On Film and Digital Media

**Alive Inside: Reprise**

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**Video:** Alive Inside (78 min)

Written, directed, and produced by Michael Rossato-Bennett

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Perhaps the greatest power of documentary film is its ability to reveal to us experiences, feelings, and events that might have otherwise remained beyond our awareness and our imagination. Two years ago in this space (Scheidt, 2013), I reviewed a brief version of “Alive Inside,” a video by Michael Rossato-Bennett. That remarkable film demonstrates the almost immediate reappearance of behavioral normalcy among dementia-struck nursing home residents who listened to individualized or personalized music. The film follows Dan Cohen, a social worker, who single-handedly delivered this experience to these persons by supplying nursing homes with iPod players. The musical intervention provided strong evidence that despite living with brains damaged by dementia, a significant part of who they are may survive intact. As noted by Oliver Sachs, well-known neurologist, the music “outfoxes” the pathophysiology of Alzheimer’s dementia, moving through myriad pathways not yet damaged by the disease. According to Dr. Bill Thomas, founder of the Eden Alternative, blinded by the limiting expectations that come with a diagnosis of dementia, professional health care workers often tend to see long-term care residents as “mere remnants of their former selves.” Moreover, as the dementia grows more severe over time, long-term care professionals often assume that the essential self of these residents has expired—with care focusing primarily on management of physical functions of someone living a zombie-like existence.

We reprise here and offer this follow-up review of Alive Inside for three reasons. First, it is a wonderful film and audiences should prompted to see it if they have not yet done so. Second, it is now a completed film, embellished with content and features not available in the original screener. Third, many gerontologists remain unaware of the history of individualized music as a health-related intervention for dementia-affected persons. It is not a new notion; to the contrary, this intervention has been the topic of systematic research for almost 25 years in the health care arena (Gerdner, 1992).

Although research data offer meaning in numbers, the unique power of the new Alive Inside resides in the fully engaging images it shares of music-infused residents who move instantly from chronic states of agitation, depression, anxiety, and sheer moribund existence (e.g., wheelchair-bound “slumpers”) to that of singing, finger snapping, swaying, and dancing. Their mood changes are obvious and immediate—they are happy and smiling. They recall not only lyrics but have memory for events and emotions surrounding the music. Some can engage in conversation about these experiences. For viewers, the shift is beyond dramatic; it is overwhelming. My students are beyond surprised. They are shocked and some are moved to tears. The residents seem like different persons. The ultimate realization for viewers settles in quickly: these are the same persons, set free by the experience. They had disappeared into a solitary place within themselves and were presumed “dead” (see Scheidt, 2013, for detailed examples).

Videographer Michael Rossato-Bennett filmed Dan Cohen for over 3 years, drawn to the power of the phenomenon and the unfolding story it presented: “I saw so many sad lives turn happy, I couldn’t help but follow him.” Though perhaps too long for normal classroom viewing (78 min), Alive Inside now divides handily into briefer menu-marked chapters. In addition to the residents’ experiences, it introduces several brief commentaries that inform us of the wider context of these experiences. For
example, Oliver Sacks details the underlying brain biology that allows the experiences to occur despite the presence of dementia-related pathology. Tracing historical roots, Dr. Bill Thomas describes how the “shotgun marriage between the poor house and hospitals” created nursing homes as “the way millions of Americans end their life.” Advocates of the Culture Change movement of nursing home care share their core values of person-oriented care. A particularly interesting application of the iPod music intervention used outside of the nursing home is also highlighted. Norman, an elderly community resident, tells us that his wife Nell, who has dementia, has used it for 10 years at home without the aid of drugs: “Without personalized music, Nell would be in an institution.”

Another plus of the video is a bonus segment called Ask Dan Cohen. Cohen answers questions related to the music intervention and discusses how the video itself has become a change agent: “This bit of information [the video] shows that lots can change when the perceptions change over time -- the money flow, the people interaction, and the professional services.” He explains that thus far three states (Ohio, Utah, and Wisconsin) have committed to seeing iPods placed within their nursing homes. To date, only 1% of nursing home residents have individualized iPod music. He challenges all Americans to become “deputized” and assist him in the task of meeting the needs of the remaining 99%.

In the first moments of Alive Inside, videographer Rossato-Bennett explains that Dan Cohen’s mission to introduce individualized iPod music into nursing homes was motivated initially by a desire “to show people what he had seen.” It is never made clear exactly what Cohen saw that energized his own personal mission. Since my original review, I have discovered that Linda A. Gerdner (PhD, RN, FAAN) of the Stanford Geriatric Education Center conducted initial research on individualized music intervention as an MS thesis (Gerdner, 1992) and has steadily evaluated its efficacy over the past two decades. Her work provides a protocol for assessment for music preferences, individualized music care plans (particularly for agitated persons), and individualized music intervention (Gerdner, 2015). In particular, gerontologists and geriatricians may find her evidence-based practice guideline, “Evidence-Based Guideline: Individualized for Persons for Dementia” most useful (Gerdner, 2013). A helpful video introduction to Dr. Gerdner and her work is located at https://vimeo.com/63811378.

Gerontological audiences would do well to join the experiences shared by Alive Inside to the findings revealed by evaluation research conducted by Gerdner and others. Individualized music intervention as both an alternative medical treatment (e.g., Gerdner’s paradigm) and as a vehicle for sustaining personhood (Cohen’s paradigm) shares common ground in an overarching ethic to treat persons as they truly are.

References


