

(*In this non-fiction work, names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.)

The Road Not Taken

All my life they called me musical. It's something they notice in you as a baby, when you bang your rattle to the beat of Bolero or wave your spoon, splattering baby spinach to The Blue Danube. They say at five, I kissed the second-hand Knaubel upright after its clumsy entrance through our front door, patting it like a visiting grandmother as it came to rest, a dark looming thing, in a corner of the dining room. Here they found me the next day making fairy bells in the high treble. Shortly thereafter they took me to a neighborhood matron who brought me solidly back to middle C, to begin my musical schooling.

Later, hearing me pour my heart into The Spinning Song, my uncle the organist remarked I had a nice touch, and my father asked me to play it again for company, though when they were gone and I started to pick out the next piece, one I didn't know yet, my brothers and sisters told me to shut up, they wanted to watch I Love Lucy. I paid them back, learning The Happy Farmer and March of the Elves to pump at them when they tried to play Monopoly on the dining room table. From then on, I don't remember ever practicing when I didn't feel engaged in warfare, nor playing when I wasn't showing off and making enemies of the others. But I do remember, somewhere behind or under the uproar it caused, loving the sound of a second or seventh resolving, of the interval of a sixth when I played N-B-C, or the running progression of thirds, my two hands playing very close together, up and down.

As a musical child, I was in demand for children's choirs, chorusing My Great Big Brownie Smile for the Rotarians and The Lord's Prayer for the Methodists, or taking the solo obbligato in Silent Night as the Sunday school tramped over frozen lawns at Christmas or stood steaming, smelling of wet wool in the Old Folk's Home. Something wonderful happened to me when I sang, some softening of my continual striving, some lightening of despair at being littlest or last. I lost my grievances when my voice lost itself in a swelling chord; I found myself when it merged in smooth unison with a handful of others. Harmonizing my soprano with her alto, I even

loved my big sister momentarily, and believed she loved me, though our truce ended when the music stopped. Singing together is still the main thing we remember kindly about one another.

Being musical is not just performing: it means also a terrible vulnerability to sound -- certain voices, tunes, timbres invaded me, penetrating my brashest defenses. I developed the most heartbreaking crush on an Irish nurse the Christmas I was thirteen and in the hospital with pneumonia. She took me to the staff party in a dark, tinsel-draped basement, and fed me hot buttered rum, then sang "Silver Bells" in a pure high voice I wanted to become. The anguish associated with that song lasted for years, sneaking up on me every Christmas from radios or loudspeakers in stores, once even from a music box I accidentally popped open, its absurd tinkling tying the familiar knot under my ribs, a longing for something unattainable, unbearable. I wanted to hurt like that always.

As might be expected, my first Mozart -- around age seven -- was a mortal blow. One morning I woke to hear my father playing his new 78, a horn concerto, on the Victrola. I had never heard anything like it, one phrase in particular moving me so I couldn't stop crying. I took my tears to show him and he played it again. I reveled in my susceptibility and in his favor, until I returned to performance mode. I found I could improvise the horn theme on the piano, which I did for weeks, until in desperation Daddy put back on the record and I was silenced. Some years later, when I did the trick again with Tchaikovsky, he found that record, too, "for me" -- and I retreated permanently from improvisation. Hearing the real version rolling out so effortlessly, so complete, without knowing how one got there from my picked out tune, my faked chords, simply undid me. I sensed that planning to learn the true piece someday was like planning to marry a movie star -- who would already be taken when you finally grew old enough to try.

That route closed, I concentrated instead on what I could master by diligence. My father once took me to a movie about Rubinstein, a small-screen black and white film with scratchy sound, from which he gleaned the maxim he was to drum into me for years: "Genius is one percent talent and ninety-nine percent hard work." Each time he repeated this to me, in his Rotarian oratorical tones, I saw I was meant to be a "genius," that is, a true musician on the order of Rubinstein; anything less would be failure, and worse, a failure not of innate talent but of character, of grit, of willingness to work. Fighting the suspicion that I didn't have it in me to

become another Rubinstein, being after all only a woman like my pudgy-handed teacher, Mrs. Agee, I nonetheless threw myself fiercely at the runs in Scarlatti sonatinas, which I practiced at dazzling speeds, sometimes stopping for mistakes, mostly racing past, with my mother shouting from the kitchen, "Slow down and get it RIGHT!" And then I did, pounding slowly, over and over, the two or three measures that had tripped me up, just beginning to get them into my hands—almost but not quite wonderfully—when she would shout, "Isn't that ENOUGH!?" And so I'd race through it all again, twice lightly, smooth as ice, until I found a new trouble spot, and the battle would begin all over. I began to see myself as someone who lacked steadiness.

I had at first no conscious ambitions and didn't spend much time evaluating my progress, aware only of a curious discomfort when someone praised me. I knew better. I had moments of losing myself in the sound I made, but mostly remember thinking I was standing still, especially after three years when I still wasn't playing the hard stuff. There must have been some halting sense of movement forward, simply because there kept being new pieces to learn, always with my mother shouting "slow down," my siblings shouting "shut up," and my father putting on his new record of Serkin playing Chopin etudes, hoping to inspire me, or quoting his other favorite maxim, this one from GE (he was an executive officer of the local electric company): "Progress is our most important product."

What I learned, those years, wasn't much about how to progress, but was a lot about how to practice in a house with other people who were not trying to become musicians. The key was to avoid playing anything loud or difficult. I resisted pieces I couldn't master easily, shunned anything with more than one flat. My courage collapsed when I saw the "Moonlight on Water" piece—three sharps, separate sheet music, not in a book! It melted my heart when Mrs. Agee played it and said I was ready. I worked those arpeggios like hard clay, against all protests, until they grew easy, but the triumph held both awe and despair: how would I ever do it again? I colluded with my father, who greeted each new effort with a request to "play that nice little thing you do so well," sending me back to "Moonlight" until I grew careless and even that lost its glow.

Somewhere around age twelve, as I was beginning to lose my taste for the battle, I was introduced to a new, more serious neighborhood matron who tried to teach me leaping chords in

the left hand. The great discordant crashing required for this new challenge filled me with thrilled dismay, and I wondered how long I'd get away with it. Not long. The siblings protested, seriously this time. I stopped practicing, and Mama finally stopped paying, when the fierce Miss Morton called to say I was not prepared for my lessons. It seemed we all lost heart at the same time, and no one was really sorry—except some secret part of me that had begun to nurture a vision of myself in red velvet sitting at a Steinway grand in Carnegie Hall. I pretended she had never existed.

So far, my story must be one echoed in hundreds of American homes. How many parents in the end can stand the screeching violin, the shrieks of the clarinet, the off key trumpet blasts? How many children have the patience to keep at it when early praise is replaced by complaints as the music gets harder to learn, and other pursuits offer more ready rewards? But I puzzled over one or two friends of mine who *weren't* defeated, ordinary enough kids for whom something went differently, though I didn't know what. In high school, I watched redheaded Annie Jude Eastland, whose mother made her practice two hours a day from the time she was seven, go on stage to play "Pomp and Circumstance" at my big sister's graduation. A child with less talent than I (or so I believed), she played for me once, a huge piece I had never heard, getting ready for a recital. I told her how it ought to go and she tried to do what I said, and it got better, which gave me a small, mean comfort against the terrible envy as I watched her big strong hands racketing over the keyboard.

I pretended to be overjoyed when buxom Libby, whose mother was a voice teacher, went off to join the Robert Shaw Chorale. Could I bear it? Next time I heard "Sheep May Safely Graze," her soprano would be among the others, but never mine. When I first met Libby at fifteen, courting her breathlessly so I could spend the afternoon in a home where the mother was a real musician, I thought I might be a singer—surely it wouldn't be so hard as becoming a pianist. I wanted it so badly my throat ached. But I had already learned to fear being heard, was already refusing solos and singing more softly, out of embarrassment; my big untrained voice had begun to make people turn around in church. Only in the Hallelujah chorus could I still open up fearlessly. It didn't occur to me that voice lessons might alleviate my misery. I had begun to suspect that, for me, singing was just one more way to make people say, "Shut up." So, I helped

Libby pack, exclaiming how great it was that one of us had made it big. I reminded myself that I got better grades in English.

How do we all do it, go ahead and live out productive lives, with our Great Expectations dashed so young? Well, it takes some of us longer than others to be really dashed. I kept looking for my place in the music. At college, I discovered the geographic fallacy. Eight hundred miles from home, among strangers, I thought at first glory was at hand. They elected me Freshman Song Mistress, for my carrying tones and electric enthusiasm. Buried safely in the ranks of our college chorus, I sang with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. I could read well and kept auditioning for and becoming part of every madrigal group and chamber chorus I could get to on foot or by train. But something was missing. I wasn't great, yet.

On the bus home from a combined concert with the chorus of another college, I sat next to our conductor, with whom I had experienced epiphany during the final chorus of Benjamin Britton's Ceremony of Carols. I lent him my hand for what must have been an uncomfortable massage of his priapic rod where it jutted up under the rough wool-covered zipper (discreetly closed.) I was willing to serve him, though inexperienced and somewhat indifferent—this was not what I'd had in mind when our eyes locked during the music. I felt apologetic when nothing seemed to come of it. He gave up and worked on himself, clutching my hand against his thigh for the duration then tucking my part of the exercise back into my lap with an awkward pat. Afterward, his lovely young wife called to offer me free voice lessons. I thought this arrangement was meant as an apology from him and felt a bit sick on her behalf, but took the lessons, thinking the Universe was finally offering me my chance.

I remember those lessons, learning what happens in the throat, how to breathe, how to trust a tone that sounded like sand swishing through the nose over a tone that sounded inside my head like hollow gold but was "wrong." The more I tried to do what she said, the more I lost the big, free rush that opened my heart, the tighter and more hurtful my high notes became. Once again it seemed that working at music, mastering the discipline that would lead to greatness, was beyond me. I would be forever dependent on moments of grace when some natural thing happened over which I had no control, a grace that could and would desert me under any kind of pressure. Singing, it turned out, was harder than playing an instrument, the voice and breath more

unreliable even than my treacherous fingers.

About this time, I met Bebe Lancer, the first violinist in our college orchestra. Bebe loved me and put herself in my hands without reason. I helped her practice for her Juilliard audition, listening with cocked head, humming where the phrasing could be improved, imagining that my ear was actually better than hers. Though I'd never held a violin in my life, I could feel the strings against the pads of my fingers, the strain of the wrist turning and pulling the bow. I couldn't believe the hours she put in, how hard it all seemed to be, how often I heard an imperfection that surely she must also have heard. Why didn't she fix it? I never made the connection with my voice lessons or my early years practicing Scarlatti runs. She was serious, after all, a real musician expecting to make it a profession. How could she be making mistakes? I still hadn't worked out the progression, the range of sounds one has to make crossing that wilderness between the happy pipings or pickings or blowings of the unconsciously musical and the serene command of the accomplished musician. Anyone who aspired to the latter had no room for growth: perfection was required as permission to play at all.

I went home with Bebe once, at Thanksgiving, to Long Island, where her whole family breathed a kind of reverence for music. I was very nearly awed into appropriate silence among the busts of Beethoven and Mozart, the signed photographs of Szerkin, Casals. But Bebe left me alone for too long in the room with the grand piano. I pretended the others were out of earshot, and sat down, my fanny tingling on the bench, my heart aching with the old red velvet longing. I opened to a Mozart sonata I had once half-learned. Maybe someone would even hear my thwarted greatness...I began.

Bebe appeared quickly, after about ten measures, I think.

"Catharine, you should stop now," she said. "Guests are allowed to perform, but not to practice in this house."

My picture of myself was fixed: I was "musical," but not a musician. In the summers, home alone, with the others gone to the lake or country club, I fussed along adding sharps and flats until I could accompany most hymns for Sunday school. I played folk guitar and sang for children's camps. But this wasn't being Rubinstein or Segovia or Callas. By some internal measure I didn't know how to re-program, I was the failure, the might-have-been, at twenty-one.

Going west after graduation, living in shared rooms without pianos, I invented compensations, modest posturings, my handful of pennies carefully spent to make a small impression. I indulged in being opinionated about particular orchestras, had favorite performers on every instrument, in every vocal range; I identified anything written between 1750 and 1892, and a few things after that.

At Berkeley, dropping out of grad school in philosophy, I decide I haven't, after all, discovered what I want to do with my life. I buy an ancient upright, another Knaubel, with \$100 grocery money-from-home and take lessons from a music graduate in my apartment building. No one hears me practice. Finally earning enough at my playground jobs, I reenter graduate school in musicology where I learn to read Schoenberg, Cage, Boulez. Several moves and a brief marriage later, I engage another piano teacher, Nathan, shaggy, terrifying, beautiful, who gives real concerts and lives right across the street from me. When I walk across the road I calculate how I might arrange to get run over by a car rather than discover he thinks I might be destined for the concert stage—or not. Fearing he can hear from his house to mine, I flee to the university practice rooms, wildly distracted by what comes through the walls and what I think the others may be thinking about what I'm sending through the walls. I transcribe melodies and realize harmonies, only to realize that it's too late: my background is too spotty, my anxiety too great, my genius too uncertain for me to become at last a real musician.

Trying marriage again, I become a mother, immersed in the immediate gratifications of rinsing dirty diapers in the toilet, wiping baby spinach off walls, watching for signs of musical genius in the bangs of the rattle on the slats of the playpen. It's the sixties, and I embrace the Beatles with all the passion of my generation, recognizing a sound I could never have dreamed up but understand instantly. For the first time I feel more grateful than envious. And for the hundredth time, I question my fate—how can I be so musical and not become a musician? I become, of course, a neighborhood matron who gives piano lessons from big red John Thompson books. I grow fierce when I hear someone quote G. B. Shaw's answer to Aristotle: "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." Needing finally to become something more than a failed musician, a playground leader with a B.A. in philosophy, something more even than a mother (at Bryn Mawr they had told us, "Our failures only marry,") I become at last an English teacher,

admitting this was always what I had been meant to become, admitting I love teaching literature and composition, knowing it is what I do best, what I have been waiting for all my life.

So, I'm content, right? Wrong. Approaching thirty, I continue to squat on any available piano seat to rip off my favorites, growing rusty but still able to produce that "nice tone" on a Mozart slow movement I memorized during the years with Nathan, or learning an easy arrangement of "Scarborough Fair," so friends can sing to my accompaniment. I begin to identify with certain women I grew up around, who arranged their homes beautifully, selected colors and forms with unerring taste, but tightened their lips when someone called them "artistic." I imagine they had really wanted to be artists. Somehow they had been diverted, hadn't learned to value the ordinary friendly sort of beauty they were making. Nor had I. This isn't Rubinstein. It is less. Less than less: unendurably, humiliatingly, not a hobby but a failure.

I couldn't stand to be like those women, I who could have been great. I hated to be "discovered" by friends who remarked in the familiar tone of my childhood promoters, "You're so musical! How lovely to be talented!" I didn't think it was lovely at all, but I couldn't stop it. Even when you begin to understand you'll never be a musician, it turns out you keep on feeling like one, in this embarrassed, private way, keeping the signs secret, not wanting to explain why you never... On sleepless nights, you lie in bed imagining a symphony like the sound of the rain, wondering which instruments could be made to capture the ocean. Mornings, you run in from the kitchen to find on the recorder the exact note the kettle makes at full boil, or grab your son's cornet to reproduce the interval of a fourth you heard when you opened the garden gate on its squeaky hinge. You sit in the car after pulling into the driveway, after work, because you can't turn off the radio until some dumb song reaches its last tonic chord. Hearing your mate hum a few notes over breakfast, you spend the whole day trying to figure out where it came from so you can hum the bloody thing beginning to end.

So I lived a closet musician, playing the piano and singing only when no one was around, satisfying that deep urge without fear of criticism, or of disturbing someone, or worse yet, of impressing someone who would eventually remark, "You ought to be a musician."

There were interludes, brief forays into the world of the concert chorus: with Colin Davis during our year in London, with Giulini in The Hague during our Holland years. If anyone could

have taught me the joys of serious amateurism, it should have been the Dutch. All our friends sang or played an instrument, practicing alone on sunny afternoons or traveling through freezing rain to night rehearsals—they shared a relentless and cheerful fervor that eluded me. Unafraid of mistakes, they enjoyed the rough beginnings of new works. Free of seeking recognition or any special identity, they desired only a chance to make music with others. I almost caught it once or twice, then instead would catch cold and give up, until someone else hearing me sing would invite, “Why don’t you join our chorus?” And it would begin again, a month of joyful evenings opening the throat to the Magnificat, then growing tired during the repetitions of every line, every part, realizing I couldn’t stay up so late and still teach well...

Back in California, late ’seventies, for a doctorate in education, I decided I’d finally given up on music. I even skipped the auditions for University Chorus, concentrating instead on my son’s troubled adolescence, my failing marriage. But, like anyone whose true life is in a closet, I had to come out. I went to Pete Seeger concerts and blasted out my lusty "John Henry," waited in line for the Sing-Along Messiah, warbled Voi Che Sapete as I crossed the park at night, sure I was softening some mugger's heart. The inner mugger, however, couldn't be reached; the heart cowered under blows I could not prevent. I was not a musician. And I couldn't say why. I only knew it was a character flaw so deep it probably meant I couldn't ever really be anything.

I fought this view of myself, as one must. I was an English teacher, heart and soul, in time even a university professor, and many days I knew I was a good one. The immediate rewards of teaching, of immersing myself in others' needs, of celebrating others' growth, confirmed my worth in ways a woman was supposed to be satisfied with. But one year, teaching Frost, I began to ask whether the longing for the path not taken ever goes away—or ever should. What can one do with it, this slow drip of regret that etches a valley in the stone of the heart?

I have a friend, a Japanese-American woman, who recently began to study Japanese for the first time. After a year, she went to Japan to meet her mother's people, and tried to talk to them. She came home knowing something final. Remembering her childhood, spent with American kids, American TV, even American talk between her parents and siblings, and in the background, her mother talking Japanese with her old friends in the kitchen, the laughter, the jokes and teasing, the nuances—she believes now she'll never be able to learn real Japanese. Too

late, lost for good. She can learn some Japanese, yes, but only as an outsider. She tells me she's already beginning to forget her lessons, finds it too hard to make time to practice. Japanese isn't her main thing. This is how it is for me: what I do with music.

I too went home once, to try out my belatedly acquired language. When my son was six, I found good after-school child care, and finally got to crash some chords in an empty house. I learned the Schubert Sonata in A minor. Got it cold, took it apart and put it back together, fast, slow, every phrase the way I dreamed, my inadequate technique rising to the challenge, passion and discipline meeting as friends for the first time in my life. Those bright afternoons in the front room on our quiet street, sunlight streaking the keyboard, I discovered the roots of steadiness in myself. It befriended and fed me, this working solitude, acquainted me with my own vast patience, freed from desire for approval.

This should have been enough, but ambition had not quite died. Hearing that it was good and wanting to show them, at last, I called my family in Charlotte, North Carolina, and said I was coming to give them a recital. Invite Uncle Eugene, I told them, he always had faith in my gift. Invite Miss Morton and Mrs. Agee, they were so disappointed before—invite the friends and neighbors. I'll play Schubert." I polished up a few *Kinderzehen* for good measure, and an old Haydn sonatina, and got on the plane.

For two days before the recital in my parents' living room, I tried to practice, slowly, methodically, the way I knew how, the way one gets steady and strong, gets it wonderfully in the fingers. I imagined my parents growing anxious, terrified that this was the way it would sound, this was what I had brought them from California. ("Guests may perform, not practice in this house.") Angrily, I practiced on, refusing to reassure them, the knot in my stomach growing tighter, until I needed for my own sake to hear how it sounded when I played it for real. The morning of the recital, while Daddy was out getting ice for the party and Mama was ironing napkins, I opened up. I played it through, start to finish, just for myself, hearing it the way it wanted to sound.

My parents each arrived at some point in my private recital. (How much did they hear?) They stood in the hallway, listening til the end. I knew they were there only when they finally walked through the dining room on their way to the kitchen. This they did with glowing faces,

not speaking, but rehearsing in their shoulders, their necks, the constrained pride they would allow themselves to display.

That was it, then. What I had gone back to Charlotte for. The afternoon recital for the neighbors, with sherry and pound cake, was something else. My hands turned to ice as I bumbled through, glad that Uncle Eugene was going deaf, deaf myself to the polite congratulations of those who endured the afternoon for my parents' sake, not knowing quite what to make of the magnificent effort and the glaring lack of polish. I have no idea how it really sounded. In the airport going home to Berkeley, I fell and broke my little finger, held it all the way on the plane, tears running down my face, wondering if something was finally finished.

But it's never finished, is it, this puzzle? It becomes a koan: Who is telling the successful person she is a failure? When is a musician not a musician? Which is sadder, a has-been or a wanna-be?

I'd vote for the might-have-been as saddest, any day. At forty, I imagine a 12-step program for my condition: "Hello, my name is Catharine. I might have been a musician. I am hopelessly addicted to nostalgia for the path not taken."

Like other addicts, I get some help from therapy, some affirmation from social theories, some solace from religion.

A therapist helps me revisit my childhood, tell my parents what they did wrong. In time I take responsibility for my own choices: I simply never chose the life of a musician. I did not choose to sacrifice everything to that one thing. I was that fatal combination: a lazy snob, cursed with too high a standard for what I was willing to work for. Music wasn't my real path.

I argue with myself over this. In college, after four years of single-hearted romance with a Jewish boy my Methodist family disapproved of sight-unseen, I lost him. He finally fled the dark complexities of my need for their approval so closely wedded to my need to rebel—what chance had a simple love to survive such a war? In the throes of my anguish over this loss, I happened to meet with my classics professor, a large, spreading woman who spoke to me across the chasm between our ages, trying to console with words that rang smugly cruel: "Someday you'll thank your parents for blocking this affair. My parents broke off my first love, and now look! I have Dr. Bob!" I didn't doubt her magnificent happiness and fulfillment with Dr. Bob, a much loved

physics professor even larger than she. I did doubt that she should be so forgiving of her parents, just because she had made the best of her tragedy.

Shocked and outraged, I vowed never to betray my current anguish by calling it a gift of fate. In therapy, I protested that, yes, I have become something different, and I might even be happy, but I don't have to celebrate my loss just because I eventually found someone else. I refused the logic of renunciation and clung to the logic of regret. The longing for that first love and the longing for a life of music merged in memory; for both, any move from protest to acceptance was stalled by my vow never to view these elemental losses as “for the best.”

For music, I kept asking how things might have been different. Was my lack of steadiness a deep character flaw, or a condition of childhood? Can steadiness grow, if fostered?

Over time, I begin to work out how growth can be frustrated by relentless perfectionism. I had made learning impossible by internalizing my family's intolerance for the learner in process. This discovery helps my teaching, but not my regret. Even when all my friends appear to have outgrown the embarrassing preoccupation with old grievances, I am not ready to forgive.

In therapy, I go on to examine my rejection of the joys of amateurism. Choruses still welcome me, piano teachers abound, friends with flutes and fiddles beg for an accompanist. And when I succumb to these blandishments, I am deliriously happy—for a moment. Then it somehow becomes too much trouble. I have no time. But these are lies; the deep undertow of regret, the sense of failure, of inflated expectation, still pulls me under after all these years. We play or sing for a few weeks and the old tapes interrupt: “Is this all? Where is this going? Stop kidding yourself—you're not a musician.” Fascinating that only the life of genius, one percent talent, 99 percent hard work, is worthy of my time. And if I fail to give that, fail to be great, I am worth nothing, may not make the noise required by practice, may not disturb others.

Resentment of remembered wrongs ties my soul in knots. I don't know whose fault it is that I'm not good enough to make music without more effort than my best results warrant. Strangely, I forgive ordinary music-makers for just having fun without sounding like Heifetz or Rampal, but when I try to join their enviable throng, I am filled with shame, a longing that can only be assuaged by quitting. I cover my piano keys, set a vase on the lid. I talk about something else in therapy.

For a while, feminism speaks to my condition. It becomes respectable to take out my disappointment and examine it in public. I learn that this is a gender issue, not my fault I was not taken seriously; my failure has sisters, my silence is one of Tillie Olson's. And there's a hint of redemption here, not just bitterness: if I want to reclaim the Goddess in me, I will learn to celebrate ordinary beauty, become one who plays for her own or others' pleasure without delusions of grandeur, recognize the gift of women's ways of making music in their lives.

But this message, so much like my mother's view, is suspect. A residue of anger remains, a special edge to my delight when women make music on stage, not just in their lives. Over the years, a better healing takes place watching Midouri, Nadja, Cecilia, Holly and Ronnie, in concert: women who, like Annie Jude and Libby and Bebe, with or without ambitious mothers, made the choice I didn't make and haven't burned in hell for it. I borrow their glory, claim them as sisters, try to practice shared success instead of petty envy.

Naturally, when I watch male artists during these years of gender rage, I am consumed with envy bordering on hatred as I imagine their advantages, the glee with which their parents must have greeted their talent, the unquestioning sacrifice of the family to the care and feeding of that talent. Never mind that my wiser self knows they have been made to pay in one way or another to carry this joyful burden. But when the women play, or sing, I am delivered. I read their life stories; I want their key to breaking the silence.

It doesn't help. These are their lives, as distinct from mine as any man's. What I need to understand is what the rest of us, the might-have-beens, are supposed to do with the tattered remnants of unused talents and unquieted longings. And I ask, how might one avoid a life of regret? What should be different about the world to prevent this small, surely preventable bit of human suffering?

Flailing at these questions, I draw comfort for a time from the notion of a Higher Being, whose grand plan after all may be at fault here, who may have wanted to use me in other ways. Even more comforting is the notion of reincarnation -- maybe next time...

Gradually, however, I think it is not so simple: last time a stone mason, this time an English teacher, next time a pianist or a singer. The distance between a worker, a teacher and a performer does not rest, as Shaw imagined, on ability, talent, training, or even, as I so often

thought, on steadiness, nerve. It's not even luck. There is something being worked out here, and if I do not work it out in this lifetime, I will just face it again in the next.

The thought of doing this all over again, mastering life through a series of false starts that leave beautiful possibilities strewn along the way like corpses, jolts me from serene acceptance of my fate. I want to know if there's something missing in me, some vital intention without which I will acquiesce again and again to the silence programmed into my DNA against the upsurging voices that yearn to be heard. It doesn't matter how the silence got there, who shares it, who's to blame; it only matters what I will do with it, how I will before my dying moment unforbid the chaos, the cacophony of primitive, unskillful sound, the swelling tide of energy that waits for my willingness to live, to take space, to make noise, to offend.

If this narrative is true—that I failed, that I am not a musician because I am a person who does not dare attract notice—then I am also not a writer, not a friend, not a flower, not an enlightened being. No! I will not die believing I should not be heard. And I will teach others not to give up to the silence, not to abandon the act of blooming.

I pause at this. Notice in my teaching, that even as I demand space for beginners, encourage experimenters, support amateurs, I don't want to teach my students, men or women, to choose mere noise-making over aspirations toward mastery. I know that potential is not enough. Talent is not enough. Wanting to is not enough. Only the mastery journey is enough, the patient, steady actualization of *something that matters in the self*—exactly what is expressed by the millionth small flower in the desert, when it blooms with or without the camera's eye upon it.

Throughout my fifties, I demystify being a musician, assuring myself I have a right to sing, to play the piano, to realize certain lively needs, not dead ambitions. In the same way, I teach my students to demystify being a writer, assuring them of their right, their capacity, their need to exercise their language, to become fully themselves without using standards of greatness as standards of worth. Foucault is helpful here, teaching us that we are immersed in a flow of discourse created jointly with others, that texts have neither beginnings nor endings and so cannot be owned as self-contained performances, cannot properly be taken as a source of individual pride or humiliation.

And yet, and yet, we craft them and craft them. And we grow toward a kind of mastery.

The growth toward mastery, I teach, is more important than greatness, and comes not from composing a text, a song, but from composing a self. This is the great work each of us must do, than which there is nothing greater. The other kinds of greatness are accidents, which simply happen for some people on their way to becoming selves. That is their path, their mountain. Each of us has her own cutting edge, her own ultimate challenge to face with courage; it doesn't have to be on the stage of Carnegie, in an Olympic ice-rink, behind a lit marquee.

Do I believe this yet?

I have spent my life learning my best lessons in mastery from years of trying to become something I would not finally be. And some of the practice of mastery carries over, it turns out: the union of passion and discipline, once experienced, remains the true goal, and one even remembers much about how to reach it, as one practices in each new gymnasium of the spirit.

And so I become content with, if not entirely resigned to the role of connoisseur, fan, great aunt to all my musician friends. I learn to enjoy holding a friend's guitar on my lap, the way women past childbearing hold their friends' babies, with a valiant and confident tenderness but none of the casualness of ownership. Slowly I own and am owned by other callings. Slowly I begin to learn the things I am teaching: that one must make noise, even if one is not yet accomplished, if one wants to grow; that there is a place in life for amateurs, those of us who, as Adrienne Rich puts it, "do moderately and pleasingly well...without solemn investment or disenabling awe."

Two years shy of sixty, I walk in Tilden Park, where eucalyptus drapes hues of dove and antelope gray against the blue of a September sky. Feet soft on the dirt path, I find myself groping for the sensation of discontent, the pulsing "if only" that has thrummed like a dirge under the music of my thoughts for as long as I remember. The familiar pall seems to have burned away in the bright ether, and I have to admit the life I have is—for the moment—too right to wish it otherwise. I probe for the old bruise, afraid of being seduced into abandoning a necessary regret, an ancient grief that has not yet revealed its essential lessons.

I am still not a musician and for twenty years have known I never will be one. Now, instead of trying to make myself a musician, I try to make my students writers, even the musicians among them. I praise amateur status, welcome them as fellow scribblers. I puzzle that I

still can't tolerate my own amateurism in that other world of warblers and pipers and drummers. I clip announcements for Sing Alongs or auditions for the Bach Choir, but end up instead grading papers or browsing at Black Oak Books the night in question. The piano has been silent for years, the ripple of sonatas replaced by the clack of the computer keyboard. Writing is, for me, the house where guests are allowed to practice.

Is this really, finally, all right? I check with my friends and discover some have begun to unbury and release similar dreams —the ballerina, the hotshot reporter, the aikido black belt, Mother Theresa, redefining themselves into the crooked surprising paths they have actually taken, some taking new turns, but all shaped by that old romance with a possible/impossible self. What do we carry with us from traveling so long with backward glances to see where the path forked, walking so long with a sense of someone having made a mistake somewhere? Who do we forgive, finally, to come into our fullness?

These later days, watching women musicians on stage, I notice that I can listen with a love untainted by envy. I am finally free simply to be glad they are in the world, glad they are making music even if I am not. Slowly, gratitude for the music of others has extended even to the men—I cease to think about how they got there and let myself love hearing the results of their committed lives. But this has been slow in coming, and the story of my liberation as a listener does not erase my history of regret, does not even now let me say, "It was all for the best." To make the best of things is not to assert there couldn't have been a better way.

Now, when I turn down an invitation to join a group of neighborhood singers, I no longer do it out of the old confusions and resentments, the pain of thwarted ambition, the vague sense that I should be professional if I am to sing at all. No, it's easier than that. I'd just rather be writing. Preferably without solemn investment or disempowering awe.

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State University

(more)

Postscript, December 10, 2014.

The reader may be happy to know that my inner musician did not, after all, acquiesce to this resolution. Today, at seventy-five, my voice (if not my fingers) can still provide entry into the joys of making music. Once I had learned to embrace writing as a practice, not a goal, I was able to transcend disempowering awe elsewhere. Finally I managed to re-embrace my oldest calling, but with new freedom just to love what I love.

My current neighborhood for possible singing groups encompasses the entire San Francisco East Bay, naturally awash in musical offerings. For my first seven years after rejoining a chorus, I sang with *Con Jubilo*, a Gregorian Chant schola that performs a monthly liturgical mass on Saturday morning at St. Ambrose Catholic Church on Gilman Street in Berkeley, mere blocks from my home. When that group changed their rehearsal from Monday to Tuesday nights, I had to look for another group that rehearsed on Mondays.

But there were so many! How would I choose?

Just surrender and go where the arrow points. I trusted, I found, I was found. I am now ecstatically learning the music of Brumel, Machaud, Dufay, Ockengham, Ciconia, Josquin du Pres, medieval and early renaissance composers whose complex rhythms and mixed modes demand and fulfill every iota of my committed longing. And all that early training, all those years of wonderful choruses, find their use. I follow gratefully in the footsteps of my Dutch friends who first showed me how it's done.

Nothing is wasted that is done with love.

And, perhaps, it's never too late.