

And the Beat Goes On
June 2021

This past Christmas, one of my sons gave me a CD as a present. It seemed strange to receive such a gift, as if the position of our lives had flipped. Once, a long time ago, to fill our three sons with the beauty and power of music, my husband and I gave them CDs. We played music incessantly in our house, and with our small sons, we danced, tapped out rhythms, and sang. Music, as Shakespeare would offer, and our lives confirmed, is the food of love. It is the food of breath, creativity, memory, and emotion. It provides strength, and it provides calm. Even the heart thumps in musical rhythm, that of iambic pentameter. A silly thought: If the leaders of the fighting world would bring music into their theatres of negotiation, perhaps peace would decimate war.

I didn't listen to the CD on that Christmas day. I waited patiently for a stretch of hours in a future day when I, with only the family dog roaming about, could curl up with the provided lyrics after making a cup of tea and setting the volume on the player to a level of audio significance (aka "loud"). That day finally came.

As the beautiful voice of the singer and the strong melody and beat of her band filled the room, I was jolted by the fact that for too long, our CD player has barely been used. I had nearly forgotten how to negotiate the dials that would allow the little CD tray to appear, as if extending a hand to receive what I had to offer. Our sons are grown and gone, and in our later years, my husband and I seem to find too many chores and projects. We have been too busy for music. We have been too busy to dance, or sing along, or pick up the beat on our dog's back. To explain, our dog loves music; he loves to dance, and to be a drum on which we tap.

I read the lyrics as Maren sang. The music pulsed through me, and I began to move to the beat, the too-familiar tension leaving my body. I dared to sing along with the refrains. I was taken back to my high school days when friends who had received their licenses invited me to join them on the several-mile trips to the beach. Rolling down the car windows, we cranked up the radio's volume, rocked our bodies, and belted out the lyrics, caring little that we dissolved into off-key as our voices grew more forceful. Each song on the Friday afternoon's "Top Twenty Countdown" had an important message, and it was up to us, careening toward the dunes and the surf, to shout it. It's a beautiful morning...Hello, I love you...MacArthur Park is melting in the dark...Baby, now that I've found you, I won't let you go, I've built my world around you.

Why had I not listened to music in so long? Does one get to a certain age to not need it anymore? Was I trying to play the role of the older woman—settled, reserved, quiet, tiny in voice, body, and soul? Was I about to throw away music just as I have been eyeing my wardrobe with the notion to give most of it away? Was allowing my body to grow stiff the latest fad among the more-than-fifty-somethings? What had happened to the joy of grabbing the dusting cloth and in the same quick motion, popping Aretha or Liszt, "South Pacific" or "A Lark Ascending" into the player and suddenly finding myself moving on center stage? Had something suddenly been declared verboten about Beethoven-induced head banging?

I had conceivably grown complacent with accidental—or might I say “natural”—music. I had certainly found satisfaction in the pinging of raindrops on the woodstove chimney, in the duet of the redwing blackbird’s scree-shout and the robin’s twitter-laugh, in the drum brush of a gust of wind through the pines, in my neighbor’s car engine that churns much before it turns over, in a list of names read aloud—Timothy Neuland Amanda Jones. These, all simple, plain sounds.

I clearly was avoiding the intricacy in music, the product of many sounds, that elaborate, artistic layering that culminates in together sounds, or “symphony”. A symphony rubs up against the notion of Heaven. It is this final creation—of composing, conducting, rehearsing, recording/performing—that softens my soul to an emotive level that brings on weeping, that brings on pain that is somehow simultaneous with limitless joy and shattered inhibition.

Why leave behind the wildness that music brings out in me? The beat that makes me bold? The words or melodies that get me through many a dark night? That cleanse me through tears. There is something to be said for the phrase “high fidelity”.

The lyrics I listened to that day, alone in the house but for the dog, carried a message of hope, self-respect, confidence. I was proud of this young singer. She was telling her many fans that aspirations and dreams were not beyond their reach, that pride and belief in oneself was essential. That there was no reason to remain a victim. That one could soar. Aretha would be pleased. How interesting that musical genres and styles have changed but the soul of music has not. How could music be so beautiful were it not for its soul? I think often that the soul of music, that which creates and sustains it, is made more distinct by its near opposite: silence. The relationship of these opposites could be considered harmonious.

In *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, author John O’Donohue writes that “music is after all the most perfect sound to meet the silence. When you really listen to music, you begin to hear the beautiful way it constellates and textures the silence, how it brings out the hidden mystery of silence. ... Music ministers to the silence and solace of nature. It is one of the most powerful, immediate, and intimate of sensuous experiences.”

As the songs pulsed through me, shattering the silence like hot waves of electricity, I wondered what the world would be like without music. That void would be impossible for the world is the result of music, and music is the result of the world. Music is beauty, and it is magnitude. The writer Louise Penny, in the “Acknowledgments” to *The Beautiful Mystery*, gives credit to music, insisting that it has a “near magical effect” on the creative process. She insists that music is “transformative. Spiritual, even. I can feel the divine in music.”

The CD ended. Silence. But Sonny and Cher tell us that “the beat goes on, yeah the beat goes on, pounding a rhythm to the brain.”