

Beth Ann Mathews

First, Do No Harm

As my third-grade teacher rolled the upright piano on wheels into the classroom, my cheeks grew hot with dread. Twice a week, she required us to sing alone—*a cappella*—on command. Hands trembling, I opened my songbook and propped it on top of my desk. After leading us through one verse together, she then pointed from child to child, working her index finger down each row.

While the student ahead of me sang her portion of “Get Along Home Cindy, Cindy,” I held my breath and shrank behind the book, praying our upbeat teacher would make a mistake this time and skip me. My thumping heart drowned out my classmate’s voice. Then, it was my turn. What emerged was not the sound of a human child, but the whisper-scratch of a creature frozen, the sound a lizard might make if forced to sing.

One third grader in that music class stood out. When it was Gary Buriss’s turn, he sat tall, chin lifted. His melodious voice filled the room. I can still hear his voice in my head.

My experiences at school convinced me I had no talent for singing. Even so, at home my friend and I strummed cardboard guitars humming to The Beatles and The Monkees, our favorite bands. Then, in eighth grade, I was required to participate in choir. I experienced moments of harmonious joy as a timid second soprano within the sea

of voices but never chosen to be part of a duet or invited by the choir director for a special part. The seed of doubt planted five years earlier grew, nourished by teenage angst.

After I had a driver's license, I discovered the endorphin rush of singing alone in the car with recordings of treasured musicians: Fleetwood Mac, Joni Mitchell, James Taylor. Cruising down the highway, my voice melded with theirs. As Bruce Springsteen's backup, I poured my heart out. Once, during a multi-track session with Linda Ronstadt, belting "When will I be loved?" my VW Rabbit's tires began to hum. Thundering along at seventy-five miles per hour, lightheaded, I slowed the vehicle and caught my breath.

I attended college and graduate school, taught at a university, married, and became a mother. Throughout the years, I continued to sing during solo errands in the car. During weddings and holiday celebrations, when familiar songs enticed me to join in, I preferred standing near confident singers, pulled forward like a biker drafting a semi-trailer. But I silently mouthed the words of unfamiliar tunes.

When our son transferred to a new school in seventh grade, the music teacher encouraged him to stick with the instrument he had played since third grade, even though he would be the only student playing violin. Instead of providing music to accompany the small class band, the teacher handed our twelve-year-old sheets of guitar chords and told him to transcribe them into music suitable for the violin. With no advice or training in such translations, he became discouraged and fell behind in class, aggravating his new-student anxiety. After witnessing our son's enthusiasm for playing violin vaporize, my husband noted that educators, like doctors, should take the Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no harm."

A decade later, a friend from Alaska—a whale biologist who plays guitar—visited us for several days on our sailboat. Craig played songs I knew: McCartney's "Blackbird," the Eagles' "Hotel

California,” and favorites from Joni’s *Court and Spark* album. While making dinner in the galley the first evening, I found myself singing along as he strummed in the main salon a couple of feet away. His easy, welcoming manner, the keys he chose, and his melodious voice drew me in. I hovered at the edge of his music. I did not sit next to him or sing a full song.

The next evening, after he played a couple of tunes, Craig asked me to sing “We Shall Overcome” with him. I told him I loved that song. The cabin was warm and cozy. Our teenaged son and his girlfriend sat at the table listening. My husband, chef for the night, stir-fried chicken, garlic, and vegetables. I’d had a glass of wine. Joining Craig on the spur of the moment was one thing, but agreeing upfront to accompany him in a specific song triggered that childhood fright, as if my teacher’s index finger had once again found me.

“Oh, no. I can’t do that,” I said. Then, I told Craig my third-grade music story.

He shook his head. “Your voice is fine. Singing under pressure like that is no way to learn. You sing on key.”

I turned away, blinking back tears. For decades I’d worried others at a church or wedding sniggered behind my back as I sang, frowning at my unacceptable voice.

In the weeks after Craig’s visit, I began to sing more, joining Adele, Pink, and Fleetwood Mac while driving and at home. A few months later, I got my courage up and contacted a voice coach to help me overcome ingrained bad habits. “Stand tall, relax your throat, and breathe from your diaphragm,” she coached. I stopped being too self-conscious to join friends singing around a piano.

Our Alaska friend’s validation led me to understand that tension interferes with pitch control, preventing the emotional exhilaration of singing. Craig was the no-harm teacher I had needed in third grade.