

*People often ask me what inspired me to begin making music. Most of the time they expect me to cite an influence that they can look up online. In my case it is a bit more complicated. It was not a melody or seeing a famous musician on stage. It was a girl with a guitar standing in a classroom I had up until that moment associated with rage, humiliation, isolation and pain. She changed my life in the space of a song.*  
~Patrick

When the blind girl visited my classroom I was sitting in the back and I couldn't hear a goddamned thing.

Teachers usually stuck me back here. Where I was out of sight and bored out of my mind.

I could not hear. Decades later the doctors at Johns Hopkins explained that I have conductive hearing loss. That means that the inner ear mechanisms that transmit sound from the eardrum to the auditory nerve no longer work because of damage from chronic infections.

As a child all I knew was that my ears hurt and people were hard to understand. In Catholic school the good sisters laughed at me for crying over a mere earache – even when the pressure was great enough to rupture my eardrums. When mocking me didn't work the nuns slapped me around.

I guess the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary didn't buy into the whole suffer the little children part of the Bible back then.

Even when I switched to public school in the third grade I was still stationed in the back of the class and ignored.

My parents coached me to speak clearly. This was useful in holding a conversation, but my teachers assumed that I could hear because I, as they eloquently put it, "didn't sound deaf."

I taught myself to read lips and interpret body language. When my teacher realized I was reading her lips she started covering her mouth with a sheet of paper.

My mother introduced me to literature. Jack London, H.G. Wells, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Emily Dickenson and Edgar Allan Poe quickly became favorites. I sat in school learning nothing and then went home and educated myself with stacks of books from the library. The librarians would get excited over the range of books I was devouring.

School days went by in a slow silent crawl. The only break in the boredom was math. It made no sense to me. No matter how hard I tried, numbers got jumbled in my head. The only thing that was more bewildering than the numbers was the way adults reacted to my difficulty. Teachers yelled or slapped me. My parents got angry. My Quaker tutor came scarily close to violence more than once.

It was a shame because I liked the tutor, but she really sucked at her job when faced with a student with a different perspective. Once she spread some coins on the table saying, "You have five coins. I take away two. How many do you have left?"

I counted the remaining coins. "One . . . two . . . three."

She slammed her hand on the table. The coins jumped. "No! Don't count it!"

"Then how do I know how many are left?"

"You should just know!"

I was trying hard not to swear. "How?"

Throwing her arms in the air, "You should just know!"

Mimicking her gesticulations I yelled, "Jesus Christ!"

She put her hand on my copy of *A Tale of Two Cities*. "How can you read this and not understand math?"

“This is about the French Revolution!” It was my turn to slam the table. “The only math in the French Revolution was counting how many heads were in a pile!”

She held her head in her hands. Her boyfriend stepped in to end the session and make us all a cup of herbal tea.

Nowadays they have a name for my trouble with math. They call it dyscalculia. People like me have trouble doing math in our heads, difficulty with time, warped spatial relationships and trouble with analog clocks. In other words, I don’t just suck at math, there is something about my brain that has difficulty with things that most of us take for granted. I can’t remember names. I have no sense of the passage of time.

It should not have been a big deal. I am reasonably intelligent. I was reading the classics by first grade. I was good in history, science and English – but none of that mattered. Teachers told me to my face that my trouble with math stemmed from that fact that I was stupid, lazy and stubborn.

With teachers flipping out at me every math period and getting shuffled to the back of the classroom where I could not hear, I was quickly singled out by the other kids. I was a prime target for bullies. Most days saw some sort of violence in my direction.

I learned the hard way that beating the crap out of a bully created a complex phenomenon. The defeated bully instantly became the victim and I was treated like a monster. If I did not fight back, I was labeled a sissy. If I fought back and won, I was a bad person. There was no way to win, so I just went crazy on any poor bastard dumb enough to pick a fight with me. If I lost a fight, I would just start the fight again tomorrow or the next day until I won.

By the day the blind girl visited my class I felt completely alone. To the teachers and students I was like some kind of alien presence.

She came in with a guitar, led by her guide dog. A ray of light in a deeply dark place. Her long blond hair was brushed casually over her shoulder. She wore an unflatteringly striped top and red slacks. Her dog was a big German Shepard.

I don’t know why the blind girl visited my classroom. The teacher said something that looked/sounded/read to my eyes and reached my one semi-functional ear as “Lion’s Club.” I guess the local Lion’s Club chapter had sent her.

I mostly ignored her presentation, and I hate to admit that I winced a bit when she broke out her Guild guitar and said something that sounded like, “singalong.” No way in hell the little monsters in my class were going to sing along. From my vantage point in the back of the room I could see them giggling and making rude gestures.

Still, I drew myself up from my self-indulgent sulking slouch. I focused my eyes on her mouth and put together that the kids were to sing, “tick-tock, tick-tock” when she gave the signal.

Then she started to play and I was never the same.

*My grandfather's clock was too large for the shelf,  
So it stood ninety years on the floor;  
It was taller by half than the old man himself,  
Though it weighed not a pennyweight more.  
It was bought on the morn of the day that he was born,  
And was always his treasure and pride;  
But it stopped short — never to go again —  
When the old man died.*

*Ninety years without slumbering  
The kids: “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
His life's seconds numbering,  
The kids: “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
It stopped short never to go again when the old man died*

*In watching its pendulum swing to and fro,  
Many hours he spent as a boy.  
And in childhood and manhood the clock seemed to know  
And to share both his grief and his joy.  
For it struck twenty-four when he entered at the door,  
With a blooming and beautiful bride;  
But it stopped short — never to go again —  
When the old man died.*

*Ninety years without slumbering  
**The kids:** “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
His life's seconds numbering,  
**The kids:** “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
It stopped short — never to go again —  
When the old man died.*

*My grandfather said that of those he could hire,  
Not a servant so faithful he found;  
For it wasted no time, and had but one desire —  
At the close of each week to be wound.  
And it kept in its place — not a frown upon its face,  
And its hands never hung by its side.  
But it stopped short — never to go again — When the old man died.*

*Ninety years without slumbering  
**The kids:** “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
His life's seconds numbering,  
**The kids:** “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
It stopped short — never to go again —  
When the old man died.*

*It rang an alarm in the dead of the night —  
An alarm that for years had been dumb;  
And we knew that his spirit was pluming for flight —  
That his hour of departure had come.  
Still the clock kept the time, with a soft and muffled chime,  
As we silently stood by his side;  
But it stopped short — never to go again —  
When the old man died.*

*Ninety years without slumbering  
**The kids:** “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
His life's seconds numbering,  
**The kids:** “tick, tock, tick, tock”  
It stopped short — never to go again —  
When the old man died.*

The kids sang along at every chorus. I was dumbfounded.

I watched her lead the children with gentle confidence. She had been presented to us as handicapped, but with that guitar in hands she was so powerful. She could have been Artemis leading the hunt across the stars to mount Olympus. I was in awe. I may have been in love.

With tears running down my eyes, I knew. I vowed. I promised myself with a knowing that went deep down to my bones that I would play the guitar someday. I would find a way to harness the power I had just witnessed.

Then one of my classmates saw my tears and laughed at me.

I got up and punched him in his face. Hard.

On the long slow walk to the principal's office I pondered the magic of the guitar and the silly sad old song.

The vice principal had a balding head beset with dandruff flaky as a homemade pie crust and a misshapen goatee. He was not very smart. I had been recently sent to his office for fighting and he menaced me with a spanking paddle. I asked him if he had two slices of bread, "Because if you touch me with that thing, I am going to make you eat it."

My dad was not happy over that call from the office.

Today the vice principal was more interested that I had been crying instead of my reasons for punching the other kid. I would not have told this moron the truth for a million dollars. He would have done something cruel with the information. Instead, with my eyes still damp with tears, I told him that the song made me sad about my grandfather.

"Oh . . . Did he, um, pass away?"

I gave a long pause before I answered with a cheesy grin. "No. He's just mean."

The joke did not go over well, but at least this time my parents were not called this time. He yelled at me for a bit and I just tuned him out. I sat there staring at him coldly, but inside I was thinking about that guitar and the sweetly gentle way she took those children and involved them in the song.

Deciding on my life's path was a big moment . . . but that decision did not factor in the difficulties I faced. Getting through to the adults in my life. Getting a guitar. Finding a teacher. Learning to play when I could hardly hear what people were saying to me. The list seemed insurmountable, but it couldn't be harder than math.

The rest of the day passed quietly. When I got home, I fished my harmonica out of my top dresser drawer. It was a Hohner Marine Band given to me by my mother the previous Christmas. When I held the instrument for the first time, mom told me, "This is music. If you have music you can go anywhere in the world and you will never be alone."

Now I understood her words. I had no idea how to play the harmonica, but I put the instrument to my lips and tentatively stumbled across the open notes to *My Grandfather's Clock*.

*My grandfather's clock was too large for the shelf*. . . It was clumsy, but the notes were there. It was a start.

That night I dreamed of guitars. It was not the kind of dream where I was rich or famous. It was simpler and sweeter than that. I was sitting on a hill singing up to a starry sky and people walking by stopped to sing along.

I usually do not remember my dreams. This one has stayed with me through these long years. It has comforted me at times when the going got rough.

The next day I started keeping my harmonica in my pocket so I could practice anytime the chance arose. Someday I would have a guitar and someday I would be able to play it. However long it took. Whatever it took.

I sometimes wonder what I would say or do if I met that guitar player today. How would I thank her? What would we play? Would I kiss her hands and thank her for showing me so gracefully that there was a way out – a way forward – that didn't involve apathetic teachers or fighting off bullies? Maybe we would not say much of anything at all, and instead sit on a hill singing up to the stars in the sky. Together.