



Tom Bowman

## *Music to My Hands* by Lois Barth

After 15 years as a massage therapist, I struggle with occasional bouts of burnout—a condition that includes fatigue and a ceaseless gnawing as to whether I’m on the right path. But that Friday three years ago, when I first met Sam\*, a new client with cerebral palsy, I had a particularly acute case. It was 7 p.m. and pouring rain. I had given five sessions, and I was exhausted. With the New York City Marathon around the corner and a non-stop month of clients with pre-race jitters and tight hamstrings, I was doubtful of how present I could be with him.

In 1950, at the age of 3, Sam was misdiagnosed with mental retardation and was sent to Willowbrook State School for the mentally retarded, the infamous mental-health facility, for 19 years. While there, he befriended a doctor, the “whistleblower” who spearheaded Geraldo Rivera’s 1972 exposé of the facility. Sam quickly became the intermediary between the doctor and the patient body, reporting the constant physical and sexual abuse of

patients he had witnessed. Together, they developed a plan to derail the guards, thus facilitating Rivera’s entrance, video camera in tow. Sam’s commitment to rallying for patients’ rights—not only at Willowbrook but also in his continued advocacy for the disabled, supervising group homes, and work with re-entry programs—deeply inspired me.

Although I felt skilled, having worked with a myriad of conditions, I was anxious. How would his body react to the massage? And how would Sam deal with the reactions of his body? I did all the “right” things. I read up on cerebral palsy treatment plans and phoned a few colleagues, but ultimately I knew I had to trust my instincts. The door buzzer interrupted my thoughts.

“We’re here,” Bob and Sam shouted into the intercom, Sam waving into the camera. Bob, my client, not only treated Sam to the session but was escorting him as well.

I opened the door. Sam, who was moving back and forth in quick, jarring movements, bolted into my apartment.

“Hi!” he declared, grabbing a hug and holding onto me for balance.

Sam captured a boyish spirit with his diminutive 5-foot-5-inch frame, khaki shorts, green Izod shirt, Clark Kent glasses and a mile-wide, Christmas-morning smile. I couldn't help but hug him back.

“Hey, where's your wheelchair?”

“We put it downstairs.”

Being in New York City too long, I had visions of teenage boys stealing it and selling it on the street. Sam reassured me by jangling his thick ring of keys in the air. “Won't run without a key,” he said with a wink.

Gingerly, Bob and I helped him down two steps that led into my sunken massage studio. He seemed surefooted. Bob and I, both unsure of how much help to give, stayed close by as he laboriously swayed back and forth trying to get his coat off. Finally he looked at us incredulously and said, “Would it kill you to help me?” We all laughed.

After a few questions about his condition and history, Sam wanted to start the session prone. I took some deep breaths to get focused and encouraged him to do the same. His body rippled with erratic movements, though his breath flowed evenly. His embarrassment was palpable. “Sorry. My body does its own thing. But this is great. You're the best.”

“The best?” I replied. “I haven't done anything yet.”

“I know,” Sam said. “But my body always knows when the best is yet to come. It always knows.”

My mind drifted back to a client I had worked with a while ago who had cerebral palsy as well. Every time his muscles would uncontrollably spasm, patterns of movement would ripple through his body. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry,” was his mantra. I hoped Sam would be compassionate with himself no matter what happened. And that if he wasn't, I would be guided to the next right word or action.

“You have such courage. You changed history. Do you realize that?”

Sam just smiled and chronicled all the steps that led up to the event.

“You're responsible for a whole new shift in patients, rights,” I added.

“It wasn't about patients' rights, but all people's rights,” he said, sitting up and pointing his finger upward to emphasize his stance.

“Absolutely.” I lightly tapped his shoulder, agreeing with him, whereupon he immediately fell back on the table.

“Whoops, sorry,” Sam said.

We both laughed. Sam was a living example of how close neighbors fragility and strength really are, this huge spirit housed in a tenuous body. As I worked on his arms and legs, they went into these tiffs of rhythmic motion,

sometimes staccato, sometimes legato.

“Hey Sam, you know what I realized?”

“What?”

“You're music.”

“Huh?”

“Look at your arms; you're jazz. I'd say a cross between Coltrane and Etta Jones. “As I said that his body listened and transitioned into slow quiet dips of movement.

“Hey, look. Now you're the ‘Blue Danube Waltz’.”

“I don't like that one. How about the ‘Anniversary Waltz’? That's my favorite,” he responded.

“You're right, it is the Anniversary Waltz. But I'm definitely feeling some Tito Puente coming on. Maybe if we go overtime we can get to the standards. Do you take requests? How 'bout ‘Pennies from Heaven’ in B flat?”

“This is so great!” he shouted.

His whole body shifted and slowed down after that, and he fell asleep. As I continued, I looked at this extraordinary, vibrant man and became saddened by all those lost years he spent in Willowbrook.

Before I knew it, the session was over. One of my favorite parts of doing massage is looking at people's eyes after the session. There's a depth, wisdom, a washing away of the struggle of day-to-day life. After the session, I brought him to the mirror. “Look, Sam. You've got massage eyes. Not quite like the ones you came in with.”

Bob rang the buzzer. I was grateful for those few last moments alone with Sam. Bob and I immediately reached out to help him up the two stairs, not wanting to have another awkward moment. He looked at us with that same perplexed, confused look, and said, “I don't need your help!” and literally bolted up the stairs. We shook our heads in amazement at Sam's transformation, and more importantly, his spontaneous and direct nature.

For me, the greatest gift of being a massage therapist is the lessons available. That night Sam was my teacher. Although I never massaged him again, his teachings stay with me. I learned that we all possess both abilities and disabilities, but it's not the disabilities that create who we are, but rather the choices we make around them.

Gratitude and intimacy had replaced my fatigue and insecurity. I thanked Bob for the check, hugged Sam goodbye, put the sheets in the hamper, and finally allowed my tears to come, reaffirming that I was on the right path.

\*This client's name has been changed.

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