



Nitya Rajeshuni //

“Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening for them is something more acute than listening to them. I suppose it’s an early form of participation in what goes on. Listening children know stories are there. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole.”¹

— Eudora Welty

On the third floor, there lives an old piano. Unwillingly overlooked, it hides tucked away in its recess, just round the bend from the elevators—the type of corner you miss because its planes merge so smoothly that the boundary is unintelligible, the space beyond simultaneously belonging and misfit. Behind it looms a gaping window, the kind where you feel if only you could thrust your palm through, you might just catch stardust—a portal to a mysterious world. On the backs of its keys, I am momentarily privy to the weights it has borne, lines delicately etched in the silhouettes of my fingerprints, whittled from dust. Maybe stardust? Rarely confronted, it stalwartly stands guard, the warden of the third floor, its residents whose cells are selfishly multiplying, and the nomads like myself, armed with stethoscopes and beepers, all in search of a thread of magic.

When the nights are quiet, I like to steal away to the piano on the third floor. Sometimes I uncover fragments of old repertoire, like knick-knacks from a collection of memories. Other times, I foray into foreign grounds, lilting through newly accustomed melodies. However, my staple, a paean of sorts, is “Theme of Mitsuha” from Makoto Shinkai’s film *Kimi no Na wa* or *Your Name*.² In this animated masterwork, Shinkai artfully weaves a poignant story of two beloveds separated by time and space. Amidst the antics of time-traveling, shooting stars, and body-swapping emerges a tale that transcends beyond love and courage to faith, conviction, connection, and time. A central theme is that of *Musubi*. There’s a scene in which the protagonist Mitsuha and her grandmother are

seen braiding sacred threads, a tradition passed onto them from their ancestors, their lineage responsible for guarding the Miyamizu shrine. Her grandmother muses:

*Musubi is the old way of calling the local guardian god. This word has profound meaning. Tying thread is Musubi. Connecting people is Musubi. The flow of time is Musubi. These are all the god's power. So the braided cords that we make are the god's art and represent the flow of time itself. They converge and take shape. They twist, tangle, sometimes unravel, break, and then connect again. Musubi—knotting. That's time.*³

There's a reason I return to this piece time and time again. To me, it represents not only the magic of a good story, replete with awe and wonder, but the choice to create magic by virtue of the stories we choose to tell, about ourselves and the world—twisting, untangling, braiding, and unknotting how we perceive and engage with time.

It was in Rachel Naomi Remen's *The Healer's Art* that I first understood the importance of telling stories. As someone who grew alongside a wild imagination and penchant for consuming stories, I was not unfamiliar with the charms of storytelling. However, it was as a first-year medical student in Remen's course at Stanford University School of Medicine that I first contemplated the healing abilities of both stories and storytelling. The Healer's Art first began at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) School of Medicine in the early 1990s and has since expanded to almost 90 medical schools globally. In this innovative didactic, students and faculty explore alongside each other their professional and personal conceptions of compassion, healing, grief, awe and mystery. The centerpiece of every session, however, is gathering “around the table.” In small groups, we swapped the stories of our lives, from the grand pomp of victory to the empty siloes of loss, to the once banal passage of clouds now suffused with meaning—often tales we had never shared with others, or ourselves. And slowly but surely, in the midst of this unraveling and relacing, new conceptions were born like freshly re-plaited memories.

In *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal*, Remen writes, “Everybody is a story. When I was a child, people sat around kitchen tables and told their stories. We don't do that so much anymore. Sitting around the table telling stories is not just a way of passing time. It is the way the wisdom gets passed along. The stuff that helps us to live a life worth remembering.”⁴ The importance of stories and storytelling is multi-fold. Perhaps most apparent is the ability of stories to facilitate escapism, exploration, imagination, and discovery. One step further is their potential to engender connection to others and ourselves, empathy and self-discovery two sides of a coin. However, the act of storytelling itself is a formidable contender *and* partner to the act of consuming stories. It not only encompasses the fictionalized stories we write and create but our own stories, interpretations, and re-interpretations of the moments and chapters in our lives. Approaching the events and people we experience as a story of our own penning shapes how we engage with time. Like the intentional brushstrokes of an artist and their manipulation of perspective, stories are our tools to awaken and leverage new vantage points. Tensions, conflicts, and branch-points become climaxes and plot twists, and ancestries, childhoods, and epitaphs become prologues and epilogues. Listening and searching for stories sharpens our discernment for beauty and magic in a

world that would otherwise fall flat—an offering of dignity on the backs of awe, wonder, and mystery. In the words of Remen:

I no longer feel that life is ordinary. Everyday life is filled with mystery. The things we know are only a small part of the things we cannot know but can only glimpse. Yet even the smallest of glimpses can sustain us... Mystery seems to have the power to comfort, to offer hope, and to lend meaning in times of loss and pain. In surprising ways it is the mysterious that strengthens us at such times...The most important questions don't seem to have ready answers. But the questions themselves have a healing power when they are shared. An answer is an invitation to stop thinking about something, to stop wondering. Life has no such stopping places, life is a process whose every event is connected to the moment that just went by. An unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens your eye for the road.⁴

This idea of “living in the question” is simple but profound, particularly as it pertains to living through challenge, adversity, and uncertainty—common companions in medicine. In *The Way of Transition*, author William Bridges explores the process of transition through the lenses of a dramatic career change and the loss of his wife to cancer. He reflects on a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

I had come across a passage [by Emerson]...that had stirred me in ways that I did not fully understand...“Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries which he would make; he lives it as life before he perceives it as truth.” Certainly, I lived out those two issues for a long time before I saw the personal meaning shining through them. Experience is a tough hieroglyphic to crack. But it is true to the original: It is the original, for until something makes sense in the context of our experience, it is just hearsay.⁵

It is the process of experiencing, interpreting, re-engaging, writing, and re-writing our narratives that imbues meaning. It is the pause between words, space between musical notes, and gaps between certainty that take more intentional interpretation and understanding. And from tangling and untangling that uncertainty and mystery come awe, wonder, and ultimately beauty. Perhaps this is why life is more easily understood in retrospect—the dots can be more creatively reconnected; but until they are, the unknowing follows like a shadow—a force once cannot see but must trust is there, moving towards something good:

There is a Sufi story about a man who is so good that the angels ask God to give him the gift of miracles. God wisely tells them to ask him if that is what he would wish...So the angels visit this good man and offer him first the gift of healing by hands, then the gift of conversion of souls, and lastly the gift of virtue. He refuses them all. They insist that he choose a gift or they will choose one for him. “Very well,” he replies. “I ask that I may do a great deal of good without ever knowing it”...The angels were perplexed. They took counsel and resolved upon the following plan: Every time the saint's shadow fell behind him it would have the power to cure disease, soothe pain, and comfort sorrow. As he walked, behind him the shadow made arid paths green, caused withered plants to bloom, gave clear water to dried up brooks, fresh color to pale children, and joy to unhappy men and women. The saint simply went about his daily life diffusing virtue as the stars diffuse light and the flowers scent, without ever being aware of it.⁴

— Rachel Naomi Remen

Stories and storytelling are powerful means of re-imagination. They allow us to understand others and ourselves, breed perspective, and make sense of conflict and complexity. They are tools to navigate uncertainty and adversity with awe, wonder, and mystery. Far from straightforward, listening and looking for stories is an active process—the deliberate choice to create magic, threading and re-threading our relationship to time. It is this choice that gives flight to my dreams, invites me to ponder, inspires me to write, and transforms everyday moments into the next passage of my narrative. It is why when the nights are quiet, I, armed with my stethoscope and beeper, choose to churn melodies about time-traveling, shooting stars, and the flow of time. It is the reason I could begin with a story about the old piano who lives on the third floor.

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References

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