

Tuning the E string: An enduring harmony as certain as the groaning of the world

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A man I know raised four children with few requirements of them. But one of those few was that each of them learn to play a musical instrument. This would not only supply them with discipline and delight, he reasoned. It would also give the family a language that surpassed speech, and his children a patois that would carry them around the world.

My parents had roughly the same idea, except that my piano lessons were strictly for my own improvement. No one else in the family played anything, and the only person I had to commune with was Mrs. Blicht, my piano teacher, who set her metronome with all the gravity of an inquisitor positioning her rack. After I failed to show any promise at the piano, I was introduced to the flute, the clarinet and the guitar, in that order. The fact that my parents rented those instruments told me everything I needed to know about their confidence in my ability. When I went off to college, I went without so much as a kazoo in my trunk.

Somewhere along the way I fell in love with a young man who made mountain dulcimers. Under his spell, I bought a two-octave psaltery made from polished blond wood and learned to tease simple tunes from it with a dainty horsehair bow. With that lovely instrument perched on my lap, I felt positively biblical. I sang psalms. I played hymns. I made things up. When the romance ended, so did the music. I got a job. I got busy. I put the psaltery on a shelf.

Last week I took it down again, at least partly because I had just watched an 88-year-old woman blow a mean tune on her two-sided Marine Band harmonica. Her face was gray when she started out and pink when she finished. The transformation was so total that I decided I could not afford to age any further without music in my life.

The psaltery was parked on a high shelf in the ironing room. When I pulled the bow from the case, half of the horsehairs swung loose in the breeze. The psaltery itself looked no worse for my neglect of it, except that the strings had all stretched out of shape. Starting with the low E, I blew on a pitch pipe and set the bow to the string, twisting the peg so that the sound went above the note and then below.

At first I did not know that the music was inside of me. I kept blowing the pipe, bowing the string and twisting the peg, without enough hands to manage it all. Finally I tried humming the note, holding it while I stretched the string this way and that. The discord made my jaws ache. Then the string found E and my whole body agreed. The note inside of me and the note outside of me were the same note. There could be no doubt.

Since I live with a lot of doubt, this tuning of the E string had a large effect on me. After long years of seeking certainty about things that cannot be seen, I have pretty much surrendered to the necessity of faith: that love will last, that goodness has power, that God is real. I cannot lay hands on any of these things any more than I can hold an E note up by its stem.

There are whole months, in fact, when both faith and music seem like impossible luxuries. What kind of music can a child from Sierra Leone make, with raw stumps where her hands once were? Would anyone like to address the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the power of goodness? I suspect that I am not the only person who ever put her psaltery on a shelf because its small clear voice sounded irreverent against the vast groaning of the world.

The discovery that E exists independently of my faith in it is no small thing. Even when I am not searching for it, the note is there. I cannot say where "there" is, exactly, since it is no place I can see, but when I hear the note I know it. I furthermore know that I did not create it. It was real before I ever was and it will remain real long after I am gone. Its reality is such that no one has to take my word for it, either. When I stretch the string just right and set the bow to it, I make a sound that has a name. Any stranger with a good enough ear can walk by and say, "That's an E."

The trustworthiness of this note makes up for its smallness. While I am learning to find it on a more reliable basis, it waits patiently to be found. It is not going anywhere, because time means nothing to it. It has always been E and it will always

be E. It has all the time in the world. Twisting the string peg this way and that, I set loose sounds that make those around me wince. Apparently I am not the only one who suffers from my disharmony. But when I find the note at last, there are no words for the pleasure of the reunion. There is only the music, as the E inside of me and the E outside of me round into one. Is it my imagination, or is the pleasure mutual? I would testify under oath that the note was as glad to be found as I was to find it.

Perhaps this is the gift my friend wanted to give his four children, as well as the one my parents wanted to give me: the early assurance that there is an enduring harmony as certain as the groaning of the world, whose small clear voice is the truest one of all. Rather late in my life, I have taken this promise off the shelf. God willing, I shall play it with all the time I have left.