

Band class taught me about being human

GARY BARWIN

It's the week before Christmas holiday. I'm 14 years old and I'm Jewish. But I'm also second alto saxophone in the Greenbank Middle School band and we're playing "Silver Bells" for an assembly at school. I'm under the basketball net because, of course, we're in the gym.

I'm a regular kid. Shaggy. Somewhat pimply. Hyper and awkward. But, even though I'm Jewish, what bittersweet melancholy I feel when the tune of "Silver bells, silver bells" resolves at "Christmas time in the city." There's a coming home to comfort and safety yet an awareness of all that that might involve. Sadness, loneliness. Exquisite regret. All those movies of the near-Christmas rush, mostly on New York sidewalks. Snow is coming down. Men in hats hurry to buy presents. Young women finish their work in offices. Mothers cook. Children ... hope. Big slow snowflakes. Meanwhile, I'm playing only two notes. But I feel connected to the entire human condition. The larger world that our honking, warbling intermediate band is invoking.

I was a middle school music teacher for nearly 10 years and my students and I played for many events, including Christmas. I hope my students found it fun and felt the joy of performing together, of working as a team to attain a specific goal. I hope my students also felt the sense of being part of something larger, of finding insight into the tender hearts of all people.

Studies show that students who are part of any kind of group — sports teams, chess clubs, theatre groups — do better socially in school. It's a protection against bullying, isolation and sadness. And it's fun. It's also an emotional education.

Three things I learned being a band teacher. One, that you never can tell what someone is feeling on the inside, even if they look dopey or insensitive. Two, in school, everyone, no matter how inept, should play in a musical group, even if they feel embarrassed. Especially if they feel embarrassed. Three, all I really needed to know I learned in band.

It's now August and I'm in my grown-up backyard, thinking about my big feelings and my two likely out-of-tune notes, though everyone else was out of tune also, so how to measure? I'm talking to my now grown-up criminal appeals lawyer daughter who played second alto in band also. I explain that I started saxophone so that I could be onstage and impress a sea of Valerie Bertinelli look-a-likes. And to be Sonny Rollins playing saxophone on the Williamsburg Bridge. I tell her how I still think of my experiences in the school band, playing "Blackberry Winter" looking out of the band room as the snow falls plaintively down.

I look back fondly at this simpler time, this time of emotional education and belonging. It can be hard to feel like you belong when you're an adolescent. I found "my people" in band. My daughter says she felt this sense of belonging, too — she played in band all through school, though, instead of feeling that "Silver Bells" reverie, she jokes, she was more likely to have interrogated power relations and gender politics in the classroom — why did that boy get first alto when she, a girl, was a better player? Though they still played "Silver Bells." And she also liked the sense of belonging, of being part of the group.

Being in band gave me a place to learn about my feelings and, very importantly, to have a place to express them.

The "Theme to Hogan's Heroes" is jaunty. I felt jaunty. Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke" is exuberant and joyous and also cool. I felt like that. When we played, Holst's "English Folk Song Suite," I felt like a hobbit and was ready to till the soil and enjoy rivers and birds. I had the opportunity to explore all the drama inside me — anger, tenderness, happiness, sadness, longing and joy.

Of course, band didn't solve everything, but it was a safe place where I could try out feelings and express them through music. The world and its troubles can surround and overwhelm us. As a line by the poet Marvin Bell states, "Now it seems to me, the heart must enlarge to hold the losses we have ahead of us."

For teenage me, band was a good place to practise that enlargement, a capacious place for being and feeling human.

GARY BARWIN'S NEW NOVEL, "A COMEDIAN'S BOOK OF THE DEAD," IS OUT SOON. IT'S NARRATED BY DEATH WHO ALSO (SURPRISE!) PLAYED SECOND ALTO SAXOPHONE IN BAND. HE SLAYED.



Musician, writer, artist and former middle school music teacher Gary Barwin says band class didn't solve everything, but it was a safe place where he could learn about feelings and express them through music.

GARY BARWIN



THOMAS FROESE

Writing about chance meetings and the value of small acts, Thomas Froese shares about recent summer interactions, including with a Neustadt area resident named Tom.

Conversations with complete strangers can be surprising



THOMAS FROESE
OPINION

In the category of "Why is life so interesting?" let's start outside a café in Port Stanley where I recently sat in the morning sunshine with my coffee. There I spoke to a stranger.

She was from Chatham, she said, about an hour away, but meets her children and grandchildren in a rented cottage during summer. I told her I'd been a reporter in nearby St. Thomas and it's good for my soul to return for a day or two every year. She asked if I knew Lori Rieger.

"Very well," I said. "In the 1990s we worked in the same newsroom." "I'm her mother," she said.

Really? Come on. Let's take a photo to show Lori.

Not long before, in Grey County, I'd stopped in the charming village of Neustadt, birthplace of former prime minister John Diefenbaker and home of a few hundred people.

A senior couple sat on a bench outside Granny's General Store with its Canadian flags and quaint heritage. It was an interesting scene, so I took a photo before we talked.

Doug and Penny were from Belmont, south by two hours if you take the back roads, which I often do for the sheer pleasure, wherever

I may be going. I eventually said I was from Hamilton, but I know Belmont from that previous reporting life in Elgin County. Then I took off my sunglasses.

"Wait, are you Thomas Froese?" This is what they asked. Then they said they remembered when I got married. It was something.

"That was 25 years ago," I said. So I showed some family photos. Why not?

This is the best part about growing up. Mum and Dad are no longer telling you about stranger danger. I mean, if you never talk to anyone, how are you ever reminded that we're all hopelessly closer than we realize on this spinning ball in space?

You've heard of six degrees of separation, the theory that two people anywhere can be linked through no more than six social connections or acquaintances? Social media is making this distance even less.

You need not be a saint like, say, Mother Teresa, who died 29 years ago today to appreciate this. "Not all of us can do great things," she said. "But we can do small things with great love." Maybe you or me talking to some stranger is one such small act.

These small acts are not to be confused with "Small Axe," an old Bob Marley song about the proverb, "If you're a big tree, we're the small axe." It's about people abusing power.

Take the comical manoeuvre to rename Lake Ontario. The better

option to Lake America is clearly Lake Small Axe, a good reminder that enough small axes swinging together can take down any old, hollow tree.

In either case, in Neustadt, along a walk called the "Trail of Dreams," I spoke to another stranger, a gentleman with hair thoroughly white. Working on a memorial bench, he told me his name was Tom.

The bench had three commemorative butterflies.

One was for Tom's wife, who died from cancer. One was for a stepson, found in a ravine after either slipping down or being murdered. One was for another stepson who died by suicide.

Then Tom told me that a certain flower, the Star of Bethlehem, had recently shown up, growing unexpectedly in that space he'd created for strangers to stop and sit and think about things. So I took a photo of Tom and his bench, too.

And isn't this the truth of it? People are easily divided by class and politics and race and gender and a million things. But at a deeper level it's suffering that binds us together.

The other significant bond that humans share is love.

Some days you'll come across suffering and love in the same place. When this happens it's a good idea to pay attention. Life itself seems to hang in the balance.

THOMAS FROESE WRITES ABOUT NEWS, TRAVEL AND LIFE. FIND HIM AT THOMASFROESE.COM AND THOMASFROESE.SUBSTACK.COM.

Embracing the lessons of aging

WAYNE POOLE

Turning 80 has this baby boomer pondering what lies ahead.

We're told that death and taxes are unavoidable. The wealthy may be able to dodge taxes, but the great equalizer comes for us all.

Having lost so many friends and acquaintances over the last few years, my habit now is to scan The Spec's obituary section over my morning coffee, never hoping to see a familiar name, but unsurprised when I do.

Will we reach our fourscore and 10? The good news is that the odds of reaching 80 improve with age — from 45 per cent at birth, to 55 per cent at 50, 65 per cent at 65 and 90 per cent at 75. On average, at age 80, men can look forward to another seven to nine years of life.

According to Statistics Canada, the average lifespans for Canadian men and women are 80.30 and 84.29 years respectively. The difference is that men take more physical risks, drink and smoke more than women and are less likely to see a doctor for routine checkups, or when they have a health problem.

In retrospect, men might consider, "I would have treated my body better had I known I would have lived this long." Biological differences also play a factor, leading to riskier behaviour in men.

According to the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging, "the number of Canadians living to 100 and

beyond has reached record highs." This makes sense statistically considering the large baby boom demographic. We can also thank better health care and healthier lifestyles. Eighty per cent of the fastest-growing age group, centenarians, are women.

When you're young you wish the time away, wanting to be older, and when you're older you wish time back.

One day you're 16, excited to get your driver's licence. In a seeming blink you're 80, the years melted away, and you're facing an eye and cognitive test to renew your licence.

The young are fearless, feeling invincible, the old often fearful, feeling vulnerable, knowing that our bodies could betray us. It was, obviously, a young person, not fully understanding the challenges that aging brings, who coined the phrase, "the golden years." If only.

Time is a precious commodity, one that shouldn't be wasted. As we age, our remaining years assume greater value. The COVID years were lost years for nearly everyone, particularly seniors, with fewer years ahead of them.

Getting your head around dying, coming to terms with the inevitable, can be difficult, bewildering. We find ourselves contemplating a human construct, the meaning of life. As someone recently reminded me, the meaning of life is less important than having meaning in our lives.

For some there is comfort in looking forward to an afterlife; for others, it's having enjoyed a life well-lived, with few regrets.

For those suffering with terminal illness there is medical assistance in dying (MAID). Others, who are simply tired of living, tired of the endless and exhausting medical tests and appointments, pain and discomfort, embrace the relief and release of death. Doctors and doulas bring us into this world. Doctors and doulas ease us out of it.

We enter the world with nothing and leave it the same way. In between we (boomers) were a plague on the planet with our lifestyle of conspicuous overconsumption. Given the harm we inflict on our fellow humans, other creatures, and the Earth, can we imagine living by the principle of "do no harm?"

Reflection comes with age. "If only we knew then what we know now" would we have done things differently? What's done can't be undone, but it's never too late to make amends. If Scrooge could do it, we can.

What's on the other side is the great unknown. No one has come back from the dead to tell us. The best we can hope for is to pass peacefully, pain-free, our minds and bodies at ease, with loved ones at our side.

Life is short. Be kind to one another ... and the planet.

WAYNE POOLE LIVES IN DUNDAS.