

Oxford Round Table, 2012
“Women in History: Against All Odds”

**“The Duet Paradigm –
The Quantum Result of
Empowering Women with Disabilities”**



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The disenfranchisement of women across history has been intensified for those with developmental or physical “disabilities.” Women with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy or blindness have generally been relegated to the fringes of society, and worse. While we may believe that we have achieved a new era of respect and care, the sad reality is that, in far too many cases women with disabilities—as well as men—still experience marginalization and maltreatment. (*New York Times*, “At State-Run Group Homes, Abuse and Impunity,” March, 2011)

Women subject to such conditions are dis-abled in an essential way: they are alien, cast out. These women exist in a highly restrictive dualism—a condition of other-ness imposed upon them. Thought of as not quite human, they live their lives in an

extended infancy, denied the opportunity to develop personal and social independence.

Judeo-Christian teachings implore us to respect all in our midst: "And the King shall answer...Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:40) Indeed, a vital indicator of a culture, East or West, is the treatment of its most vulnerable citizens. The societal implications of this New Testament message were revolutionary two thousand years ago, and the revolution has not yet come to fruition.

Thomas Kuhn, "who made an academic career out of studying so-called 'paradigm shifts' [tells] us that such shifts are not easily accomplished because inertial forces, like conservative habits, are hard to overcome." (Lockley, p. 34) Well into the 20th century, the disenfranchisement of women with developmental disabilities was governed by a socially conservative paradigm, which foreclosed the very possibility of

individual growth through paradigm shifts. As Lockley continues, "We are often over-conditioned into accepting old ideas and far too reluctant to adopt new ones."



"The Duet Paradigm" is a transactional framework that breaks through the individual and social paradigms that confine disabled women in an overpowering isolation: a monadic existence is suddenly transformed as the disability is integrated into an improvised musical duet. A woman with blindness sitting at the piano realizes that self-expressivity, relatedness, and social value do not require eyes. As a result, those who witness a Duet Paradigm performance are overwhelmed by emotion exponentially greater than anything they may encounter at a 'traditional' concert.

"Against all odds," women with disabilities are a spark for a paradigm shift in which new dualisms arise that en-able rather than dis-able. The imperative to value "the least of us" takes form in ways that dissolve entrenched social archetypes. Human

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life becomes an act of mutual regeneration in the recognition that, no matter who we are, “We are one, after all, you and I. Together we suffer, together exist and forever will recreate each other.” (attr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin)

Homo sapiens are distinguished from other species by the capacity for art. This is true for every human being, regardless of the presence of a physical or cognitive ‘handicap.’ However, arts and music therapy programs often perpetuate the belief that a person with disabilities is essentially less imaginative or capable than his or



her teacher. Based on conventional teacher-student hierarchies, they fail to give the ‘disabled’ individual *full* creative license.

The Duet Paradigm functions as an “exploratory and revelatory device,” (*Masterworks of God*, Francis Mannion, p. 118) that began as a form of piano

pedagogy. Rather than learning by rote or being confined to notated music, a

student is afforded free exploration in duet at the piano. She or he becomes an equal partner in an open-ended musical transaction. Both student and teacher recognize that the outcome exceeds what either could manifest alone.

Over thirty years, I have developed this modality in countries as diverse as Guatemala, the United States, Colombia and Australia, improvising side-by-side with individuals who range from 9 months to 85 years of age. I am now implementing The Duet Paradigm with special needs students, notably at Riverbrook Residence for Women, the most established facility of its kind in New England (USA).

The results were unforeseeable. When women with Down syndrome, autism or blindness engage in The Duet Paradigm, anomalies appear immediately: a woman with no facility for verbalization begins to express herself with subtlety in a non-syllabic language. A woman with Down syndrome defies her



'simplemindedness' with a skill that does not rely on musical notation. Auditory and

kinesthetic intelligences emerge that cannot be measured by standard IQ tests. A woman with disabilities easily passes a 'musical intelligence test' that constitutes a developmental paradigm shift. Through improvised duet, these women are not conquering a known world. They are introducing a new one.

The piano readily lends itself to dyadic music making, and is a critical aspect of The Duet Paradigm. Functioning as the *triadic* element, it allows a woman with disabilities to connect to her duet partner and move into the world around her. The piano is the mediating feature missing in most therapeutic or educational modalities: it is the *bridge* that vanquishes autism or Down syndrome.

In the human situation, experience moves in two directions—from outside to inside, and from inside to out. Traditional therapeutic paradigms are the former only. They are an extension of the ontology of disability, reinforcing a 'negative otherness.' The Duet Paradigm operates in both directions simultaneously. It replaces restrictive behavioral and communication norms with enormous flexibility that opens the way

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to an indefinite spectrum of self-expressive possibilities. The result: The Duet Paradigm supersedes existing paradigms of disability.

Commonly held notions of inadequacy are safe: they enhance who *we* are. But, human ‘incapacities’ result more from the imposition of conservative therapeutic approaches than inherent physical or cognitive constraints. Prejudicial beliefs exact a price higher than we might imagine. In The Duet Paradigm, the teacher’s experience is one of joyful liberation. The ‘non-disabled’ instructor evolves in her perspectives and relationships. *Mutual* growth is the result!

John Dewey valued the aesthetic experience as best suited for paradigm shifts because it activates channels of expression that are “free from the forces that impede and confuse its development.” (*Art as Experience*, p. 274) In The Duet Paradigm, the unique musical qualities of the student are beheld without discrimination. When arts and music programs embrace the freedom inherent in the aesthetic experience, new dualisms arise that en-able teacher and student alike.

For Dewey, music is the highest of all art forms. The 20th century pianist and composer, Sergei Rachmaninoff agreed: “There is a vital spark that seems to make (music) a living thing...It exists only for the moment and cannot be explained...After all, the vital spark is the soul.” (*Great Pianists on Piano Playing*, James F. Cook, ed., pp. 217, 219) In spontaneous musical duets, excitement and discovery outrun conservatism or “indurated habit.” (Dewey, p. 348)

Hence, The Duet Paradigm allows for unencumbered *communication*: it “insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule or precept, admonition or administration.” (Dewey, p. 349) The traditional concert experience is applauded as an isolated, transcendent and *unachievable* expression. In a Duet Paradigm performance, the over-conditioned audience enters into an aesthetic experience *in the making*. As women with disabilities come forth with original music, audience members, themselves, are empowered as creative agents. “I could do this, too,” they realize. Thus, the distance between audience and 'disabled' women is bridged: the creative impulse is activated simultaneously in both. Art and experience become

one. As old paradigms are superseded by a sense of inspired possibility, Dewey's innermost message is concretized.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty provides a phenomenology of duet as he explores the mystery of our interconnection with all life. “Between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place...the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning...” (“Eye and Mind” in *The Primacy of Perception*, p.164)



A 26 year-old woman with Down syndrome describes the experience in this way:

“I am starting to understand the meaning of duet because I was practicing for a short hour before dinner and i was thinking about what you said to me when we were having our lesson together and we were talking about how i should start listoning (sic) to the sound of the music and i should start listoning to the sound of the chords and i should also watch the motion of my hands on the piano and try to make my hands stay on the keyboard but not off that is the hard part for me but when you are with me it makes it more easy for me to have you there next to me and to help me find my true self and my true courage and to make my hands more softer and more gentle and maybe you could help me with to make hands stay in the right tone and the right beat and the right rhythm so if you could help with all these things that would be really nice of you. Lots of love, yours truly, your friend.



Performance for Governor
Deval Patrick

Women with disabilities suggest a remarkable future, one that was presaged two millennia ago. In the story of “The Man Born Blind,” Jesus’ disciples ask him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work

of God might be displayed in his life.’” (John 9:1-4) The fruition of God’s work is a new life beyond separation—a “meeting, *center to center*, of human beings, such as can only be realized in a universal, mutual love.” (*The Future of Man*, Teilhard de Chardin, p. 75)

In The Duet Paradigm, the people “we despaired of reaching and influencing are all there, reunited by the most vulnerable, receptive and enriching point in their substance.” (Teilhard de Chardin, p.77) Finally, we are fused “in origin and destiny.” (Dewey, p. 271) A woman with disabilities is at the fulcrum of a cultural revolution in which we are *all* enriched. For the first time in history, she is outcast no longer.

Jessica Roemischer is a pianist, composer and advisor whose transformational model, The Duet Paradigm® can be applied with or without music in personal, educational, organizational, and spiritual contexts. Her new book, *In Duet with God*, will be released in 2012. Since graduating *magna cum laude* from Princeton University, Roemischer has performed and taught throughout the world, including from 1989-99 on the Music Faculty of Middlebury College, Vermont. She currently conducts an acclaimed music program at Riverbrook Residence in Stockbridge, MA, New England's finest facility for women with developmental disabilities. Her Riverbrook program has been supported by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Caroline and James Taylor. Roemischer has performed with her students across Western MA, including on three occasions for Governor Deval Patrick. She was nominated for a 2012 CNN Heroes Award. In musical performances and teaching, as well as in a consulting and advisory capacity, Jessica Roemischer is sharing the catalytic power of her work throughout the United States and internationally.

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Video: "Flying Free: Music Without Limits" – Riverbrook Residence for Women performance: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2dpqzM2L4E>

Video: Duet performance with Hope Garner, teen girl with Down syndrome: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXi73CKfS_U

Article: "The Transforming Power of the Piano Duet" by Jessica Roemischer, *Exceptional Parent* magazine: www.pianobeautiful.com/EPArticle.pdf

Additional duet videos can be found on Jessica Roemischer's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/user/JessicaRoemischer