

Ngoma: Toward A General Plan for Salisbury Central School

You have read many short chapters about the importance of drumming-singing-dancing-playing-performing-healing-wholing as one primary-communication process, or mind-body-integration process, or *ngoma* (for convenience lets use the single Bantu word for events that do it all) in early childhood. I believe that some portion, maybe a substantial portion, of what people call 'Attention Deficit Disorders' or 'Hyperactivity', 'Pervasive Development Disorders' or different kinds and degrees of 'autism' very broadly defined, might be prevented or remediated by a lot of movement, action, coordinated physical activity stylized as *ngoma* in the years before age 5 or 6. I also believe that we could have a great many more artists, poets, musicians, actors, dramatists, dancers, jugglers, comedians, cartoonists, sports champs, philosophers, brilliant intellectuals per capita in the Lakeville/Salisbury area if all the children learned to act, move, drum-sing-dance-play-perform-heal-and-get-whole as one primary-communication or mind-body-integration process – if they get a lot of *ngoma* skills before age 6.

When you surf the web for info about ADD and PDD, etc. you see psychologists talking about “sensory integration” and “perceptual motor therapy” and “auditory integration” and other ways to get children back in synch and into the groove. The best and happiest ways to do this have always been *ngoma*. When artists and creative people of all kinds write about their childhoods you often find a lot of *ngoma* memories. How much less ADD and PDD and other bad stuff can we avoid? How much more good stuff can we encourage? I don't know. I really don't know at all. But I'd like to find out over time. Hence this groping for a 5-to-10 year general plan for Salisbury Central. And then for all the primary schools in the NW corner of Connecticut.

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What if all the 5 year-olds or Kindergarteners learned to drum-sing-dance in Latin or salsa grooves, Brazilian samba grooves, Puerto Rican bomba grooves, Dominican merengue and palmbeachay grooves, plus some Senegalese grooves in the fall semester, then went on to invent some drum-song-dance grooves of their own in the spring semester?

What if they got better at all this in first grade and explored still more cultures by learning drumming-singing-dancing grooves first, e.g. learning some Iroquois social dance songs, steps, drumming before they experience the “unit” on Native American heritage? Learned some tai chi and calligraphy as a way into studying China? Some of that taiko “martial arts drumming” before doing Japan? Some clogging and jigging before the unit on the English vs. the Irish?

Rather than speculate about what could happen in 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades, on up the ladder, let's say that we need to start talking with teachers about these *ngoma* strategies and figuring out how to fund visiting experts to facilitate more arts-in-education work at Salisbury Central. The ground or foundation for doing more each year up the grade levels is in making sure that we are doing everything we can for pre-K and Kindergarten children in the northwest corner so that they have abundant skills they can teach to each other. We have to stay focussed over the next few years on what can

happen before age 6 and during Kindergarten. How can we spread skill-building to children before they get to school? Can we work with any Music Together and Kindermusik teachers in the area to give our Kindergartners a head start on salsa, samba, bomba etc.?

Can we create weekly or monthly events where families can bring their very young children and infants in arms to dance and play? And where 6 and 7 year-olds who have some skills can “teach” or help 3 and 4 year-olds to learn their first dance steps or drum rhythms? Can we spread all this to Falls Village, Canaan, Cornwall and Kent so that when all these *ngoma* practitioners hit Housatonic Valley Regional high school eight or nine years from now there will be an explosion of hit songs and dance music that can be commodified and make us all rich?

We actually need a comprehensive plan to steadily change the way we currently live our lives! A way or path that leads away from consuming media and buying stuff (dontbuyin.org) and toward producing many little musicians, dancers, poets, show-offs.

- 1) find and support the local Music Together and Kindermusik people
- 2) support local dance studio efforts to bring in specialists with fresh repertoire for us all
- 3) ask Project Troubadour and/or other non-profits to make all this one of their projects and raise money for it
- 4) invent a monthly or weekly live music and dance event
- 5) get instruction tapes on to the local-access TV channel for kids to play along with at home
- 6) tape a series of thirty 2 minute drum lessons to play over the radio stations
- 7) ?
- 8) ? what are the other ways to spread performance skills?

At Salisbury Central we have two fine music teachers who I know are ready, willing and able to work with us on spreading skills to the youngest. When I visited with classes last spring it was thrilling to watch what can be accomplished with simple “warmups” in which kids move in synch and sing or chant at the same time. And it is a great moment for me when some of the drummer-dancers I’ve been working with step up and demonstrate salsa and samba patterns to their classmates. Instant heroes and heroines of the *ngoma* revolution! In just one visit we began to take songs that they knew how to sing and put them into salsa and samba grooves. Most children’s songs will fit very nicely into one or more of the “afro-beat” grooves and everyone can feel and hear the difference immediately. Oh! I can take this song that I heard on the radio or over TV or from a song book and put it “into samba” or “into salsa.” Or I can make up my own song and put it in this groove or that!

I have to do more visits and do them at the beginning of each semester. Just to the Kindergarten and First Grade classes. So that drummer-dancers from the after school program can see how their skills can be spread around and influence what happens in music classes.

This past spring I went to a wonderful evening performance of Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade classes, each class singing 4 or 5 pieces with good energy, in synch gesturing, holding up some visuals on cue, singing along with some solid piano playing by the music teacher or doing “choral karaoke” with the grooves of the computerized boombox. I think it will not be hard for us (some kids from the afterschool ensemble and instruction class) to join the teacher at the piano and/or replace the computerized boombox on some tunes next spring. If we introduce some basic rhythms at the beginning of the school year as part of “warmups” and if we rehearse together in the spring for the annual performance, anything and everything is possible.

But the enumerated list above is also essential. Reaching the parents and children way before kindergarten, via the emerging parent-child musicking organizations, via new events and parties, via recordings, via media, via as many reinforcements for skill-building as we can coordinate – all the “vias” will add up to a path or a road or a superhighway.

Pat Campbell:

Since generations of five-year-olds went without occasions to drum-dance-sing, it may take training (and re-training) teachers to develop these skills. A group of 14 teachers signed in for such a workshop a few years ago, and in a week they had discovered new musical sensibilities within themselves. Gary was one of the teachers, a band director, a trumpet player, responsible to 250 students in five bands at his high school. He’d never laid hands on a conga before, certainly not in his percussion methods course in college. By the end of the week, he could rip out grooves of every sort: salsa, samba, bomba, merengue, palmbeachay. He returned to his school that fall with a renewed vigor, a true passion for Latin jazz. After purchasing some used congas, he hooked his drummers up with the grooves he had learned, brought a few local Latin experts in to guide his students, and wound up with a very tasty band, a lot of excitement from his students, and parents who couldn’t sit still at the band concert that year. One thing leads to another, and Gary’s experience in a single workshop worked for him in wondrous ways. It would be intriguing to trace how the other 13 applied this drum-dance-sing experience to their lives, following their pathways from a single workshop to the classroom work they are doing now.