

NEVER FOUND WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR

by

Ian Brown

Many years ago, I was working as a music therapist on the palliative unit of a hospital close to Vancouver. One day, as I checked in at the front desk, one of the nurses said, “there’s a new guy in the room at the end. He’s very angry and won’t talk to anyone, including his own family.” She went on to say that he had terminal cancer and wasn’t expected to live long.

“Give it a try if you want. Good luck,” she added wryly.

I needed a bit more information to go on other than he was an angry man with cancer.

“Is there anything else you can tell me about where he’s from, or his occupation?” I enquired.

“He’s Welsh and I think he was a teacher,” was the reply.

That was useful – two tangible connections. We were both from the U.K. originally, therefore both immigrants and misfits of one kind or another. And we were both teachers (my main occupation before becoming a music therapist). The question was what music did I know that he would know. He was Welsh. What music did I know that was famously Welsh?

Then it came to me. As a boy growing up in Edinburgh, my father had taken me to the International Rugby matches at Murrayfield stadium. On one occasion, the game was between Scotland and Wales. For days before the match, the streets of Edinburgh were filled with the red and green colours of Welsh supporters. In the stadium, the atmosphere was electric. On one side were the Scottish supporters in colours of blue and white, some holding the flag of Scotland with its St. Andrew’s cross. And on the other, there was an army of Welsh supporters, at least 20,000 of them.

As the teams came out on to the field, the Welsh supporters began to sing. I had never heard anything like it. The only experience remotely close was attending the annual New Year’s performance of Handel’s ‘Messiah’ at the Usher Hall and joining in at the end with the massed choirs for the ‘Hallelujah’ chorus. But this was on a different scale. The volume of sound was huge and reverberated around the open air stadium. Various traditional Welsh songs were sung but the one song (or hymn) that was sung over and over again throughout the ninety minutes of the rugby match was Cym Rhondda. I knew it well. We had sung it many times at school services. The lyrics went like this:

*Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer
Pilgrim through this barren land
I am weak but Thou art mighty
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven
Feed me till I want no more (I want no more)
Feed me till I want no more.*

It was the second last line that was extraordinarily powerful and uplifting as the 20,000 voices went from singing in unison to harmony. As one faction sustained the dominant note on 'more' (G in the key of C), the other half sang "I want no more" on the rising dominant seventh notes of G, B, D and F such that the adjacent notes of F and G were sustained together before the final line was sung. It was emotionally moving and spiritually uplifting at one and the same time. You didn't have to be a Christian to feel it.

I paused for a second outside the room at the end gathering myself. It was worth a try. I figured out the best way to establish a bridge of communication was to give my name, inform him of my role as music therapist, and then quickly mention that I had heard he was originally from Wales, and that I too was from the U.K. Then, without missing a beat, follow this up immediately with my very heartfelt associations with the Welshmen I had encountered at the Rugby International. As I entered the room with my guitar, I knew full well that I had a window of no more than 30 seconds to a minute to make this connection before I, like others before me, got unceremoniously kicked out.

The plan worked. Having navigated that first all-important minute successfully, I asked him if he knew 'Cym Rhondda'. When he replied that he did and that *his* father had taken him to see the Rugby Internationals at Cardiff Arms Park, I knew I was getting somewhere.

"Now how does it go again?" I said, playing a few introductory chords and then following this with the first line 'Guide me O Thou Great Redeemer', I could see his face soften slightly.

"Would you like to sing with me?" I asked tentatively. To my surprise and delight, he joined in. When we got to the climactic penultimate line, his expression suddenly lost all trace of tension and hardness and he began to cry - great heaving sobs.

There followed a tearful monologue that went something like this:

"I'm not a believer but I've always been a seeker of the Truth."

My heart opened to him in empathetic identification. It could have been me talking.

"I'm bitter and angry," he continued because I'm about to die and I never found what I was looking for. All that searching for meaning and purpose – all those books, all that reflection, all that investment ... and I failed. I'm a failure."

I was deeply moved by his confession. Only a few years earlier, I had been at my father's bedside as he lay dying. He was also a bitter and angry man. He also felt he had been a failure. And he also, for the first time in my experience, opened his heart and talked about his regrets and showed the pain behind his anger. It had fostered at least a partial reconciliation between us and sowed the seeds for future forgiveness.

The Welshman cried and I was not ashamed that he saw my own tears flowing. We were connected.

We sang a couple of more songs. I think one of them was that transcultural and transformative song 'My Bonnie'. And then I could tell it was time for me to leave. I thanked him for sharing so much with me. We shook hands and I left, humbled, shaken and grateful.

Two days later, I returned to the Palliative ward.

"How's the Welshman?" I asked at the front desk.

"He died yesterday," came the reply.