

“Anything Essential is Invisible to the Eyes”: A Meditation on Love, Loss, and the Deeper Hearted Case for Music Education

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*Music teachers in the United States are grappling with educational policy changes that include Common Core implementation, standardized testing, and new teacher evaluation and certification models. The focus on assessment and measurement in education is set against a global backdrop of violence, xenophobia, political strife, and profound human suffering. These overwhelming and complex dynamics can leave music educators questioning their local, national, and global significance. In an effort to reconnect with the essence of our profession, this multimedia paper/presentation addresses two existential questions for music education. What is at the heart of music teaching? In the end, what is significant about what we do? Using a range of literature and media including Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, RadioLab’s *SPACE* broadcast, Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach*, Elizabeth Alexander’s poem *Praise Song for the Day*, audio and video recordings from the soundtrack of a sibling relationship, and my own music teaching experiences, this multi-media work examines these existential questions about music education through the lenses of love and loss; challenging future music educators to think about what is significant, big, and lasting in music education at a time when it is easy to feel small, helpless, and overwhelmed. By pondering our role as educators on the largest possible scale, we gain perspective that brings into focus the profound impact that music education can have on our most intimate and cherished relationships.*

Keywords: *music education, music teachers, empathy, caring, teacher education, educational philosophy, vulnerability, interpersonal relationships, love, grief*

(This is a text only transcript of the multi-media arts-based composition of the same title. Please view the .m4v file for the composition to be “read” in the format intended by the author.)

[Video link]

Challenges facing educators are neither small, nor imagined, nor over exaggerated. Educator Maxine Greene (1988) stated, “We do not know how many educators see present demands and prescriptions as obstacles to their own development, or how many find it difficult to breathe” (14). Current demands and prescriptions for educators include pressures levied by new teaching evaluation models, Common Core implementation, and standardized testing. What is valued in education is too often synonymous with what is quantifiable. The State of New Jersey, for example, requires that students meet cut scores on the SAT, ACT, GRE or Praxis Core to enroll in a teacher certification program¹. In addition to regular coursework and student teaching, teacher candidates must complete the edTPA for certification, which measures and scores teaching “effectiveness” in a classroom.² Once teacher candidates become certified and find a job, their annual rating is often reduced to decimal points using the popular Danielson model of teacher evaluation.³

Perhaps we shouldn't be too critical of quantification. As musicians, we have our fair share of measurement. Out of tune. By how much? Late entrance. By how many beats? Wrong interval. How much was I off by? We have scoring systems for auditions that quantify musical performance to determine acceptance or rejection. We see the impact of measurement during high school marching band competitions when a voice booms over a loudspeaker, “...and in second place with a score of 98.2, in first place with a score of 98.4...” The results place large groups of students in hysterics. Overjoyed by point two. Crushed by point two. Two tenths of a point. What does that even mean?

The challenges associated with the culture of quantification in music teaching and learning are only made worse by the difficulty of teaching in today's political climate. Impacts that some of my recent music education graduates witnessed in their teaching positions included band students stacking up instrument cases and shouting “WALL! WALL!” at Hispanic students, and male students who announced the day after the 2016 United States presidential election, “Now we can hit our wives again!” Another former student, now in his third year of teaching, reported that he recently attended professional development that focused on what

to do if ICE (United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement) arrives at a school building.

The challenges facing education are many. While music education is situated within the context described above, it has another unique set of difficulties. Budget cuts, curricular emphasis on tested areas, and other factors have created a continual need to advocate for and defend the role of the arts, and more specifically music, in schools.

As a result, music education is increasingly justified by its relationship to non-musical outcomes, including claims that music participation can result in higher SAT scores (back to the quantifiable again) and correlation to career success.⁴ Reflecting this dynamic, NAFME (National Association for Music Education) launched the Broader Minded campaign that advocates for music education's place in the curriculum from inside and outside of standardized testing "bubbles," highlighting every conceivable benefit that involvement in school music can hope to claim.⁵

While advocacy is important, my fear is that in the midst of constant quantifying and defending, we risk losing the essence of our profession, the very core of what we do as music educators, and why we do it. What if we were to pause in the midst of these turbulent times and consider the following questions?

What is at the heart of music teaching?

In the end, what is significant about what we do?

After working for nearly twenty years in music education, I've discovered what is at the heart of this profession, for me. This is my story.

My drive to work at The College of New Jersey winds alternately through open farmland and heavily wooded forests. As I drive, I watch the play of the sun as it dances on my steering wheel, whirring like bicycle spokes in a dizzying pattern of sun and shadow before the black interior of my car is drenched in light as I hit the open farmland. I find peace on my commute and usually just drive in silence—enjoying the glittering solace for a bit.

On my first day of teaching at The College of New Jersey, I was restless on my drive. I just began my career as a full-time music faculty member and I felt uncertain about how to begin my Contemporary Issues in Music Education class that

was scheduled to meet for the first time in just a few hours. In an effort to calm my thoughts, I cued up NPR's RadioLab and selected their broadcast about space.⁶

One guest for this episode was Ann Druyan, Creative Director for the Voyager Interstellar Message Project of 1977, the initiative responsible for the audio content on two golden records that are aboard the Voyager Spacecraft. She talked about the awesome sense of responsibility she felt as she worked on this project.

"We felt that this was a kind of sacred trust, that here we were, half a dozen very flawed human beings ... building a huge cultural Noah's ark with a shelf life of a billion years."

According to Druyan, the record, currently traveling through interstellar space, contains the sounds of "a kiss, a mother's first words to her newborn baby, Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, greetings in 59 most populous human languages and one non-human language, the greetings of the humpback whales..." The record also contains the compressed sounds of Ann Druyan's brainwaves, heart, eyes, and nervous system impulses and we hear a bit of it on the podcast. Fascinated, I continued my drive to work as the electronica-like sounds of Ann Druyan's body faded to silence and host Jad Abumrad signed off saying, "billions of years from now our sun will have reduced our planet to a charred, ashy ball, but that record with Ann Druyan's brain waves and heart beat on it will still be out there somewhere intact, in some remote region of the Milky Way preserving a murmur of an ancient civilization that once flourished on a distant planet."

A charred earth, a pristine golden record—humanity captured in sound bites moving through the universe long after we are gone. Imagine that our students are like these golden records. What lasts when they leave? Did we make any kind of imprint on that gold record? How will they remember their time with us? What will that mean for their future? What will that mean for all of us? What truly endures?

I think of what has lasted for me—the imprints of music education on my own golden record. I will never forget the look on the faces of my eighth grade band students in the exhilarating split second between sound and applause after the final chord of a piece they never thought they would be able to play. The letter from a parent of a seventh grade student with Tourette's syndrome, saying that he relaxed in my class because he felt safe and supported.

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I would like to thank you for the safe, nurturing and inspiring environment you create in your band class that allows my son to appreciate the quality music program you offer. He has stuck with the clarinet because of you and your gentle, humorous instruction. Because he has ADHD, anxiety and puberty onset Tourette Syndrome and OCD, any one of which is an excuse for failure, you should be commended for your remarkable accomplishment. He relaxes in your class, which reduces the intensity of his internal and external symptoms, music to a mother's ears.

The boy, who was described by his peers as “the worst kid in the school,” quietly enjoyed learning how to play the guitar in my general music class. And the students in my Contemporary Issues in Music Education class who listened to RadioLab's SPACE broadcast on the day that I felt lost, and created one of the most thought provoking, beautiful, and deeply meaningful class discussions about the purpose of music education that I've ever been a part of.

Some of the grooves in my golden record are deeper than others. The deepest ones belong to my little brother, Andrew. I was eleven when he was born. I still remember how warm and heavy he felt as I rocked him to sleep as I sang “This Old Man.” We swayed in each other's arms and I rested my chin on his head as we sang the special song that I made up for him, “Andrew, Pandrew, Mandrew.” At age four, he would constantly chant the opening of my sophomore year Les Misérables marching band show. He was only seven when I went away to college. His sweet voice played on my college answering machine when he was in elementary school and I was a music education major.

“Hi Colleenie. I have a question about the flutophone!”

I proudly beamed as I listened to him play in the New Jersey All State Band when he was in high school.⁷ We shared recordings of Eric Whitacre's choral music.⁸ He introduced me to Yo-Yo Ma's “Quarter Chicken Dark.”⁹ We shared a pretty incredible love for Chuck Mangione's “Land of Make Believe.”¹⁰ And we danced like kids to Arturo Sandoval's “Mambo Caliente.”¹¹ We played flute and saxophone together at my mother's beginning piano recital. I can still feel the warm sunlight that streamed into her teacher's living room as Andrew and I played a bizarre little flute and saxophone piece for our family and a few neighbors. He made me smile right before I started playing Schwantner's “Black Anemones” for my doctoral recital.¹² I caught his eye and he waved his arms in the air, pretending to be some sort of sea creature, swaying in the ocean current. I proudly listened to his

saxophone solos in Grainger's "Children's March" when he performed with the Cornell University Symphonic Band, as a hotel school major.¹³ We spent long summer days in my parents' pool and performed our specialized brand of synchronized swimming—holding hands while floating in our tubes and twisting and spinning each other as Bob Marley's reggae floated out of the speakers, setting a perfect summer vibe.¹⁴

We still sang "Andrew, Pandrew, Mandrew," but now he was the one resting his chin on my head.

In March of 2013, three days before my birthday and nine days before his, Andrew was tragically killed in a hit and run accident in New York City.

Nearly one thousand people attended his wake, including nearly every music teacher he ever had. We played Miles Davis and a recording of Andrew playing Charlie Parker's "Ornithology" as everyone came to pay their respects.¹⁵

That night, I rocked my eighteen-month-old daughter Ella and quietly hummed, "Andrew, Pandrew, Mandrew" as she drifted off to sleep.

Of everything that we do in our music classrooms, what will truly last? What is our imprint on the golden records we see in our classrooms each day? What's left in the end? Justifying music with better SAT scores and stories of success in the boardroom fall dramatically short of capturing the potential for music and music education to have profound impacts on our relationships, our humanity, and our love.

Perhaps the fox in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's (1943) classic, "The Little Prince," captures it best when he tells the prince, "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes." If the fox is correct, then anything lasting, anything meaningful, and anything essential in what we do in music and music education comes from and ultimately resides in just one place: the heart.

Parker Palmer (2007), educator, activist, and the author of "The Courage to Teach" states, "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts" (11).

Most of our students will no longer perform in band, choir, or orchestra after their PK–12 music education experience. Most of our students will not go on to become music educators or CEOs (who will go on to write articles about why music

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helped them to become successful). It is possible then, even likely, that for the majority of students, the lasting parts of their music education experiences, the web of connections, will exist solely in the form of tiny crystallized images, mental snapshots of powerful moments and feelings that are generated in our classrooms.

In her 2008 poem for the inauguration of Barack Obama, poet Elizabeth Alexander asked, “What if the mightiest word is love?”¹⁶

Love. It is a word that is largely absent from music education advocacy and educational policy discussions, and yet is really the only word that can answer the question, “What truly lasts?” In thinking about my life as a music educator, I realize that my work has less to do with the mind and nearly everything to do with the heart. This realization was confirmed by the beautiful discussion that emerged from teaching Contemporary Issues on the day that I felt lost. We arrived at this conclusion: The memory of love in the relationships that we form in our classrooms will remain in our students’ minds. If we’re really lucky, the memory of that love is etched in *sound*, allowing us to use music and music education as the conduit to experience the deepest levels of human connection.

Every tiny, crystalized image on my own golden record is filled with love—love for music, love of teaching, and of course, love for Andrew. For me, the deepest grooves often lie at the intersections; the places where my special relationship with Andrew, music, laughter, and our K–12 experiences met. Those places were and always will be alive and teeming with love.¹⁷ As Palmer (2007) states, “The darkness around us is deep, but our great calling, opportunity, and power as educators is to shed light in dark places” (213). The work of teaching from the heart—teaching with passion, love, justice, and compassion—is the work that will cast what Elizabeth Alexander called “a widening pool of light.”¹⁸ It is the type of work that will certainly crystallize into those lasting, meaningful, powerful, awe-inspiring, love-filled moments. This kind of teaching challenges us to focus on human connections and the webs of connectedness that we weave between ourselves, our students, and music making in our classrooms. It is work that Palmer (2007) says “tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart” (19).

Last year, a new etching was unexpectedly added to my golden record when a former student who played trumpet in my middle school band for three years, now twenty-two—Andrew’s age—cried in my arms at the wake of his little brother who died in a tragic fraternity incident. I looked into my student’s tear filled, green eyes

and in a quivering voice, told him about Andrew and wished him the strength to get through each second, each minute, each day without his brother. I had barely finished speaking when he was suddenly hugging me again, crying into my shoulder, not wanting to let go. In that painfully vulnerable, love-filled, heartbreaking and heart opening moment, I held him tight, and let the image crystalize.

Gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler (2004) spoke extensively about grief and vulnerability in a collection of essays she wrote after September 11th entitled, “The Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.” She states,

What grief displays, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us ... in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control... Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something (23).

How do we construct the “self-conscious account of ourselves” as humans? As teachers? To an extent, we can control the perception of our realities through Instagram and SnapChat filters and carefully curated social media identities that allow us to manipulate the account of ourselves that we wish to portray. Teaching in a system that quantifies every aspect of our practice on a rubric creates the sense that just about every aspect of teaching can be controlled, measured, or regulated in some way. Indeed, the “account of ourselves” as teachers is well documented. But what opportunities do we miss with our students and with each other when we surrender to the illusion of control? What would it be like to become undone? What happens to the “account of ourselves” when we surrender not to control, but to undoing?

Butler (2004) asks, “Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief...If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?” (30)

There is no shortage of grief and loss in teaching and in education. I’ve experienced the deaths of students. I’ve witnessed personal tragedies my students throughout the years have endured. I cried as the nation grieved for the unimaginable deaths of children and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. On the surface, it seems ridiculous to ask if there

is something to be gained from grieving. The shock, the intensity of pain that defies description, the dark vastness of time that nearly swallowed me whole—I'd gladly return all of that if I could. Instead, I've had no choice but to do what Butler speaks of, tarry with grief, remaining exposed to its unbearability, forever bound to a profound sense of loss. And yet, there is something that I've gained from it.

I imagine myself like Eve in the Pixar film "WALL-E." She's the robot that repeats the word "DIRECTIVE" as she goes on her assigned mission to locate any traces of biological life left on a post-apocalyptic earth.¹⁹ While looking for the "DIRECTIVE," she encounters WALL-E, an antiquated robot, and they connect in a touchingly human moment. She laughs, he melts. The irony of this scene is that Eve finds love in the form of tenderness and laughter in her relationship with WALL-E, as she's on the most prescribed, literally robotic of missions.

Butler (2004) states, "When we think about who we "are" and seek to represent ourselves, we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me, but they also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded" (28).

On the quest for her DIRECTIVE, to find life on a barren planet, Eve became undone and unbounded. She unlocked her inner life and discovered her need for and later profound joy in emotional connection. Like Eve, I find myself on a DIRECTIVE mission. I constantly search for aspects of Andrew in place and in people. Just like Eve on her mission to find life, I scan everywhere I go, everything I hear and see, and everyone I meet—looking for reminders, glimpses of my brother. Just as Butler described, Andrew lives on "in the fiber of the boundary that contains me" and he also haunts, who I am, and who I continue to become as a human being, and as a teacher.

At the point that I was most undone, right after Andrew's death, I found that I couldn't listen to music of any kind for nearly six months. Any beautiful sound utterly destroyed me. In fact, I sent a message to a colleague, apologizing for not being able to attend his first major wind ensemble concert at The College of New Jersey, fearing I'd be reduced to a sobbing wreck mid-concert. He said this in his reply, "I hope that music can once again become a safe haven for you—a way to connect with your brother." He was right. Nearly a year later, I attended a wind ensemble concert. One of the pieces the group played was David Vickerman's

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arrangement “Ára Batur” or “Row Boat” by the Icelandic group Sigur Rós.²⁰ I knew about Sigur Rós long before that concert because Andrew was the one that introduced me to them. The one repeated line in the lyrics holds much deeper meaning now: *I parted, you parted*. In loss, though, the order is reversed. It becomes *you parted, I parted*. Again, drawing from Butler (2004), “Who “am” I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well” (22). My DIRECTIVE, then, is not only a search for Andrew, it is a search for myself.

Somehow, I find Andrew most often as I am teaching my music education students who are twenty-two years old, just as he was, and will forever be. They are curious, funny, deep thinkers, ready to light the world on fire. In finding and connecting to my students through my “DIRECTIVE,” I am able to be fully myself as a teacher. Open, ever evolving, undone, unbounded. Returned, as Butler (2004) says, to a human sense of vulnerability with my students.

Just as with WALL-E and Eve, the DIRECTIVE goes both ways. When I am open and vulnerable in my own teaching, my students are as well. Perhaps my DIRECTIVE can ultimately become theirs; a search for connection through music, love, shared humanity, and openness in their own classrooms. My hope is that they might be able to break from the prescribed, even robotic motions of teaching, (the measurable objectives, assessments, and the cycle of practice, perform, repeat) and like Eve, discover tenderness and deeper meaning in what they do and how they do it. If they can learn to be unbounded and vulnerable in their teaching, to use music as a way of “holding oneself open,” their students might do the same in return (Bogdan 2010, 118). This type of mutual openness can be the conduit for profound musical experiences “that connects us to one another and gives us larger truths about what it means to be alive and human” (Palmer 2010, 164). Connecting through grief and surrendering to the messy, painful, heart breaking, heart-opening parts of teaching can birth a transformational force in the world. This is the deeper hearted case for music education.

What I have gained from grief, from carrying loss with me at all times, is a focus what truly matters in music teaching, what actually lasts. And what actually lasts has nothing to do with anything that is quantifiable on a rubric. Because anything essential, anything lasting, is invisible to the eyes.

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DIRECTIVE.

To run like we're on fire to love, make human connections through music, and to do the type of teaching and music making that makes us feel alive and unbounded.

DIRECTIVE.

To let ourselves be more open, more compassionate, more vulnerable, and more undone in our teaching.

DIRECTIVE.

To allow the mightiest word—love—to give rise to the music, experiences, images, and feelings that will crystalize...leaving beautiful, lasting, and deeply meaningful imprints on golden records.

Acknowledgements

For Andrew Quinn, with all my love.

The world is so exquisite with so much love and moral depth...be grateful every day for the brief but magnificent opportunity that life provides. (Carl Sagan 1997, 258)

About the Author

Colleen Sears is an Associate Professor and the Coordinator of Music Education at The College of New Jersey where she also leads curriculum development and interdisciplinary programming for the *Institute for Social Justice in the Arts* which she co-founded in 2014. Her current projects engage students and K-12 educators with issues of social justice through innovative collaborations, music performance, and interdisciplinary aesthetic experiences. She also enjoys exploring existential themes as they relate to music education in multi-media presentations. She has published in *Music Educators Journal*, *Action Criticism and Theory for Music Education*, *Music Education Research*, and recently authored a chapter in *Marginalized Voices in Music Education*. She frequently presents work at regional and national conferences including the *New Directions in Music Education Conference*, the *Society for Music Teacher Education Conference*, the *Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic*, and the *CBDNA (College Band Directors National Association) West/Northwest and National Conferences*. She holds a Bachelor of Music from The College of New Jersey, a Master of Arts from the Eastman School of Music and a Doctor of Education in music education from Teachers College, Columbia University.

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Notes

¹ Standardized tests that measure math, reading, and writing skills include the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), ACT (Americas College Testing), GRE (Graduate Record Examinations), and Praxis Core (A test developed by Pearson which focuses on math, reading, and writing skills).

² edTPA is a performance-based, subject specific assessment that evaluates teaching skills and knowledge. It is used as a one component for teacher certification in the United States. See <https://www.edtpa.com/> for more information.

³ The Danielson Framework is a model for teacher evaluation that assesses components of planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. See <https://www.danielsongroup.org/framework/> for more information.

⁴ L. Scott McCormick, “The boardroom case for music education,” *Inside Indiana Business*, accessed August 20, 2015, <http://www.insideindianabusiness.com/contributors.asp?id=1140>

Joann Lipman, “Is music the key to success?” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2013, accessed August 20, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/opinion/sunday/is-music-the-key-to-success.html>

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⁵ See <https://nafme.org/advocacy/broader-minded/> for the National Association for Music Education's Broader Minded materials.

⁶ Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, narrators, "Space," radio broadcast on *Radiolab*, National Public Radio, August 20, 2012, <http://www.radiolab.org/story/231536-rebroadcast-space/>

⁷ Timothy Mahr. *Endurance*. San Diego: CA Neil A. Kjos Company, 1993.

⁸ Eric Whitacre. "Water night," Polyphony. Stephen Layton. Track 11 on *Cloudburst and other choral works*. Hyperion Records Limited. 2005.

⁹ Stuart Duncan, Chris Thile, Edgar Meyer, Yo-Yo Ma. "Quarter chicken dark," track 2 on *The goat rodeo sessions*. Sony Masterworks. 2011.

¹⁰ Chuck Mangione, "The land of make believe," sound recording on *The land of make Believe*. Mercury, 1973.

¹¹ Arturo Sandoval. "Mambo caliente," sound recording on the original motion picture soundtrack of *The Mambo Kings*, 1992.

¹² Joseph Schwantner. *Black Anemones for flute and piano*. European American, 1981.

¹³ Percy Grainger. "Children's march."

¹⁴ Bob Marley and the Wailers. "Three little birds," track 4 on *Exodus*, Tuff Gong, 1977.

¹⁵ Charlie Parker. "Ornithology," B side on "A Night in Tunisia," Radio Recorders Studios, 1946.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Alexander, "Praise song for the day" (poem delivered at the inauguration of Barack Obama, Washington DC, January 20, 2009.

¹⁷ The Beatles. "In my life," Rubber soul. EMI Studios, 1965.

¹⁸ Justice as defined by Allsup and Sheih (2012) as a "moral imperative to care." Allsup, Randall Everett, and Eric Shieh. (2012). Social justice and music education: The call for a public pedagogy. *Music Educators Journal* 98 (4).

¹⁹ Andrew Stanton, *WALL-E*, 2008; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios, Pixar Animation Studios, DVD.

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²⁰ Sigur rós, “Ára bátur,” arranged for wind ensemble by David Vickerman, 2010.