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College Writing

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From Crushed Dreams to Revelations

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” my uncle asked me.

At the age of ten, I was ready with an answer: “I want to be a conductor of an orchestra.” I

waited, expecting praise for being so ambitious.

He wrinkled his brow. He smiled sadly. “Well,” he said, “Guys who conduct symphony

orchestras have mastered instruments by your age; they get music degrees in their teens…”

I knew what he was telling me. He was saying it was *too late*. I was ten, and it was too late. I

dropped the dream, then and there. And, music faded away from me for the next three years. It wasn’t

until the eighth grade that my feet were set back on the path.

My need to be a musician came back and I slowly realized that I was not *just* a musician; I was a

communicator. Maybe, in the end, that statement above was the thing that allowed me to learn this and

taught me not to not to be a single-minded person.

In eighth grade, we were assigned a group project. We had to use a cassette tape and pretend to be

disk-jockeys on a radio station. We were to pick songs to play, record them onto the tape and insert our

“DJ” voices into the mix. I partnered up with a friend of mine, Nick – a slightly overweight kid with curly

black hair and a very intense personality. When he asked what songs I wanted to add to the tape, I was

baffled. I really didn’t know what was on the radio at the time – what was popular.

My parents are both musicians, so I heard music constantly. But it was never *popular* music.

My diet of tunes, by random exposure, was classical, jazz and songs from musicals. My parents were not

into “pop” music, so neither was I. In fact, I really wasn’t a “fan” of anything in particular.

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I told Nick just to pick them.

The next day, he came in with a song by the progressive rock trio, Rush: “Tom Sawyer.” This

was from their current release (1982) *Moving Pictures*, which would go on to become one of the most

critically acclaimed progressive rock albums of all time. Of course, no one knew this would happen, but I

did know that, as soon as Nick pressed “play,” my jaw dropped. I heard Neil Peart play the drums and

everything changed. The next weekend, I found myself picking out a drum kit with my dad: a beautiful,

silver Pearl five-piece. I was officially hooked and I have been in one band or another ever since. But,

something else happened, and I owed this to Peart, too.

I began listening to Rush every chance I got -- in particular, *Moving Pictures*, which never left

my cheap turntable. One night, when I was supposed to be asleep, I was in bed with the headphones on,

listening and following along with the lyrics on the album jacket and I saw (really *saw*) this,

from the song “Limelight”:

Living in the Limelight,

The universal dream

For those who wish to seem.

Those who wish to be

Must put aside the alienation,

Get on with the fascination,

The real relation,

The underlying theme.

I had heard it a thousand times, but this time, it hit me: Neil Peart, the drummer, *wrote* these lyrics (as he

did all of Rush’s lyrics) and he was a genius. I learned, from example, that just because you are banging

on things, it doesn’t mean you can’t be smart. (Heck – Peart even quotes Shakespeare elsewhere in the

lyric.) He was talking about fame and reality – about keeping perspective. He was sending messages

below the text, like a poet. He was entertaining both sides of his human nature: the animalistic and the

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intellectual.

Because of this lyric, I began really thinking about the other things he had written and I started

exploring and writing lyrics and poetry on my own. My fascination with words had begun; and I owed it,

ironically, to a heavy metal drummer; to one of those long-haired rock musicians my dad was always

complaining about.

The drumming continued and the writing continued and, junior year, I found myself sitting in a

history class with a substitute teacher. He was flirting with some of the girls (very creepy) and not paying

attention to the group work we had been assigned, so a bunch of my friends and I were talking about

everything under the sun. At one point, my friend Blair reached down to get something out of his book

bag and I saw a paperback in there: *The Return of the King* by J.R. R. Tolkien.

At this point in my life, I was not a reader, though I had always wished I was. I still wanted to

find books I liked. I asked him about the book. He explained to me that it was part of a trilogy of books

called *The Lord of the Rings.* He loved the books and encouraged me to read them. Pete, another friend of

mine, said: “Get *The Hobbit* first – it set up the background.”

That night, I found myself standing in front of an imposing wall of books at the mall bookstore. I

remember feeling intimidated. I didn’t have much confidence in my own intelligence. I remember

thinking: *“What if I don’t understand this? What if I’m not smart enough to get through books that are*

*that long?”* Regardless, I made the purchase, went home and dug in to reading…

Tolkien’s work transported me. A few months later, I found myself awake at three in the

morning, pacing the floor of my room reading the final clash between Gollum and Bilbo as the Ring

finally plummeted, along with poor Gollum, into the fires of Mount Doom.

I have been in the middle of a book of some kind ever since…

So, now, I knew that music and words would always be part of my life, so I studied English in

College, earned my degree, and kept playing and studying composition privately, until I got to graduate

school. My family couldn’t afford the tuition, so I applied for a “teaching assistantship.” Happily, I was

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awarded the position: free tuition and a salary of twenty thousand dollars a year to teach writing to

college freshmen.

I had never really wanted to teach, but, one night, standing in front of the class, I remember that a

conversation really “took off” and that the students had really grasped what I was trying to teach them. I

literally got chills. I had managed to change the thinking of a group of young people – to challenge their

perspectives and to lead them to their own individual conclusions. It was then that it hit me…

…people make a mistake when they label themselves as one thing, only. We are all too complex

for that. If we focus on one label for ourselves, we are in danger of neglecting all of the facets that make

us up as people. I was not a writer. I was not a musician. I was not a teacher. I was a communicator.

Communicating both ideas and emotions was my “thing.”

After a life of connected experiences, from the music project to *The Lord of the Rings*, to the

classroom, I realized I needed to commit to communicating – not just to drums; not just to writing, not

just to composing or teaching, but to all of it. It all amounted to what makes me feel complete as a person.

So I suppose I should thank my uncle for crushing my dream.