

# MANDY'S WORD SALAD

by

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“Hello Mandy. How are you doing? Would you like to do some music?”

“No, no, no, no,” replied Mandy with a smile.

I smiled back and started tuning my guitar.

Mandy was a woman in her seventies. I visited her twice a week in the long-term care ward of Peace Arch Hospital in White Rock. “You’ll enjoy working with Mandy,” remarked the nurse who first introduced us, “she’s got a wicked sense of humor!”

Mandy was bedridden due to suffering a major left brain stroke. The main consequences of her stroke were partial paralysis on the right side of her body and Broca’s (expressive) aphasia. Broca’s aphasia affects speech. One can understand but not be understood due to words and phrases being thrown together randomly. Mandy’s speech would come tumbling out in a kind of gibberish or ‘word salad’. Clearly articulated words often meant the opposite of what she intended, as in the “no, no, no” example. Before the stroke, Mandy had been an active and vibrant woman, a wife and mother intimately involved with her family and community. Now, despite retaining her intelligence and a lively sense of humor, she was mainly a picture of frustration as her attempts to communicate verbally failed again and again.

In my role as music therapist, I had the opportunity to work with Mandy for about six months. From the start it was clear that Mandy loved music. In addition, we ‘clicked’. After I sang a few songs, I could see Mandy’s enthusiasm. Then something astonishing happened. I started singing ‘You Are My Sunshine’ and suddenly Mandy was singing along with me clearly, articulately, and correctly! I went away and immediately started consulting the literature and speaking to my colleagues. Although not unknown, I found little information on the subject. What gradually became clear was that because music is processed by the right brain, words (as in recalled lyrics) accompanied by music could be expressed appropriately. I was fascinated especially as in my career as an E.S.L. teacher of beginner adult immigrants, I had been intrigued by the way in which rhythm, rhyme and repetition contributed to linguistic comprehension, retention and functional usage. I had long used materials such as ‘Jazz Chants’ developed by a New York ESL teacher (and musician) Carolyn Graham. I had also observed how young children loved nursery rhymes and how their grandparents, even those with dementia, would be able to recall the words to ‘Jack and Jill’, ‘Humpty Dumpty’, ‘Twinkle twinkle’, etc.

As a consequence of my observations of Mandy, I decided to investigate the possibilities, however remote, of some kind of language rehabilitation through the use of music. I didn't think it was worth working on the 'no, no, no' conundrum. However, finding a way for Mandy to express what she wanted did seem like a functional and hence worthwhile objective. Was there a way that Mandy might be able to say "I want water", or "I want music"? It wasn't a question of volitional rehabilitation; Mandy knew what she wanted. To a certain extent, she could indicate what she wanted through gestures. She just couldn't put it in words.

I needed to choose a song that she would know and then insert the 'I want' lyrics. The tune that I came up with was 'Frère Jacques'. Thus the lyrics were as follows:

*I want music, I want music*

*Yes I do, yes I do*

*I want music, I want music*

*Yes I do, yes I do.*

There was no problem with the first step. Mandy knew the song and could sing the melody without mistake. The next step was harder and involved what ESL teachers would term 'language drills'. In the following weeks and months, we kept at it. After Mandy became adept at singing and articulating 'I want music', we switched to 'I want water'. We could only 'drill' for 5 or 10 minutes before Mandy would indicate she was tired and/or bored. So 'work-time' would be followed by 'play-time' of 'You Are My Sunshine' and other golden oldies.

And so we came inevitably to the final part of the experiment. Mandy could say or sing what she 'wanted' but could she do it without my verbal participation? If I held up a glass of water and pointed both at her and then the glass, doing my best through gestures to encourage the desired outcome, would Mandy be able to initiate the lyric?

The day came. I was excited. This was the acid test. Mandy seemed to be in a good mood and was happy to see me. We loosened up with the start-of-session theme song, 'I want music'. Then, without further explanation or instruction, I slowly and methodically filled a glass with water, held it up, gestured at Mandy and the glass of water, beckoning and willing the holy grail to appear. Mandy looked perplexed. I tried again. Mandy gave a little smile. 'Aha', I thought, 'here we go'.

Mandy opened her mouth and with perfect pitch sang:

*I want music, I want music*

*No. no, no .....*

'Ah well', I ruminated later, 'not all experiments work out'. The question was 'did Mandy have the last laugh – *on purpose?!*' Maybe the experiment had been a huge success and there had been a neuronal conspiracy between Mandy's volition and her wicked sense of humor.