

What Makes Your Heart Sing

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Some time ago, I was given a wonderful gift, this little book of poems. A woman I didn't know very well thought I'd be inspired by these poems written by a child; a child who started creating poems, somewhere near the age of three. His poetry explores life, in its fullest form. He writes of grief, having lost three of his siblings to death. He writes with inspiration, hope, courage, humor and a shocking amount of wisdom, for someone younger than 80.

That woman was right. This little book of poems does inspire me. But perhaps more importantly, I realized that very important things can come from a meager source.

Mathew Joseph Thaddeus Stepanek, almost 5 feet tall, weighing about 70lbs, was certainly big enough to carry his full and long name. But everyone knew him as Mattie. Mattie was in 1990, with Dysautonomic Mitochondrial Myopathy, a form of muscular dystrophy. Children like him and, his three siblings, born with this disease don't live very long. He knew this, and treated every day as a gift. He died as a wise young man, just weeks before his 14th birthday. He lived long enough to have a motto: "Think gently, speak gently, live gently". He had a philosophy too: "Remember to play after every storm." And he knew how he wanted to be remembered: As a Poet, Peacemaker and Philosopher, who played. There is a memorial park in his name in Rockville Md. Oprah came to the dedication, so you know he must have been a big deal.

I want to read you the title poem of one of his books. The poem is called HEARTSONG:
I have a song, deep in my heart,
And only I can hear it.
If I close my eyes and sit very still
It is so easy to listen to my song.
When my eyes are open and
I am so busy and moving and busy,
If I take time and listen very hard,
I can still hear my Heartsong.
It makes me feel happy.
Happier than ever.
Happier than everywhere
And everything and everyone
In the whole wide world.
Happy like thinking about

Going to Heaven when I die.
My Heartsong sounds like this -
 I love you! I love you!
 How happy you can be!
 How happy you can make
 This whole world be!

And sometimes it's other
Tunes and words, too,
But it always sings the
Same special feeling to me.
It makes me think of
Jamie, and Katie and Stevie,
And other wonderful things.
This is my special song.
But do you know what?
All people have a special song
Inside their hearts!

Everyone in the whole wide world
Has a special Heartsong.
If you believe in magical, musical hearts,
And if you believe you can be happy,
Then you, too, will hear your song. Mattie Stepanek

Have you ever heard your heart sing? Did you even know that hearts can sing? They don't sing like a gospel choir. Its usually something much more subtle than that. Our song doesn't need to be loud or even on key. In fact, our song can be so subtle at times, that it's not even a song at all. It can be just a note or 2, or a hum or a quiet sensation. But I'm convinced, and Mattie was too, that we all have a song in our heart. Even if we can't hear it sometimes, or have never heard it before, we all have a song in our heart.

It seems me –and Mattie alluded to it in his poem—that we need to be in a particular frame of mind in order to hear our song. When we can't hear our song, maybe it's because we simply don't know what to listen for. Or because we are caught up in being judgmental of ourselves or of others. When we are feeling pessimistic or focused on our failures, its got to be hard to tune to the channel of our hearts. When we are depressed, we lose awareness of our song altogether. When we feel lonely or defeated, the volumn on our Heartsong channel is very low indeed.

We need to be in a particular frame of mind in order to hear our song. We need to be open to hearing our song, we need to have an attitude of receptivity. We may need to go

for a walk or work in the garden, whatever we do to relax and calm ourselves. We may need to close our eyes and be very still. Or maybe just adjust the channel or volumn.

But in truth, I'm not convinced we really need to DO anything at all. I think it only takes BEING OPEN to hear our song. I believe a mere willingness will do the trick.

If we tune in, pay attention, there are things all around us that can introduce us or remind us of our heart's song. It may come in a nano-second of sensation, it may flash before us like lighting or come like a whiff of bread baking. Or it can sit in front of us for hours like a flower in blossom or the endless lapping of waves at the seashore. But however the invitation to hear our song may come, we'll miss it if we are not in a frame of mind to receive it. We'll miss it for sure if we are not open and receptive.

Notice, I'm using words like being aware, open and receptive. I'm not talking about manual labor here. It's not about aggressively chasing after something or being grabby. Ashley Montagu says: The moments of happiness we enjoy take us by surprise. It is not that we seize *them*, but that they seize *us*. According to Emily Dickinson "The mere sense of living is joy enough". Henry van Dyke writes "Happiness is inward and not outward; and so it does not depend on what we have, but on what we are." And said as only Alice Walker could: "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field and don't notice it". All these people I think, are telling us that all we need do, in order to hear our song, is to notice, to pay attention.

Pablo Casals takes a bit more proactive approach in the following quote:

"For the past eighty years I have started each day in the same manner. It is not a mechanical routine But something *essential* to my daily life. I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being."

Bach, makes Casal's heart sing. What makes your heart sing? Over the years, I've asked that question of people I've met. When they haven't been totally freaked out, I've gotten some interesting responses. Sky blue morning glories, hands in the soil, the first brush stroke of a painting. Feeling your own heart and breath while running or skiing, unexpected and unmerited beauty, laughter. Being present when someone discovers a new talent or understanding. Waking up to the sound of the ocean. Seeing a spiral galaxy in a telescope. As for me, it might be a hawk, soaring overhead against a bright blue sky, or an alto saxophone playing a melancholy Bb.

So now, let's thicken the soup. What are some of the things that make the hearts in this community sing? For the next minute or two, let's hear what makes your heart sing. Speak in your theatre voice because you won't have a microphone. BUT wait, there is one RULE, not a suggestion or guideline, a RULE: NO stories, only a word, a phrase or a sentence or two. What makes your heart sing?

There is something important about recognizing our own song. Sometimes it jumps out at us and won't be ignored. Sometimes, we need to be teased into an awareness that our hearts are singing. Sometimes, we are reminded by people, places and things in the external world. Some of us hear our hearts easily and often, some of us may struggle and wonder what we've heard. But however and whenever you hear your own heart's song, take notice. Even if you don't know exactly what it is you are hearing, pay attention. Because there is something important going on. Learn to know and befriend your song. It will make a difference in your life.

For one thing, it will lower your blood pressure. And paradoxically, while you will feel calmer---you will also feel invigorated, because you will know that you are alive. It's hard not to smile when you hear your song, even if no-one else notices. Mattie in his poem tells us what it feels like to hear our song, he says: "It makes me feel happy, Happier than ever, Happier than everywhere, and everything and everyone."

This kind of happiness is only possible when it comes from somewhere deep inside of us. This kind of happiness we call JOY. And that joy can come only when we are connected to that deepest part of ourselves, our true selves. It does not come from who others would have us be. When we hear our hearts' song, we know we are being who we are intended to be. We know we are in touch with some essential truth.

Hearing our own song feeds us. It is more nutritious than food, and has zero calories. But not only does it feed us personally, its impact goes well beyond us as individuals. When we are happy, when we feel joy, when we hear our own song, when we are in touch with some essential truth, it radiates out from us and touches the world. The world is calmed, and invigorated and enlivened.

THICH Nhat Hanh, captures this idea wonderfully when he says: "My joy is like spring, so warm, it makes flowers bloom in my hands". And someone once said: "When you finally allow yourself to trust joy and embrace it, you will find you dance with everything."

I want to end with one of Mattie's poems that I think illuminates this concept wonderfully. It's called The Importance of Windows.

“Windows are very good things to have. They let you look out, and see all the different things. And they let you look in, to see all the other different things. And do you know what is the most Special window of all? The window in your heart, That’s between the Heaven in the earth and the Heaven in the sky.”

I think this young, wise man is using Mattie words to tell us that there, at the window in your heart, one encounters the divine. So find your heartsong. Go looking for it if you must. Listen to your own song and let it’s rhythm take you where it will.

May it be so, AMEN