

Episode 47 Vayelech

In 2007, a professor of psychology at the University of San Diego was recording a lecture in her home. At one point in the lecture, she uttered the words “sometimes behave so strangely.” *Sometimes behave so strangely*. She was editing the final recording and put these words—sometimes behave so strangely—on a loop, so that it played over and over, because she wanted to edit this particular part. But then she wanted a cup of tea, so she went to her kitchen, while this loop of “sometimes behave so strangely” played in the background.

Then, something quite unexpected occurred. The psychology professor, coincidentally named Diana Deutsch, thought she heard somebody *singing* in the next room. But when she opened the door, it was just this tape loop playing “sometimes behave so strangely” over and over. Nevertheless, it now sounded like a *song*. And when she played this loop for others, they, at first, only heard somebody *talking*. But after hearing it repeated enough times, the words opened up, somehow, into music. Suddenly, it was *bursting* with song.

What this little accidental experiment indicates is that music isn’t something we just occasionally *do*; rather, our minds and our language are musically wired. We notice our inherent connection to music, in fact, all the time. As we all know, music can transport us back to previous times in our lives far better than verbal descriptions, photographs, or even videos. Music can make us feel all kinds of emotions which mere speech cannot summon. We need only sit in a concert hall and hear a solo celloist play a Bach suite. The cello is somehow able to speak to us, stir up emotions within us, even though all it is communicating is vibrations and pitches. People with brain injuries or dementia, for example, are often able to react to and understand music whereas mere speech fails them.

Music, then, is like another doorway into the house in which our psyche dwells. It is, say, the side door which never gets used. Yet, it is just as valuable and effective an entranceway as the door we use 99% of the time—the front door of rationality and logic.

It seems as though, in our modern age, we have cut ourselves off from this second accessway of music. We have been trained by society to overly strengthen the left half of our brains and to let the right half shrivel up and wither. Was it always this way? It seems as though, in ancient times, the musical was far more integrated into everyday life and everyday interactions than it is today. The experiment from Professor Deutsch appears to bear this out. When humans first evolved to speak languages, they were, in a sense, not just speaking but also *singing*. This line “sometimes behave so strangely” was, at one point, meant to be half-spoken, half-sung. Yet, the modern age has repressed this singing side. Now, only the remnants of the musical remain; they can only be heard when we carefully listen to human speech played back on a loop.

As I’ve pointed out before on *The Schrift*, Germany used to not just be a single country but rather a collection of hundreds of tiny kingdoms, known in their entirety as the German Lands. Each of these kingdoms spoke its own German dialect. There was no “high German” or *Hochdeutsch*. High German is simply the dialect of what was then the kingdom of Hanover. To this day, these regions maintain their dialects. Most Germans will be able to speak both High German / *Hochdeutsch* as well as their local dialect. For those folks living in Hanover, they have no local dialect, as both their dialect and High German are one and the same.

When speaking to these Germans from all over the country, and this includes Austria as well, I’ve noticed that many of them have sing-songy accents and intonations in their voice. Speaking to them is sometimes like conversing with a singing bird cooing in the cool morning

air. Their voice will occasionally reach notes and pitches so high that it becomes a bit difficult to understand them. Or, as you discourse with them, their voice bounces up and down the c-major scale that you almost expect them to break out into song, as though they were starring in an opera or a musical.

Most languages, and particularly the German one, has musicality built into it. A common criticism directed against German is that it is an “ugly language.” I think this criticism is really just a product of group-think, originating among people whose only access to German came from watching World War II movies featuring screaming Nazi soldiers. I’ve always thought German to be a beautiful language. But sometimes, I am walking down the street in Berlin, or I am watching the news, and I hear someone speaking German, and I do find it rather unappealing—not necessarily “ugly” or “scary, just robotic and lifeless. But then, other times, I hear German and it sounds so seductive and enchanting. I recently figured out why there is this difference. When German is used to speak about nature, about animals, about the body, about love, about adventure, about food, it sounds beautiful. In short, when German is used to speak about *ancient* ideas and *ancient* matters, it is an exquisite language. But when German is brought into the modern world and is used for small talk, for political debates, for technology, for contracts, it becomes dull and ugly.

When you think about it, we are the only animal which has created a division between music and communication. Music is for fun, entertainment, maybe self-expression, whereas communication is for more serious matters like reporting news, handling contracts, giving advice, and so forth. But for most other animals, music *is* how they communicate. As I just mentioned, birds sing to each other in various tones to get their message across. Dogs and wolves howl to the moon like lead tenors and sopranos. But dogs and wolves do not howl to the moon to garner applause for their musical talents; rather, they do so to impart some urgent memorandum. And don’t even get me started on all the crazy noises whales make.

Our society, by contrast, has become quite literally *tone deaf*. We have excluded the musical from our method of communication. It remains, tucked away, buried deep into our speech, like a kind of relic from a bygone era.

We have allowed our society to become this way; we have done this willingly. If you pick up a newspaper today, the front page will be filled with dry, factual, hyper-rational accounts of what is “going on” in the world. The next page will be similarly straightforward and left-brained. This is an information dump which, it goes without saying, would not make very good material for a musical score. Here, one reads about taxes, political campaigns, insurance companies, young men carrying machine guns in remote parts of the world, epidemics and diseases.

It is to music what gasoline is to flowers. In a newspaper, to get to anything remotely artistic and cultural, you have to tear through dozens of pages before arriving at the “arts and culture” section or, in Europe, the *Feuilleton*. This section is buried deep in the newspaper like some kind of dusty old book hidden in your attic. And even this section does not provide music or art, but more hyper-rational critiques and analyses of art.

To us, this hierarchy in the newspaper seems entirely rational. Why should we read about a mere song when we could read about terrorists or taxes? Why should we bother learning how to hum a new tune if an earthquake just killed off three hundred people somewhere?

The truth is that it is not our fault that we gobble up these neutral, dry, fact-driven analyses while we can barely bring ourselves to take tepid, wary bites of the musical and artistic. Our society has trained our minds to think this way. In writing courses, both at universities and

in high schools, the emphasis is on logical, step-by-step argumentation rather than on creative expression. Standardized admissions tests require astute and rigorous analytical and deductive skills—not musical or artistic or creative talents. After our studies, it is as though we come out with our left arm bulging with muscles whereas our right arm is emaciated and puny. Because we have this super-strong left arm, we then use it for all subsequent activities, ignoring the right arm. The left arm gets more and more brawny and the right arm becomes further malnourished and enfeebled.

What happens, then, when you put a bunch of adults together at a dinner party? Do they sing? Do they dance? Hardly. Maybe if it is someone's birthday they will sing for less than a minute, or if it is a religious occasion they will sing a few short hymns. 99.9% of the time is devoted to rationalized discourse—the exchange of data, the insistence on a particular argument, the disproving of someone's faulty use of logic. Everyone flexes their left biceps and hides their right arms under the table. Our society has literally made us tone deaf—deaf to tones, ignorant of the musical side of life.

But sometimes, we need our right arm. Someone forces us to sing a song, or to write a poem, or to dance. Some social duty, originating out of an ancient custom, creeps upon us, and we cannot escape the task. We must bear our hideous, sickly, grotesque right arm for all to see. Then come the excuses: “I don't sing in public”; “I can't dance”; “I'm not a right-brained person”; “I have a cold.”

We are not the first society to face this problem—nor will we be the last. In 1795, the German dramatist and philosopher Friedrich Schiller would write a theoretical work known as *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. In 1795, Schiller was writing just after Europe had witnessed the French Revolution and the French Terror. The Terror occurred when the French Revolution turned radical, and thousands of French aristocrats were beheaded by the guillotine in the name of Reason. In these letters, Schiller argued that the Enlightenment had caused humans to become overly dependent on rationality and to have lost their ability to *feel*. He said that it was this overemphasis on reason which allowed the French Revolution to turn barbaric. Reason had become so excessive that “normal” people could send innocent citizens to the guillotine to have their heads chopped off. The instinct of emotion and feeling had been so suppressed that it was not there to intervene when the gallows were wheeled out.

What Schiller wished for was a return to the culture of Ancient Greece, where feeling and reason, where music and logic, where left-brain and right-brain, stood in perfect harmony with one another. This idea was the main tenet of the literary movement known as Weimar Classicism, which I discussed in episode 44 on Goethe and his play *Iphigenie auf Taurus*. Weimar Classicism, of which Schiller and Goethe were the main figures, did not wish to discard *reason*. Rather, it sought to bring reason (*Vernunft*) into a balance with feeling (*Gefühl*).

And Schiller had a solution for his society. He said that we must expose ourselves, as much as possible, to art. Schiller believed that the more we attend performances, read great literature, visit exhibitions, the closer we will come to attaining this harmony. Art will work its way into our psyches, if we open ourselves up to art and bring art into our lives. Schiller writes that we must find some instrument which will keep us “pure and clear throughout every political corruption ... This instrument is the Fine Arts.”

In the parsha for this week, Vayelech, Moses will actually write down the entire Torah. He writes it just before his death at the age of 120. After writing down the Torah, he instructs the wise men of Israel to gather the entire community of Hebrews once every seven years, during the holiday of Sukkot. At this assembly, the Torah is to be read to all of the people. The purpose of

this reading is so that the people will learn to observe and follow every word of the Torah. These verses should not come as a surprise to us. It should not surprise us that somewhere in the Torah it states that the Torah should be taught throughout generations. It is no secret that the Torah makes up the most essential component of education in Judaism and that is read not only by Jews but by people of all religions around the world.

But actually, there is another passage this week which is complementary to the verse I just mentioned. Not only does Moses write down the Torah for us to learn and remember; he also writes down a song. And for this song, Moses gives the same instructions: teach this song to the people throughout the generations so that they will remember their history and their duties. Moses says that this song will “never be lost from the mouth of their children.”

There is no indication in this passage that the Torah—the writing—is more important than the song—the singing and reciting. Why do we need both a song and a book? The reason seems to be the same as that proposed by Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. In order for us to really understand a teaching, it must enter our minds through both pathways, through right-brain and left, through a balance between reason and emotion.

But even more importantly, we should not view reason and emotion, music and speech, so dualistically. As the story of the song / sentence “sometimes behaves so strangely” shows, we should not view music and art as confined to the concert hall or the gallery. That which we think of as strictly logical has elements of music, and that which seems to be only artistic and emotional is also infused with reason. I had said that Moses taught the Hebrews a song. But that is not exactly accurate. In Hebrew, the word for song and for *poem* is the exact same word—*Shir* or *Shira*. This supports my earlier point that, in ancient cultures, singing and reciting were not so separated as they are today. Moses may have only *read* the poem rather than *sung* the poem. But if we can *attune* our ears and our minds to the inherent melody within speech, then reading becomes a manner of singing, a poem becomes and is no different than a song.

In his book *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller advised us to bring great art into our lives to restrengthen our emotional muscles, so to speak. Schiller thus made the important point that we have the ability to cultivate this side of ourselves, even if we have let it stagnate and wilt. And the stronger we make this “muscle,” the more comfortable we will feel using it, the more it will become a part of who we are. It is so easy for us to pick up a newspaper and browse through it. We apprehend all of the meanings, opinions, facts, within a matter of minutes. This is not because we are inherently a data-driven, highly analytical, argumentative people, but rather because this is what society has trained us to do. Yet, we can train ourselves in the complementary direction as well. It is said, for example, that the composer Johann Sebastian Bach would receive sheet music, musical scores, from his friends in the mail. And then he would sit at the breakfast table and read them as though he were reading the newspaper. Bach had spent so much of his life creating music that it became his language. He could read melodies on a page just as well as we can read sentences. If you’ve ever listened to Mozart’s duet “Papageno”—which I played at the end of Episode 36—you hear how much the singing sounds like chirping birds. Mozart’s mind was so trained to experience the world musically that he could hear melodies within the sounds of nature.

Our minds function like muscles—they can become weaker and stronger in various areas, depending on how we use them. But, unlike the muscles on our bodies, we cannot see the muscles in our brain. It is therefore far easier to remain unaware of the state and condition of our minds.

Meditation is a practice which is much like giving your brain a workout. The more often you meditate and the more discipline you bring to your practice, the more you will strengthen areas of your mind relating to relaxation, concentration, empathy, and creativity. These are all muscles you will need if you are going to cultivate the artist dwelling latent within you.