

Getting to Yes with an Invitation and a Song

*A Lesson Learned from Dorothy
by Mary Sue Wilkinson,
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Dorothy was a plump, round woman with a ready smile, a contagious laugh, and a beautiful singing voice. She delighted in anything funny and could always cheer me up by her mere presence. Her sense of rhythm was impeccable and she would bounce in her chair to the beat of the music. Given the opportunity, she would dance.

Dorothy's dementia had not robbed her of language but her conversations were sometimes hard to follow. She drove her housemate Velma nuts when she would go on and on about her dog Sunshine or how she had just been at the hospital or how her son had gotten her special shoes. None of which were fully true in the moment but held kernels of true memories for Dorothy and as such were of great value.

I learned an important lesson from Dorothy.

I knew Dorothy loved music and she loved to sing. If she happened to be out in the dining room where we gathered she would always join in enthusiastically.

If she was in her bedroom? It was another story.

Because I knew she loved music, I would go to her bedroom and say "Dorothy, do you want to come to music?"

What was her answer?

"Oh, I can't come now. My son is about to call." Or simply, "Oh, I don't think so."

But I KNEW Dorothy loved our music sessions.

So I got smart.

I learned to invite and to encourage. Not ask.

After I learned this lesson, here's how the conversation would go when I popped my head in her room.

"Dorothy! I'm so happy to see you!!" (Said with an enormous smile and a gentle side by side hug.)

"I can't wait to sing with you!"

"It's music time!"

“What shall we sing today?”

“How about *You Are My Sunshine*?”

When I began to sing, Dorothy invariably would join in and I would gently guide her to the dining room, either by holding her hand or sometimes with my arm around her.

Sometimes Dorothy continued to object.

Dorothy: “But I’m waiting for my son to call.”

Me: “Oh, I understand. I’ll help you listen for the call.”

Dorothy: “I don’t feel like singing today.”

Me: “Oh, that’s OK. I’ll do the singing. You can just listen.”

You get the idea.

Were there times Dorothy stayed in her room? Yes.

There’s a difference between encouragement and being pushy. Don’t give up too easily. But don’t bulldoze people. What works one day may not work the next. What works for one person may not work for another. Your relationship will help you decide how far to go with this. In the end, “Dorothy” always gets to decide.

An encouraging invitation is a positive approach to care.

I hope you’ll look for the “Dorothy” or the “Don” in your midst and give it a try.

Mary Sue Wilkinson is the founder of Singing Heart to Heart and the author of “Songs You Know By Heart: A Simple Guide for Using Music in Dementia Care,” from which this Music Moment is an excerpt. The book includes contributions from Teepa Snow as well as Mary Sue’s CD of 18 favorite sing along songs. Buy the book [HERE](#).