my lesson, and afterward we would eat dinner at a nice restaurant. Frank and Betsey funded these organ lessons—not because they needed to, but because they wanted to. That was their gift to me—a gift that has forever changed my life.

When I was fourteen, Frank suffered a massive stroke from which he never fully recovered. After Frank left the hospital, he was cared for at home until his death two years later. During this time he was unable to talk, could not move around without help, cried easily, and seemed more like a tender child than an elderly man. I continued to practice the organ in Frank and Betsey's living room. Many times I would finish a piece, turn around to say something to him or to see his reaction, and he would be crying and smiling, with his hands awkwardly clasped together, trying to clap.

In that living room I began to understand the power of music and the comfort that it brings. Frank and I were not able to communicate as we had before, for words did not come easily, nor did comprehension. Yet we

experienced a wordless bond through music and it was only in those moments that I was sure he remembered our past together. Music became a wordless ministry to both him and me. It was a comfort.

Music has a pastoral and ministering effect on those who listen, which is as ancient as the Hebrew Scriptures: “And whenever an evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his lyre and play it, so that relief would come to Saul; he would recover and the evil spirit would leave him alone” (1 Samuel 16:23, CEV).<sup>1</sup> Music alone has such power. It can stir our emotions, inspire us, lift our spirits, and bring about commitment and action.

On a survey I distributed within my church family, one request read, “Share a time when music brought you comfort.” Jerry wrote:

During my junior year in high school I had an eye injury. The ophthalmologist said I had a 50/50 chance of losing my sight in that eye. He put patches on both eyes and I was basically blind for ten days. That first night, someone brought me record albums—a Bill Cosby comedy record and others. One of the songs on another album was “I just want to celebrate another day of living.” It was very upbeat and reminded me that if I lost my sight, I could still celebrate life.<sup>2</sup>

If just *music* can do these things, composer Fred Bock reminds us, what greater powers can we expect from *sacred music*?<sup>3</sup>

I was blessed to be part of a group of about sixty members from my church who gathered outside Will’s house on his fiftieth birthday for a surprise serenade. Our cars lined his residential street and everyone congregated in his front yard. Children, teenagers, parents, retirees—all there to give comfort and support to hopefully brighten his day—complete with flowers and a birthday cake! As many as possible stood in the entrance way of the house, while Will listened from the top of the stairs. We sang “Happy Birthday,” “Peace Like a River,” “Amazing Grace,” and “It Is Well,” and then we prayed. It was an extremely moving experience for me. I was surrounded by people I love—my kids, my church family, my friends—and I saw a Christian spirit in a man whose life was coming to an end. Lung cancer was causing Will’s body to slowly die, yet he radiated with an inward peace and trust in God.

The hymns of the Church are a comforting presence, not only in worship services, but also in places far removed from a sanctuary. They are with us in the many experiences of daily living—moments of joy and contentment, as well as times of grief, pain, and tragedy. I am reminded of Ben, a hometown friend of mine who died several years ago. When he was told that he was dying with AIDS and that there was no cure, he said that the greatest comfort and peace he found was sitting down at the piano and

playing hymns. Ben would play through the hymnal from start to finish and this sustained him through his illness.

I would venture to say that most of us can recall more hymn texts than scripture texts. So, couldn't we offer hymns, sung or spoken, to a person in need? In my survey I asked, "If you were in the hospital or in a crisis situation, would it comfort you to have one or more people sing hymns to

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you?" The majority felt that the singing of hymns would be a blessing and a ministry. Because this is not a universal opinion, one might ask the person in crisis if they prefer that the hymns be spoken. The

brief opening line of a familiar hymn is enough to remind them of God's healing and caring love. Familiar hymns provide comfort when recalled by a person in need.

An elderly invalid woman, confined to the upper floor of her home, said, "Sometimes when I am in my room alone at night, I feel lonesome. But I begin repeating hymns I know from memory, starting at the beginning of the alphabet— 'A Mighty Fortress,' 'Abide With Me,' and so on. Before long, I drop off to sleep in peace." This story reminds us that hymns are a part of us; they are our companions along our journey. When hymns are in our memory, they come to us, consciously or unconsciously, to support us.

Regardless of whether we have hymns memorized or not, they still have the words that provide comfort and healing when spoken or sung to us by others. We lift up through hymns the yearnings and joys of the human heart. On the survey Faye wrote:

While my mother was in the hospital and nursing home for several months, the music in our worship services was a great comfort to me. I was unable to participate in choir during that time, but I looked forward to the music each Sunday. It helped relieve the stress of caring for my mother and reminded me of God's love. Sometimes music has helped me to cry after I had been unable to cry. Such experiences were very therapeutic.

Brenda wrote very eloquently about how music has ministered to her:

My family met the Robinson family at Weight Watchers. They travel around the United States, singing at fairs and other engagements. They invited us to their New Year's Eve party.

My brother, Gee, said, "Let's go; if we don't care for the music, we can always leave." We went; we stayed. Something happened

that night other than our being entertained. As Mary Ruth Robinson, the mother, walked through the audience singing, I felt as though an angel walked among us, that we were being sprinkled with “angel dust.” My brother, sister-in-law, sister, and I came away from that evening feeling good, uplifted, and blessed!

On January 8, my brother was severely burned. When the Robinson family became aware of this, they came to the hospital. We asked if they would sing for Gee. They sang a song we had never heard called “I Hope You Dance.” This song became “our” song. They sang other songs, too, and stayed with us throughout that night and the next day. They were just there. They returned several times and always sang for Gee. I don’t remember what they sang; I just know we felt comforted, not only with their singing, but by their presence.

Glenna, it seems the human body is the vehicle of music through the voice, through the playing of an instrument, but when the human ego gets out of the way, the Comforter comes through the music, the Comforter that Christ said He would send.

Music is symbolic of love. It reminds us that we are loved by others. But, more importantly, music surrounds us with the assurance that God loves, God cares, and God is able.

## NOTES

1 Scriptures marked as “CEV” are taken from the Contemporary English Version Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

2 I have changed the names of the following church members and friends, but not their stories.

3 Fred Bock, “Let’s Hear It for Eclecticism,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, 28 (Fall 1994), 213-215.



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