

Rhythm to Reconciliation & Respect

Fostering connection & understanding in the face of increasing division

Today we live in an age of increasing isolation and polarisation, where many of the major influences on our thoughts and behaviours turn us against one another, and often to self-denigration as we compare ourselves to others. The values of capitalism – competitiveness, individualism, and materialism increasingly shape our values, beliefs and behaviours, and when attached to a hyper-accelerated, digitally saturated life, can foster a culture of loneliness and disconnection. Politicians, Religious leaders and online influencers are some of the leading voices of hate and division, knowing that this strategy weakens collective resistance and utilises fear and emotion as motivators to attract support to their cause.

Young men are particularly vulnerable at this time, drawn to the safety of the online world where their search for connection and belonging is readily manipulated into blame and division by influential bad actors. The so called ‘masculinity’ crisis and its associated connection to identity confusion, allows online influencers to radicalise these anxieties and offer simple solutions that are often grounded in blame and aggression towards others, with a particular bent towards demonising women and other minority groups. Social media algorithms escalate these tendencies as they reward outrage and provocative content, whilst also restricting access to alternative points of view.

Competition and individuality are deeply embedded into our education programs; so much so that even very young children feel the pressure to succeed and win, and many parents start tutoring classes for their children from an early age. In my own practice, running groups for social and emotional health, it is not uncommon for children not to understand how to play a game non-competitively and these trends are increasingly transferred to family dynamics. Many of the mental health challenges faced by young people across the world stem from the pressures of competitive expectations. In any competitive system there are winners and losers, and for those on the losing end the impact on their self-esteem can become crippling, leading to school avoidance, internalised shame, depression, self-harm and, on occasion, suicide.

Music education is not immune from this problem, and many young people, even those with extraordinary talent, stop playing music because of the competitive nature of their environment. Television reality shows reinforce this element by openly and very publicly, denigrating performers whose standard is judged to be below excellent. We read of child prodigies practicing until their fingers are bleeding and then giving up their instrument entirely at an early age due to the relentless pressure to play at the highest level. Student involvement in music drops sharply as they reach their teenage years.

The world is in desperate need of righting this imbalance in favour of individual desire, division and competitive systems towards a new focus on social responsibility, collaboration and cooperation. This was the vision of the United Nations when it was formed in order to avoid repeating the horrors of the 2nd world war but today, we see more and more countries walk away from that commitment. It is hard to imagine the immortal words of JFK 'Ask not what you can do for yourself, but what you can do for your country' being spoken by a political leader today. We saw clearly during the COVID 19 epidemic how closely our futures are entwined, and the climate crisis is a further reminder. Without a broader understanding of our obligations towards one another and the symbiotic nature of our relationships the future looks bleak.

One of the key opportunities for working with people to reduce division lies in the use of the improvised music circle where people of all ages and abilities gather under the guidance of a facilitator (educator, therapist or community development professional) to play music together, using hand drums and percussion instruments. These types of programs can increasingly be found in countries around the world; used to foster connection, belonging and understanding in schools, therapy centres, and numerous community settings. Participants sit in a circle formation, itself a reminder of equality, and learn to work together and support each other in order to realise the group's creative potential – everyone's contribution is valued and contributes to the whole.

These music groups provide a safe space for connection and engage people who might otherwise shy away from more confronting, talk-based, approaches. The heavy reliance on dialogue in many social and emotional development programs favours the articulate and restricts input from those who are less confident in expressing their thoughts and feelings. Words are open to misinterpretation and can be used aggressively to bully and hurt others. Additionally, we know that for many people who have experienced trauma, specific regions of the brain required for speech and language processing are impacted, making it difficult to express themselves and engage in these types of approaches.

Opportunities for non-verbal connection and communication, such as the facilitated music-circle provide an important opportunity for bringing disparate groups together whose primary language differs. Much of the division we witness is between an in-group (us) and an out-group (them) – social groups that perceive each other as different and not sharing the same values. These characterisations are often based on false facts and a lack of familiarisation with people from different walks of life. When people are placed in situations where they interact with others whom they would not generally do so, these misconceptions often disappear and are replaced with a new recognition of similarities and an understanding of how much we all share in common. In my own practice working with warring ethnic groups, I have seen first-hand animosity turn to understanding and friendship using this approach in both schools and community settings. Peace building drumming circles like these have been used

in conflict zones like Iraq, Palestine, the Balkans, Bosnia, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, El Salvador, Rwanda and currently in Ukraine.

These facilitated music circles place people into relationship with each other, and hence are useful vehicles for examining relationship issues, including those issues that lead to division and disharmony and those that achieve the opposite. A wide range of analogies can be used to link the musical activities to issues directly impacting the lives of those participating. Amongst the most common of these is the link between musical harmony and social harmony – exploring the skills and actions required to find harmony with others across a diverse range of situations – family, school, work, community. Looking at the importance of listening closely to find opportunities to connect, and of adapting our playing (behaviour) to find common ground. The importance of slowing down in order to give time to developing these relationships and the importance of a stable foundation (core values & social responsibility) to underpin the relationship. The harmony of the music is often a direct reflection of the harmony between the different participants, and their use of these elements, at any given time.

Fun and engaging musical activities can be used to look at specific issues related to polarisation, division and hate. In our work at Rhythm2Recovery we have specific exercises that look at ‘Dialectical problem solving’; moving away from black and white thinking to understanding more complex nuances in relationships and finding middle ground – understanding that two opposing ideas can often incorporate elements of truth which when recognised can lead to new ways forward together. One such activity ‘1 + 1 = 3’ involves dividing the music group in two and allocating each seemingly very different parts to play, symbolising opposing points of view – when the group is asked to play these parts without listening to each-other they will clash dramatically, but if one part begins and the other half listen carefully, they will find they can introduce their part in a way that compliments the other. From such exercises, conversations can begin that look at how easily we can dismiss other people’s ideas and beliefs when a more respectful acknowledgement may offer opportunities for working together and building something greater than the sum of its two parts.

Rhythmic affirmations are another useful tool for embedding social and emotional learning. All cultures use rhythm songs and phrases to teach children, and many oral cultures have utilised this format to pass on traditional knowledge over thousands of years. The ‘Songlines’ in Australian Aboriginal culture are one example where song is used to define ancestral routes across country and the significant spiritual markers along the way. Song has a way of maintaining its integrity compared to story which is vulnerable to change with each retelling. Research has shown the way in which song is embedded across the whole brain and hence is amongst the most long lasting of memory types. In our work at Rhythm2Recovery we have specific exercises that embed affirmations of forgiveness, understanding, support and tolerance. And others that directly counter intolerance – “Reach Out – Don’t Hesitate”, “Reach Out – It’s Never Too Late”, “Reach Out – Say No To Hate!”.

In our work at Rhythm2Recovery we are often working with people whose behaviours are exacerbating the challenges in their lives. Behaviour change is at the heart of the work we do driven by new-found awareness, insight and personal commitment. We use the nature of the word 'rhythm' to talk about the regular patterns or routines that govern our lives. We are all creatures of habit and fall into predictable patterns that offer us security; some constructive, some destructive. Rhythms (patterns) of talking and acting negatively towards others can become ingrained in this way, particularly when they are reinforced by others in our immediate social circle, rewarding us with a sense of superiority, but often more importantly, with a sense of belonging and group identity. Shifting these patterns can be difficult but analogies like these, used in conjunction with the music-circle, can provide us with an opportunity to explore the problematic ways these rhythms are impacting ourselves and those around us.

In Australia we have around 200 existing Aboriginal languages remaining from over 500 upon colonisation just over 200 years ago. Within those languages there is no equivalent word for 'Hate'. Aboriginal people didn't always live in harmony, but they understood their interconnectedness – that they and all other elements of the natural world were inextricably linked together and their fate fundamentally intertwined. This recognition aligns to a world view geared towards building relationship and finding consensus. Today we are constantly reminded about the importance of individual rights and freedoms with very little insight into the equally important role of fulfilling our responsibilities towards others and the world we live in – this is the current imbalance that needs rectifying and the facilitated community music circle offers great potential in this space.

Simon Faulkner, 2026.

This is a shortened version of a submission to the International Journal of Peace Studies