

A Crippled Piano

By Sheila Luna

Some people do yoga. I play Bach. If I play a fugue perfectly, my body becomes weightless. Hours of practice, forgetting to eat, is worth that feeling of transcendence. Playing the piano involves every muscle, bone and brain cell. It reacts to every variety of human touch, producing sounds from thunders to whispers.

I studied piano under the tutelage of Mrs. Conlin who made me play the Bach two-part inventions backwards. She told me that Bach's music was building blocks, perfectly balanced, and if I could master the fugues, I could play anything. She seemed more like a boot camp sergeant than a piano teacher. But, when I heard her play Bach's 'Prelude in C,' my knees trembled. I wondered how a simple piece could be so beautiful and my love affair with the piano began.

I was a senior in high school when rheumatoid arthritis scaled into my life, attacking my major and minor joints.

"She'll probably be in a wheelchair by the time she's 40," the doctor whispered to my mother. Afterwards, my mom took me to Dairy Queen. It was something she did after traumatic childhood experiences. One time she treated me to Baskin-Robbins after I had a tooth pulled. Her way of saying things would be okay. This time was different. She kept shaking her head and saying, "Sorry, Sweetheart," between sips of her root beer float. She also had RA and knew my fate. I was always afraid to touch her deformed thumb – as if it were a baby bird fallen from its nest.

After a few cortisone shots, not to mention the rosaries my mother prayed, the disease went dormant and I went into denial. RA reared its head when I was 27. Swollen joints, fevers and flattening fatigue gobbled up my youth.

"It's a serious disease," said a rheumatologist. "No heavy lifting. When the seven wrist bones glide against each other in the synovium they move the fingers. In RA, the synovia inflame with fluid causing pain, loss of motion and erosion. You should give up piano."

My heart beat against my rib cage in triple time, forcing me to swallow. I wasn't "giving up" piano. He acted like it was a pack of cigarettes. Piano had been my friend for ten years. I practiced five hours a day and I had the growing repertoire and fancy fingering to prove it.

"Protect your joints," he said, cradling his wrists. "Your immune system is attacking itself. RA can damage other organs too, like your eyes. Your heart. We need to bring out the big guns now."

I didn't like his war metaphors. These were my bones, not toy soldiers. But, fight I did with artillery from Gold to Imuran to Methotrexate, sprinkled with enough aspirin to give the whole town of Ulster an ulcer.

The bitter battle lasted over twenty years.

Throughout the conflict, there were weeks I could barely walk—my knees globs of cement hardening into stabbing shards. The medical term, “morning stiffness,” is too polite. Some days, I surrendered piano because my fingers were so inflamed that all I wanted to do was stick them in a bucket of ice. I'd tried alternative treatments such as grapefruit diets, homeopathy, bee stings. Prednisone was the true combatant in this war, but it came with hazards like bone loss, little beards and a heart that raced out of my chest. Then, along came the biologic drugs of the 21st century, which put me into remission. A ceasefire. While my melon-sized knees deflated to normal and fevers and fatigue vanished, the disease left me with bone-on-bone pain, irreversible joint destruction and deformity. One of my fingers curved outward like a plant reaching for sunlight.

I recently consulted a hand surgeon because I could no longer endure the pain — because sometimes it felt like my hands contained shattered glass — because maybe there was a miraculous fluid that could humpty dumpty them together so I could play the piano without cringing. I wanted my hands back. The way they were when I played Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata' — when my fingers melted into the keys and tethered me to eternity. Dr. Dave slapped x-rays onto the screen, one by one. He leaned towards the images of my digits and shook his head as if he just saw another dead goldfish in his bowl.

“This one is smashed. Both thumbs have fallen out of joint. There's no cartilage here, here, or here.” He pointed to the x-rays with the monotony of a TV weatherman. He recommended hand therapy. After noticing my confusion, he added, “Surgery is only 50 percent effective when it comes to the small joints of the fingers and wrists.”

My hands transfigured into heavy bricks — immovable objects to my goal of utter musical perfection. I yearned to go for ice cream with my mother. Instead, I went to hand therapy.

“What do you play?” asked Kate, feigning enthusiasm. She was more interested in my gnarled fingers and auto-fused wrists.

“Classical. Bach, mostly.”

Thanks to Mrs. Conlin, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach is sewn into my soul. Playing the second movement from the 'Piano Concerto in F Minor' is like conversing with angels. Bach's music is an ethereal puzzle. It goes beyond words to something unutterable—almost proving the existence of God.

“Bach is the worst for arthritics. You can still play, but don't use your thumbs or your pinky.”

“That’s like taking the watercolors away from Monet.” She swatted my stab at humor.

“Change your repertoire. If it hurts, don’t play.” She lectured me on how years of repetitive hand use during active disease attributed to their destruction. When she advised me to refrain from playing piano due to severe joint damage, an arpeggio of emotion flushed through my veins.

I endured unbearable pain with simply brushing my hair, but, like a punch-drunk boxer, I had always returned to the ring when it came to piano.

“So, RA destroyed my thumbs, too,” I said, as if ready to hire a mobster to whack somebody. She didn’t respond and I was convinced she had never known the joy of playing piano, or even a kazoo.

Several therapists examined my hands as if they were entomologists marveling over a rare insect. They flipped through pages of a book the size of a Volkswagen, somberly murmuring *brevis, flexis, radius, medius*. It sounded like I was at a Latin mass.

I wanted to wallow in a hot bath with Mozart’s ‘Requiem in D Minor.’ I felt like Antonio Salieri in *Amadeus* when he said, “He gave me that longing... and then made me mute.”

My orders from Kate were to wear resting hand splints at night to reduce inflammation and braces during the day for stabilization. And, to stop piano. I reluctantly complied. I wanted to heal. But, the longer I went without playing, the more I felt a part of me was missing. Piano had become essential to my being, like protein or vegetables. I tried not to glance at its seductive, pearly keys. I’d tap the black wood, as if it were a touchstone reminding me of who I used to be. I still took care of it, though, because pianos are alive, too. Like a lipid panel, annual tunings are important. Still a piece of me, the piano had to be kept healthy.

The piano tuner made a corkscrew of notes sound like flowing water. Cherubic arpeggios twisted my heart.

“This key is mute. You have a crippled piano.”

“Can it be fixed?”

“Sure. It may not sound exactly like before.”

“I don’t play much anyway. Arthritis.”

“If you love piano, you’ll find a way. Byron Janis has crippling psoriatic arthritis but his renditions of the Chopin waltzes will turn you into pudding.”

After four months of hand therapy and learning tools for pain management, I felt better. It didn’t come without scolding from Kate. She’d growl at me whenever I turned a doorknob

incorrectly. Kate wasn't much different than Mrs. Conlin. Brusque. Stickler for rules. Efficacious. It wouldn't be my only rodeo with Kate, either. Relapses would force me back. She'd plunge my hands in hot wax, tape the hell out of them, and strap me back into those dreadful splints.

Like petting a fractious kitten, I began playing again. Instead of grueling five-hour stints, I now practice in short durations. My hands still hurt when I overdo. I'm learning to listen to my body—not only to Bach. I have accepted that the piano is just one note in the chord of my life.

There's something that transcends polished perfection—the haunting and torment only pain can create. When my pinky with the smashed knuckle touches the high D in Chopin's 'Waltz in B Minor,' it's almost as if that one note bears the weight of the world. Until Dr. Dave has a drug that can grow cartilage, I won't be attempting Rachmaninoff. As long as I'm able to play Bach's 'Prelude in C,' I can converse with angels.

Sheila Luna is a writer from Arizona whose essays have appeared in *Kaleidoscope*, *PILGRIM: A Journal of Catholic Experience*, *Longridge Review*, *Spry Literary Journal* and *DINE: An Anthology* (Hippocampus Books). Lately, she has been writing about illness, ability, and disability, including her own challenges living with rheumatoid arthritis. Luna loves baking, road trips and Bach. www.sheilaluna.net.

© 2022 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*