

Excerpt Following the Songline of the Heart

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Several years ago, I spent some time at an educational center on a remote part of the California coast. I was leaving soon for Japan to give several concerts, so occasionally I used the old upright piano in the corner of the busy dining room to practice after dinner. Behind me there was the steady hum of animated conversation.

Most people were familiar with me and my piano recordings. But there was also a regular turnover of attendees. The young man who joined me on the bench one evening was one of these.

“I enjoy your music,” he said when I had finished playing.

I thanked him. I was about to get up from the bench when he added quickly, “There’s just one thing. . .”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“You sound too much like Michael Jones.” Then after pausing for a moment, he added, “You really should develop your own style.”

I hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to say.

“I *am* Michael Jones,” I said finally, wondering what reaction this might provoke.

He thought about this for the longest time. Then he said, “No you’re not!” The certainty in his voice left little room for debate.

For the next few moments we sat on the bench, arguing about who I was; an argument that I was sure I was about to lose.

“Here,” I said finally, pulling out my wallet with the driver’s license from my hip pocket and pushing it into his hand.

He examined the picture carefully and then looked back at me.

“You *really* are Michael Jones,” he said with a whisper. Quickly he apologized, shook my hand vigorously, and rushed off to tell his friends.

I took this opportunity to step outside and listen to the surf breaking up on the rocks below, recalling a similar encounter at a conference a few months before.

“Do you know who you *are*?” someone had said to me there. He was halfway through a bit of vegetarian lasagna when our conversation turned to music and to one of my recordings that he knew well.

It was an important question, because there was a time in my life when I didn’t know who I was. I didn’t know how my subtle trust in the instinctive and imaginative world fit within the context of the rational and orderly world I inhabited each day. How was I to speak of this realm to others, who were convinced that it either did not exist or, if it did, was simply a world of fantasy that was trivial and irrelevant?

I remembered, as a child, when I wrote my first song. Unsure of its outcome, I worked on it secretly for several days. Once it was done, I was amazed with the sound. It had a melody, a rhythm, a key signature; it had a beginning and an end, and I loved it so much that I played it every day. And yet, while this accomplishment filled my life to the brim, the hours of concentrated effort that I brought to the task seemed irrelevant when seen in the context of the more urgent demands that were then being asked of me. There was homework to do and errands to run. I was the oldest son, with three younger brothers to tend. Even at this early age, there were many things I was being asked to do that had

more importance in the world than my little song. And yet, for me this was probably the most significant thing I had ever done. Not only did it signal the value that music was to have in my life, but—perhaps of even more importance—I was being made aware that even in the midst of the demands of the world, I was also being invited to respond to what seemed to be the impractical and “useless” calls from within.

“There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain,” writer Annie Dillard says to us. “It is hard to explain because you have never read it on any page. You were made and set here to give voice to this, your own astonishment.”

What I have come to see through my own life and those of others is that each life is given something, a question perhaps or a curiosity, one not yet fully formed, but one whose nature is so compelling that we are drawn to it like a gravity pull. We live in service of it, sometimes blindly following its trail, even if we are offered only a few subtle cues to guide our way. The trick, of course, for each of us is to discover how to follow the clues.

“The most demanding part of living a lifetime as an artist,” Annie Dillard goes on to say, quoting the words of sculptor Annie Truitt, “is the strict discipline of forcing oneself to work steadfastly along the nerve of one’s own intimate sensitivity.”

What does it mean to follow the nerve of our own intimate sensitivity? What is it that has true heart and meaning in our life? Is there something that we can be steadfast about, something that so attracts our curiosity, interest, and passion that we are willing to stand with that above all else? Is it possible to uncover the doubts and uncertainties that so often disguise these mysterious attractions and curiosities with vague feeling of dissatisfaction and a busyness that dulls our senses and claims our lives?

For many years, I resisted these questions. “I am a pianist,” I would say. “I don’t know how to speak of this in words.” I was content to simply sit at the piano, to let it be my oasis, a place to which I could retreat from the chaos and pain of the world. But life had other ideas. One evening, I sat in the Green Room in a small concert hall in New England. It was intermission. I had a few moments to plant the second half of the evening. Generally, I didn’t submit program notes in advance, preferring instead to play through the music as I felt it, rather than try to force my program to fit some preset plan.

So, I was using this opportunity to sketch out some ideas on the back of an envelope before the second part of the evening began.

What about *Swallows in Space*? I mused to myself. No, just a minute, I played that one in the first set. . . Well, okay then, how about *Aspen Summer*, that would be a good start, and then I could go on to . . . *Spring Song*. Suddenly my throat became very dry. I had played all of these compositions in the first half of the evening. No, that’s impossible; how could I have? I said to myself.

Although I had played only a few concerts, I had never run short of music before. I knew I was a little nervous tonight, but did I play them that fast? My mind was racing. As soon as I noticed its rapid pace, I realized that perhaps I had. But there was no further time to waste trying to figure it out. The lights were flickering on the stage, and in a few moments, four or five hundred people would be returning to their seats in the hall. They would be expecting me to return to the stage as well. But I didn’t want to go—I didn’t have any more music left to play.

Slowly I walked across the stage and sat at the piano. My mind was foggy, but fortunately my voice was clear. I turned to look across the darkened hall. I was able to make out some faces in the front two rows, so I spoke to them. This relaxed me.

“People sometimes ask where the inspiration for my music comes from,” I began. “I have sometimes wondered the same thing.” As I talked, I surprised myself with how quickly I warmed to the task. What came to me to speak of were not so much theories or ideas, but stories, ones that spoke about my life and where the music had come from. What was so significant about the stories I chose to share was that I had forgotten that they were there. They were not the ones that I usually told. In fact, these had been so distant from my mind that I could no longer be sure that they were true.

Perhaps the stories that hold the most significance for us work this way. They are experienced and then forgotten. When they are recalled, they are no longer simply a part of our biography, but reveal how the mythic dimension of the universe is weaving itself into the fabric of our personal lives; details of time and place and chronology are overshadowed by the importance these stories hold in revealing the deeper meaning that is emerging as our lives unfold. Although the story itself may represent only a small moment in time, it shows that we are participants in a larger story, one that lives in us, but finds its origin in all that has gone before. When we speak of it, it is no longer just a memory, but a living presence: Our words carry the weight and conviction of our own experience; we have earned these stories—they are now in our blood. As we discover how to follow the stories’ unfolding trail of meaning, we can appreciate how perfectly suited they are for us: They become our teachers, subtly and exquisitely revealing to us our next steps. Then we are complete within ourselves; no one else’s knowledge is greater than our own.

After the concert, many members of the audience pulled me aside to tell me one of their own stories. The freshness and excitement in their words revealed to both of us that they were also sharing them for the first time. The stories offered a bridge, a means through which I could let my life merge with theirs, and theirs with mine.

How many of us, I wonder, are walking around with stories inside of us that we are unaware of? Stories that speak deeply of who we are, ones that are waiting urgently to be told. Our life is a story, Carl Jung once said, and our spirit needs to have this story in order for us to live. When our story is lost, he believed, the culture is lost as well.

How many of us remember, as children, being sustained by the stories that were shared under a dusty yellow light beside a freshly pulled-down bed? How often have we been spontaneously filled with feelings of wonder, joy, and tears as the story offered us, in its telling, a warmhearted and welcoming embrace of life? Perhaps that is why I have always loved to tell and to listen to stories. Some part of me dissolves away, and I stand naked in the essence of who I truly am. That was what had been significant for me that evening. In walking to the stage empty-handed, I had been given something. I was no longer playing an instrument, I *was* one. I had become a vehicle through which the deeper purposes and rhythms of life could be felt, and the longing of the heart revealed.

After that evening, I thought more deeply about my life as an artist. Maybe it was too easy to try to isolate myself from the larger community of which I was a part. “Artists are the antennae of the race,” Ezra Pound once said. I began to see that my needs for privacy needed to be balanced with an awareness that the sharing of my music and stories might help to awaken the artist that is so often sleeping within each of us.

So, in addition to sharing the stories in concerts, I decided to write about them as well. But no sooner had I put the pen to page, than this short book grew from a few pages after the first week to five or six chapters a few months later. Outlining the stories had soon led to writing about piano playing, and this soon led to writing about creativity. And the topic of creativity, I realized, was larger than I had first envisioned. Within a short time, I felt a little like a fish trying to write about the sea.

In the meantime, somewhere in this process, the stories got lost, and so did the music. The subtle magic of that evening had been overridden by another part of my nature that was demanding that this project become bigger and better. In doing so, the stories that had first inspired it got left behind. And the piano that had been the source of the stories was put aside as well. It sat forgotten and untouched, its strings untuned, its surface buried in dust.

My office, on the other hand, was a flurry of activity. Mounds of paper, each page more dense than the other with theoretical expositions and quotations, filled my desk. The floor beside my chair was stacked high with drafts of chapters, each more labored and abstract than the last. Although the content of what I wrote was about creativity, the process by which I was writing was becoming anything but.

Finally, it was done. I passed it along proudly to a friend, an editor, for comment.

A month passed, then the editor and I met late one September afternoon. “What about your stories?” she said, by way of beginning. “I remembered how you described them to me when you first began to write. I always enjoyed them, but I don’t see many of them here.”

“Hmmm. . .” I replied, feeling a little self-conscious. I had almost forgotten them. “I discarded most of them,” I said defensively. “Why don’t you just do some light editing on the rest.”

She sat silent for a moment and then cleared her throat. “I liked them! If you want my honest opinion, I suggest that you include the stories—and discard the rest.”

This was followed by a much longer silence. Slowly, the sun drifted behind a cloud. The birds that had sung merrily around us when we sat down to talk seemed to have gathered now in the far pasture. Their voices so full and rich a moment ago were now faint and distant.

“But the *rest* is 90 percent of the manuscript,” I protested. “I can’t just throw it out.”

“Let the stories speak for themselves,” she said. “Once you have put yourself back into this book, you won’t need all the rest.”

The following week, I reread the manuscript. She was right. Somewhere in the process, there had been a palace revolt. The part of myself that had helped me navigate through school essays, college honors papers, and a graduate dissertation had taken over the show. It was a voice that put more faith in concepts and theories than in direct experience and held a greater investment in showing off my competencies to the world than in revealing my vulnerabilities. It had little faith or patience with the poetic, uncertain, heartfelt, dreamy, imaginative parts of my nature. Though this mental intelligence may have helped me get good grades, it had little interest in revealing the deeper desires that lay within my heart. Yet it was my heart that came most to life when I sat the piano, and, though its voice may often feel tentative, awkward, and unformed when first heard, it was from this part of myself that the words for this book must come.

My head was ready to push on and make the necessary corrections, but I was listening more to my heart now, and it was ready for a rest. It needed time and space to do its work. Although its rhythms might unfold more slowly, I trusted that the words that did flow from it would draw from a different inspiration, one that was free and independent of external stimulation and therefore more likely to be heaven-sent.

I also realized that I was writing in the wrong place. I had been working upstairs, and the piano was downstairs. It was *down* I needed to go if I were to truly write this book. So, I returned to the piano, tuned its strings, and dusted the keys. And as I experienced the joy of playing again, the purpose of this book became clear. It was about piano playing, but it was not about technique. It was about recognizing that our “artfulness,” whatever form it takes, is neither a luxury nor something to distract us during our leisure time. Instead, it is an integral part of the whole of ourselves. It offers an insight into tasks that we are here to fulfill; it provides a place of inner nourishment, a reminder that, no matter what life brings us, we can always come back to the well.

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C Michael Jones
www.pianoscapes.com**