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VOICE MATTERS:
BUILDING RESONANCE IN EDUCATION USING STORIES ABOUT IDENTITY
AND BELONGING

A Thesis Presented

by

Joseph A Antonioli Jr.

To

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

the University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

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Abstract

How do we maintain our own authentic voice while still being a productive member of a group? How do we not lose our voice and our meaning to the collective? This thesis is a series of stories that examines one student's experience with the intersection of music, education, technology, and personal life. It is a document of *resonance*, identifying interdisciplinary events and ideas that amplify each other, helping the student to extract and apply meaning in times of hope and challenge, peace and chaos, and serenity and sorrow, using the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) approach.

The chapters shape the explorations. The first chapter of this thesis expresses the importance of **Listening** to our own voice. Chapter 2 explores **Dissonance**, the tension that challenges us to examine what we believe to be true in our own voice. The third chapter examines **Empowerment**, looking to the head, heart and gut, carried on our breath, to find success by using our own authentic voice. Chapter 4 looks at **Liberation**, and the steps we take to reclaim our voice when it is being suppressed. Chapter 5 shares the healing power of music, examining its relationship to **Memory**. The last chapter attempts to pull all of these ideas together by exploring the relationship between personal **Identity and Belonging**.

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Robert J. Nash

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Resonance

*To wake the soul by tender strokes of art,
To raise the genius, and to mend the heart;
To make mankind, in conscious virtue bold,
Live o'er each scene, and be what they behold:
For this the Tragic Muse first trod the stage.*

~ Alexander Pope, Prologue To Mr Addison's 'Cato.'

How do we maintain our own authentic voice while still being a productive member of a group? How do we not lose our voice and our meaning to the collective? The answer, I believe, is where universalisability in SPN and music align.

My favorite musical compositions are the ones that align the music with the message.

This augments the meaning creating resonance. As a composer and an arranger, I use my experience with the craft to create the art, to make my singers and the audience to connect with their own personal stories so that they feel something together. Working with singers to develop their voices so that we can craft these moments fills me with joy.

I am not just a musician, I am also a teacher and a parent, yet I think about these roles in the same way that I think about music. I want my students and my children to explore their voices so that they may share them with the world. My own sense of purpose is very student-centered, starting with the individuals and working outward. I believe this combination of philosophy and practice is why SPN resonated with me, and why I chose this style for my thesis.

Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray, co-professors for EDFS 309A, gave us an additional homework assignment at the end of class on a chilly fall evening, a little more than half-way through the semester. They asked us to come up with an “apt metaphor” for Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing. I had written down my metaphor before they had finished explaining the assignment.

“SPN is a melody that holds truth for the writer that they hope resonates with the reader.”

The metaphor assignment prompted me to put into words what an SPN song would sound like. One student in our SPN class, Amy, caused me think that both forms are looking for resonance. I can imagine every SPN paper having a resonant frequency, one that gets amplified when it comes into contact with the reader’s own internal resonance.

This is a physical phenomenon for sound. Air compresses and expands at a rate, often represented by a sine wave. Adding sine waves together changes the amplification, the same frequency added to itself makes a sound louder. Frequencies that are multiples of each other create harmonics, ones that are very different create dissonance. Dissonance wants to resolve.

“We tell our stories to prove that we’ve lived, that we are still alive, and that we intend to live into some unknown future.” ~ Robert J. Nash, Our Stories Matter

The SPN writer creates the piece, their melody, on their own frequencies, with the hope that it will help the reader to feel a connection with dissonance and resolution. Their melody is the “what,” the resolved dissonance is the “so what,” and the impact on the listener is the “now what.” An SPN song will have lyrics and score that integrate and amplify each other, a mix of familiar and new that resonates with the listener.

“I use scholarship to highlight the notion that, while I have my own perspective and experience, others might be able to take my story and find hope and healing in their own story. This is what SPN writers refer to as ‘universalizability.’” ~ Sydnee Viray, How Stories Heal: writing our way to meaning and wholeness in the academy.

SPN and music help us to make human connections, sharing pieces of the shattered mirror that reflect our own humanity back at us. These connections remind us that we are more alike than we are different. SPN does this through personal stories and scholarship, a piece of music can do the same.

This paper connects pieces of music with personal stories and scholarship, my own experience with my a cappella group and the experiences around it, combined with observations on music, education, technology, and relationships.

Have you ever seen a meeting where someone has created graphical notes? They draw cartoonish representations of the conversation, usually on a large piece of paper, a la Common Craft (<https://www.commoncraft.com/>). I witnessed this once at a conference.

There were panelists on stage in a room of about 500 people, and one woman, with alacrity and creativity, captured the meeting on a scroll of paper 4 ft high and 25 feet long. I could not believe she was doing this with un-erasable markers.

The same thing is done in song. The intellectual essence, concepts, ideas and stories, are captured in lyrics, and the emotional tone is represented in chord structures and rhythmic figures.

I was thinking on this as I reviewed my notes from class, and as I did this common themes and ideas jumped out, resonating in my head until they became bits of poetry.

Professor Sydnee Viray took us through a number of mindfulness exercises over the semester, ones that focused on our presence in class. A number of them use the phrase “I am here,” and I remember one exercise where we stated “I am here; You are here; We are here;” with various orientations of our point of view, some of them looking at fixed spaces, and others looking at each other. During another exercise I wrote:

I am here...

... to be present as myself,

... to develop my voice,

... to hear others.

I read these words over and over, thinking about how they resonated at various points in the class. The words themselves started to bounce off of each other, each activity adding new vocabulary to the word-cloud forming in my head. Variations of the phrases started to connect with others, forming poetry and possibly lyrics.

*You are here,
Here and now,
I hear your voice,
This space allows.
Please raise your voice.*

To me these words represent the desire from a listener to hear the authentic voice of the other person, that the listener is giving the speaker time to express himself or herself, and that this is a very human connection. It says, “I am with you.” This could be a strong opening statement or a chorus in what would be an SPN song.

This happened with other concepts. How many times has family been mentioned in class conversations? This thought inspired more lyrics.

*Being pushed by our children
and pulled by our ancestors,
The branches of fathers and mothers
Reaching for the light through us.*

Sharing our writing also prompted a discussion about extremes.

*Avoid black and white and stay in the grey
Share the things you've seen in the space between*

Singers look for an emotional connection to the message of a song for a better performance. If the lyrics come from the class discussions, then will the members of the class find a similar connection to the song? Do listeners find more meaning in a song when they recognize their own thoughts and feelings sung back to them?

This thesis is a series of stories that examines one student's experience with the intersection of music, education, technology, and personal life. It is a document of *resonance*, identifying interdisciplinary events and ideas that amplify each other, helping the student to extract and apply meaning in times of hope and challenge, peace and chaos, and serenity and sorrow, using the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) approach. This thesis uses the story of a recording project to connect ideas, each chapter aligned with a song on the album *Exit I* by Root7.

“SPN is about giving yourself permission to express your own voice in your own language; your own take on your own story in your own inimitable manner.” ~ Robert J. Nash, Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative.

We are born with our own unique voice, our expression to the world. Throughout our lives we are asked to follow paths that help guide and shape our voices, some that align with our voice, and some that work against it. The first chapter of this thesis expresses the importance of **Listening** to our own voice in order to find its resonance. I believe that a learner-centered model for education starts with this step, helping students listen to their authentic selves.

Chapter 2 explores **Dissonance**, the tension that challenges us to examine what we believe to be true in our own voice. What happens when we share our voice with the world and it clashes with what we hear back? Do we let it pull us into a new key, releasing some of our control for the sake of resolution? Or do we sit with the dissonance, and even lean into it, letting it create a colorful and rich sound experience? I believe this is a model for compassionate and productive discourse.

The third chapter examines **Empowerment**, looking to the head, heart and gut, carried on our breath, to find success by using our own authentic voice. Where do we find the courage to speak up? How do we break the bubbles of learned helplessness and analysis paralysis to affect positive change? Student activism has been a powerful vector for change, how do we make sure all voices participate and are heard?

There are moments in our lives when we push back against the forces that keep us from living purposeful lives. In these moments we break the physical and emotional boundaries that keep our voices from soaring. Have we developed an educational system that places each voice in its neat and tidy, pre-determined box? Will we turn the corner in a way that allows future adults to thrive and explore their own limits? Chapter 4 looks at **Liberation**, and the steps we take to reclaim our voice when it is being suppressed.

Chapter 5 shares the healing power of music as we examine its relationship to **Memory**. What will we remember when we approach our quarter-, half-, and three-quarter life milestones? If we were each to construct the soundtrack that represented our most

important moments, what would it sound like? Can we replay the music to connect with the feelings of the moment, as well as lessons? In this way, can we relearn in the context of our current selves?

Will we be soloists, the bards of our own compositions? Or will we be participants in a dynamic and impactful choir? Can we do both, maintain our own voice while still contributing to the aggregated musical expression? Will education continue to be something that we participate in before we enter the real world, or will we see more harmony and integration with other sectors of society? The last chapter attempts to pull all of these ideas together by exploring the relationship between personal **Identity and Belonging**.

Resonance (reprise)

Voice is the sound that comes out of our mouths. It is also what and how we express ourselves.

The sound of our voice resonates; it vibrates in our vocal apparatus. It resonates in a room when the frequencies we produce with our voice cause construction materials to vibrate. These sympathetic vibrations amplify the sound and allow it to last longer.

The words of an author, their voice, can resonate. A reader can vibrate, finding connection to the author's stories, experiences, and ideas with their own. This is similar to when two voices harmonize with related frequencies, their voices create a new resonance that amplifies and sustains the sound. Each person, and the space they inhabit, vibrates with their collective voices.

Educators need to pay attention to how our teaching, our voices, resonates with the voices of our students. Ensemble work, or building a learning community, is that craft that we employ that allows voices to maintain their independence while sharing a collective message. **Resonance**, in both the classroom and the vocal ensemble, is the measure of our success.

Educators need to do the hard work of allowing members of our groups to maintain their own identity while being productive, to be their own voice in the ensemble while

building resonance. We are all more than our demographics, more than a set of numbers, more than tick-marks on someone's dashboard.

The following language is crafted for educators, however I use it whenever I am in a leadership role or being a parent.

Listening

Listen to all of the unique voices within your group. Understand the complex relationships that exist within a group. Start with your own voice, how it fits into the mix, and how you relate to each individual. Understand the relationships of the small groups, with and without you.

Dissonance

Recognize dissonance for what it is, and sit with it. Take the time to determine whether you need to return to old rules, establish new ones, or whether the old rules and new ideas can coexist.

Empowerment

Surround your students with the support they need to use their own authentic voice. Give encouragement. Find experts and advocates. Empower them to share their voice with others.

Liberation

Remove the obstacles that get in the way of your student expressing himself or herself. Help them find alternative pathways to use their voice. Change the way you give directions if they get stuck. Liberate their thinking and expression.

Memory

Celebrate students for who they are, and give them the opportunity to celebrate with everyone. These will reinforce memories that they can take with them as they continue to use their voices in their lives.

Listening

*It's gettin' late, I'm making my way over to my favorite place
I gotta get my body moving, shake the stress away
I wasn't looking for nobody when you looked my way
Possible candidate, yeah*

*Who knew that you'd be up in here lookin' like you do
You're making stayin' over here impossible
Baby, I'mma say your aura is incredible
If you don't have to go, don't*

*Baby, are you ready? 'Cause it's getting close
Don't you feel the passion ready to explode?
What goes on between us no one has to know
This is a private show, oh*

*Do you know what you started?
I just came here to party
But now we're rockin' on the dance floor, actin' naughty
Your hands around my waist
Just let the music play
We're hand in hand, chest to chest, and now we're face to face*

*I wanna take you away, let's escape into the music — DJ, let it play
I just can't refuse it, like the way you do this
Keep on rockin' to it
Please don't stop the, please don't stop the music*

”Don’t Stop the Music” by Rhianna <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yd8jh9QYfEs>

*“Your mind knows only some things. Your inner voice, your instinct, knows everything. If
you listen to what you know instinctively, it will always lead you down the right path.” ~*

Henry Winkler

Rhianna and Henry Winkler remind us that there is a time for thinking, but that we need to pay attention to our voices. When we connect our actions to our own voice, we align our actions with our own purpose and meaning.

Breathing is one of the first things we learn to do after we are born, it is not taught to us by someone else yet our bodies tell us that we have to do it. We leave the birth canal and our bodies react with our first intake of air, expelled with the vocal announcement that we have arrived in the world. *We are here.*

Most of our breaths occur without a sound. We inhale, muscles and organs engaging to draw air past our lips into our lungs to providing blood vessels with oxygen. We exhale and carbon-dioxide filled air leaves our lungs and passed our lips, returning to the air outside our body. 12 to 20 times per minute the air moves quietly in and out of us.

Making a sound takes some intervention, like breathing in through your nose or breathing deeply and quickly, too fast for the air to pass silently. When my children were infants, I would lie on my back and breathe deeply, in through my nose and out through my mouth, slow and steady, it felt like the tide pulling back then returning to crash gently on the shore. If my daughter stirred I would increase the volume of the exhale letting them know I was still there, then slowly dialed it down until she relaxed and eventually slept.

We make simple sounds. A soft hum as we get lost in thought on a question, maybe placing the tip of our tongue on the palate to produce an “n” sound if we are feeling

vexed. A guttural grunt or “oof” after tasting a delicious gumbo or bumping into a coffee table. A whistle when we close our lips and place our tongue forward and back. These are the sounds we instinctively make when our breath is forced through our vocal apparatus.

Vowels add some complexity; the loud and open “ah,” the bright “ee,” the round and warm “oo.” Our lung capacity grows and our breathing becomes more controlled, we can sustain sounds for longer periods of time. Experimenting with our vocal apparatus we can move back and forth between the vowels, stopping at a variation we find particularly pleasing, all without disrupting the sound.

Consonants break the sound for a fraction of time, creating punchy “k”s, gliding “l”s, and poppy “p”s. We listen to those around us so that we can put various combinations of vowels and consonants together to produce nonsensical syllables, which later become phonemes as we develop language. We have a need to communicate with those around us, so we match pitch and inflection, our accents a mashup of all of the voices we hear. Lullabies and mechanical mobiles are for most of us our first introduction to music, which also influences the sounds we learn to produce.

We want to imitate the sounds we hear, so we match pitch and rhythm with our early nonsensical sounds. These sounds become the spoken words of our parents and others that surround us. Eventually we sing along to the radio in the living room or car, practicing our developing musical talent. Others will join us, and social connection is built with a common activity, and a love for certain tunes.

Music education in early school years is spent teaching kids to sing in unison, everyone singing the same words and notes at the same time. Rounds displace the timing while introducing simple harmonies. By this time we are sorted by voice type, those that can sing high and those that can sing low, and eventually harmonies are added. Parts become separated by voice range, and other harmonies are added until you have the construction for a four-part chorale. These parts work together to produce one voice in a chorus. Add fugal techniques to displace the timing again, and you have many parts singing the same words but at different times and pitches.

That the pursuit of harmony is as at least as important, and may be more important, than the achievement of harmony. To pursue harmony we must listen to all of the other voices in the mix, contribute our own voice, and bend and flex our voice until the result resonates with our internal frequencies. This I believe is what it means to participate.

It is hard to hear all of the voices at the same time, the bold are trying to outdo each other in an effort to prove that they know their voice. These voices make the mix louder than necessary, generating fortississimo when a mezzo-forte will do. These voices also generate multiple undertones that cause distortion, adding to the energy but removing the foundation.

The insecure voices are also troublesome, mostly in their absence. They are unsure of their part, afraid they will get it wrong or that it will be shouted back at them. They may

have been told that they cannot sing, a horrible thing to tell someone. Harmony requires a variety of voices, not just the loudest. Beauty comes from leaning into the dissonance, the notes that are not present in the chords by conservative standards, but when added make you think differently.

Loud voices can give the quiet voices space to build, the words and tone are developed around them, gaining strength until they can match volume. Once everyone has their voice the mix can be amplified to its peak, until it clips. This is the sign that it is time for all voices to decrescendo, still there but quiet enough so that everyone can hear everyone else. The volume is then raised to an acceptable level so that all voices are present and heard. This is balance.

While our voices are maturing, the songs we learn in the practice of singing are chosen for us. A teacher selects the repertoire for the season, creates a strategy for learning the music, then works with the students to put it together. Some of this is controlled by curriculum requirements and state mandates. In recent years, choir directors have solicited suggestions from the students, involving their input into the music selection process. The adventurous teachers even encourage students to draft their own arrangements.

Options are available to us as we enter college. There still exists the structured faculty-led ensembles, and in addition there are student-run groups. The music selection and learning

process is determined by the members of the group, who are also the singers. Some groups decide to focus on specific music, like jazz or pop rock in Hebrew, but most choose an eclectic mix that represents the interest of the individual members.

During rehearsals and performances we breathe in together.

2... 3... 4...

And out on **1** with sounds that make up simple and complex chords. We know we are in harmony with each other by the way the chord “rings,” the frequencies align and amplify when they are in tune. We can feel the hear and feel the harmonies as they resonate inside our bodies. This inhale and exhale at the same time, emotionally connecting to the sound, repeats over and over and creates a strong bond. While classes change every semester, the a cappella group is a constant activity that spans many semesters and years.

Glee clubs and barbershop quartets have existed at colleges and universities for over a century, and in the ‘80s and ‘90s there was a drastic increase in the rate of new groups forming (Duchan, Joshua. *Powerful Voices*). Groups made up of all men, all women, and both together were pulling current songs off the radio, creating intricate arrangements, and performing them for their classmates and communities. College groups have an end date, we know that it will be time to move on after graduation. We know moving on is hard because sometimes there will be an individual who overstay the welcome, even going so far as to add undergrad years just to stay in the group. It is touching, at first, and

even a little flattering, but after the first, second, third year it is time to ask them to move on.

Years of your life have been spent developing a craft with, hopefully, some very talented people, some of whom will be our lifelong friends. We made music, music that was chosen by us, and sometimes even created by ourselves. Each of us contributed a unique instrument that has been with us from birth. This group helped us use and develop our voice. My own voice became stronger, more confident during this time. I was able to hone my leadership skills while also expanding my musical chops. I started to learn when it was time to push for improvement, and when it was time to enjoy and celebrate the craft.

So then what happens when it is over?

More post-collegiate a cappella groups exist now than a few decades ago. Finding a group is easier if you live near a metropolitan area. Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and other major cities have a number of a groups that have the same variety as the collegiate groups. Some have dreams of stardom and making a living, singing for their super. Others are an artistic outlet for busy people, a chance to make a connection with a group of people through music.

I started many groups after college, some lasting longer than others. The first was a group of high school boys, they would earn summer money by learning music and singing

around the area. I performed and directed the group for a number of years, then turned it over to the other members.

Next came Random Association, my first adult a cappella group. It seemed like the optimal set up, a group of adults with good musicianship, with enough time to meet a couple nights a week, and a member who owned a recording studio. We learned and practiced music on-mic, and rarely did a performance without amplification. Turnover happened immediately following our recording projects, people were burnt-out from the process. Our goals had been to continuously perfect our performances, but there came a time when the members collectively said that we had taken it as far as we wanted to go. That was when it was time for me to move on.

The next two attempts never got traction. The first was made up of recent college graduates, and life took them to other locations. One resulted from an invitation to me by a Random Association bandmate. The people he had put together did not have the skills to make a cohesive group, and I did not have the time to develop the skills in them. About a month after the last group had said goodbyes, one of the women in that group, Karen Mitchell, and I talked about forming another group.

We decided that everyone in the group needed to pass an audition, even the two of us. We auditioned each other and decided that that was good enough to start. We took our time taking on new members, making sure that everyone had a substantial amount of

musicianship. It took a year, and replacing one member, and in 2005 we put together the first lineup of Root7.

Dissonance

*I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lord
And I've been waiting for this moment for all my life, oh Lord
Can you feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lord, oh Lord.*

*Well if you told me you were drowning, I would not lend a hand.
I've seen your face before my friend, but I don't know if you know who I am.
Well I was there and I saw what you did, I saw it with my own two eyes.
So you can wipe off that grin, I know where you've been,
It's all been a pack of lies.*

*Well I remember, I remember, don't worry, how could I ever forget.
It's the first time, the last time we ever met.
But I know the reason why you keep your silence up, oh no you don't fool me.
Well the hurt doesn't show, but the pain still grows.
It's no stranger to you and me.
I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lord.
Well been waiting for this moment for all my life, oh Lord.*

~ "In the Air Tonight" by Phil Collins <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkADj0TPrJA>

"The human voice: mysterious, spontaneous, primal. For me, the human voice is the vessel on which all emotions travel, except perhaps jealousy. And the breath, the breath is the captain of that vessel." ~ Claron McFadden

My high school choir teacher said that dissonance is what makes music great, and I agree with her. Dissonance can foreshadow change, like in the Phil Collins song. It can shake things up, disagree with what we believe are the established rules. It wants to resolve, we want that feeling of release. I have found it more satisfying to lean in and sit with dissonance, and have even found satisfaction in letting it be unresolved.

Root7's journey with *In the Air Tonight* started as I was rummaging through a collection of old music and found the Miami Vice Soundtrack. There is a simple intensity in Phil Collin's memorable '80s song. Three basic chords oscillate, up then down, then down and up, crescendoing towards the middle chord each time like the tide against the shore. The solo is haunting, reverb making the ends of his tenor phrases last a bit longer than they should to good effect, accompanied by minimal harmonies in one chorus and extended echoes in the last verse. The percussion is expressive, solid downbeats, quick pickups to the hard hits on the 2 and the 4, repeated over and over with little variation. That is until his voice starts to raise in its register, bringing us to the climax of the iconic drum fill, alternating 8ths and 16ths tom hits that shake the pulse we had gotten used to until now. The song ends with a more prominent bassline, strong solo, and aggressive percussion.

To me the lyrics represent the moment of letting go of emotions, freeing yourself by giving them voice. The attachment to negativity is ever present, affects your thinking, and in reality wants to be let out. The lyrics also express the anticipation of the critical release, the letting go of the control of our emotional responses. Vocally, and in life, we pay so much attention to controlling the details that we forget to embrace what it feels like to use your voice well. One of my former voice teachers and undergraduate advisor, Dr. David Neiweem, would constantly remind me of this during my voice lessons. He would demonstrate this by placing showing the difference between controlling your

finger to have it arrive at a specific location on a sheet of paper, verses simply allowing your finger to land on the spot.

At the time I was thinking of adding it to our repertoire I was exploring the idea of having members of the group create their own parts. I had gotten into a routine with how I arrange and wanted to break things up, as well as introduce the other members to the idea of arranging themselves. I imagined that the parts they would create would help them make an emotional connection to the songs. On a practical level the singers would create parts they could sing, and would be more likely to remember them.

In the early days of Root7 this was how all of our arrangements were created. One of our members would bring a song to the group, we would listen to it together, over and over, assign the range that each voice would operate in, then each of us would create our contribution. We would spend some extra time in places where things did not line up, and where we needed to make some choices about transitions and textures that added to the message of the song. This process was efficient and rewarding, we learned a lot of new music during the first few years of the existence of the group, and we saved on paper by not printing the score!

All of this was fine until our membership started to change. Life happens, and when music is not how you earn a living it tends to drop in priority and fall off the list. Within one year two different members had babies, and one member got a job out of state. All of

these are good things, we were friends and were happy for each other's good news, while also feeling sadness that we would not be singing with these people from here on out.

This is where our process for learning music fell apart. There was no record of parts that we could share with new members. Trying to teach the new singers music from memory was challenging; we relied on an oral tradition and did not have a score to check when memories were different. There was also another challenge. Music can be arranged as SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) where each voice type gets their place in an arrangement. The alphabet soup of parts can be expanded and rearranged as necessary, for instance multiple parts for voice types can be expressed as SSAATTBB, or a designation can be given when only a couple parts are doubled, like SSATBB. M for mezzo-soprano can be used, as well as C for Contralto, and VP for Vocal Percussion. This is a solid structure, when a person leaves the singing group you know what voice type is needed to replace it. The assumption with this structure is that a person can be found with that voice type, and that every person with that voice type sounds the same. This does not match reality.

I do believe we are each born with a natural range, our highest frequency and lowest frequency define our top and bottom pitches. This is physiology that helps place us in the choir. What happens is that through different experiences these extremes change. The area of the world we come from, the people we have conversations with, and the singers we listen to influence how we produce sound. Our lung capacity can change, adding and

removing support. How we shape our filters (vocal folds, throat, tongue, teeth, lips, mouth for instance) is very different from person to person.

Oftentimes directors will assign parts to the singers. The longer a person is assigned the same part, the more they associate the identity of their voice with the part. This can cause a natural dissonance in small group, where two people that are singing the same part (pitch, rhythm, lyric, dynamic) but their voices will clash because the sound produced sits differently in each other's range.

Two of our current members are sopranos, yet their voices are very different. Corrine is naturally a mezzo-soprano, a mid-range female voice type, and she is classically-trained to make use of her upper range. She is a powerful soloist who makes controls her mid-range to tell an amazing story with her singing. Her dynamic range, how loud and quiet she can get, is broad, however it gets lessens as she moves into her upper register, she only has a "loud" setting for those notes. Also, control over her control over her vibrato, the variation in pitch of a held note, changes as she moves up in her register, it gets wider and slower.

Contrast this with Sam. She is a natural soprano, the bottom part of her range rests in the same place as the middle of Corrine's range. In the same range where Corrine is strong she is breathy and quiet. As she moves to her upper range she gets more dynamics, and her breathy-ness becomes a soft roundness to the top of our sound, whereas in the middle of the voices she gets lost.

You cannot replace Corrine with Sam, or Sam with Corrine, and achieve the same sound. I believe this is true for all voices. Our voices, ourselves, do not land neatly into a defined category, even though we may have the ability to sing a defined part in a piece of sheet music. The SATB model works when you have a large choir, and the sound is defined by many voices on a part. Two electric guitarists playing the same type of guitar will sound very different. A small group ensemble, like Root7, needs to operate as a band, with every person being their own unique instrument. We do not have sopranos, altos, tenors and bases. We have a Sam, a Corrine, a Danielle, a Kayla, a Sharon, a Mack, a Chris, an Izzy and a Joe. The challenge with this model is that every time the membership of a group changes, the sound changes. You essentially have a new group.

Some members struggle with the change, they want the group to sound the way it did. They like maintaining the familiarity. Others enjoy the opportunity build a new sound, explore the possibilities that the new voices bring. These feelings are not easy to resolve, however recognizing them can help both thoughts work through their own dissonance. Whether we keep the same sound, or start a new one, or find middle ground, we have always celebrated the next performance.

Empowerment

*Well you done done me and you bet I felt it
I tried to be chill but you're so hot I melted
I fell right through the cracks
And now I'm trying to get back*

*Before the cool done run out
I'll be giving it my best-est
And nothing's going to stop me but divine intervention
I reckon it's again my turn,
To win some or learn some.*

*Well open up your mind and see like me
Open up your plans and damn you're free
Look into your heart and you'll find love love love love
Listen to the music of the moment people dance and sing
We are just one big family
And it's our God-forsaken right to be loved loved loved loved loved*

*So I won't hesitate no more, no more
It cannot wait I'm sure
There's no need to complicate
Our time is short
This is our fate, I'm yours*

*I've been spending way too long checking my tongue in the mirror
And bending over backwards just to try to see it clearer
But my breath fogged up the glass
And so I drew a new face and I laughed
I guess what I been saying is there ain't no better reason
To rid yourself of vanity and just go with the seasons
It's what we aim to do
Our name is our virtue*

*But I won't hesitate no more, no more
It cannot wait I'm yours
Well open up your mind and see like me
Open up your plans and damn you're free
Look into your heart and you'll find the sky is yours
So please don't please don't please don't
There's no need to complicate
'Cause our time is short*

This, oh this, this is our fate, I'm yours

~ "I'm Yours" by Jason Mraz <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkHTsc9PU2A>

*People killin', people dyin'
Children hurt and you hear them cryin'
Can you practice what you preach?
Or would you turn the other cheek?
Father, Father, Father help us
Send some guidance from above
'Cause people got me, got me questionin'
Where is the love (Love)*

"Where is the Love" by the Black Eyed Peas

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpYeekQkAdc>

"I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood."

~ **Audre Lorde**

We feel nervous when we know we need to do something important. Lorde's quote elicits the courage that it takes to overcome fear, the stage fright fright that lives in our gutt when we know we have something to say and we are unsure of how it will be received. Mraz sings about the chance to let go of apprehension and insecurities to pursue the possibility of love. Vulnerability, showing someone else our authentic selves, our real, helps us to build relationships, trust. The stakes are higher when the goal is love, this increases the anxiety. Mraz asks us to let go and give ourselves the chance to succeed or learn.

The Black Eyed Peas song reminds us of the search for love amidst an ocean of negativity, the two songs together express courage to experience greatness in the presence of fear. We know all of our own secrets, the parts of ourselves we are not proud of, and it is a scary thing to share that with another person. These parts, the monsters, challenge our sense of humanity within ourselves. *Will this other person still love me and grow with me? Will they accept who I am or flee? Will I be comfortable with the consequences of sharing my monsters? Will I change?* Chris's mashup of the Mraz and Black Eyed Peas songs compliments the words by using different voices with different messages, and example of the conflicting voices in our heads. As the song approaches the conclusion each voice fights to be heard, causing a cacophony of sound. In the end, he believes that the risk is worth it, the chorus gathers strength and love wins out.

The vulnerability that it takes to establish a loving relationship helps to build our fortitude, our courage to use our voice when it is most challenging. We have survived being heard by someone, and there is a chance that others will hear us, and maybe even want to add their voice to our chorus. The school environment is one of the most important places where we want our voices to be heard.

Last Spring, one of my daughters, Chiara, approached a teacher, expressing concern about the sexist remarks of a guest speaker. She said the statements reinforced existing bad behavior in the school. The teacher listened, and encouraged her to document instances of sexism for the rest of the semester and share it with the teachers.

One teacher described it as another girl complaining that someone “patted her on the ass.” They completely misread her, I do not believe that they understood the intensity of her commitment. She dove in and developed a sense of purpose. Her mission was to expose damaging and hurtful activity so that it could be dealt with, and her young cousins would attend school in a safer place.

Chiara interviewed her friends and learned that some had experienced sexual pressure from past boyfriends, some had succumbed. A girl I will call Carrie was a close enough friend to be considered a sister, and while she was attending college she raped on her campus. This friend’s sister, Patricia, was in an abusive relationship, and was shot on the 4th of July during the fireworks. I say “shot” because it was ruled suicide, however the people close to her suspect the boyfriend.

She had promised the peers she had spoken with anonymity and that the stories would only be shared with the teachers. She had rewritten the stories in the first person. She also altered facts so that individuals could not be identified, sharing the variation back with her friends to make sure that she had stayed true to their story. Her mother and I have never seen or heard her presentation. This made us extremely uncomfortable, the vents were hidden in a black box as far as we were concerned. All we could do was give her our support and trust; she had certainly earned that much.

My daughter did not just share observations, she shared stories. The teachers that heard her during a practice run were in tears. They did not anticipate that someone would have

the courage to speak out about the trauma and violence that comes with sexism. The teachers shared what they had heard with the principal, who then pulled her out of class to speak with her. The plan had been for her to speak at the faculty meeting, just before a discussion about the technology budget. What he had heard made him believe that what she had to say deserved more attention, and he asked if she could postpone her presentation until he could make sure that the proper support services were in place. She agreed and waited a few weeks before addressing the faculty during the fall of her senior year.

The school formed a committee to address issues of sexism in the school, made up of two teachers, a staff member, and two students, one of them my daughter. She is helping to build a curriculum to educate the school on issues of sexual violence to be used in the month of April.

Shortly after her presentation and the formation of the committee there was an incident that she felt put one of her fellow students at risk. This infuriated her. She sent an email to the principal explaining how disappointed she was, and he offered to speak with her and anyone else that would like an explanation the next morning before school. At one point she was so angry that she contemplated starting a riot. Eventually calmed down and thought that you cannot end violence with more violence. She texted and emailed everyone who she knew was concerned about the issue, and in the morning there were more than 50 students and teachers, including two sports teams, who heard what the

principal had to say. They listened and understood it was a communication issue, and she advocated for more transparency about the process.

I felt better hearing about this. She has a good support group in the school, made up of teachers and students, that I hope will have her back when she is confronted with aggressive denial and anger. Her family is 100+% with her, and I am so proud of her diligence, agency, and her courageousness as she rises above her fear to believe in herself.

My daughter is on her way to changing culture at her school. She is now part of a group that is developing programming to raise awareness and educate students, teachers and staff on sexual violence issues. She made people listen, and now she is seeing the results from using her voice.

Chiara had the opportunity to speak at a school assembly, she shared these words with her peers:

“If there’s one thing that I want to leave all of you with (not just the girls), it’s that you deserve better than someone who gets angry at you for saying no. You deserve better. And I know what it’s like to be a freshman in high school and hate what you look like. I know what it’s like to feel like nobody wants you. But I promise that you are perfect exactly the way you are. And whether or not your nudes are in someone else’s camera roll doesn’t change that. I wish someone

would've said all this to me when I was 15. So, here I am, saying it to you: **you are worthy of love and respect.** And if you ever feel like you're not, please contact a trusted adult or me or Roarke or Ryan or anyone in Student ACT because we think you're amazing and we will do whatever we can to **make you feel empowered.**"

Liberation

*Dry lightning cracks across the skies.
Those storm clouds gather in her eyes.
Daddy was mean a old mister,
Mama was an angel in the ground.
The weatherman called for a twister,
She prayed blow it down.*

*She heard those sirens screaming out.
Her daddy laid there passed out on the couch.
She locked herself in the cellar,
Listened to the screaming of the wind.
Some people called it taking shelter,
She called it sweet revenge*

*There's not enough rain in Oklahoma
To wash the sins out of that house.
There's not enough wind in Oklahoma
To rip the nails out of the past.*

*Shatter every window till it's all blown away,
Every brick, every board, every slamming door blown away,
Till there's nothing left standing,
Nothing left of yesterday.
Every tear-soaked whiskey memory blown away.*

~“Blown Away” by Josh Kear and Chris Tompkins

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KtMnLor2Go> performed by Kayla James and

Root7

“Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.” ~ Steve Jobs

Have you ever witnessed someone finally using their voice? Did you cheer for them? Did you wish you could do that? What are the circumstances that help someone liberate their voice?

“Well, Joe, I’d like to try singing again.”

Megan LaRose and I were contemporaries taking classes in the UVM Music Department, I was pursuing a BA in Music, she was pursuing a Music Education degree. We collaborated on an a cappella project after graduation, starting an all-women summer group. Years later she took on a position at Mount Abraham High School as the choir director, where she started two a cappella groups. I would visit from time to time, working with the students on pieces of music, and sometimes teaching them vocal percussion.

It was during one of the visits that I was introduced to a bright young musician, Kayla James. Megan explained that she had taken an interest in a cappella singing and arranging, and that Kayla had taken on a solo in the choir and worked hard to develop it. Kayla’s father, Rick, would later tell me that it was the first time he had ever heard her sing.

Her parents visited her shortly after bringing her to Saint Lawrence University, where she proudly told them “I’m a Sinner!” the all-women’s group on campus. She had been accepted to the all-women a cappella group, and before the end of the year she would be

their music director. As if this was not enough, she joined a second group and became their director as well. She wanted to be a school teacher, and this was a way for her to develop the skills needed to lead a group of people while keeping music in her life.

While she was in college I was hosting a cappella events at Middlebury College. One or both of her groups would attend every year, and it was great to see how her groups were improving with what I am sure was her leadership. One year I reached out and did not hear back from her, so I found her father who also worked at Middlebury.

“She was in an accident. She cannot remember how to do some things, one of them is singing.”

I stopped breathing.

He went on to say that there were other things she couldn't do, like mow the lawn. She would sit on the mower and stare at the same ignition and steering mechanism she had grown up with, but she could not understand what she need to do next. There were other things that were difficult for her, and some days were harder than others.

I walked away from the conversation, forcing myself to exhale. It shook me that this could happen, and to someone I knew. I felt grief for Rick, watching his daughter's life change, but to hear that someone had lost their ability to sing left me hollowed me out.

She had been given a gift, had a desire to share it with others, and it had been snatched away from her. The accident had taken her voice.

After time I began to think about what would it feel like to lose my ability with music. What would it feel like? It would feel like writing and not being able to use written words, as if adjectives and adverbs suddenly disappeared. Language would be formed with a a disconnection between the head, heart and gut. I had been singing and making sounds as a way to understand the world since I could remember. What if that was all taken away? Could I still be me?

I would see Kayla on campus from time to time. I'd stop and chat, see how she was doing, and make a mental note of her demeanor. I was conflicted between concern for someone I knew, and not wanting to be a reminder for something she had lost.

I was outwardly much more reserved when she told me she wanted to sing again. I did not want to put pressure on her with too much enthusiasm, but inside I was bursting with joy.

At her audition she shared about her accident. She also shared the moment where she sang in front of children while student teaching, she had built up the courage to try a simple sweet song. It had taken her a long time but she finally did it, and the children applauded. It was the encouragement she needed to pursue being in a group.

She passed the first audition and was invited for a callback. She did well, and when we invited her to join the group we told her that “you can learn music, accept feedback, adjust, and work within the group. It was also noted that you are a great listener, paying attention to everything that is going on.” We also noted and told her “that at times you were very quiet and hard to hear.” When we asked her to join the group she excitedly accepted.

After the auditions we got into the routine of rehearsals, and for Kayla there was a lot of new music to learn. It was slow progress. We would learn over time that her quietness was her way of concentrating, that it took a lot of effort and practice to be comfortable enough to sing out, so sometimes it was hard to know whether she knew her part or not. We needed to learn a large number of songs in a short amount of time, and we could not spend a lot of time in repetition. Some days were better than others, but on a few she simply shut down.

She sent me an email after a particularly difficult rehearsal, about a month after joining the group.

“As I mentioned during my audition, I have a brain injury from an accident that I was in a couple of years ago. I have had some time since then to find ways around some of the impacts, but I am still trying to do my best to make up for some of the things I used to do well but don’t do well anymore. Unfortunately a lot of the skills I need for rehearsal and music, like short term memory,

sequencing, and verbal/sound processing are some of the things I still struggle with the most. Remembering the order of chunks of information, being able to discern one particular sound, and understanding directions are all things that are slow-going. Sheet music now looks like a foreign language to me, which is disappointing considering I used to be able to sight read like a champ. As someone who has invested a lot of their life in music, I'm sure you can imagine the disappointment and frustration you might feel if all of your strategies for learning music suddenly didn't work like they used to.

“Before joining the group, I knew I would probably run up against some things that I would have to work at, but it's harder than I thought it would be. I've worked hard to regain a lot of skills that I lost, and I am confident I can work just as hard at this, but it probably won't be without frustration, on my end and probably for all of you at times as well. I've learned how to get through things in a way that most people wouldn't know I struggle with these basic skills, so most days I can hold my own without a problem. But on days when I seem lost or frustrated with keeping up, it isn't because I'm not trying my hardest – it's because I'm still trying to relearn how to learn music.”

I read her email over and over. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to lose the ability to sing and make music, and be left with the cruel knowledge that I had been able to at one time.

In my reply I told her “Please know that I want you to have a good experience with this group, and I believe the group needs you.” I meant it with all of my heart, as if the reason for the group to exist was to help her find her voice again. A year later in a writing assignment I would discover that this was my reason to exist, my purpose was to help her, and others, develop their voices.

Rehearsals continued and we would make a point to speak with each other. I noticed that she had a hard time making the connection between my conducting gestures and the music, I needed to explain things verbally. When we reviewed a song, she could only concentrate on one element at a time, attention to rhythm, dynamics, timbre, lyrics and pitch each had to be worked on separately. She also had difficulty finding a harmony on her own, it had to be created and taught to her.

Eventually she did it and learned twenty songs, enough for a couple sets of music. She was solid with her background parts, and had even taken on a few duets, but eventually we started encouraging her to take a solo.

During the Fall of 2016 I asked students to design a playlist of songs that described empathy for them, and share why they chose each song. One student included Carrie Underwood’s “Blown Away,” the story of a daughter who refuses to help her abusive father during a storm. The song made me think about oppressive forces that hold us back, the barriers that keep us from expressing ourselves, and the feeling of helplessness that pushes us into a corner until the only course of action we have left is to lash out violently.

Would this song be a good fit for Kayla? Would it empower her to push back against her situation? Would she make that connection?

I started sharing the arrangement with the group in little pieces, starting with a chorus, only 16 bars. Everyone could learn their part relatively quickly, and it gave me a chance to see gauge their interest and test the orchestration. Kayla could also work on the solo a little at a time, and I could make some decisions about what was needed to support her.

Kayla did connect to the song, but not for the reasons I thought she would. She brought in different experiences to her performance, reminding me that she was not just about the accident. The song clicked with her own stories, not my version of her story.

It also did not hurt that it was a country song. Kayla loves herself some country music.

At the time I was working on the arrangement I was experiencing disillusionment with our political process. Specifically, I could not understand how a person that treated people so poorly could be considered as a leader. This did not fit with my worldview and caused a lot of distortion in my thinking. I did my best to listen to all sides, but the dissonant voices kept echoing inside my head, swirling around until I felt like my head would come apart.

I brought this experience into the arrangement. The bridge began with a duet, what I pictured as the main character and her mother. As they finished their first phrase, voices started chanting “blown away,” faster and faster until they overlap, clashing, causing dissonance, getting louder and louder, until it grows into one dissonant chord that pulls the music apart. This was the house, and all the oppression that went with it, shattering to pieces.

The group said they experienced chills when we tested it out.

The textures for the verses painted the picture. The ladies began with sporadic “din”s, quick notes that repeatedly pelted the house, slow at first but then picking up as the storm got closer. The men’s entrance were heavy pedal tones, sustained notes that represented the boot-steps of the father, trying to weigh the house in place. By the second verse the boot-steps lost some of their form. The open fifths in the bridges, hollow chords that connected the verse to the chorus, built the anticipation, the calm before the onslaught. After the explosion, Kayla, as the main character, sang out loud and exultant, finally free. As the storm settles, she felt a calm wash over her. What held her back no longer exists, she was now herself.

We did not want to use songs that we did not know when we decided to record our first album. After our process we had five songs that we felt confident would make a good album. After the selection process we started learning “Blown Away,” and felt that we needed to add it to the list as it was quickly becoming one of our strongest songs. Rather

than remove one of the others, we decided that we needed to have a six song EP, and it was the first song we recorded.

We wanted to do the recording project right and have it be the best representation of our work. We also had a time restraint, our talented sound engineer, Luke Young, was going to move to New York to pursue some incredible opportunities. In order to get the project done with the time we had we needed to raise more funds, so we started an IndieGoGo campaign. Our research showed that the campaigns are more effective when associated with media, so we decided to make a video for Blown Away. We did not want an epic MTV music video, we wanted one that focused on our performance. We also wanted to capture our environment, the Meadowlark Studio and the surrounding orchard, that had an influence on the emotional connection to the music. Yasmine Taeb, the owner of the studio, recommended Scott Barber, and we scheduled a shoot.

We wanted the video to reflect the story of the song, the oppression of the verses in contrast to the freedom after the shattering of the house. There would also be a separation of parts, the women representing the voices in her head, the men representing the conflict from the father. The end should show the joy of being free, and being together as a group.

Scott presented some great ideas, most of the video was shot in the studio. The first scenes were shot in dim light, with the men and women separated. Kayla's solo was shot separate from everyone else, portraying her isolation and being inside her own head. As the climax approached voices would take turns leaning in, the light shining more on their

face, the darkness disturbed. We all sing together in the light after the explosion. The day was long and there was nervous energy, but we made it through the day.

A few days later Scott shared a draft. We were all excited watching ourselves until it finished and we glanced over at Kayla. She had been crying. She pointed out that in all of her solo shots she was looking down, you never saw her eyes. Seeing everyone else sing with emotion and joy had made her feel good, but she also felt that she had let everyone down, her own performance had been lacking.

We spoke to Scott and he agreed to do another shoot just for Kayla. We changed some of her positioning, having a window that overlooked the orchard behind her from different angles. She and I talked about her mindset and how she could give an expressive performance. The new footage worked, and we launched the video along with the campaign.

Kayla had been in negotiations with the insurance company of the person that had caused the accident, they were refusing to pay for her therapy. In one session the lawyer pointed to a screen and played a video of Kayla performing with Root7, explaining that anyone who was able to do this was functioning and did not need therapy.

I became furious as she shared this story. Did he not understand how much work it took to get to that point? And how much harder it was for Kayla? And how much she had lost because of the accident? Sure, she had made a lot of progress, but there was so much that

she could not do now that she could do before. She cannot sight-read music. She cannot understand visual cues. She cannot construct chords in her head. She cannot write music. Her endurance was diminished. She had been the director of two groups, and now was struggling just to sing.

And how dare he use something that she loved, something that **I** loved, against her.

My fury diminished to cool passion as she explained her reaction to seeing the video. At first she had had a similar reaction to mine. As she watched the video she started to feel empowered. Here he was attempting to take her down with her own accomplishments, but in fact what he was doing was strengthening her resolve. He had brought the music she loved and the people who supported her into the space, and that gave her courage and resolve. She could do this.

And she would have help. We all offered to do what we could to support her. Her lawyer could visit rehearsal and see how she struggles and the group copes, and how it affected our ability to learn new music. He could come to performances and see what kind of prep was needed to be on stage. We were all ready to be examined in this way.

I also let Kayla know that I would be happy to speak directly with her lawyer. I knew her before and after the accident, and I could speak to what was difficult for her. He and I met for lunch and we talked about what I had observed. He was empathetic and intelligent, and I remember leaving the conversation feeling like she was in good hands.

Sometime later her lawyer asked me if I would testify at the trial, he thought my stories could help her case. It was very easy to agree, I was invested in Kayla's story as a friend and a band mate.

I did not know what to expect the day of the trial. I practiced my breathing, as if I was getting ready for a rehearsal or performance.

Breathe in deep, hold it, then let it all out.

I did this for a few minutes while I waited outside of the courtroom for my turn. The bailiff interrupted the pattern when he opened the door and asked for "Mr. Antonilis," which I assumed was me. He escorted me across the room to the witness stand, asked me to raise my hand and swore me in, then asked me to sit. He pointed a mic towards me, I heard the amplification, and immediately checked the mic.

"Check-one-one. Check-one-one."

What the hell? My body had betrayed me and operated on instinct. The practice was so ingrained into my being that I did it without thinking. A few people chuckled, adding to my embarrassment.

The next hour and a half was a blur. Having already inadvertently behaved foolishly I wanted to maintain my composure for the rest of my testimony. As Kayla's lawyer asked questions I moderated my breathing.

Breathe in deep, hold it, then let it all out.

My voice sat in the lower part of my register, calm and slow. Maybe too much so. At one point I looked over at the jury, and the gentleman that was three seats in on the top row was asleep.

I do not recall the details of my answers, only that I told Kayla's story as I had observed it as authentically as I could. There were moments where I had to describe her challenges, and in these moments I would look at her and get choked up. It is very difficult to talk about someone's challenges to a room full of people, you feel as if you are rubbing salt into deep wounds. I had to keep telling myself that this was for her, and that this would help.

After a very brief cross-examination from the defense attorney, who appeared to be nervous, the judge said that I was done unless I wanted to sing for the court. I politely declined and stepped down as the trial took a break. I gave Kayla a hug, not wanting to keep too much of her attention as she still had two more days of trial. I left with the hope that my testimony would help her case.

She did win her case, and the validation that she was making good choices. However, this was never going to feel like a complete win, it could not bring back what she had lost. It closed a chapter in a continuous story.

And her story is still being written by her. The day before the trial we learned that the video for Blown Away has received a nomination for an A Cappella Video Award. This was a reminder of how far she and the group had come.

Memory

*When I die I don't want to rest in peace,
I want to dance in joy,
I want to dance in the graveyards, the graveyards
And while I'm alive,
I don't want to be alone
Mourning the ones who came before,
I want to dance with them some more,
Let's dance in the graveyards.*

*Gloria, like some other name
We kept on calling ya
And waiting for change.
But I belong to all of your mysteries.
And all of us
are meant for the fire
But we keep rising up,
And walking the wires
So when we go below,
Don't lose us in mourning.*

*Oh my love, don't cry when I'm gone.
I will lift you up, the air in your lungs.
And when you reach for me,
We'll dance in the darkness.*

*And we will walk beyond
Our daughters and sons.
They will carry on
Like when we were young
And we will stand beside, and breathe in the new life*

*When I die, I don't to rest in peace
I want to dance in joy
I want to dance in the graveyards
The graveyards
And while I'm alive,
I don't want to be alone
Mourning the ones who came before
I want to dance with them some more.
Let's dance in the graveyards.*

~“Dance in the Graveyards” by Delta Rae

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPOM0IUsd_0

“Music, at its essence, is what gives us memories. And the longer a song has existed in our lives, the more memories we have of it.” ~ Stevie Wonder

I made a connection between music, memory, and education while I was in high school. I would listen to an album while studying for a test. It had to be songs that I was very familiar with. During the test I found that if I sang the songs in my head the answers would be easier to remember. Stories, like songs, help us to remember concepts, events, and people.

I lost a very good friend and colleague, Jim, while writing this paper. He was a smart, kind-hearted man that led with compassion. He passed away in his sleep, no one knew until he had missed a few meetings on this Monday morning, and the police were called to open his door. The library where we worked was very quiet, filled with a feeling of sadness and much thoughtfulness.

Departments gathered to share the news, and Human Resources provided services to help people with their grief. Those of us who knew him well helped each other heal by sharing stories about how much he meant to us, and how much we will miss him. I will remember learning that he was on the board of the Addison County Humane Society, where my family and I adopted a few cats. We both believed that, “Every pet needs a

home and every home needs a pet!” I kept him up to date about my daughter’s activities, she was volunteering at a local animal hospital and shelters, and she was planning a trip to Costa Rica to educate the community on how to take care of their pets. We both agreed that this was important for personal growth and for a community, that we are more than our careers, that we all have an obligation of service to make the world a better place, locally and globally.

Since he has passed, I’ve noticed people are more thoughtful and kinder to each other. I’ve caught myself noting each leaf on a tree, paying more attention to quiet sounds, pausing as a scent stirs memories, letting my touch linger on an armrest, and savoring the flavors of a meal just a bit longer than usual.

Earlier in the summer, in the middle of the recording project, we lost my wife’s Uncle Art to cancer, it had been discovered too late. He was also very compassionate, I remember he made me feel very welcome to my new family. He was hard-working, and had an easy humor about him. We would talk about being the fathers of daughters, he had five and my heart broke for them thinking that only a few years ago they had lost their mother, his wife, as well.

I wondered how long we were all going to hold it together at the service when the time for family to speak arrived. My wife’s cousin, Leigh, answered this immediately by taking us on an emotional rollercoaster of hilarious stories mixed with tearful sobs of how much she would miss him. We all went along for the ride, continued by by many

members of the family. I watched his daughters move closer and closer together with every story, and felt that they would be all right.

We honor someone's passing by sharing stories, piecing enough of them together to capture a life. Their qualities, their interests, their activities. Their meaning to us. We amplify their memory by sharing. Why do we wait until after someone dies to share their stories with each other? Do we need the occasion to gather, to remind us of how important this is? Do we avoid these conversations because they are so often associated with a death? Is there some other way than to wait until they have passed on? Is it the emotional trauma of the end of a life that invokes the memories so that we may share with others and heal?

Music has a similar effect on us. It moves through our hearts to reach into our brains and call forth memories without our permission. Some songs will simply elicit feelings. Others will disconnect us from our current reality, immersing us in another time and place.

Meadowlark Studios had been another home for us for the past eight months. It's warm wooden walls. Its warm wooden walls, comfortable furniture, and heavy sound-proof doors became familiar and comfortable. There were joyous, triumphant moments when our ideas became sound that matched our vision. There were moments we struggled, doing our best to bring out the best performance in each of us. And there was that sad

moment after Luke and I had gone over the final mixes, I walked out the door and down the steps to my car for the last time.

I will never confirm nor deny that I shed a tear.

We made memories that will stay with us for the rest of our lives, that we can visit with every time we hear the music that we created.

The back window of the studio overlooked the orchard, and during a transition I found myself staring into the trees, Humming “Leather and Lace” by Stevie Nicks and Don Henly. My mind faded and I was transported back to May 24, 1997, swaying to the lilting lines and strums.

I remember her smile.

I remember the scent of her hair.

I remember the feel of the texture of her wedding dress on her back.

I remember that no one else was there.

I remember how big my heart felt.

This is one of the most powerful things music can do. We hear a song and it brings back memory. The sound helps us recall the environment we were in, who we were with, and what we were doing. It will also compel us to feel what we felt in that moment. In that song we experience the elation, sorrow, passion, and serenity of a time in our life.

Composers use the memory to call forth emotions from within the listeners. We do not always know it is happening, as a tune familiar only to our subconscious lies hidden behind the lyrics in a melody, causing our heartbeats to resonate as if it was the primary instrument.

And in a lot of ways it is.

Vocal Rush, an Oakland School for the Arts a cappella group, performed Delta Rae's "Bottom of the River" on the Singoff! In December of 2013, sparking Corrine's enthusiasm, but it would not be until January 2015 that we would find an arrangement that matched what we wanted to bring to the song. Corrine's power needed to be supported by a full baseline and a pulse in the lyrics. We took H.R. Steven's arrangement, added pedal tones, a rock-beat percussion line, and dynamics that brought us in and out of intensity and euphoria. It became an audience and group favorite.

While researching a song I will often listen to other tracks from an artist. As I listened to *Carry the Fire* I was drawn in by Delta Rae's hard rock sound with folk sensibilities.

iTunes shows that I listened to the album 15 times, but the track I went back to more than 100 times was “Dance in the Graveyards.”

The percussion line felt earthy, grounded, I could feel my feet going step-step-step/glide glide, step-step-step/glide glide to the main beat. The rest of the percussion was a wild mix of sounds, nature unchained. The harmonies of the trio were beautiful in their own right, calling out to make a connection.

The video was also a source of inspiration. A shaman travels to a clearing in the woods, calling out people to join him. He casts his spell, and each person is reunited with a lover who has passed away.

The arrangement of the song need to be sacred and spiritual. It needed to move between a sense of intimacy, and one of celebration. It needed to feel earthy and wild.

I had already decided that the wild would come from group percussion, where each singer would produce rhythmic vocalizations. The sounds would be primal.

Intimacy and celebration would come from alternating between unisons and full chords. This would create contrast with the group percussion. This would continue until the first choral “Gloria!”

I let the group know that I wanted to perform the solo, and since I did not have another solo and this one fit my voice they agreed without argument. I also wanted Mack and Kayla to sing the duet and trio with me. At the time they were the ones that I had spent the most time outside rehearsal with, and that fact that they were the youngest and oldest members of the group added even more meaning. It did not take us very long to learn our parts from starting pitches, then give the song its shape.

Everytime I have sung this song I have pictured friends and family that have past away, like Jim and Uncle Art. This has kept me connected to their memories, helping me understand my past while influencing my present. I believe this is an important part of learning and growing.

Identity and Belonging

*I'm gonna need you to raise your glass,
I don't care what you put in it.
Here's to nights that you can't take back,
We live hard but we love to laugh.*

*We all thought that we'd get rich fast,
Hop the plane out for greener grass.
Found out the green is cash,
Don't compare to the friends that last.*

*So here's to the cheap sunglasses,
Red Bull and minivans and
People who had your back when
The world didn't understand.*

*See, we won't forget where we came from,
The city won't change us,
We beat to the same drum.*

*When ties loosen
We're losing touch
And fading away,
We'll still be raising our cups
To the same damn things.*

*Oh no, the city won't change us.
And no matter where we go
We always find our way back home.*

~ "Back Home" by Andy Grammer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REHfRCYvie8>

"I think voice matters because it's so intricately tied to our identity, our culture, our history as an individual, and even where we've been and what we like to do," ~ Dr. Rupal

Patel

My wife wanted to see *The Greatest Showman*. It wasn't on my radar. My family had attended the Barnum and Bailey's Circus when I was very young, and I remember watching the spectacles from a few rows up in the bleachers. My memory convinced me that the visuals would be brilliant on the big screen, and I believed this would be a pleasant historical-fiction piece with exciting moments. When I entered the theater with my family I expected to be entertained but nothing more.

In reality, was moved to tears.

"The noblest art is that of making others happy," by P.T. Barnum.

I haven't let myself cry since I was seven years old, watching my mother drive away in the rain as my parents struggled with their emotions while going through their divorce. I've teared up, gotten choked up, but have never let myself go and full on sobbed.

So why was I in public letting tears stream down the sides of my face? Was the darkness that made me feel hidden. No, that was the wrong feeling. I actually felt exposed, watching a parallel version of my life play upon the screen. Building a relationship with the woman of my dreams, experiencing the joys and struggles of parenthood, bouncing to and from jobs that do not quite fit, finding inspiration in children and resourcefulness in yourself, being successful then getting lost pursuing a preconceived idea of happiness, reconnecting with the people who matter the most. I squeezed my wife's hand as Hugh Jackman and Michelle Williams spoke and felt their lines, excitedly telling her "We had

that SAME conversation!.” I felt like this was my life and everyone in the theater was watching it.

The movie ended. Like everyone else I applauded for a cast and crew that could not hear it. The songs echoed and bounced around inside my head. I could not stop singing them.

It was caught off guard, not expecting to experience so much resonance with my life.

When I watched it again with Mack I thought to myself, “I am ready for it, surely I would not be surprised. I could detach myself.” Yet I had the same reaction. Knowing what was going to occur enhanced my second immersion with the movie. Again, I teared up, and again, everyone, including me, applauded at the end.

“This is Me” composed by Pasek and Paul, sung by Keala Settle
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEJd2RyGm8Q>

*I am not a stranger to the dark
Hide away, they say
'Cause we don't want your broken parts
I've learned to be ashamed of all my scars
Run away, they say
No one'll love you as you are*

*But I won't let them break me down to dust
I know that there's a place for us
For we are glorious*

*When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out
I am brave, I am bruised
I am who I'm meant to be, this is me
Look out 'cause here I come*

*And I'm marching on to the beat I drum
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies, this is me*

*Another round of bullets hits my skin
Well, fire away 'cause today, I won't let the shame sink in
We are bursting through the barricades and
Reaching for the sun (we are warriors)
Yeah, that's what we've become (yeah, that's what we've become)*

*This is me
and I know that I deserve your love
'cause there's nothing I'm not worthy of*

*When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
I'm gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out
This is brave, this is proof
This is who I'm meant to be, this is me
Look out 'cause here I come (look out 'cause here I come)
And I'm marching on to the beat I drum (marching on, marching, marching on)
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies,
This is me.*

The most powerful moment in the movie occurs while Barnum is hosting a private celebration of Lind's performance of "Never Enough." The Oddities, led by Settle's Lettie Lutz, seek to join them. Barnum blocks them in the doorway, holding them back, before ultimately shutting the door in their faces. The Oddities respond with the song, "This is Me."

I have felt this despair of having the door shut in my face, the feeling of being betrayed by the people who should have had my back.

One warm fall evening when I was young I was walking down Church St. with some friends, wearing ripped jeans and my father's old football jersey. We weren't doing anything special, just walking. As we passed by the mall entrance we heard bellowing from a group of local kids. The noise came from a large boy, maybe twice my 120 pounds. Probably drunk, at the very least he felt like he had something to shout out to the world.

“Shut up, asshole.”

The challenge came from one of my friends without any warning.

As we kept moving someone shoved me from behind.

“Did you call me an asshole?”

I smelled stale beer on his breath, and he was itching for a fight. I am not sure why he had chose me. Maybe it was my long hair. Maybe he thought that the football jersey meant that I would put up a good fight. Maybe it was just because I was smaller.

“No, it wasn't me.”

“Then who did?”

“I don’t know.” I wasn’t going to throw my friend under that bus.

With my denial the belligerent meathead redirected his interrogation to my two friends. I stepped back and looked at the group he was hanging with, there were at least ten and most of them looked like they could fight. I looked some of them in the eye, recognizing them from school. One of them said, “If he swings at you and hits me I’m coming after you.”

The situation was not getting better.

My friends and turned away and headed up the street and towards where our car was parked. As I turned the corner I felt a tug at my shoulder and a meaty fist struck my face.

I saw darkness and went down with a thud. As I regained my bearings I realized I was on my hands and knees, heaving air in and out of my lungs, as the metallic fluid dripped down my face and onto the pavement. I could hear him yelling at me at me, telling me to get up. He has found his target, and it’s me.

At that moment MY flight or fight response kicked in, and I want to fight. My head told me he will win because he is bigger, my heart told me I cannot back down, my gut told me I could get in one good shot in before he would pound the crap out of me. I lifted my head a little, but not enough to see his face. I was vaguely aware that his buddies were

around him, maybe holding up his arms, and that his side was exposed. I think about giving him a quick shot under his ribs.

Just then out of the corner of my eye I saw my two friends running away.

It felt like I had been stabbed in the back and kicked in the chest at the same time. Any fight I had in me was gone, I was losing blood and breath.

I propped myself up, and started to rise. My body hated me, it wanted to stay on the ground, but I got up and began to walk slowly away. I probably should have been running from unequal odds, but I wasn't sure if I was walking because I was defiant or because it is all I could do.

My friends drove me to the Emergency Room, blood covering the front of my shirt. The nurse said something about boys not being able to stay out of fights. I flipped her off in my head, I hadn't asked for this but I knew she was a gatekeeper to my treatment so I kept silent. I was both embarrassed and relieved when the mother of a family friend working at the hospital walked by and got me into a room. The attending nurse used a thick silver fluid to close the bleeding wound in the back of my throat. Breathing, speaking, and singing were difficult for a few months, but eventually I healed.

This scenario has occurred many time in my life, physically and metaphorically. I am for the most part minding my business, someone instigates a conflict, I neither back down

nor escalate things, but still I find myself on the receiving end of someone else's ignorance, fear, or anger. It is easier for me to recover from the physical damage. Wounds can be seen, cleaned, stitched up and bandaged. Bruises and aching muscles can respond to ice and heat. The initial pain fades, and the healing process can be observed and take its course.

The emotional wounds are more difficult. Unseen and untouched, yet I've felt them creeping through my body. My stomach churns with acid and bile, leaching into my stiff and agonized muscles. I have become preoccupied. Toxic thoughts contaminate my thinking.

Why was I attacked? What made me a target? Why had my friends run?

Years later I was visiting a friend on break from college. We went up to Newport, Vermont, where he had lived before moving to South Burlington. There was going to be a party at a camp in the woods, and we thought we'd go.

Everything seemed okay at first. We were all college-aged, about 50 of us altogether. I recognized some guys from our high school soccer days, drank a few beers around a fire and had a pretty good time.

Nature called and I went off into the dark to relieve myself. Someone who I had not spoken with followed me to the side of the trail, up against the woods. I didn't think

much about it at the time, it was like being in a public bathroom without the urinals. He made a joke about the trees and we started a mildly uncomfortable conversation. We were both buzzed, but even in that state I was thinking I did not want to talk with my fly open. He talked about a girl he liked and I wished him luck with her. He asked if I was interested in her, and I said I didn't know her.

Then he told me that my friend and I better watch it.

At that moment I stopped, zipped up and returned to the campfire. As I was letting my friend know that it was time to leave I noticed that a group of them were chatting looking at us, including my buddy from the woods. We started walking towards our car, weaving through rows along the dirt road.

“Hey! Where are you goin’?”

I recognized the voice belonging to someone I knew from soccer, we had played against each other. Of course he was the biggest guy, and was drunk. It's always the biggest drunk guy.

I walked over to the passenger's side door, and as I went to open it another guy leaned on the door to hold it shut. I looked at him and asked him what he wanted.

“We want your friend.”

“Why?”

“He was running his mouth.”

Well that's just f-ing great.

“All we want to do is leave, you won't have to deal with him the rest of the night.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw shadows pass through the cars in the other row, going away from me. I wondered if it was my friend had avoided the fight with the big drunk guy. If so, good.

Then a hand yanked on my shoulder and the fist hit me on the cheekbone. Again from behind and again with the punch to the face.

My vision shrunk to a pinhole, and I realized I've fallen down a grassy embankment, just 6 inches from a barbed wire fence. The big drunk guy is above me, screaming at me. He is foaming at the mouth, his spittle hitting my face. My thought moves from the pain in my cheek to the situation as my adrenaline kicks in. He hadn't started hitting me, and where I was I was not going to get a hit in.

I thought of the barbed wire fence. If I could kick his leg out from under him, or pull him over me, I could toss him into the fence. I imagined his rage would trap him, tearing at his t-shirt and skin, maybe even his face. The harder he struggled the more it would tear at him.

Then I wondered where his friend was, and I remembered that there were many more of them. How would they react if I push their friend into the fence?

Some of his crew hauled him off of me, still yelling but willing to walk away. I got up, shaking, walked up the hill and leaned against the car. A crowd gathered around, maybe they were checking to make sure we were all right, maybe wondering what we were going to do. At that point, I just wanted to leave.

Later I learned later that the big drunk guy had been recently discharged from the military. I rationalized his behavior by thinking that his fury was mixed with fear, caused by not knowing what his path forward was going to be. My group presented him with a target for his fear and anger, a way to lash out and try to reclaim some of his power and retake control of his life.

This happens again and again. People in positions of power may enter our lives with good intentions, with a vision of a better future, only to find that their own authority was an illusion. They make poor choices driven by fear, anger, and ignorance. Usually it is when they are experiencing a loss of their own power, control, and influence. They have

worked hard to get to a position where they can make their own choices, and they see that slipping away from them.

It is a noble thing to believe in a cause and to give our loyalty to our leaders, it makes us feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. It pulls us from obscurity and raises us to a shared platform. It feels like purpose. It stings all the more when the people that we have trusted abandon us, when we discover that our loyalty has been misplaced. We feel lost, and in despair, the hands we relied on are not there anymore. We feel our own fear and anger filling our muscles, and when it dissipates we collapse under our own weight, having fallen on the sword too many times in support of our leaders.

At some point in our lives we all experience the anger and fear. People with power are no different. We cannot control how they behave, we can only control how we react. I think back to that night by the campfire and wonder what would have happened if I had put my aggressor in the hospital. Or worse, I could have lost a piece of myself, and I would see myself very differently now. I am grateful that ultimately I did not react violently. I could take the punch and let the conflict end. I did not let the situation turn me into the aggressor.

I am not a pacifist, I know I have it in me to fight and to hurt. I've been told that I do not have a flight instinct, that I am all stand and fight. I have learned to restrain the physical manifestation, but there are times where my body cannot contain the emotional. And in these times my breath is a weapon shaped by my voice. My words can make sharp

staccatos in someone's heart, finding the pain and tearing it open, creating fresh wound from old ones. I lash out and make my target cower behind thick scars. I am the aggressor in these weak moments, I am no better than the big drunk guy.

When the anger and fury have finished running through my system, when I have regained control of my voice and my breath, I am left with hurt and pain. I am left with the look on the person's face, the shock and realization that I have betrayed them, that I - their colleague, friend, parent - have just exposed their hurt. I wanted to be their protector, but I couldn't protect them from myself.

There is a dull knife under the ribcage, tearing my flesh from the inside. It is a boot striking my chest, forcing all the air out of my lungs. My vision goes dark except for the vision of their face burned into my memory. I am hollow, nothing left. I am nothing. It takes a long time to build trust after that. Not just their trust in me, but my trust in myself.

Then I breathe.

No matter how much it hurts, how much the bruised muscles resist, I breathe. My heart is torn, my mind is screaming, but my gut tells me to keep breathing.

And I start by saying "I am sorry."

My breath is no longer a weapon, but a scalpel. My voice uses it as an instrument to gently slice away the scar tissue on the person I have hurt. It creates small holes that let my vulnerability in. I am careful and patient. The scraping can be irritating, so we have to take breaks. It is on their time, not mine. I will be patient wait for whatever time they need to heal from the wounds I have caused, and I will help when they are ready.

And like Jackman's character I will get to a place where I understand what I have done and take responsibility for it. I will get to a place where I can sing again, a place where I can forgive myself of the pain that I have caused, and be proud of my voice again.

“Dream On” composed by Steve Tyler; performed by Aerosmith
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TL31F6b6ndo>

*Every time when I look in the mirror
All these lines on my face getting clearer
The past is gone
It went by, like dusk to dawn
Isn't that the way
Everybody's got the dues in life to pay*

*I know nobody knows
Where it comes and where it goes
I know it's everybody sin
You got to lose to know how to win*

*Half my life
Is books, written pages
Live and learn from fools and
From sages
You know it's true, oh
All these feelings come back to you*

*Sing with me, sing for the years
Sing for the laughter, sing for the tears*

*Sing with me, just for today
Maybe tomorrow, the good Lord will take you away*

When we take the time and attention to share each other's vulnerability we expose a resonance, a feeling of shared experience that connects us. I have shared my authentic self with another human being, and they have shared it with me, reinforcing that we are not alone left to wander our lives in isolation and obscurity. We find there is someone who knows our joys and sorrows, what makes us feel strong, and what brings about our weakness. These are the ones that know what we celebrate, and what we fear.

This helps me make music with others. Pitches, rhythms, and dynamics are all important, but it very easy to get so lost in the mechanics of the craft that we forget to tap into the emotions and tell a story. I've listened to technically perfect performances, and while I was impressed with their skill and precision, I was left unmoved. They have performed to the letter but not the spirit; there is something missing on the human level.

We can tell when an artist believes in their work. It pulls at our heart and our gut, drawing us in to live their story and connecting it with our own. They make us believe. They make us feel. They make us relive parts of our own stories, and through this we learn more about ourselves.

A cappella singers are also fans, we listen to songs and build attachments. We bring our own lives into our music to share with our audience. In order to do this we need to be vulnerable with each other.

We are not vulnerable with everyone the same way. We share different pieces of ourselves with different people, and rarely allow a single-serving friend get the same insights into ourselves as a life-long companion.

Within the group, relationships get complicated. It is hard enough to build the one-to-one relationships, to cut through the noise so that our voices work in harmony. We do not learn about every person at the same pace and in the same way. Interests and experiences may be shared with one person, and not resonate with another. This complexity gets exacerbated with our singing group. We are not a collection of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses. Our parts are crafted for the individual, we want everyone's unique voice to come through. This takes a lot of careful attention, in and out of rehearsal.

I am the director of Root7. My job is to make sure that the musical performance on stage is the best it can be. I have spent most of my almost-half century of life building up the resources to do this. In the last quarter century I have earned a music degree, served on the board of a non-profit dedicated to the growth of *a cappella*, crafted over a thousand pieces of music, and directed a number of different groups. I bring a lot of knowledge and experience to the role. Building the relationships that produce music that connects to people is the hardest part of the job.

I can look at a piece of music and understand how all of the notes fit together. In this piece, the bass and vocal percussion will need to work together to reinforce the timing of the downbeat and the tonal foundation of the chord. The alto 1 and soprano 2 parts are harmonies of the same voice here. The tenor and baritone parts are counter-rhythms to each other. This structure makes sense, the score is an idealized version of the performance that communicates the vision of the piece to the singers.

Then we add people.

Will I be able to connect with Izzy to make the downbeat do its job? Will Danielle and Corrine be able to match the shape and timbre of the lyrics so that it sounds like their voices are together? Will Mack and Chris be precise enough in the timing of their parts so that tempo and groove are maintained?

A composer or arranger may believe that the singers have the responsibility to step up to the score. Our group consciously crafts the music to match our singers.

The job of the part has to match the ability of the singer, and each singer needs to trust the others to serve the collective role. Izzy and Corrine need to sing the same A flat when they share the octave. Chris and I need to line up our pick-up notes to move us to the next measure. Mack and Danielle need to use the same vowel sounds when it is time for them to do their pad parts.

All of these interconnected relationships need to function in order for the music to work. Trying to work on all of them at the same time causes confusion. One person may get the rhythm where another struggles. Someone else may still be struggling with learning their part in a way that keeps her from listening to the others. Others may have spent most of their life treating the consonant “r” as a vowel that it is hard for them to sustain an “ah” in the lyrics. Each part of a part needs to be broken down into its components, worked on, and committed to memory.

Every person in the group has a list of things that needs attention to move the song forward, but their lists are different, with different priorities. They are being true to what their ears and experience are telling them, it is based on their own understanding of music and how a song is constructed.

My job is to use my own experience and knowledge to untangle competing lists and set priorities for the group. I do this by not only pointing out the problems, but also identifying the cause and coming up with a strategy to fix it.

“They missed their entrance because the off-beat is not accurate. Let’s practice lining that up.”

“Your pitch is dropping because you are losing breath support. Skip this not so that you can take a deeper breath”

“It sounds unstable because your vowels are different, this is a place where they need to be the same. Say ‘new’ and ‘ew.’ Now say ‘true’ and ‘blue.’ Think ‘true blue’ when you sing this vowel.”

Sometimes we do not get to everything. We are not a fulltime group, we have lives and careers beyond the rehearsals and shows, and sometimes they interfere with our ability to practice, or even attend rehearsal. Issues with our families and our jobs pull at our attention, new information about the music does not sink in. Members have less time to devote to the business of running the group, like maintaining the website and communicating with people who would like us to perform, and balls get dropped that need to be picked up again. This causes frustration that strains the interconnected relationships that are so important to what we do.

And what happens when the group changes? People come and go from the group as our lives change. All of the carefully crafted relationships move to a state of flux. What will the group sound like without these people I have come to rely on? We’ve built our sound around the uniqueness of individual voices, and now they are leaving the mix. Will the sheet music, our musical blueprints, still work as we swap instruments?

The audition process introduces more uncertainty. Who will answer the call to join an established group? Will they have the talent and desire to sing that we need? Can we create a space where they can show us their best voice? Will they have most of what we

need, and will we have the patience to help them meet their challenges? If they display exceptional talent and skills with their voice, will there be shifts in the identities and roles of the current members? And most important are they good people that we can get along with? Can we learn everything we need to know during a brief audition?

I am at the center of it, stitching the relationships together with the music, helping others to see the connections between their voices. I am a facilitator in the middle of a negotiation, asking one, or the other, or many, to lean in or bend in the relationship. This is the hard work, and at times it takes patience and encouragement. At times it does not sink in until after a few months after we first step on the stage, the lessons are remembered, we nail the troublesome parts, and, hopefully, we soak in the admiration of the audience.

I am consciously aware of the authority I hold while I am doing this work. I know this is an activity that the members choose to do with their precious free time, so I am constantly balancing the needs of the individuals with what I see are the needs to the group. I have to keep checking myself by asking “Is this what the group needs? Or is this what I want?” At these moments my own desires for music can get diffused and undefined, and I lose my own authentic voice.

This is the same feeling I get when I attempt to enter conversations around diversity. I am a white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, male. In every conversation I wear the face of the oppressor, the one that is keeping others in their place. I am also the

oldest, the one that my siblings are compared to. My last name begins with the first letter of the alphabet, visibly sitting towards the front of the room to be called upon. My authority has been given to me by a system that favors the circumstances of my birth, I've been given every advantage to succeed. Life is mine to fail.

Sometimes, when I attempt to enter into these conversations, I am chastised for being careless with my words. I am the recipient of hate that has been building for many generations, an ugliness that reflects the damage done to ancestors. It bites and stings, and as I learn more of the truth my heart is crushed by the weight of sadness.

So I hold my shield.

“Battlefield” composed by by Biancaniello, Tedder, Watters, and Wilkins; sung by Jordin Sparks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suPIYwJ3YvM>

*Don't try to explain your mind
I know what's happening here
One minute, it's love
And, suddenly, it's like a battlefield*

*One word turns into a war
Why is it the smallest things that tear us down
My world's nothing when you're gone
I'm out here without a shield, can't go back, now*

*Can't swallow our pride
Neither of us wanna raise that flag, mm
If we can't surrender
Then, we're both gonna lose we have*

Both hands tied behind my back for nothing 77

*These times when we climb so fast to fall, again
I don't wanna fall for it, now*

*I never meant to start a war
You know, I never wanna hurt you
Don't even know we're fighting for*

*We could pretend that we are friends, tonight
And, in the morning, we wake up, and we'd be alright
Cause, baby, we don't have to fight
And I don't want this love to feel like a battlefield
Why does love always feel like a battlefield
I guess you better go and get your armor*

My breath is not just my sword, it is also my shield. I use it to protect myself, to guard against the blows of adversity and protect my sense of self-worth. It helps me deflect the sharp, hurtful words that threaten to slice through my psyche. It is the armor that I use to nullify the impact, letting nothing through.

This armor has been battle-tested, weakened by experienced and planned attacks. It has been hit by blows hit from everywhere: front, back, sides, above and below. It has been dented and reformed. Punctures have been filled and reinforced. It is my breath, made of an infinite supply of air that is pushed back at an adversary, cancelling the cruelest attack. It has not crumbled: I am still here.

I breathe in and out, pushing back against the verbal blows and standing firm. In my best moments I am stoic and present. In my weak ones when I am tired, angry, or afraid I can crouch behind the shield. It muffles the noise so that I can hear my own thoughts and regain my strength. Then I step back up and use my voice again.

In recent years, before I started pursuing this degree, I found myself hiding behind my shield too many times, and for too long. I would try to listen to everyone's voice, hear the choir and the individuals, but I find the noise has been too much, the compounded dissonance of so many voices in my head clanging against each other. This was accompanied by distortion, false information, spin and lies that misdirected attention. Voices turned angry and resentful in the cacophony, true harmonies were lost.

My voice struggled to push back on the volume coming at me. I started to spend more time behind my shield, protecting myself but at the same time covering my mouth, my voice, and falling away from the conversations. My own thoughts and feelings disappeared into the blend, losing their own form and shape. I was surviving, but not contributing to my own life. I felt like a soulless automaton, emotionless, functioning without joy or sorrow. I did not recognize myself, and the path towards who I wanted to be was overgrown with moral indignations and tangled diatribes. I did not see a way to step forward. I was less than the average Joe, I was invisible to others and myself.

My *a cappella* group finds that we find more enjoyment in a performances that are meaningful, so we look for opportunities to share our music where it is needed most. For instance, we had been hired by the Jazz Festival to perform for the Hope Lodge, a place where families can stay for outpatient cancer treatment. It was not our usual performance venue, we were singing in their living room only feet away from them, and it felt warm

and inviting. Their appreciation was rewarding. We reappeared in their living room over the holidays, not because anyone had asked us, but because we wanted and needed to.

Sometimes the shows find us, sometimes we find them. We had an idea that we could lead some workshops with high school students, then perform all together in the evening for our friends and family. We reached out to Carl Recchia, the choir director at Champlain Valley Union High School, with the idea. He had already been speaking with the UVM TopCats and Cats Meow about a show, and asked if we would like to join them. It was not our original idea, but that was ok.

Unfortunately, Izzy could not join us. He had already made a commitment to a Lyric Theatre performance and they were rehearsing that night. Still, one person missing was not an incredible hardship. Later, Chris let us know that he could not attend, an opportunity had appeared at work that he could not pass up. We would be missing two voices.

One of the blessings, and sometimes curses, of having rehearsals at my house is that my wife and daughters hear everything we sing and say. My youngest daughter, Taylor, had been listening to the rehearsal where we were discussing the show, and asked to talk with me when it was over.

“Do you think I could sing Chris’s solo?”

One of Chris's first arrangements was a mashup of Andy Grammer's *I'm Yours* and the Black-Eyed Peas *Where is the Love*. Taylor and her sisters could be heard throughout the day singing this song. It was one measure that I had to tell me that a song was a good choice. But singing while walking through the house was one thing, singing on stage with an *a cappella* group was another.

"Why don't you try it in rehearsal, and we'll see how it goes? If it feels good then we'll work on it."

She gave a determined nod, and we planned the rehearsal.

Her performance was sweet and endearing, and it worked with the song. There was something about her innocence and vulnerability that carried the song. Sure, she missed some entrances, and held out a few notes too long, but there was something there to work with. The rest of my band members agreed, so we got to work.

Taylor and I practiced a few times. We focused on groove, entrances, and timing. She was getting better, and I thought a few practice runs with the group would help make it solid.

Then everything started to fall apart.

The hot water heater in the house that Corrine, and Danielle had commitments with work that she needed to meet. Both of them missed a number of rehearsals leading up to the show. Taylor joined us for one of these, the second-to-last before the show, and she had a hard time. She missed the entrances she had been working so hard on. After the rehearsal we spoke, she said she was worried that this would be the weakest song of the night because of her, and she didn't want the group to look bad because of her.

I've never pressured my daughters to sing, in public or private. I love hearing their voices in the house, in the car, together or each on their own. I don't care whether they join a *cappella* groups, I just want them to enjoy the sound of their own voices.

I myself have stage fright. I know what it is like to have my mind has go blank, to have the inside my head it look like an explosion of thoughts, connecting arcs flying all over the place. It is not that I am not thinking, it is that I am thinking of everything. My brain is making quick random connections. I am thinking about the words, pitches, rhythms, blend, feedback, sound system, volume, what the guy in the front row is wearing, what I had for lunch, too much sugar, not enough water, ticket sales, venue name, color of the program, that email I forgot to send, the email I did send, what date it is... In the worst moments, when I am tired, angry, or afraid, words come out of my mouth that do not make sense. I can't stop them because the song has already started.

I know well that getting up on stage, sharing your voice and vulnerability, is hard. It is made harder by our assumptions about the expectations of the audience. We picture them

as unforgiving critics ready to tear into our every flaw, never hearing the effort that goes into crafting and practicing a song, they only the end result. We are exposed and at the mercy of the listener, trying to build a connection knowing that what we send may not be received. Critical, abusive voices bounce around in our heads, and we worry we may hear them out loud.

“You sang it differently.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard it sung quite that way.”

“Turn it down.”

“Be quiet”

“There is nothing special about your voice.”

“Stop singing.”

I do not ever want to put my daughters, or anyone, in a position, where they lose the love of their voice because of a bad experience. No one should ever be crushed like that. But there are so many variables, and most of them are beyond our control. So what do we do? Do we stay protected, hide behind our shields where it is safe and our voices are never

heard? Or do we step out from behind our armor and let the world hear us, and risk not wanting to be heard?

And how do I be a father and a coach? How do I protect and nurture, while encouraging courage? Do I risk her failure and mine, or risk losing the opportunity of doing something great?

Whatever the decision, it had to be ours.

“It is enough for me to sing with you in rehearsals and work with you alone on this song. That is all I need. Why don’t you sing with the group one more time, see how you feel, then we will make a decision. Is that all right?”

She nodded and gave me hug.

The next day I drove her to school, and we practiced in the car. I asked her to work on her diction, this has the effect of bringing the voice forward. With each time through the song her confidence increased, and we both smiled. I let her know she had to run through the song at least three more times that day and practice with diction.

I know she did it, because the next rehearsal, the one right before the show, she nailed it. Most of her entrances were right on, and we noticed that the one she missed was because I

had made a confusing hand gesture. So I conducted with my shoulders and head, the two of us would lock eyes and she would lock into the groove. We made music.

As it turned out Murphy's Law was still in effect. Sam had gotten the news that her husband's grandmother had gotten ill, and that they may have to leave to go to New Jersey to see her. She said she may not be able to make the show.

Ultimately was able to join us, they would leave the next day. But then Kayla felt ill during sound check, just before the show started. She had to sit down for part of the check, then spent the evening leading up to the time we entered the stage alone in a dark room.

Corrine's house. Danielle's job. Sam's family. Kayla's health. Two people already missing. It was not adding up, it was being subtractive. Life was pulling at our attention. Could I let Taylor step on stage with all of this? Was it my job to keep her from what could be a disaster?

I watched from off stage as she and the other highschool women performed before us. Her voice was strong and true, I was very proud. No, I wasn't worried about her, I was worried about the situation. Whatever happened, I was confident she would stay strong.

We stepped on stage for our first song. Corrine ended up making a mistake she had made before, she skipping some words and jumping to the chorus. We recovered, but we were shaken. So much was on our minds, collectively and individually, anything could happen.

After the song, Danielle introduced Taylor. Taylor walked on stage and took her mic. Kayla blew the pitch, and we began to sing.

The first note is the most important for me. I cannot stop the craziness from entering my thoughts, but if I can nail the first note then all of the practice and training clicks in. I've learned to trust this in music, speeches, and teaching. Most of my attention is spent on the first thing that comes out of my mouth.

We started well. A part of me believes that in that moment we all gave Taylor our attention. We shut out the calamities and demons in our lives and sang for her. She gave us the focal point.

She nailed every entrance. She sang with heart. The two of us locked eyes and grooved together. I was happy in that moment, and judging by the audience's applause they were happy too. For three minutes there was shared joy.

And the gift? My mother had brought her mother to the show. My grandmother, Taylor's great-grandmother, at 98 years old had heard the two of us singing together.

More importantly, she had seen Taylor be brave. Imagine that, being able to see your descendant do something that most people are afraid to do, and may never try.

This defines hope for me, and why I am a educator. My purpose is to help others find and develop their voice, and in doing so I've found mine.

I keep this sense of purpose at my core while being a teacher, a friend, and a parent.

Taylor had seen both of her older sisters go through the college selection process, looking up the statistics, locations, programs, and resources of the institutions that would help define the next phase of their lives. She had been pulled along for a number of visits to colleges in the northeast, which in a way started her own process.

I had the chance to visit a college with her in upstate New York. This time was precious, nine hours in a car allows for a lot of uninterrupted conversation time. We talked about what she was looking for and what kind of feel for a campus would make her feel like she was in the right place. We talked about about her writing, the passion that has driven her to set down on paper hundreds of thousands of words. She explores her thoughts about relationships, identities, and conflict by writing fan fiction, extended stories that live in the realms of *The Lightning Thief*, Harry Potter, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Her characters are complex, struggling to make sense of their own place in the world. Her community is a group of writers and fans from around the world that share their stories, give encouragement, and provide comments and suggestions for story arcs. Her writing friends form a group of belonging.

Our trip had two purposes. One was to see if this college would be a good fit for her. The other was to attend the 90th anniversary of the founding of my fraternity, the Alpha Chi chapter of Theta Chi at Syracuse University.

I had chosen Syracuse at the encouragement of my parents, the other options were too far away or too close to home. Syracuse was far enough away to build independence, but close enough to return home within half a day. Also, my father knew a student on campus that could be a resource for me if I needed it.

I had been placed in the engineering dorm, a small building on the edge of campus for twelve of us. We had our own living room and stocked kitchen. I was studying electrical engineering, along with a few others. Other students were working on other civil or mechanical Engineering degrees. Most of them were from cities in New York, a few from as far away as Chicago. I would not say we were close, but we supported each other as we navigated an environment that held various degrees of unfamiliarity for each of us.

Two of my dorm mates were very interested in the Greek system. I had never considered it, my only knowledge coming from movies and newspapers, none of it appealing to me. While I was in high school I had read about fraternities and sororities being disbanded at the University of Vermont, just up the hill. Nothing I had heard that caught my interest.

At the beginning of each semester, each Greek entity, or house, would set up tables to start the Rush event. Rush was a campus-wide activity where students would meet people living within the Greek system. This kick-off even allowed students to visit tables and get a feel for each fraternity and sorority in one place, and would start the recruiting process for the house.

My dorm mates did their best to convince me to go, and it took some doing. Finally I gave in and walked out the door thinking that at the very least I could talk with a few people about forming a band. I had not been introduced to a cappella culture at this point in my life, but I had fronted a few rock bands during high school. I wasn't going to meet other musicians sitting in the dorm. In February of 1990 I stepped out the door with my friends and headed to the student center.

The space was packed with people. I couldn't understand how anyone could hear each other, it was almost as loud as being in a club. There was some pushing and shoving from people who knew which houses they wanted to meet and were hell-bent on getting to their table. When I finally approached a table I would ask the same simple questions.

“Do you have a house band?”

“No.”

“Are there any musicians in your house?”

“Not that I know of.”

After a couple of of these not-so-inspiring conversations I wondered what I was really doing there, and thought about leaving.

One of our dorm mates was dating a brother from Theta Chi, and said we should check out their table. I saw their banner and decided that I would try one more time.

“Do you have a house band?”

“No, but Dan here plays bass. Do you want to talk with him? Hey, Dan!”

Dan and I chatted for most the event. Most of the conversation was about music, but I did manage to learn some things about their house.

I had learned about the categorization of houses in Greek system during my first semester. Some fraternities and sororities only admitted African American or Jewish students, and I noted that I did not encounter Italian American or formerly-Catholic houses. Some houses admitted students from the same major, but I was looking to expand my activities.

Of the four people at the Theta Chi table there were two Jewish students and one African American. Two were in the Newhouse School of Public Communications, one was in Engineering, the other was in Economics. I started to think about whether they were selected to show diversity, or whether there was something else that brought them together.

Dan invited me to visit their house on Comstock Ave. during the Rush week, a time where students visited the houses they are interested in. Even at that point I wasn't interested in joining a house, even at that point, but I did want to talk more about forming a band. I went to the house and ended up talking to a few of the fraternity brothers before finding Dan. I found that some were athletic, some were from ROTC programs, and that there was a variety of majors represented. Skin color and background did not seem to be a factor. They seemed like a bunch of guys that were inquisitive and friendly.

I left the house and returned to the dorm, thinking I would talk with Dana again once Rush was over. Theta Chi seemed like a good group of guys that I could hang out with, but I still did not think that joining a fraternity was for me.

Back at the dorm we sat at the dining room table and talked about the experience. The two friends that had dragged me out the door talked about the different houses they were interested in, both of them included Theta Chi. I had only visited one, and they listened while I talked about starting to play music again. One of our female dormmates, Faith,

mentioned that her boyfriend was in Theta Chi and talked idly about one of their big parties, the OX Roast where they barbecue half a cow on a spit throughout the day.

The conversation was casual and laid back, and as I was faced the window as I saw three guys in long wool winter coats approach our front door. I recognized two of them from Theta Chi, only they looked more serious than when I had seen them during the last last couple of days. They handed me an envelope, and said they would like me to come back to the house the following day to meet more of the brothers.

“This seems way too formal just to have a conversation. What’s going on, guys?”

“We just hope you come back to talk with us.”

After they left I turned to my friends and asked what the hell had happened.

“They are recruiting you, they want you to join the fraternity.” Faith said that she had been asked to keep me in the dining room until they arrived.

I was unnerved at the formality and the effort, but I admit I was also flattered. I learned over time to identify this as a specific kind of activity- the getting to know the new person- and to question its intentions. Everyone wants to find out what the new person is like. This happens whenever you start a new job, meet potential in-laws, or visit a college, and it happens, too, when you recruit a new member for an *a cappella* group.

This experience has guided and shaped my thinking about the audition process: how to make someone feel welcome and wanted as they are considering joining us, and as we are considering whether we want them to join.

This is when I started to consider joining a fraternity. But not any fraternity. *This* fraternity.

The Rush process requires that a student visit at least three houses, and visit a house twice before they are invited to pledge. Pledging was a semester-long initiation process where the brotherhood determines whether you and the house are a good fit. So if I was going to consider joining Theta Chi, I would have to visit at least two more houses.

The first house I visited other than Theta Chi was pristine. Every guy wore the same colored blazer, tie, shirt, and pants; the house was immaculate; conversations were structured and ordered. Take a number, please.

The second house was the opposite. It was a room full of guys wearing ripped jeans and t-shirts that had not been washed anytime recently. There was clutter scattered on the furniture on the sticky floor. After initiating a conversation with a guy that went ok, I was whisked to another room where I met a dingy James Spader wannabe smoking a joint as though he could care less that I was there. No warm fuzzies here, although ironically I received an invitation to go back to the house that night. Didn't happen.

By the time I walked up to the front steps to the Theta Chi house I felt like Goldilocks, and when I entered the front door I was whisked away again to someone's bedroom.

Crap, I was going to meet James Spader again.

Instead I was introduced to some guys I hadn't met before and we spent the time in something that was a blend of interview and conversation. Everyone participated to a degree- there was one guy who only asked a question about what sports I played, another asked about my major. But by the end of the conversation I had agreed to pledge.

I learned that there was a bit of a bet going on in the house regarding whether I, or another pledge, might be the first to join. I met Eli, the other new member, shortly after hearing that he had been the first and got to know him some. I asked him if he was worried about all of the drinking that accompanied fraternity culture.

"I don't drink alcohol, and the guys said that wouldn't be a problem."

Huh.

This helped me feel better about my decision. I was still trying to figure out what unified the brotherhood, and this seemed to suggest that it wasn't the partying. It also indicated that there was a choice in what we did, that we did not have to join in everything in order to belong.

I tested this theory over the next few months, observing how Eli was treated and what it meant to abstain in this culture. I admired him and got to know him fairly well. A couple of times I got between him and another brother that forgot to accept Eli's abstinence. At these times I was supported by other brothers, further evidence of a value system that was becoming clear to me over time. Brotherhood wasn't just a word. We not only spoke of the Helping Hand, our motto, we also put it into practice.

In musical terms, our lyrics matched the orchestration. This, for me, is resonance that builds a feeling of belonging with a group. I could be a part of something that felt right to me, surrounded by others who spoke and acted the same. We all had different stories, different backgrounds and different goals, but we could come together to support one another and hold each other accountable. These kinds of groups - whether they are a fraternity, a family, a classroom, a workplace - makes us feel like we belong and allow us to be our authentic selves.

I met Mack during my interviews for Middlebury, when we had lunch with another colleague. I remember talking about everything that you should not talk about in an interview... family and other personal information came up frequently, we may have even talked about religion. I note this because even before I was offered the job all conversation topics seemed to be fair game.

On paper it might seem unlikely that the two of us would become friends. After all, what would a single gay man from the south have in common with a heterosexual family man from the northeast? He was also older, post midlife and thinking about retirement, while I was closer to quarter-life and mid-career.

Luckily we are more than our demographic data. What made us best buddies could not be aggregated into a pie chart or bar graph. It was our common humanity: a love of people and a drive to make our world a more beautiful place than we found it. Mack did this by engaging and spending time with students, getting to know them and using his worldly experience to help them navigate the choices they faced as young adults approaching quarter-life. He also showed them how to create captivating visual imagery, as he helped them bring their poster and video projects to life. He loved teaching, and I often admired how he delivered his instruction.

Like all of us, Mack's demographics have impacted his life. He was born in Fort Worth, Texas at a time when it was even more dangerous to be openly gay than it is today. I've never felt the world owed me an easy life, but I had to face growing up in a time and place that was threatening to me. Mack always had to wear a mask, it was a matter of safety. His love of people made him vulnerable, and it was uncertain whether this vulnerability would be rewarded or punished. He escaped his upbringing by bouncing around, first in colleges and later traveling the world with the Navy, an activity that was part searching and running away. He found community in San Francisco, then companionship would bring him to Vermont.

The companionship was not everlasting, and by the time we met he was living alone in a small house on Lake Dunmore. Another failed relationship left him feeling even more alone. It is hard enough to find a life-long companion living in a sparsely-populated place, and even harder for a gay man who is never sure if his sexuality will be accepted. The channels of communication for the gay community have predatory hackers, wearing their own masks made of anger and fear so they can prey on another's vulnerability.

Eventually, Mack attended one of Root7's shows at Metronome and became hooked on the music. His audition had a bit of a stutter start. He auditioned once, backed out because of other commitments, then re-engaged and was accepted. After two years later the isolation at Lake Dunmore and the long commutes to rehearsal twice a week caused him to leave the group. Yet he couldn't stay away. He was in the audience for most of our shows, and when he made the decision to move to Burlington, closer to us and a larger population, he had already re-joined the group.

Hi latest decision to once again leave the group and move on is not filled with the same pain as the first time, but rather with with hope. Burlington offers more opportunities for Mack to be with people, with crowds, and build meaningful relationships. He misses the theatre, and hopes to perform in Lyric productions in the near future. His decision to leave is because he wants to do more and he knows he cannot split his attention and do everything well.

We get the opportunity to celebrate a member's contribution to the group when they leave in this manner. We are doing this by letting Mack choose his final song.

In 1969 a young gay man heard a song by Dusty Springfield that spoke to the conflict in him between his Southern Baptist upbringing and his sexuality. Ten years later he would meet his own "Son of a Preacher Man." It was the beginning of the resolution for him, meeting Jimmy, the son of an Assembly of God minister, in a Memphis bar called David's in 1978.

It was a soul-fulfilling exercise to create an arrangement for Mack that fused church music and gritty funk, and then hear him make the song his own. My own hope is when Mack steps on the stage and he feels like he can take off all of his masks and be himself, and that the audience will show him their love because of it. Hopefully, for a few minutes he will feel like he belongs, that he will share his authentic voice with us and we will share our appreciation back to him. This is what SPN writing and these classes have done for me, and this is my way of sharing the importance beyond the classroom.

I have been thinking a lot about belonging and what makes someone feel like they are part of a. This is one of the topics I wanted to explore when entering the program, it has been in the back of my mind for every class, and this seems like the right opportunity to synthesize those thoughts.

Finding the Interdisciplinary Studies M.Ed. program felt like finding treasure in my backyard. I had been searching for a program for a few years that aligned with what I felt were the important topics of my career and interests. Other programs that I looked at were either too heavy on education or the technology parts of the job. But it was more than this. These programs felt rigid, a prescribed path towards a defined goal. I've learned that when you start something new, regardless of however much research and thinking you do ahead of time, the reality is not what you envision. I wanted the flexibility to change my path once I was on it, to explore the ideas that made me vibrate, that resonated with my core, my gut. I did not want to start a path only to find that it was not the right fit, wasting money and more importantly, time.

I also appreciated that the core program was face-to-face. I am not against online, asynchronous learning, I had recently completed a certificate program through Stanford University online. In that case, online learning was appropriate for the content and my learning style, I could learn the content and do the activities at my own pace. The frameworks and writing assignments lent themselves well to a more individualized pace. I wanted this phase of my learning to be different. I wanted the type of community that occurs when you cohabit a learning space. Not just the classroom, but the geographic area as well.

The University of Vermont is my undergraduate alma mater, just down the street from where I graduated from high school at South Burlington High School. I had started my undergraduate adventure at another school, but after experiencing administrative and

financial challenges I found myself back on familiar stomping grounds. Ultimately, it was the right choice for me, the faculty and programs challenged me and engaged my interest. My friend groups benefited from my local knowledge, and I learned that the world operates under different political, social, and economic practices than what I had observed and experienced in my Green Mountain state. Most of these social groups centered around music: the Catamounts and the TopCats. Vocalized harmonies were the initial threads that tied us together. I was a connector between these groups of friends and my local friends, commingling my social time and attention. Concerts and parties were the culminating events and rewards for our academic efforts.

Through these groups I learned about some of the administrative functions of the University. Developing my leadership skills in a student-run group included managing bureaucracy and relationships with people who schedule campus spaces and track dollars received and spent. Learn the path, learn the system, learn how to navigate it. These skills were amplified when I took a job with the Center for Teaching and Learning, where I was introduced to the administrative side of academic activities. These are the activities that students never see, the professional development and political conversations that result in classroom resources and activities. I knew the players and I knew how things worked, and achieved some measure of success.

I felt like I belonged at UVM.

Some of this got lost as I learned about the Human Resources side of UVM. I tried to avoid the union conversations, tainted by my experience while working at the Flynn Theatre. That experience led me to believe that unions favored longevity over competence and growth, and I was a new employee working as a perma-temp. It was when Middlebury offered me a permanent position that I felt the new opportunities at another institution were too appealing to ignore. *Why had it taken another school to notice me before a permanent job was offered?* That question made me realize that even though I felt like I belonged in the space, this was not an observation that was shared by everyone.

My time at Middlebury has been rich with faculty who are devoted to good teaching, motivated students, and remarkably skilled staff. I understood the globally-focused mission, and still believe in it and that Middlebury has the right resources to show the world a good path. These ideals, and the fact that the school primarily resides in my home state, give me a solid foundation for job satisfaction. Again I felt like I belonged.

Over time the distance between my home in Williston and Middlebury, VT wore on my sense of belonging. The ten hours of driving every week felt isolating, but not as much as the conversations that would take place about the surrounding town, a place that I did not live. My intimate knowledge of the people and locations in the Burlington area began to fade with attrition. I did not live in the place I worked, and I was losing touch with the place I lived.

I felt like I had the opportunity to return home when I entered the program. It felt comfortable to walk through Waterman as I addressed admission and tuition issues. Lafayette and Old Mill beckoned me to visit my colleagues from a decade ago. Walking the paths in and around Living & Learning felt natural, reminding me of the days that I would walk from Redstone to Main Campus. Writing while lounging outside of the Recital Hall in the Music Building, the place where I had some of my hardest personal struggles and most meaningful successes, felt inspiring.

I remember starting the first class, Scholarly Personal Narrative, in L&L. I had chosen the class because I was nervous about the writing, I had done very little academic writing in my lifetime and wanted to start with it first in order to be prepared for future classes. I had met Robert only once before at Chef's Corner, everyone else was new to me. The class seemed like a mix of professionals pursuing degrees to advance their careers and undergraduates looking to explore their writing skills. There were a couple people that had retired or were about to retire, who were only there to maintaining their life-long learning. The multigenerational, multi-disciplined roster was intriguing and refreshing to see.

But... my mask went up.

We cannot avoid doing things that are difficult for us, it is part of life. One way we cope is to create personas, alter-egos that we imagine can be successful in certain situations. Some performers have an easier time stepping on stage and acting in-character than they

do in small face-to-face conversations. Language learners take on the persona of someone who is fluent. These masks help us detach our insecurities from the task and allow us to “fake it ‘til we make it.”

I first noticed that I did this back in highschool. Our writing teacher let us leave the classroom and venture out in the hallway to write. A couple of us went down the hall while another group stayed near the door to the classroom. As I finished my writing and was getting up to return, I overheard the other group talking.

“You can always tell who is an underclassman and who is an upperclassmen by where they walk in the hallway. The underclassmen walk near the lockers, but the upperclassmen are more confident and walk in the middle.”

After I heard this, I counted the tiles on the floor, found the middle, and proceeded to walk down the hallway in what I thought was the exact center.

“Wow, Joe is 100% confident!” I heard them say.

Funny, I didn’t feel confident, yet that was how I was perceived. I’d figured out the formula and acted accordingly. Over time, I used these formulas to construct the masks I wore when I felt uncomfortable.

The mask that I wore during the first few SPN classes with Robert and Sydnee was cautious, analyzing, and patient. I listened more than I spoke. Wearing this mask I was also careful not to take attention from other people in the room, to make sure they had their space. Inside this mask, the breathing hole is small, suppressing and filtering my voice. Very little of myself is revealed so that it cannot be criticized.

There were times where I knew I need to participate more in class, so at these points I had to put on a different mask, the one I use when I have stage fright. I wear it not just when I am onstage, but also when I am in social settings. This persona is confident, extroverted, and eloquent. It is aware of the crowd and revels in being the center of attention. The breathing hole is larger than my mouth, letting everything out, sometimes more than I would like. It recognizes that emotional intensity can connect with an audience. After wearing this mask I would switch back and feel awkward and out of place, as if I had sung the words to the wrong song.

My writing gave me hope and courage, my storytelling ability lent itself well to the style. *Heart, Head and Home* did not contain a lot of scholarship, but it was strong with the personal and the narrative. It allowed me to wrestle with thoughts and feelings that were hard to deal with concerning my family, my career, and my love of music. It was a good foundation to start from with my writing.

Then I shared the writing with my family.

My wife and my daughters read my paper over the holidays, and we talked about it. They had never heard these stories from when I was growing up, my feelings of disconnect because of the job, and they wanted to know more. The stories about music and college peaked their interest, our oldest daughter had started looking at colleges for her own journey. Taylor and I talked about my writing about her, and she shared some incredible writing that she had done herself. We had felt more connected at that time because I had shared my writing with them, I had shared my own voice.

This was the first, and probably the most important gift the Interdisciplinary Studies program has given me, it returned a sense of belonging with my family.

Ethics of Helping Relationships with Robert and Jennifer brought another gift, a desire to seek a common humanity. Until that class, I had looked mainly at the differences between the people I met and myself. Now I look for the commonalities. It was during this class that I started to feel less isolated beyond my family. I rethought my relationships with people at work and in my *a cappella* group, and took steps to make the good relationships stronger.

Philosophy of Education, again with Robert and Jennifer, gave me the gift of purpose. When I declared to myself that, "I am the one that helps others find and develop their voice," I felt a sense of peace, contentment, and most importantly duty. This encompasses everything I am and how I do it, whether it involves raising my children, teaching someone how to build a website, or helping a singer connect with the music. I

am now keenly aware of when my actions align with my purpose and the joy it brings me, and I look for more opportunities to move forward with this purpose. This is where I felt the masks start to fade.

Since my journey started with writing, it is only fitting that it end with writing classes. Last semester's SPN class helped me makes sense of some challenging events in my life. It also helped me to develop a more meaningful thesis. Now, I am not just writing about a recording project, I am writing about *voice*. The topics of Resonance, Listening, Dissonance, Empowerment, Liberation, Memory, Identity, and because of this writing Belonging, are being shared with my head, heart and gut.

Because of this writing, and because of these classes, I believe that in order to achieve a sense of belonging I have to share my own authentic voice.

These classes have influenced my life.

And this is where my heart breaks.

My time in the program is coming to an end. The Writing to Make Meaning class has a few more weeks, and I find myself going back and forth between just savoring the moments and living in them. In this time of uncertainty I feel the masks reappear.

SPN is a gift that I will take with me, it is a wrapping for all of the other gifts you have given me. I can't picture myself writing in another style. I've tried for the sake of trying, but it doesn't feel like my voice. I know I can do this.

Sadly, what I can't do is bring the classroom with me. I can't pack up these amazing people and bring them with me for the times that I need to hear their stories, have them hear mine, and talk about them. It is in these moments where I feel deeply connected to other human beings, where I feel I belong. That sense of belonging has helped me make a tremendous amount of progress, and I know I still have a long ways to go.

“Listen to the Music” composed by Johnston; performed by the Doobie Brothers
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJqk2yWUGTM>

*Don't you feel it growing, day by day
People getting ready for the news
Some are happy, some are sad
Oh, we got to let the music play
What the people need
Is a way to make 'em smile
It ain't so hard to do if you know how
Gotta get a message
Get it on through
Oh now mama, don't you ask me why*

*Well I know, you know better
Everything I say
Meet me in the country for a day
We'll be happy
And we'll dance
Oh, we're gonna dance our blues away
And if I'm feeling good to you
And you're feeling good to me
There ain't nothing we can't do or say
Feeling good, feeling fine*

Oh, baby, let the music play

*Like a lazy flowing river
Surrounding castles in the sky
And the crowd is growing bigger
Listening for the happy sounds
And I got to let them fly*

*Whoa listen to the music
All the time*

“Mind you, I wouldn’t call it art... But putting... all shapes and colors on stage with you—some might have even called it a celebration of humanity.”

~ Bennett in The Greatest Showman

Whether I am in my role as a teacher, a music director, a parent, a family member or a friend, Listening, Dissonance, Empowerment, Liberation and Memory help me hold onto my Identity, which in turn builds my sense of Belonging to these groups. The music and the stories reflect our humanity, what we all want for our lives:

A sense of purpose.

Work that motivates and challenges us.

To have our voices heard.

To be free to be ourselves.

To be remembered.

To belong.

It is comforting to know that somewhere in the world there is someone who is moving into a home with their loved ones. Someone is making a safer place for everyone.

Someone that is confronting oppression. And there is someone who is finding comfort for the passing of someone dear to them by sharing stories with others.

“From Now On” composed by Pasek and Paul, sung by Hugh Jackman and Ensemble
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEJd2RyGm8Q>

*I saw the sun begin to dim
And felt that winter wind
Blow cold
A man learns who is there for him
When the glitter fades and the walls won't hold
'Cause from then, rubble
One remains
Can only be what's true
If all was lost
Is more I gain
'Cause it led me back
To you.*

*I drank champagne with kings and queens
The politicians praised my name
But those are someone else's dreams
The pitfalls of the man I became
For years and years
I chased their cheers
The crazy speed of always needing more
But when I stop
And see you here
I remember who all this was for*

From now on

*These eyes will not be blinded by the lights
From now on
What's waited till tomorrow starts tonight
Tonight
Let this promise in me start
Like an anthem in my heart
From now on
From now on*

*And we will come back home
And we will come back home
Home, again!*

Glossary

Resonance: noun

Source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resonance>

1.
 - a. the quality or state of being resonant
 - b.
 - i. vibration of large amplitude in a mechanical or electrical system caused by a relatively small periodic stimulus of the same or nearly the same period as the natural vibration period of the system
 - ii. the state of adjustment that produces resonance in a mechanical or electrical system
2.
 - a. the intensification and enriching of a musical tone by supplementary vibration
 - b. a quality imparted to voiced sounds by vibration in anatomical resonating chambers or cavities (such as the mouth or the nasal cavity)
 - c. a quality of richness or variety
 - d. a quality of evoking response

Resonance Uses Beyond Sound

Many of the finest musical instruments possess a high degree of resonance which, by producing additional vibrations and echoes of the original sound, enriches and amplifies it. Violins made by the Italian masters Stradivari and Guarneri possess a quality of resonance that later violinmakers have never precisely duplicated. And you may have noticed how a particular note will start something in a room buzzing, as one of the touching surfaces begins to *resonate* with the note. Because of that, *resonance* and *resonate*—along with the adjective *resonant*—aren't always used to describe sound. For example, you may say that a novel resonates strongly with you because the author seems to be describing your own experiences and feelings.

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