

A Path with a Harp

Talk given as part of the “Winter Tales” series at the National Library of Australia 26th June 2016, for the Australian Women’s Archives Project (AWAP)

Before I start my talk I’d like to give you a quote that was part of my childhood, and when I rediscovered it I realised how lovely it was, and felt it probably had a profound impact on my attitude to life. As a member of the children’s radio program the Argonauts Club my certificate pledge stated: “Before the sun and the night and the blue sea, I vow to stand faithfully by all that is brave and beautiful, to seek adventure, and having discovered aught of wonder, or delight; of merriment or loveliness, to share it freely with my comrades, the Band of Happy Rowers”.

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On looking for a theme for this talk I was inspired by a quote by Carlos Castaneda in the Teachings of Don Juan “... ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question...Does this path have a heart? If it does the path is good; if it doesn’t it is of no use”. I always liked this because already from a very early age I have been concerned with understanding and following what might be my “right” path. I think I used the harp to gauge and test my way along this path - I chose the harp as my guide so that if this was going right, then my choices would be suitable for me.

Why the harp? - I came to it via several other experiments in instruments...recorder, violin, piano, and preferring to play the strings inside the piano....
So I was searching for that instrument which expressed my sensibilities, which connected my inner being with my outer expression.

Castaneda intended his observation to mean that the path can be any path, to be the right path - as long as it has a heart. So *which* path or decision is not as important as if it has a heart - a meaning for us - and if we can use this path as one of growth - which is essential to all living forms.

Many things one learns on the path as a musician apply to life skills.

The concept of path is tied in with a concept of priorities - once there is a clear path it is easier to understand everyday priorities. For a musician this is essential early on, since the enormous amount of time needed to work on your craft makes it obvious that there is not much time left to do other things. An ability to have priorities clear in the mind and follow these through, is essential to excel at anything, and is a useful skill in today’s busy world, where so many distractions demand our attention.

It is also always obvious that you either move and grow forwards, or go backwards. There is no standing still in music - *if you do not progress you are getting worse*. Skills achieved need to be continuously stretched - to maintain them is only done by creatively thinking and working further. Any resting on the achievements of the past result in stagnation and an actual sliding back.

This means that nothing can be rigid. To be human is to be creative, therefore things are always fluid and growing. As a society we need to be always questioning assumptions about our systems and our achievements. This also means that you can never stop learning as a musician; and ties in to how we could be more open to learning and changing as a society.

Teaching music is a great way to see how this works. You observe how each individual takes essential concepts and structures, and needs to have them explained in different ways; the result of exactly the same ideas comes out in an individual way through each student. As you observe this, new ideas arise and new ways of seeing the same concept. As my mother the sculptor says - truth is 3-dimensional like a sphere, and different people see the same "truth" from different sides. The student questions you, and a dialogue arises which enlarges and changes the original concept. So teacher and student both learn to be open, to grow towards perfection of expression in an organic way.

Encounter with a musical work has the same process and result. Every time you work on a piece, even if it is familiar, you try to listen with open ears and search the score to find the clues to see what is it telling you - and this way each time adds something to the truth of the performance.

A musical career is also subject to continual changes; no two performance situations are the same, nothing is laid out for you but rather it is your own responsibility to create your own opportunities.

In terms of openness and flexibility, if we could go to our aboriginal sisters and brothers to learn from them their values - for example of non-possession, connectedness, attitude towards cultural and spiritual activity, we might regain some lost values. They are a link to knowledge of how to be, how to find the heart in humanness that city-state civilisation has lost. If we could do this, we might find other social issues and tensions dissolve.

Unfortunately our society has become so complex, that we find it hard to integrate its essential component aspects. Consequently, what was integrated and balanced in tribal societies is now divided. For the vast majority of human history, cultural

activities were central to life and not separate. Now, culture is mostly seen as entertainment, rather than an expression of all that is highest and most human in us, a connection with the essence of the world, the ineffable and the abstract, the emotional and our highest intellect - in fact as the most essential and central part, the **core of social activity**. We have gained a great deal in our long human history, but it is important to also consider that we might have also been losing something, and that if we don't find it again we are in grave danger of falling apart. Without this essential focus or priority, does our path have a heart?

When I was in primary school and was just beginning to realise my focus on a life in music, I recall being shocked by a conversation between my headmaster - who I had hitherto quite looked up to - and my mother. I had auditioned for the Conservatorium High School in Sydney. He was basically challenging her for encouraging me to have a life as a musician, since this was not a path with any financial security. Coming from a family of artists, this was such an alien concept for me, that this could be a priority or consideration, that I immediately lost my respect for him. But I came later to understand that this is in fact an attitude that has long developed and become entrenched in our society - maybe ever since it became possible to move outside one's social birth situation. How are we educating our young people to find their paths? My daughter Lara has always been a broad skills personality (just the opposite of her musical parents) - she takes an incredible number of streams of interest, which each gradually feed into a river of power which keeps getting stronger and more purposeful. Each person has an individual approach which can be nurtured, as long as no one is afraid of their own decisions - if it has a heart it should be supported.

To divert from philosophizing for a moment, here is a stroll along my actual path: Born as the youngest of 3 sisters to artist parents, in an idyllic wild garden in the hills of Adelaide, I started the harp when I was 8 - as I said, very naturally. My teacher Lydia Shaxson gave me some basic guidelines but also allowed me to find my own technique, to sing and play; after about 3 years we moved to Sydney where I went to the Con High School. My teacher there, June Loney, asked me in our first meeting what I wanted with the harp, and I said I wanted to be a soloist. With hardly a batted eye, she started immediately on a plan of action - she became my mentor, guide and task-master. I had to go back to the basics of technique; we had a plan of repertoire, and she organised a solo recital for me each year with increasing demands and performances as I progressed. When I was 17 and still in yr 11 I started playing 2nd harp in the SSO, where she was Principal harp. This was a big risk on her part, and an extraordinary opportunity for me. I was almost expelled for missing 1/3 of the school days that year! Given that later I did not have as much time for orchestral playing, this was a musical breadth and development I never regretted.

After leaving school I did a lot of free-lance playing, working especially to earn enough to purchase a good concert harp. I won a Churchill Artistic Fellowship for 1 yr study abroad, and commenced a degree in the USA studying with Alice Chalifoux of the Cleveland Orchestra.

The US was a wonderful experience, which I managed to eke out to 4 years. The University was especially a centre for composition and it was stimulating to mix in this creative environment. Highlight were 3 summers at an exclusive summer school - 8 weeks of intense chamber music playing, run by Rudolf Serkin - professional big names and students playing and mixing together with nothing but music to think of - besides walks in the Vermont woods and swims in the lake. This luxury of isolation - physical and mental, enabled a completely different approach to blossom, and something to try and recall in spirit later. Now when I run my annual summer course on the coast I make sure that there is room and space to think and relax, surrounding the intensity of the musical focus.

During my time in the US I also attended the main international harp competition at that time - the Israel Harp Contest, which I was lucky enough to win. Lucky because these things depend on so many variables, including the jury! However it did involve real dedication in preparation for over a year - just as an athlete would prepare for an Olympics. Returning to Australia for ABC concerts, I began to realise there was still something missing in my studies, and went to Israel to spend time with a teacher there (Judith Liber). She helped me work from within my own critical faculties, to free myself from being a student and become responsible for my own musical expression and sound. At the same time I met my future husband, pianist Arnan Wiesel and we decided to move to Germany to make our way.

This marked the start really of a different kind of phase of the path - one where there was less of a definite plan, but rather a complete trust in the fact that if one kept going the path would keep on unfolding safely a few steps ahead. A patron appeared (we lived in a free apartment for artists for 6 yrs), then one concert would lead to another connection and another concert and so on. We lived many years, playing solo recitals, with no guarantee of a future beyond gradually seeing that the year would always somehow bring enough concerts. This was excellent training for the modern world - where nothing is certain and jobs are in any case no longer for life.

We returned to Australia after Lara was born - it was time to take stock and decide on a life ahead - rather than following those steps one after the other, we needed again to look into the future and plan. Priorities had changed - family, immediate and extended, and quality of life topped the list. We thought we had two ½ positions promised us by a former director of the School of Music. When this did not eventuate

at the last minute, we decided to take the plunge anyway and trust we could lead fulfilling musical lives in Australia regardless.

Eventually, as you know, we did achieve good positions in the School of Music. 10 years of our working lives were full of security, and we were able to do many things that were creatively fulfilling that would not otherwise have been possible - my trip to Antarctica, the Seven Harp Ensemble, the Chopin competition for example. However our former experiences enabled us to also move on quickly when this proved not to be permanent. Priority decisions again made it clear that living on the land in Yass was what made us, and our extended family happy, and we set about making that work.

This brings me to another aspect - that of being a woman as a professional harpist. Harp has been perceived over the last couple of hundred years as a feminine instrument, used to demonstrate feminine characteristics of aesthetics, sensitivity and emotion. However, previous to the time of Marie Antoinette, for example medieval troubadours, celtic poet harpers, still existing African cultures and so on - harp was mostly a male or at least gender neutral instrument. Maybe this demonstrates the sidelining of these very important attributes to a non-dominant place in our society in recent history.

However, there have been male harpists over this recent history, and clearly the *great majority* of the dominant soloists have been men. I think there are a few reasons for this which are interesting:

Two obvious ones: harp takes a great deal of time (relative to other instruments) to perfect and to maintain at a professional level. Many women professional harpists have been single as it requires a single-minded attention and dedication of time to stay on top of its demands.

And, the modern instrument is physical and upper arm strength is a natural advantage. But, my purely personal conjecture is that:

The harp was so overwhelmingly pushed into the drawing room for about a century that I think there is an instinctive response to see a woman harpist with an amateur aura, whereas a man will in contrast appear professional and outside the subliminal salon association.

How does this relate to my own experience? I would say many female harpists have a sense of defensiveness or even chip on the shoulder - both being women in a tough career world where aggressive / sexist marketing is dominant; and also as harpists where the instrument is still not taken seriously even though the 20th century saw it regain an essential place in the palette of composers. I was told by one head of the School of Music that harp was indeed not essential as compared to for example the viola. I have got on with my life regardless of this and have had a wonderful and fulfilling time.

But I do know that it would not have been possible to such a complete extent without a life as a partnership in music with my husband. We have shared every professional responsibility, financial risk, caring for home and family together equally. So I feel that I have had a life with an advantage - no gender role divisions in my everyday surroundings.

We have supported each other in other words. At key times in our life we have had outside support - scholarships to study, the apartment in Germany, job security for the few years in Canberra or an occasional grant. Given the absolute focus required of an artist or musician, I think we've done pretty well to live and work with artistic freedom, doing the projects and things that have been important to us and able to maintain integrity of purpose.

I have experienced and understand the necessity for a dynamic interchange between financial security and needing to live on the edge as an artist. Ultimately though, society needs to understand that there are certain areas of human endeavour that require support due to their inward looking nature - I rank arts, academia and the sciences together here, and in equal importance. Whereas other areas generate the resources needed by society through their outward-looking nature - commerce and food and goods production for example.

So I have brought us to this moment of time of my path - a time of life when ambition is no longer a prevailing driving force because one questions the need for repetition of the same, but looks for depth and meaning.

Do we also question the path of our society and nation at this time? What does our society aspire to - and are we guiding this path or are we letting other external forces push us this way and that? Do we ask our politicians to put this collective vision into practice, or do we expect *them* to lead us? What is *humanity's* path? What *priorities* do we have to enable us to focus on this path? Who do we let decide this path and does it have heart? (most places it certainly doesn't have a harp!).

And *I* wonder if I am fiddling while Rome is burning. Is it time for me join with my daughter, with all those who see the disaster of the future looming, and cry HELP with a loud voice instead? I have spent my life sensing the abstract, the subtleties of human feeling and sensibility, looking inwards and communicating beauty and truth. But what use will that be to the future of humanity - does this path with the harp still have a heart?

In a crisis like a national emergency we down tools and leave what we are doing because there is another, overriding need and urgency and everyone pulls together - we are good at this in Australia. We are now at a time of international emergency - maybe we should all down tools and go on strike until something is done to deal with climate change. After all, when you make something your priority things become quite simple to achieve.

To digress for a moment: when I went to Antarctica I felt that I encountered a world where people from all different professions and walks of life joined together in a common interest for exploration and discovery. Antarctic conferences and bases are full of these people coming together to share stimulating ideas and cross referencing in ways that would usually be quite separate in the normal social situation.

Antarctica is also in a state of urgent, imminent crisis. The uneasy balance of the Antarctic Treaty held for so many years, is stretched as the nations involved there start to ramp up pressure to dominate and assert national interests over international joint interest. I came back from there feeling that there is a huge hole in our ability to communicate - even though many are working together there showing great potential for Antarctic professionals to work for creative good - there is a dangerous lack of proportional presence and involvement of artistic and humanities professionals. Communication is therefore poor, it is not part of "*our story*" and therefore in danger of proceeding under the dominance of those who are *not* thinking of taking humanity on a path with a heart.

The original purpose of my trip as an Australian Antarctic Division Arts Fellow, was to present a concert at Australia's Mawson Station to Commemorate the Centenary of the First Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911 -14, my specific interest being to celebrate the participation in that voyage of my grandfather Cecil Thomas Madigan as meteorologist. The whole thing was the most exciting, unusual, creative and definitely unexpected event in my life. The concert I performed comprised words from Madigan's diaries, songs, hymns and music he mentions in the diaries, and music by contemporary Australian composers especially written for the occasion. Madigan recorded in his diary the various hymns that kept his spirit going and the gramophone records that brought him cheer, clearly describing how live and recorded music was an essential component in maintaining equilibrium and the thread with home. Today, one hundred years later, there remains very little music written by Australian composers that directly relates to Antarctica, even though Australians have been a consistent presence on the continent.

The First Australasian Antarctic Expedition was one of the most successful scientific expeditions ever, and its goals were for the most part very clear in terms of scientific discovery rather than national posturing and possession. However Mawson was very aware of the wealth of resources and their potential. Australia has the largest chunk of the continent under its supervision, as a result of our early understanding of the importance of the continent. But Australia is not the largest international power with presence and influence there. Underwater, on the ice, on the continent and in the atmosphere above, the story of humanity's future will play itself out there over the next century.

We know that if the West Antarctic Ice Sheet melts, and it will if we continue as we are now, sea levels will rise a couple of metres by the end of this century, creating an unprecedented and entirely preventable crisis for civilization as we have known it for thousands of years - to occur within the lifetimes of my children and children's children.

My feeling is that all people and professions within our society need to be supported to work together, focusing on Antarctica and on the halting of climate change - including the support for and through artists looking inwards and communicating outwards.

Well, this has been a long and rambling winter walk along my path. Thank you for listening, and I hope it has not been too serious or tedious to hear my thoughts. Hopefully I have left enough time to answer questions!