

All-State: Conviction: A Reflection On String Teaching and String Being

by Lori Carlson

At the 2009 MNSOTA All-State String Teachers' Workshop I ran into Jane, the woman I student taught with several years ago. She was one of the people who helped me find a confident smile, captured in a photo a few months before I began teaching. I know she had moments of uncertainty in some matters, since she was a human being (thank goodness, because so was I). But when it came to how music fit into life, she always seemed convinced. In a recent attempt to recover this kind of faith within myself, I wrote a poem entitled *Tribute to the Elementary Violinists*. Like odd paper children, I sent copies of the poem out into the world and into the e-mail of a few of my music education role models.

In brief moments throughout my time at the workshop I saw that Jane appeared as refreshingly convinced as ever. I heard the results in the high school violin section she had worked with through the week. One of those students, a former student of mine, caught me at dinner and told me she saw me in the audience, reaching for the sun during Barry Green's *Inner Game of Music* presentation for the students. All of the students were on stage pulling the universe together with their arms. What I neglected to tell this girl was that I stood up and reached for the sun with the students because Jane stood. It was her natural reaction to take it all in, right along with the students. Perhaps it's the compelling intersection of teaching, learning, giving, receiving, just being, yet always becoming.

In relation to pinning my own conviction to the world, Jane told me she has my

poem to the elementary violinists posted outside of her studio and I told her those kids continued to show up with their violins and smiles each week. It helped me stay patient through the ridiculously short instructional time allotments (and find some sustaining meaning in my work during what would potentially be the last year of 4th grade orchestra).

I have allies, but I've felt myself drowning in attempts to save my own principles. In times of economic crisis and bubble-tested intelligence, people begin to ask, "What is 4th Grade Orchestra for?" Like a true violinist in perpetual existential crisis, simply trying to blend into some bigger picture, I ask the world, "Well then, what am I for?" *Hmmmm...*

The fact that fourth grade orchestra was not cut did not settle my irritation. But I've been reminded that we all begin resolving the same old questions with new or renewed commitments as our answers, however minute or grand. This year I vow do a finer job holding my role models in mind so I can be that for others. Turnover quickly turned me into the old-timer in my department and I find myself working with aspiring music educators at our local universities. I tend to believe they have potential because as long as they really care. In my social constructivist theory of discipline and confidence, I know the freedom to care is given to all of us. We only need to remember that it is something we share.

As the finale to our string teacher workshop, we listened as the Minnesota All-State Orchestra played the snot out of Tchai-

kovsky and Wagner. The finale to Mendelssohn's *Reformation Symphony* felt as if it were riding on an expanding view, while the orchestra's performance of Britten's *Young Peoples' Guide to the Orchestra* reminded me why that piece is worth the effort.

After the concert, I met the exhausted-semi-delirious smile of one of my viola students. Her eyes were dazed and starry with overtones. We had witnessed the result of hours, broken down into subdivided seconds of both wide and fine-pointed attention. We witnessed the care in each present, subdivided beat and the overtones thrown into the hall. If I had to explain the whole performance in one word, I'd call it *convincing*.

In all the meaning-making that goes into living, for those of us doing this particular thing, the orchestra is known as an institution of one-and-everything. We know it simultaneously as a metaphor, an expression of anything lived, and a real lived experience that demands our presence. In this situation, we don't even have time to negotiate courage. We simply make a choice. We show up, sit down, and we're all simply carried right along on our own *flinging* forth of Being. (Heidegger's terminology) If that isn't a way of reality, I guess I'll never really know what reality means. And that's fine, because for now I'm feeling rather convinced-like.

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