The Beauty is…Tracking physical affirmations of love

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Abstract

Often, new researchers will undertake their first data collection research project solely as a means to study the art of research without any regard for personal connection, growth, or emotional catharsis. Certainly, that was the case when this researcher initially approached personal data collection simply as an arduous course requirement for a first year PhD course. However, through the journey of collecting, analyzing, and artfully representing, she discovered the poignantly ethereal voice of personal data collection through visual and aural representation. Given the reflective and personal nature of this data collection project the researcher used journaling, poetic inquiry (Faulkner 2018), aspects of narrative inquiry, as well as art-based visual data, all under the umbrella of auto-ethnography (Adams 2018). It also seemed appropriate that its artistic depiction should be an aural soundtrack depicted through music wholly representing personal everyday while demonstrating how collection and research can be personal, fulfilling, poignant, artistic, and fun!

The Beauty Is…: Tracking Physical Affirmations of Love

For three consecutive weeks in November 2017 I was tasked with collecting, analysing, and visually representing personal data as a research project for a PhD course on research methods. I was eager to test my new skills as a neophyte researcher and, as we were collecting information on ourselves, we could get started right away without ethics committee decisions, discussions, or involvement. This research replicated the 'Dear Data' data collection project and included the tracking of one incident in one's everyday life for a period of time, analysing these data, drawing conclusions, reflecting, and writing.

Epistemologies, Processes, Choices

The methodologies I have used in reflecting on the data for this paper have been steeped in arts-based research. Given the reflective and personal nature of this data collection project I have used journaling, poetic inquiry, aspects of narrative inquiry, as well as art-based visual data all under the umbrella of arts-based method through which I can relay my data collection, my story.

Using the poetry of Elizabeth Barret Browning, Adam Guettel and, yes, even Monty Python, allows me to express emotions and represent data in a more poignant, reflexive and artistic manner. Prendergast (2009) writes:

> Poetic inquiry is, like narrative inquiry with which it shares many characteristics, interested in drawing on the literary arts in the attempt to more authentically express human experiences…. Poetic inquiry is the attempt to work in fruitful interdisciplinary ways between the humanities…fine arts…and the social sciences. (p.561)

I have also embraced some aspects of narrative inquiry, particularly through dialogue with my son. My journal entry examples contain dialogue specifically when chastising my son about a playground accident. Adams and Jones (2018) note:

> The task of creative plot and story – replete with characters, narrators, and dialogue that reveals what's at stake and what we care about – is the search for the *how, what,* and *why* of ourselves, experiences, and cultures. (p.152)

Journaling or Arts-Based Writing is also featured in this paper as a form of Arts-based inquiry. Stout and Daiello (2018) write that arts-based-writing:

> …conceptualizes, examines, and illustrates the performative potential of writing – not *that* writing that represents and settles, placing normativity and conformity on stage. This writing won't stick to the page. It rises and respires. It vibrates, filling the air with enticing overtones – suggestions, sensual connections, and rememberings, associations toward the furthermore but not yet said. (p. 609)

Arts-based visual research is also employed throughout this project. According to Holm, Sahlstrom, and Zilliacus (2018), "arts-based visual research may include creating and using various forms of visual art as a way to collect data, conduct analysis, and/or represent research" (p. 312).

As the "Dear Data" was a personal data collection story and my experience was sensitive, heightened, and emotional, I felt that using many of these emergent art-based methods would complement and enhance the telling of my "affections of love" story during these three weeks.

Dear Data…

The Dear Data website reads as follows. "Dear Data is a year-long, analog data drawing project by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec, two award-winning information designers living on different sides of the Atlantic" (www.dear-data.com). By diligently collecting and visually representing their personal data they were able to gain new and deeper insights into everyday life. For example, during one week Stephanie and Giorgia tracked all the moments they said goodbye or goodnight to someone, and then represented this on a postcards through colour, images, and design. Another week they tracked laughter, and used unique and colourful visual representations.

The project is insightful, creative, and artful, and I was very excited about choosing a topic. I wanted to pick one that would be passionate, interesting, and personally relevant, and I did not have to look very far to find it. I decided I would collect data on demonstrations of love. Specifically, I would track who deliberately and lovingly touched me, either physically or digitally, with the intent to encourage, support, or love me. A simple glance at a very recent and highly emotional experience would highlight what was most important to me: love. This tenderness would give me the curiosity and fortitude to study love's touch both as a formal project and as a personal reflection.

Cancer, Crisis, and PhD'ing

On July 23, 2017, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and was immediately scheduled for an urgent thyroidectomy. I knew the healing journey ahead was a solo one and I often felt the impact on my physical and emotional health was greater than I could bear but I was supported by many friends and

family. Even after the very successful surgery I deeply felt the emotional remnants of this trauma. I was lonely and afraid. A qualitative study reported that thyroid cancer survivors must have access to psychological supports after the completion of treatment (Misra et al, 2013, p.50). A particularly relevant passage follows:

> The psychological response to the diagnosis of locally recurrent thyroid cancer typically includes emotions such as: shock, fear, sadness, anger, and frustration. For some patients, this experience may be emotionally devastating…. Although recovery from the physical and emotional trauma of treatment of thyroid cancer recurrence is usually positive, some patients may experience unmet information needs and lingering worry related to future recurrence. (Misra et al., 2013, p.50)

Consumed by sadness and fear, I clung to what I felt mattered the most, my children. My children, Estelle (age 8) and Seth (age 5) are happy, well-adjusted children who love their mom very much. My children and I frequently exchanged the many words and acts that manifest the band of love between us, and I thought the "Dear Data" project would help illuminate that joy at a time when I could use some help acknowledging beauty around me. In tracking demonstrations of affection I felt I could look at all my interactions in a three-week span, and the results would either lift my spirits or reinforce my situational gloom. Also, during this data-collecting time period I would be quarantined in hospital for a treatment, eliminating any remaining thyroid cancer tissue in my body. I would be radioactive and unable to be around people. How would that isolation impact me emotionally? Examining that physical and emotional journey would be interesting, reflective, and potentially beneficial to my journey back to health and happiness. I was more than ready to begin.

On October 31st I began to track all physical and digital affirmations of love that others showed me. I crossed my fingers, and I hoped for the same affirmation Sally Field exclaimed when she won an Oscar in 1985!

> "I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now", she gushed, "you like me!" (Oscars, 2011).

I took a deep breath…and began.

A reflection on this data collection process

Twenty consecutive days of tracking data led to some interesting insights on who I physically interacted with, and how often they showed physical or digital signs of affection. Of the 20 days, seven were "touchless" as I was quarantined in hospital or secluded in my cabin. In the remaining 13 days I was working, mothering, socializing, and "PhD'ing". I collected 71 separate instances of touch from 29 individuals, including friends, colleagues, an acquaintance, a nurse, my children, four of my friends' husbands, and one cat. I developed a system for denoting types of gestures, several of which I will explain here. I counted "digital love" as emoticons such as hugs, kisses and hearts. They meant the same to me as if they were 'in the flesh'. Numerous kisses and hugs with my children are described as "snuggles". One evening my eight-year old daughter was upset so I only received the love from my five-year old son. My data chart reflects the relative emptiness of that bedtime snuggle.
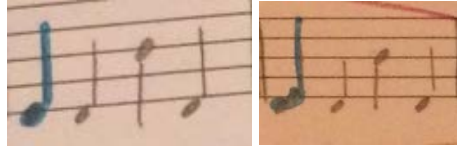
Figure 1. Evening Snuggle with Seth without Estelle and Evening Snuggle with Seth and Estelle

Very deliberate patterns of love emerged throughout the first seven days of this collection period. Mornings and nights were filled with loving touches from my children, while the work hours showed surprise demonstrations of affection from friends and colleagues. On the weekends, friends were eager to include me in their social lives, and indicated love through gentle hugs, rubs, and hand-holding. The seven-day dreaded radioactive hospital treatment was not as negative as I thought. I had ample time to read, watch Netflix, study, and reflect. It was lonely and empty, but I did know the end was in sight and that I would resume my daily life again. Interestingly, when the hospital stay was over the pattern of affection emerged immediately without skipping a beat. My mornings and evenings were filled with children's kisses, and friends and colleagues could show their concern through loving physical touches. However, I did not emotionally rebound to my normal, happy self quickly. That recovery was a slow and delicate journey. I kept a journal reserved for when I felt the most vulnerable. It reads:

> 6:00pm Invited to Angela's for supper. Kids are at Moms. I don't want to go so I am writing my thoughts down in this book to get some clarity. I don't want to talk about my woes to everyone and I know they will ask about them. I don't want to cry at a dinner party and bring everyone down…and besides the treatment eradicated my taste buds and everything tastes like glue…old-cheap-dried-up horse-glue. This is tough and gross. (Halfyard, personal journal, November 17, 2017)

My data from that night indicate that Angela hugged me, Gerry hugged and kissed me, Mark hugged and kissed me, and Kellie held my hand for a while. I was beginning to recognise and feel the strong correlation between my new-found awareness of physical affection and its direct impact on my emotional strength. There was a glimmer of awareness of the power of love. Could my darkened mood be lightened by recognizing the simple act of loving physical touch?

My stories of touch, highlighted through a personal data collection process, show that though I felt lonely, I was not alone. I was truly blessed by many who love me. Tracking and analysing love-touches acutely illuminated how fortunate I was to have 29 different caring individuals who physically expressed love in my life over that 20-day period. Imagine the love we receive throughout an entire year? A decade? A lifetime? I need only to be aware of the camaraderie, love, and support around me and in the seemingly bleak hours, I can ride on the kisses, love rubs, snuggles, and yes, even emoticons to help guide my emotionally and physically damaged ship safely back to shore. Here I must include a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning that deeply resonates with me. It expresses true, committed, passionate love.

> *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.*
> *I love thee to the depth and breadth and height*
> *My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight*
> *For the ends of being and ideal grace.*
> *I love thee to the level of every day's*
> *Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.*
> *I love thee freely, as men strive for right.*

> *I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.*
> *I love thee with the passion put to use*
> *In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.*
> *I love thee with a love I seemed to lose*
> *With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,*
> *Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,*
> *I shall but love thee better after death (1850/2005)*

Written explanation of the visual and aural data

After I had collected the data and arranged them by day, person, and action, patterns began to emerge. I arranged them in five columns under the headings "who, what, when, why, and how". Twenty-nine different individuals (including one cat) showed me demonstrations of love in the 20 days of tracking. These patterns were intriguing. For example, every morning my children exhibited the same signs of affection. Every night, we routinely snuggled before bed. If I was going to represent these data in a musical composition, not only would it look the same, but the aural representation would also create a music motif particular to them. What would these visual representations of data sound like? Could they create the data-based soundtrack of my life?

One measure. One touch.

If I represented one touch as a full measure of music I could visually (and eventually aurally) depict the "who, what, when, why, and how" of the touch, as well as classify the depth of the love, personal love, or an act of friendship. Some days may have up to 11 acts of love (11 measures), while others may only have three. A coloured phrase line indicates the beginning and end of one day. When played, these phrase markings may be used to create a musical line to help indicate where each day begins and ends.

Time Signature

I choose a simple 4/4-time signature to reflect four of the five major categories of the collected data. Each measure in the piece would represent one physical touch. In the four beats per measure, the first would represent the who, the second, the what, the third, the when, the fourth the why and the how.
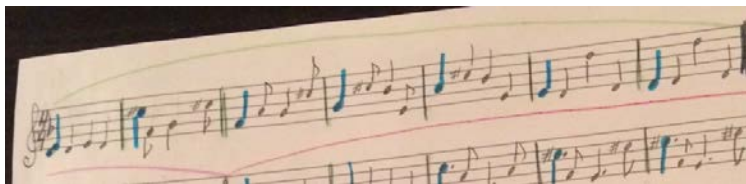

Figure 2. These 7 Measures indicate 1 Day and 7 Demonstrations of Touch.

Who

My children, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, one nurse, and my cat were the 29 givers of affection throughout this 20-day period. My day to day activities did not veer off a normal course during this collection process, and I mostly stayed close to home, or work, or attended some medical appointments. Everyone who physically touched me with affection is listed in my tracking data. They are

in order, Estelle, Seth Ginny, Ian, Michelle, the cat, Jenny M., Shannon, Gerry, Jan, Ruth, Glenda, Katie, Brian, Don, Amanda, Lisa B., Lisa R., the nurse, Peter, Ryan, Mark, Kellie, Mark Q., Susan, Jared, Jen H., and Sheila. They were all issued a colour and a note on the scale. If the note on the scale was duplicated, then their assigned colour was different. These individuals were always represented by the first note in the measure.
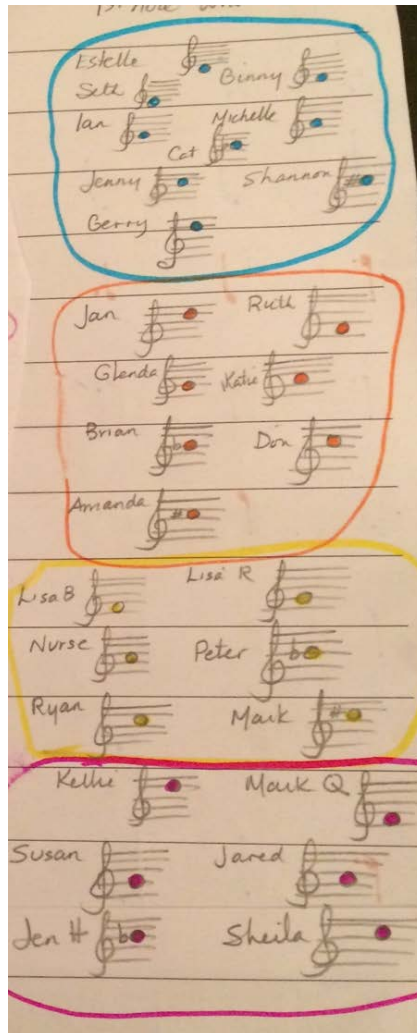

Figure 3. Individuals and their Noted Designation

What

I found I could arrange the data into four categories: snuggles, hug/kiss, a love rub, and a digital love. For this second note of the measure, I assigned the tonic of the scale to the snuggles because, like the tonic, it feels like home. I assigned the F4, the mediant, to the act of love rub. The love rubs were usually given by friends as a pick-me-up, as encouragement, or as support – a little touch on the arm or back. The F4, the third, creates the somber tone of the minor key. The hug/kiss was given the dominant of the chord – the A natural. It was usually given as a greeting or an act of support and was always appreciated. The digital love was given a leading tone note, either a C natural or C sharp.

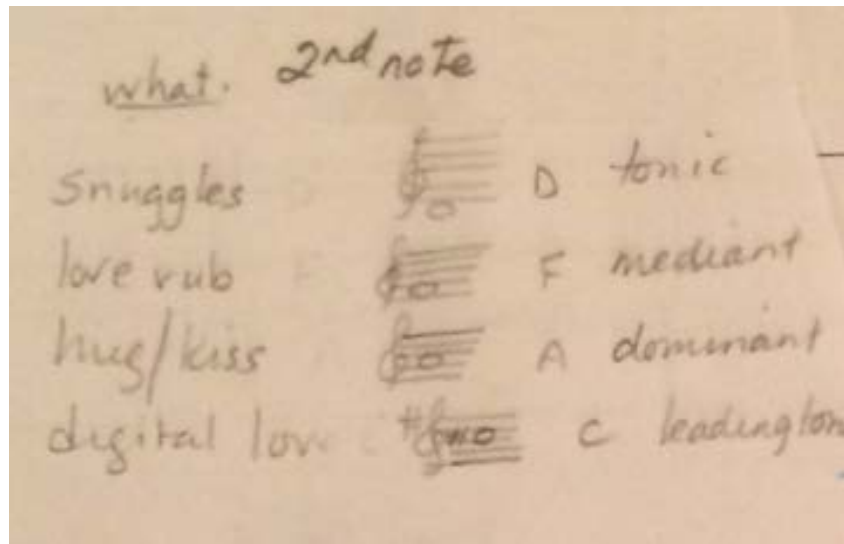THE BEAUTY IS: TRACKING PHYSICAL AFFIRMATIONS OF LOVE

Figure 4. Affections of Love and Assigned Notes

When

 I categorized four specific times of day, morning, afternoon, evening, and late night for the third note of the measure.   For the morning events, I randomly assigned the supertonic E natural, for the afternoon, the sub-dominant G, for the night, the sub median B flat, and for the late night I assigned an octave tonic.
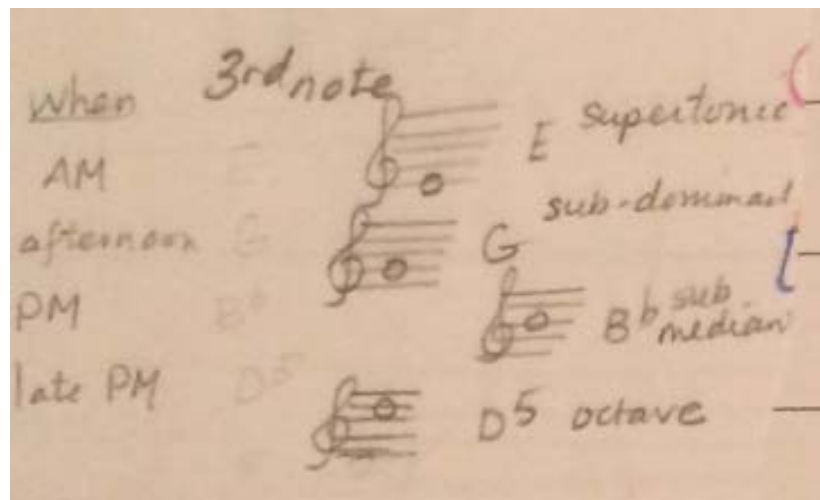

Figure 5. Time of Day and Assigned Notes

Why

I arranged the data in groupings of child's love, a greeting, friendship love, nursing compassion, and colleague support. I assigned a child's love to the foundational tonic, a greeting to the dominant A,

friendship love to the super tonic E, nursing compassion to C natural, and a colleague's support to the C sharp leading tone. This is always the fourth note of the measure.
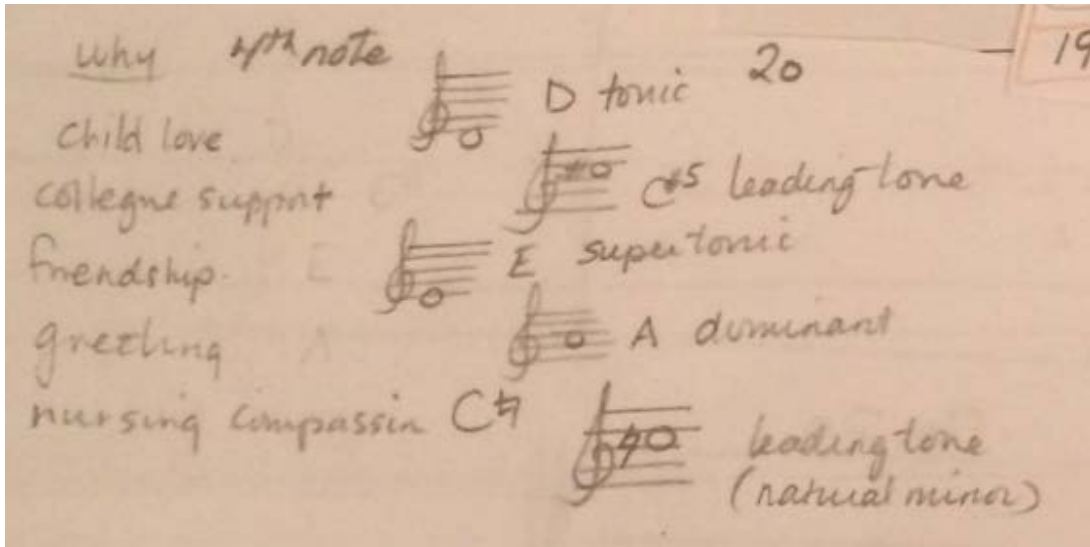

Figure 6. "The Why" and Assigned Notes

How

I depicted whether the act was personal love or an act of kindness through rhythm. An act of kindness was a dotted rhythm: impromptu, joyous, unexpected, and party-like – reminiscent of the skipping rhythmic dance or the fluttering heart of a first love. Personal love was four straight quarter notes: steady, secure, and unfailing.
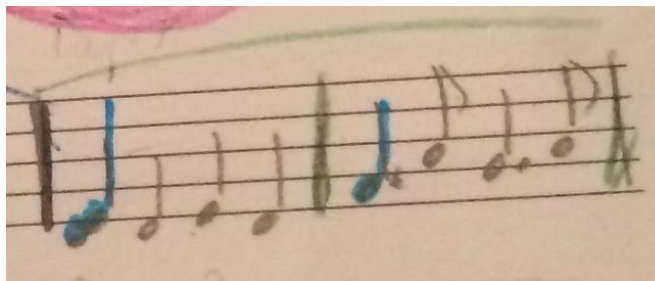

Figure 7. Personal Love Rhythm followed by Act of Kindness Rhythm

Key signature

How could I decide which key would represent the data? To aid this decision, I looked to the composers' descriptions about the moods of key signatures. In Steblin's (2002) book, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,* Charpenier described C major as "gay and militant" (p.226). Schrader suggested B minor was "bitter, gloomy lamentation, on account of hard suffering…the shocked soul looks around exhausted and almost without hope" (p. 296). Schubart wrote that C# minor suggested, "penitential lamentation, intimate conversation with God, the friend and help-meet of life; sighs of disappointed friendship and love lie in its radius" (p 237). Schrader also writes that C# minor

describes, "a depraved insane mind" (p.237). None of these descriptions matched what I felt the music of my life represented, but I wondered if the evocative key of D minor poignantly echoed my quiet sorrow. Masson suggested D minor was "gravity mixed with gaiety" (p.243). Schubart referred to D minor as "melancholy womanliness" (p. 243). And Heinrich suggested "gently sorrowing" (p.243). Gervasoni in 1800 called it "affectionate" and Gardiner described it as "contemplative" (p. 243). Indeed, I deeply connected with all of those adjectives: gravity, melancholy, and sorrow, and while I embraced vulnerability, sadness, and used this as a time of reflection and healing, D minor was the perfect key.

THE SCALE – Assigning notes and colours to individuals

After choosing the key, the time signature, and the representation of both the measure and of rhythm, I assigned all 29 "givers of affection" an individual note on the scale. I choose to use both the raised and lowered 7th notes on the scale simply because I wanted the extra surprise that melodic minor can bring and, practically, I needed the extra note because of the number of people who touched me and my desire to represent them individually. Colour coding some of the same notes would denote different people as well. Shannon and Kellie share the same C#5 but visually the colour red indicates Shannon and yellow indicates Kellie. Some of the assigned notes were a systematic process, while others were more random. For example, I knew my children would be highly prevalent in this piece, so I gave Estelle the tonic, the D4, and I gave Seth the E4. Because of their close proximity, when played together they are dissonant, which represents their childhood relationship, a little discordant yet loving – clashing and beautiful. Also, including them as the tonic and the supertonic of the key represents them as my home, as my refuge and safety, and my greatest love. Shannon was quite supportive and kind throughout these three weeks. She was represented by the leading tone of C#5. Mark and Amanda were also given this leading tone note, but coloured yellow and orange respectively. Shannon, Mark, and Amanda's kind influence guided my panic into calm just as a leading tone leans into the tonic.
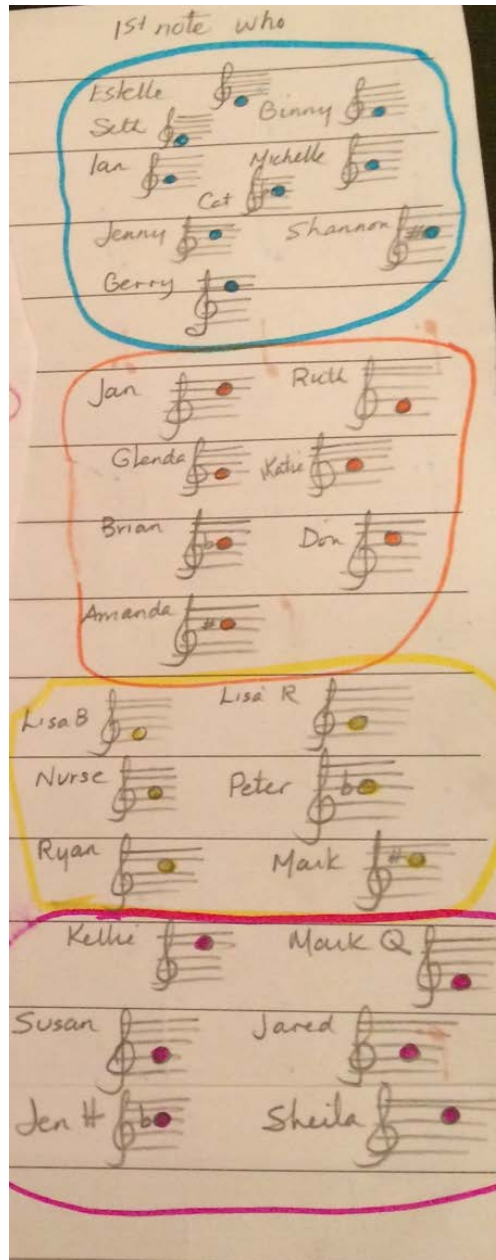
Figure 8. colour coding the individuals

Forty-two measures of rests

I also embrace silence in the piece. During my time in hospital no one was allowed to physically touch me for close to seven days. There could be no data to collect but the emotions of these days, represented by one measure per day, are reflected in the 42 measures of silence. Upon playing the piece, one can hear the emptiness and deafening solitude in the silence.

It brings to mind the avant-garde composer, John Cage, who created an entire (and controversial) piano composition around silence. Gann (2010) describes the scene at the 1952 premiere in his book, *No such thing as silence: John Cage's 4'33*.

> Pianist David Tudor sat down at the piano on the small raised wooden stage, closed the keyboard lid over the keys, and looked at a stopwatch. Twice in the next four minutes he raised the lid up and lowered it again, careful to make no audible sound, although at the same time he was turning pages of the music, which were devoid of notes. After four minutes and thirty-three seconds had passed, Tudor rose to receive applause—and thus was premiered one of the most controversial, inspiring, surprising, infamous, perplexing, and influential musical works since Igor Stravinsky's Le sacre du printemps. (p.4)

John Cage later suggested that the piece, "4.33" was in fact, not silence but, "full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out" (as cited in Gann, p. 4).

My hospital stay, in fact, allowed me the time to listen to all the "incidental sounds" around me. The time alone permitted me time to think, assess, and process this particular intersection. Like the uncomfortable 42 measures of silence in my data, it encouraged me listen to what was happening around me instead of paying attention to what was missing.

Interpretation of the data visually and aurally

Visually, the composition is colourful, with coloured notes reflecting different individuals. Musical phrase markings are also used on the top of the measure in different colours to indicate each day. As each loving touch is represented through one measure, one day may yield a variety of these loving-touches and be quite different from the next. One day may have three measures while another has seven, giving inconsistency to the lyric lines of the piece while reflecting the spontaneity of daily physical loving affection.

I also see (and hear) support and love through a digital medium. Michelle, (the first note) represented by a blue A4, sent me a digital love, (the second note) C#5, in the late night (the third note), and it represents colleague support (the fourth note). The rhythm also indicates personal love.
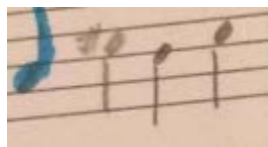

Figure 9. Michelle's Heart Emoticon (second note) sent to me late one night (third note)

Shannon, a blue C#5, gave me a love rub twice in a row in the morning, followed by a hug in the afternoon. The love rubs were categorized as colleague support while the hug was a greeting. The dotted rhythm indicates an act of friendship.
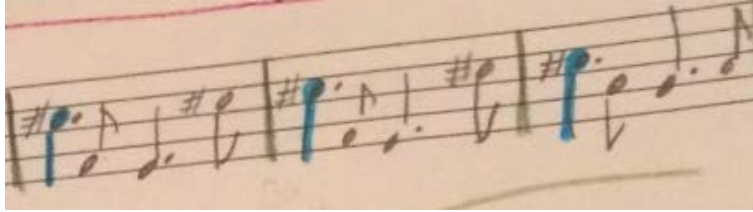
Figure 10. Shannon's 3 Acts of Affection

Not only can I see the personality of my friends in this visual representation, but I can also hear how they express concern and affection towards me when I play their motives. Lisa B hugged me three times in a row, in the evening, expressing friendship. The straight rhythm also indicates a personal love.
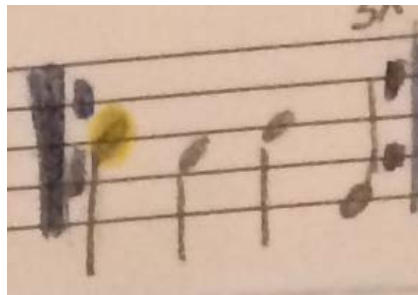

Figure 11. Lisa B: 3 Hugs in the Evening.

Through the visual and aural representation of this data I can recall with ease, the event, the moment, the act of affection, and the individual. The data however, also represent the absence of physical affection during the week of the hospital stay. According to the first week of data, a day will average 6.712 physical affections. If I rounded this down to 6 then I could surmise that the following week I could receive (on average) six touches a day for seven days, for a total of 42 measures of music, yielding 168 beats. Since I was unable to be physically touched, each beat would be represented with a rest. Each measure would receive a whole note rest. This silence is deafening and truly reflects the loneliness and impact of the isolation.
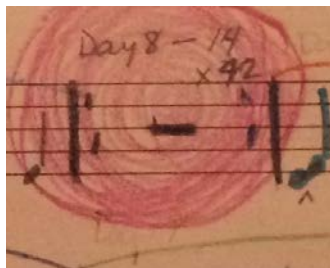

Figure 12. 42 measures of Lack of Physical Affection

The Beauty is…

Since November, I have sat down and thought about all the commotion that surrounds me. I feel strangely calm and measured**.** I feel surrounded by strength and love, and I am inspired by it. Award-winning Broadway show, *Light in the Piazza* expresses hope, new beginnings, love, loss, and finding beauty where and when you least expect it. In the following excerpt, Clara sings of a plethora of blessings, even when surrounded by the unfamiliar: a new city, language, and people.

> *This is wanting something, this is reaching for it,*
> *This is wishing that a moment would arrive.*
> *This is taking chances, this is almost touching, what the beauty is.*
> *I don't understand a word they're saying*
> *I'm as different here as different can be.*
> *But the beauty is I still meet people like me.*
> *I've hardly met a single soul, but I am not alone.*
> *I feel grown.*
> *This is wanting something, this praying for it,*
> *This is holding breath and keeping fingers crossed.*
> *This is counting blessings, this is wondering when I'll see that boy again.*
> *And the beauty is, when you realize, when you realize,*
> *Someone could be looking for a someone like you (Guettel, 2005, p. 19)*

Similar to Clara, I am, "holding breath and keeping fingers crossed" for health and happiness. Already, months into my new journey I can reflect, with the help of the "Dear Diary" project, on the community of love around me. It is the small gestures that power strength. By acknowledging each physical demonstration of love through the "Dear Diary" project I am able to remember these moments and highlight their role in fueling inner strength and helping rebuild love, life, and confidence. Studying the smaller aspects of a day can influence perspective and make a whole day brighter. The "philosophical", comedic team of Monty Python declares that:

> *Some things in life are bad*
> *They can really make you mad*
> *Other things just make you swear and curse*
> *When you're chewing on life's gristle*
> *Don't grumble, give a whistle*
> *And this'll help things turn out for the best*
> *And always look on the bright side of life*
> *Always look on the light side of life (Idle and Du Prez, 2005)*

Reflection about participation as a collaborative researcher

Though my chosen data collection was sensitive and personal, I was comfortable in sharing the data and results with my colleagues at the end of the process. They offered encouragement, insight, and opinions on how to better present the data enhancing the use of the visual and aural representations. Also, acknowledging use of the narrative story, journaling, poetry, theatre libretto, and popular song texts, as an effective method to tell the story, explain my process, and share the results, was encouraging and propelled my interest in the creative arts-based method of research. I am very excited about my

discoveries throughout this process. I have also created an aural representation of the data, and I am eager to share the results on piano for my colleagues and professors.

Acknowledging more beauty within the data

Throughout the entire project I was gently reminded, by the data, how fortunate I was to be surrounded by people who cared for me, particularly at a time when I felt the most vulnerable and alone. Perhaps I would not have been so open to these small moments had I not chosen such a personal and emotional topic. Upon reflection, I am also delighted to discover that the first measure of the piece (the first instance of touch) and the last measure of the piece, (the last instance of touch) represent my children and the love for their mother. Measure 1 depicts a "snuggle" from Estelle and Seth in the morning as an act of child's love. Measure 112 shows Estelle and Seth "snuggling" with me in the night time as an act of child's love. Acknowledging these acts of affection through visual and aural representation at the top and bottom of this data collection illustrates how central they are to my world, and how lucky and blessed I am to be literally bookended with love.
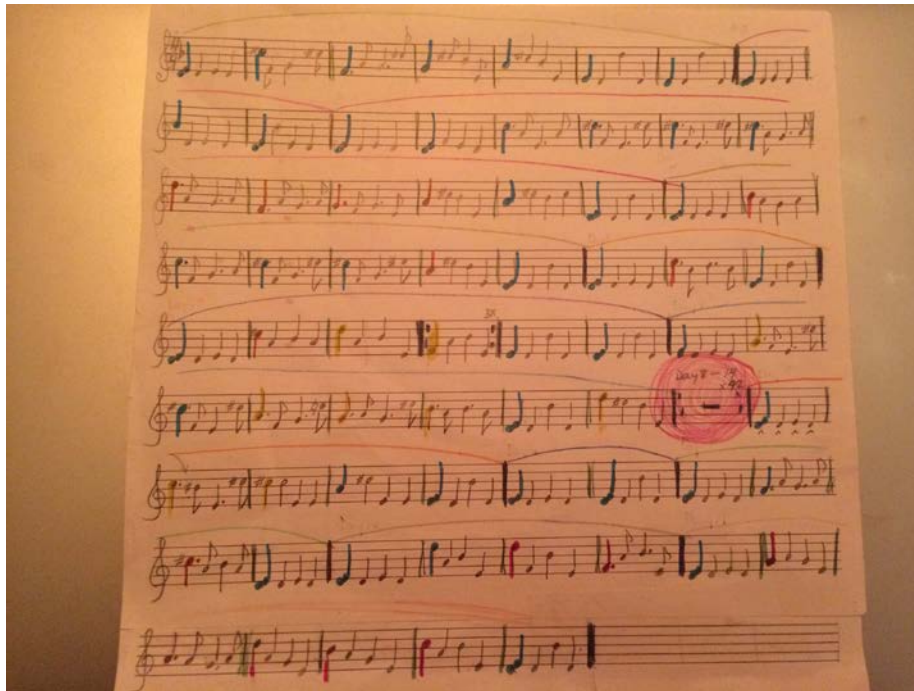

Figure 13. The entire 3 weeks of data

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