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Interlude 7 Singing Through Grief

An Autoethnographic Fragment with Brief Commentary

†Note from Editors: Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman passed away on June 4, 2020, after submitting an abstract for consideration in this volume. We invited Estelle Jorgensen to frame the abstract so we could publish her words posthumously.

Death arrives with dreadful finality upon an unfinished life. For my former student, colleague, and friend, Patrice Madura Ward-Steinman, it came as she was poised to write the story of a “five-year musical and spiritual process of grief and recovery” after the death of her beloved husband and “soul mate,” David. She had hoped to explore “through journal analysis” her “winding path from initial devastating grief to cathartic and insightful experiences through music, poetry, psalms and spiritual explorations.” The purpose of this story was three-fold: “to examine the nature of the musical and spiritual experiences that have led to my recovery over five years; to give hope, understanding, courage and suggestions to others who find themselves incapacitated by grief; and to provide insight to those who are among the grieving but misunderstand their seemingly endless recovery period.”

I cannot imagine a more important purpose in writing such a chapter. As one who traveled with her along part of this journey, I encouraged her to write her story. Those who knew Patrice as family member, friend, colleague, teacher, student, or musician will understand that she sought to use her own experience to help others. The frame in which she intended to do this – so uniquely Patrice – was to tell her story and draw closely the links between music, poetry, readings, and spirituality as ways toward healing.

She hoped to “specify the illuminating musical compositions (classical, jazz, and folk), readings (psalms of lament, Unity prayers, and books), and personal poems that provided me with catharses, insights, growth, and finally, recovery.” How I wish that she had been able to accomplish this task! We have only the outline of her concept. Still, the fragment Patrice left is of value to music educators because of its intersections among grief as a fundamental reality of lived experience, a journey of recovery, song, spirituality, and hope.

In this fragment, Patrice briefly tells of her marriage in 2001, news of David’s cancer in 2013, and his death in April 2015. She then describes her grief and the poignant journey throughout the following five years until her death in 2020. Here are her words:

... ..

Marriage 2001

Marriage is the
wedding of souls,
uniting of hearts.
One heart is greater than 2
One love is greater than 2
Two soulmates are we.
It feels like 2 birds
Who utter two words—Love you!

2013

We learned that David has metastatic prostate cancer. Dr G. surgically removed a cancerous “gray, cement-like” mass of lymph nodes. He said the cancer is from his aorta to groin. We knew something was seriously wrong before this. We slow-danced and cried together. Our days together are numbered. I want to know all of him and be all for him. I don’t want a single regret. Our hearts are broken – overflowing with feeling, as Cheryl Strayed stated at the end of Part IV of Wild. That’s what David and I share now; the precious fullness of life. Gratitude for it. Longing for each drop of it. Dance, play, sing, love, appreciate, support, laugh, encourage, praise, feel, prepare, do! Treasuring every moment of our time together.

ER trips, biopsies, surgeries, blood draws, CT scans, MRIs, experimental drugs, bone scans, EKGs, kidney stents, chemotherapy, dialysis, hospitalizations ...

April 2015

The last few days of David's life were in the hospital under continuously deteriorating conditions and all systems failing. Except for his mind. He suddenly said the unimaginable, "Write this down. I want this music at my funeral. It's the last section of my oratorio where Moses dies. Joe can sing, and Don can play the piano. It also needs a soprano who can sing a high A."

The experience of the loss of my love was *unimaginable*. I knew he would die from cancer, and I had imagined what my life would be without him. I knew I would miss him terribly, but I couldn't have imagined how deeply one can miss another who is gone forever. I never imagined the utter silence that the house could hold. I never imagined that my heart would literally pound so hard that I could see it beating against my shirt. I imagined that I would be OK because I had been a very independent person before we married. I never imagined that the person I became from loving him was a very different, not-so-independent half of a person, who had given so much energy to fighting his cancer and living "our" life to the fullest.

I had not imagined or prepared myself for the first days after his death – appointments with the pastor, with the funeral home, with the cemetery, with the bank – questions such as "Should I get the blue metal coffin to match his airplane or a traditional beautiful wooden one?" "Would he like to be in the low breezy section of the cemetery or on the top of the hill even though it says 'Catholic Section'?" "Should I pick out the blue marble headstone that is the color of his eyes even though it is the most expensive?" "Do you have a piano image for the headstone?" "How can I decide on funeral hymns and readings?" and "Are you kidding me how much this all costs?" – and ultimately being sure I could not possibly show up to these events in one piece as my body was trembling constantly. I didn't want to live without him.

Unimaginable grief over the loss of my husband led to loss of my personal and professional identity resulting in depression. The path to re-discovery was difficult and lengthy and began with grief counseling on the need to allow myself to feel, by avoiding over-sleeping, over-eating, and over-drinking, which numb feelings. Periodic fasting and abstinence, along with listening to and performing feelingful music, began to allow me to express my pain. I went through a very long period of constantly looking for (and often finding) signs from beyond from him but eventually realized that with an open heart and mind those will come to me without obsessive focus. I found that efforts to seek musical and spiritual experiences that reminded me who I was before David, but also others that allowed me to acknowledge the treasure of my love for David, were both necessary. A professional conundrum was that my fundamental priorities and dispositions had changed as a result of my loss – I no longer appreciated music styles that had been the focus of my teaching and research because they were imbued with a joy that I no longer felt; and I lacked empathy for others' pain because my own had hollowed me out too deeply.

It took me five years to “wake up,” as my therapist called it. I learned that the creative activities of playing piano and singing transformative music, and creating cathartic poems and visual art, in combination with the spiritual disciplines of daily meditation, contemplating spiritual readings, and attending church choir, the physical practices of periodic fasting and guided exercise, and continued grief therapy and an immersion in grief literature led to profound self-discoveries and a clear focus, courage, and faith to carry on.

... ..

I love the metaphor that Patrice invokes of waking up. She sang, prayed, played, meditated, conversed, exercised, dieted, and journaled her way from darkness to light. It was as if she had been asleep and was now wide-awake (Greene, 1995, p. 43) to the possibilities of life that, notwithstanding the magnitude of her loss, could still hold deep meaning, fulfillment, and even joy. I like to think of this waking up as a soulful experience in which music, poetry, religion, and ritual served a cathartic purpose in enabling her to express her grief. It also brought her solace as her imagination awakened to possibilities she could not see beforehand. Nor was she alone on this

journey. Friends, family members, colleagues, and students who loved her were there with her. In a time of profound sorrow, these musical, spiritual, and communal experiences helped her find a way through this blighted time.

Patrice's sense of divine abandonment, distress, and grief are expressed in the texts of the psalms of lament. In her final posthumous publication, she draws upon choral settings of these psalms to illustrate those suitable for high school-level choirs (Madura Ward-Steinman, 2020). Her sense of blight aptly expresses the condition of grief that connotes something spoiled or damaged by disease. David had perished of cancer, and his death in turn brought dis-ease to her. Thinking of grief figuratively as blight helps one to better understand it. It is a condition of dis-ease and an affliction that is physically and spiritually destructive. There must be healing, and this process takes time – sometimes years of recovery. For Patrice, choral settings of psalms of lament were among the pathways from dis-ease to wellbeing, from darkness and despair to faith and hope. For her, these choral laments provided a means of expressing grief and opening herself to the possibilities of grace and healing. As she puts it, “The lament psalms, set to choral music, are a potential tool for reaching singers who need to express their grief, and through that process may begin to feel hope for better times, and ultimately to experience joy in living again.” (p. 15)

The quest for happiness as a music educational value and end contributes to the health and wellbeing of musicians, teachers, and students. Nevertheless, happiness has its limits and can be misunderstood. I suggest (Jorgensen, 2020) that seeking an education filled with joy, life, and light requires that musicians, teachers, and students also acknowledge, address, and express the pain, suffering, and death that inevitably come to everyone. At such times, Patrice indicates, music, texts, poems, and readings that convey this sorrow are comforting and healing. The music that teachers teach needs to engage the panoply of human experience. Grief is a necessary condition of mortality through which everyone passes. Expressing grief musically, poetically, artistically, and theatrically channels it into productive and creative “self-expression” (Dewey, 1934/1979, p. 62). This process heals as it voices grief and allows greater insight into self and others. When musical expressions are communal in the choral settings which Patrice envisions, people sense more intimately that they not alone but are all together in the shared condition of humanity.

I see examples of this principle in the work of music teachers who are quarter finalists for the 2021 Grammy award for Outstanding Music Teacher of the Year. As a reviewer of dossiers, I am struck by how these outstanding music teachers engage the COVID-19 pandemic when their students come from a wide array of backgrounds, are separated from each other, and classes and choral, instrumental, jazz, and popular music ensembles cannot be conducted face-to-face. I am moved by the ways in which they understand that they and their students are grieving for what cannot be, for their sense of isolation, and for the loss not only of companionship and live instruction but of basic necessities of life such as employment, food, and shelter. All the teachers speak and act out of a recognition that they need to directly address this individual and collective grief in the face of their predicament, assure their students that they are not alone and they can come through this pandemic successfully, and assist them in meeting their basic needs.

Principals, fellow teachers, parents, and students alike express the ways in which singing brings them together as a community notwithstanding that they are physically isolated. Teachers go well beyond their required duties to deliver food to families in need, to visit the students in socially distanced ways at their homes, to celebrate with them the milestones of their school lives, and to give voice to the sadness and grief they feel. I cannot forget a video performance put together by students and featuring many of their fellows, faculty, and administrators singing together from their separate locations a song, "Lean on Me," arranged for these singers by their music teacher. For them, this song expresses their solidarity with each other at a difficult time. Or an instrumentalist composer who sets the school motto to music, arranges it for his isolated band members, and creates a video performance that becomes the new school song born out of the grief of this pandemic.

This is the vision that Patrice seeks to articulate in channeling her own grief through singing among other means. She recognizes that choral directors and music teachers can directly address grief through well-chosen repertoire and enable its musical expression in ways that bring healing. In so doing, she advocates a humane musical education for the common good (Yob & Jorgensen, 2020). She suggests that music needs to encompass the

whole of our lives – sadness and joy, physicality and spirituality – and in so doing brings, as June Boyce-Tillman (2000) posits, healing and well-being in its train. It may be true that only as one has experienced grief can one more fully understand the grief of others. The tragedy of Patrice's loss and grief enables her to grasp experientially how singing may help ease the journey into wide-awakeness and acceptance. Her message beyond the grave is to urge music teachers to pay greater attention to matters of trauma and grief in their music education programs and realize the power of singing among other ways of musicking to heal the brokenness of body and spirit. The poignancy of this present writing as I bring context to Patrice's autoethnographic fragment clarifies the preciousness of her person. In memory's eye. I see Patrice – wife, friend, colleague, teacher, student, musician, scholar, swimmer, and host at her home – laughing and joyful not long before her death as she emerges from the terrible grief she has endured. She leaves an important legacy for music education in her writing, musicking, and example. It is comforting to know that before her death, she reached a point of acceptance and resignation and saw, once more, hope and possibility.

Singing is a balm for the soul. It is as crucial to human existence as breath itself. Patrice's words and example teach us the power of singing through our grief. Since grief is a common human lot, it needs to be a central concern for music educators, especially in dark and difficult times. Reflecting on Patrice's contribution to music education, I am grateful for having known her and her example continues to light my life. Importantly, she reminds music teachers and students of the privilege of singing songs and psalms of lament that express grief with its sense of profound loss, silence, and darkness, and of the possibility of gradually finding healing through song.

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