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A Sonic Birth

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We were ushered into a cold, white, visually sterile room with a single medical examining table. On that table was a tiny baby with vibrant red hair. She drew me across the room like a powerful magnet. Almost exactly one year after the death of our baby Melissa, we took our new daughter home to meet her brother and sister. We named her Erica. There were problems with Erica from our very first day together. She cried and screamed inconsolably. Nothing we did seemed to calm her. To make matters worse she was plagued by recurring ear infections that kept her ill and in pain through much of her early childhood. Erica was being forced to pay a high price for her very existence, and the price was going to keep going up.

Erica entered the toddler stage as a delightful, if developmentally delayed child. She learned to speak later than usual and had difficulty expressing herself. She was painfully accident prone.

Her alert first grade teacher brought to our attention Erica's poor grasp of reading, spelling and mathematics. Coupled with Erica's inability to express herself well and her occasionally disruptive behavior, these problems suggested that Erica might have a learning disability. Our fears were confirmed. For Erica this particular learning problem manifested itself in an inability to sound out letters. She couldn't reproduce the sounds because she was unable to hear them correctly. This situation was complicated by a phenomenon unique to dyslexia: Erica's brain reversed printed letters. This meant that what she learned with her ears and what she perceived with her eyes had little or nothing in common. (A rapidly increasing body of clinical evidence relates learning disabilities to problems of the ear and auditory processing.)

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The consensus of the experts was that Erica was not ready to move on to the second grade. We reluctantly agreed to hold her back, but placed her in another school in a futile attempt to avoid stigmatizing her. As with most families who have a member with a disability, more and more parental attention was being focused on Erica. She was also enrolled in private special education classes for language and speech. Unfortunately, our efforts had the opposite of the desired effect; she viewed herself as a failure.

We contributed to the problem because we didn't understand it. Simplistically, we just thought that the solution was for Erica to work harder in order to overcome her handicap. We failed in our efforts because we failed to see that she was trying as hard as she could.

This constant pressure to succeed, combined with a steady diet of failure, began to have a seriously negative effect on Erica's behavior. She had difficulty accepting reality and became withdrawn.

Fourth grade marked the beginning of a dramatic change in Erica's view of herself and the world in which she was living. She saw the disintegration of my marriage, which moved through separation to divorce, as further evidence that nothing could be counted on, no one was going to give her the stability and unconditional acceptance she so desperately needed.

Though we were now living apart, the bond between Erica and me was not severed. In fact, taking on the mantle of matchmaker, she engineered a meeting between me and Kate O'Brien. When Kate and I decided to be married, we were delighted to discover that Erica wanted to live with us. However, what we hadn't counted on was sabotage. She (unconsciously) transformed herself into an implacable adolescent warrior. Instead of peace, love and understanding, we found ourselves in an emotionally ruthless struggle.

As Erica's focus in the family became more and more destructive, her academic efforts suffered greatly. Our concern for her increasingly hostile behavior grew, as did my concern for her ability to succeed in school. Her will to learn was evaporating. She became sullen and withdrawn and started experiencing significant bouts of depression.

By the end of junior high two unpleasant facts were clear to us. The first was that the school system had washed its hands of Erica. Our second realization was that Erica had truly given up on herself. During her eleventh grade year things came to a head. On a personal level she now refused to accept any responsibility for her own

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actions. Her motivation and self-esteem slipped even farther down, and she sank into a deeper state of depression. Psychotherapy seemed to have little effect on her. Finally, half way through the year she hit some invisible wall. Her tolerance for school disintegrated completely, and she dropped out.

She cycled through a series of low skill, low paying jobs from which she was invariably fired. She found herself eighteen years old, living at home, out of school, fighting with her mother, alienated from the rest of her family and deeply depressed. Helpless and hopeless, her thoughts turned to death.

We found ourselves in a state of agonizing helplessness. Nothing we did seemed to make any difference. We were all truly desperate.

Unexpectedly, we got a small ray of hope. A friend brought me an article entitled "A Dyslexified World," by Paul Madaule, and insisted that I read it. Madaule wrote as one who suffered from dyslexia himself. His description of the alienation caused by dyslexia was so cogent and powerful that I realized that none of us in Erica's world had even begun to comprehend the horrifying grasp that her learning disability had on her. Madaule also wrote about a therapeutic program that had helped him overcome his dyslexia.

The program was called the Tomatis Method. Although relatively new in North America, the Tomatis Method was reported to have been used with excellent results in Europe for more than twenty years. The program was developed by a French ear, nose and throat physician, psychologist and internationally recognized expert on auditory problems, Dr. Alfred A. Tomatis.

I had never heard of Dr. Tomatis or his method. But some hope, no matter how slim, seemed much better than no hope at all. I asked Erica if she would be willing to visit the Tomatis Center in Phoenix, and she agreed. That decision had a profound effect on both our lives.

Within a few days we visited the center. I was unclear about how and why the program worked. But, I took the leap of faith and signed Erica up. I also signed up for the program. On some deep intuitive level I saw that it could also enhance my well-being.

As unlikely as it sounded to me, the program used listening to effect change in both the body and the mind, and used music to effect that change. By presenting music in a unique way, our ability to truly listen is awakened and our desire to express ourselves is stimulated.

In humans the ear is the first sensory organ to develop. It is fully

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functional four-and-a-half months before we are born. In the womb the sounds we hear—our mother's breathing, her heartbeat and especially her voice—stimulate our brain and fire electrical charges into our cortex. It is the nourishment provided by these electrical charges that enhances our mental function and spurs the proper development of the brain and the central nervous system. Because the ear is an active channel to the brain and nervous system, it acts as a battery, constantly charging and stimulating them both. This stimulus is critical not only to our body's ability to grow properly and develop muscle tone and coordination, but to our ability to both hear and listen—and ultimately learn and understand.

Erica's biological mother unintentionally denied her the continuity of her voice—the thread that provides the positive intrauterine and post-birth experience so critical in fostering the ability to bond with others. Without that experience we may lack the capacity to bond. Without that capacity we can never be fully human. But Erica was also robbed of the desire to listen and to communicate effectively. Her repeated physiological problems, like her ear infections, further diminished both her desire and her actual physical capacity to master communication in all its forms.

An important underlying idea in the Tomatis Method is that listening is learned and must be accompanied by the desire to communicate. If listening is learned incorrectly—so that information is distorted and cannot be understood—it must be relearned. If desire is lacking, it must be rekindled. This relearning or retraining process is at the heart of the Tomatis Method. As Dr. Tomatis said, "When hearing gives way to listening, one's awareness increases, the will is aroused and all aspects of our being are involved at the same time. Listening is intimately tied up with the ability to actively attune the ear to a particular sound signal, with both intention and desire to communicate."

The program involves a course of audio stimulation generated by using the music of Mozart. But why use music to create this change? And why specifically Mozart's? For centuries the healing professions have known of the profound emotional, psychological and physical effects of music. But it was Dr. Tomatis who discovered the particular efficacy of Mozart's music.

For two hundred years musicians, composers, conductors, critics and historians have described Mozart's music as transcendent and divine. These same experts often talk about something ineffable in

his music that defies description or analysis. During the course of the development of the Tomatis Method, the music of Mozart proved to be universally accepted and effective in evoking the full listening function. After listening to Mozart's music, people from virtually every culture on the planet feel more creative, intelligent, empowered and motivated. Dr. Tomatis believes that this is because Mozart's intellectual and spiritual genius, not his personality, entered into the music. Because of this, when we listen to his music we are free to be in touch with the light within ourselves, rather than in touch with the creator of the music.

But the day Erica and I started the Tomatis Program, I didn't have an understanding of the theory and the science of the program. All I knew was that finally someone held out some hope for Erica.

And so it began, two hours a day, both of us listening to Mozart and Gregorian chants. The music soon began to sound scratchy as the low frequencies were filtered out. It was strange but not unpleasant. We listened to the music by both air conduction and conduction through the bones of the head. As the sound switched back and forth between the two formats, a grating effect was created that produced intermittent changes in the music.

As we filled our days with routine activities after our sessions, I felt that Erica was starting to communicate and share with me on some level we had never reached before. I sensed that the time was ripe for a real discussion. Perhaps now I could understand her suicidal urges and why she didn't seem to feel my love for her. I needed to know why she pushed away our past offers of help. And for the first time, I wanted to know these things about her, not to change her or fix her, but simply to understand. In some subtle yet profound way, my listening had been changed.

The time was right. That night in our hotel room we had a deep and transforming talk. She reacted as if some massive emotional dam had burst. She described how she had never felt wanted, beginning with her adoption, plaintively detailing the pain of not knowing her birth mother and describing the crushing rejection that came from the knowledge that her mother did not want her. She told me how she had come to feel incompetent, stupid, even ugly. She confessed that her life was a prison sentence and that she was just "doing time" until her sentence was up. To Erica, love, joy, life and the future were meaningless terms.

I was amazed at how articulate and clear she was. For the first time

she was using language as an effective tool for communicating her deepest feelings. She painted a picture of a life so filled with emotional rejection that I understood how death could seem a welcome solution. I marveled at the courage it took for her to keep on living.

As I listened to a litany of pain about her disability, her adoption, her school and her anger at my former wife Nancy, Kate and me, I was acutely distressed. I wanted to interrupt her, as I had done so often in the past, with assurances of our love for her. But this time I listened silently, finally willing to allow her to be completely and totally heard. It was an incredible emotional catharsis for us both. Understandably we were both in tears as together we experienced the pain of her life, step by traumatic step. We cried and laughed and felt connected in a special new way. I apologized to her for never understanding before, and she absolved me, saying, "That's o.k., Pop, you didn't know." She was right. I hadn't known. And she hadn't been able to express it before either. That night she told me that she felt truly listened to and heard for the first time. Never before in her life had she felt so connected to another human being. As we continued to talk there was something in her voice I had never heard before. It was the sound of hope. We were not out of the woods yet. But with Erica finally ventilating years of anger and hurt in a healthy manner, the path to healing was at last opening.

By the fifth day of the program Erica began to manifest other changes in her behavior. Her sleep pattern changed. She started waking up feeling pleasant instead of hostile. Literally overnight, the severe depression that was inexorably pushing her toward suicide vanished. I was astounded, delighted and perplexed. What I was witnessing flew in the face of all my clinical experience as a psychiatrist. What's more, it was happening without medications, without the usual analysis, catharsis and abreactions I had been taught were necessary for the resolution of conflict.

With her depression lifted, Erica's thoughts of death and suicide dissipated quickly. She claimed that things were clearer and that she was able to remember better. Even her spelling showed a dramatic improvement. As I watched these changes take place I realized that Erica was awakening to the possibilities of her own life. She recognized these changes herself by telling me repeatedly, "My mind just works better."

As the days progressed her mood, overall energy, body posture and mental attitude all improved. Oddly enough, at the same time the

clumsiness she had experienced as a small child returned. It was as if her body was saying to her, "You will have to reintegrate your physical coordination because you didn't get it done right the first time." She made giant emotional strides, becoming much more willing to speak out for herself and about herself. She was able to articulate how she felt. She started taking emotional risks and became more open and honest. Most important, she made major progress in overcoming her fear of rejection. By the time the program was completed she had stopped overreacting emotionally, and her behavior had become appropriate in virtually every area.

In the two months after completing the program, Erica made a giant leap in maturity. She was now able to process the math we take for granted. In one instance, while dining out, she added an upside-down dinner check. This simple triumph, which would have been impossible just two scant months before, exhilarated her and thrilled us.

Now the changes were coming dizzyingly fast. She began to have dreams and plans for her future. She rapidly matured in her ability to develop and maintain personal relationships. This included the ability to set and hold realistic limits and to expect a level of respect from her relationship partners. She began to acknowledge her own intelligence. As she joyously told me one day, "I always thought I was smart, Pop, but I couldn't prove it before." Even her voice became animated and expressive, no longer flat and atonal. As I watched this happen, my belief in her ability to survive and even succeed in life grew.

I am convinced that the mechanism that triggered these changes was the filtered music of Mozart. The Tomatis Method had transformed the music to recreate the sonic environment of the prebirth intrauterine state of listening. In effect, Erica was sent back to a time when her desire to listen was still intact, a time before she lost the sustaining and nourishing thread of her mother's voice. For, as Dr. Tomatis later told me, "Mozart is a very good mother."

That final week, Erica wasn't the only one experiencing changes. I too was being taught to be what I call a "true listener." This ability helped me endure the flood of emotion that spilled from Erica that night in the hotel room. But an improved ability to listen was just the beginning. By my fourth day, significant changes began to manifest themselves. Suddenly I was wide awake after only four or five hours of sleep. Yet I awoke refreshed and rested. I felt more relaxed, too. During the next four or five days I often found myself tearful. It

seemed to me that the tears were a mixture of grief for old pains and tears of joy for new self-discovery. I could feel those tears washing out old sadnesses. The process was inspiring, as if something was touching my core and releasing emotional experiences that had been weighing down my soul. With my inner self freer and lighter, something vital and new was brought to the surface—a sense of joy and hope, not just for Erica, but for myself as well.

Even my voice was affected. By practicing techniques taught in the program, I achieved a fuller, more resonant voice. This in turn helped me feel more self-confident and fully present in the world. In a very real sense I discovered my own voice, the one that is unique to me, rather than the conditioned voice that was a product of my parents and early emotional traumas.

I was also taught a vocalization technique called toning, a type of nonverbal vocal expression. By practicing toning I was able to release emotional and physical constrictions created by my subconscious mind. In effect, my body remembered emotional pain I had experienced long before my ability to verbalize was developed. This preverbal emotional pain had lain trapped inside my body, totally unnoticed by my conscious mind. Through toning I was able to release these old hurts without analyzing or dissecting them. I did not have to understand them. I did not have to relive them. I simply had to let them go and they were gone. Each time this occurred it triggered a wave of tears and a feeling of being cleansed. For me the process was like dropping emotional ballast, old unneeded baggage that impaired my ability to get on with my new life. Looking back on that period I can see that by letting go of those old pains I became more willing to commit to all types of relationships. Because I was able to reduce my fears of rejection, a problem which had plagued me from my childhood, I also became less threatened by criticism.

I learned many things undergoing the Tomatis Method. But as a psychiatrist, the most surprising was a new-found ability to articulate what had been an unconscious dissatisfaction with the limitations of conventional psychotherapy. I had spent years in psychotherapy in order to understand myself and my craft. I had mastered the techniques of my discipline and spent even more years applying them as a psychotherapist to help others. Yet psychiatry had utterly failed to reach my preverbal problems and experiences, and I was sure that it was not reaching similar problems in my patients. When these problems are not released, the ability consistently to feel good about ourselves is blocked.

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The Tomatis Method is an incredibly dynamic channel for personal change. It is a simple and effective way of speeding the process of personal growth and development, either by itself or as an adjunct to psychotherapy.

Over the next three months, I gradually perceived a series of deeper changes. A physical knot that had lived in my stomach for more than thirty years had vanished. I was clearly happier with myself and consequently much happier with and tolerant of others. As a trained psychotherapist, I found the most significant thing was that all these changes were generated internally, not from any interpretation by others.

The physical and emotional changes I witnessed taking place with Erica electrified me. I felt compelled to track down how and why the program worked. During the next two years I made repeated trips to Europe to investigate the Tomatis Method in greater detail. I visited centers in Spain, Belgium and Greece. Ultimately, I was fortunate enough to study directly with Dr. Tomatis in his Paris facility. In 1990 I returned to the United States and, along with Kate, established a pilot Tomatis program in Prescott, Arizona. In January of 1991 a fully accredited Tomatis Center opened in Denver, Colorado.

After completing the Tomatis program, Erica finished high school. Today she is enrolled in college in a vocational/technical program studying graphic design. For her life has changed from something to be endured to something to be enjoyed—a process of a constant unfolding of new choices and opportunities. Her depression is gone. She continues to develop the emotional and psychological tools she needs to successfully shape a positive life for herself. She can articulate how she feels and describe what she wants out of that life. She is operating in a realistic way. She is happier. She has hope. And all of us in the Minson family share that hope.