

Mr. Peter Walsh: His Voice Continues to Sing

Karen V. Lee

Mr. Walsh was my grade 6 teacher in elementary school. He was my homeroom teacher and the music teacher for the school. He was over 6 feet tall, had short brown hair, a small belly, a beard, and a moustache that trembled when he spoke. His deep voice had an accent that made him sound stern at times. But his demeanor developed respect from students as they were compliant and mindful of his requests. Mr. Walsh still remains one of my favorite teachers.

Written by Karen V. Lee, Faculty Advisor and Ph.D. student at The University of British Columbia.

We sat in rows in Mr. Walsh's class. He seated us in alphabetical order. I sat second from the back in the middle row. I felt cheated that I could not sit near him. But the distance did not make him neglect my presence. He called upon me if my hand was raised and even asked me questions when my hand was not raised.

Mr. Walsh had a natural flair for teaching music. He had guitars, recorders, harpsichords, and variety of non-pitched percussion instruments in the classroom. He had charts of musical notes, instruments, and composers on the walls. I stared at them when taking a break from written work. Our classroom was musically alive and intertwined with other subjects such as math, social studies, and language arts. Mr. Walsh seemed to integrate music throughout our day. I remember how he would play the piano to obtain the classes' attention or to remind us of the songs we sang in choir. I liked the way he conducted our day and encouraged musical creation. He sometimes sang as he entered the classroom.

Mr. Walsh made the piano seem powerful. I remember how he positioned the piano so that he could play the keys while facing the class. It is this position that I think of when rearranging a piano in front of a group of music students. It's like my tribute to Mr. Walsh. I used to give heed to the way he banged his hands on top of the piano to get the classes' attention. Sometimes, he played arpeggiated minor thirds to scare the boys at the back of the choir. He had a variety of non-verbal musical fortes to obtain the classes' attention. I was in a particularly challenging homeroom class. Terry and Perry were constant bone of contentions for Mr. Walsh as they spent many music classes in the hallway. Cynthia had a rebellious streak and enjoyed talking back to Mr. Walsh. I think she liked to annoy him so she could sit out in the hallway with Perry. But these students did not stop Mr. Walsh from teaching music. He expressed an interest in continuing music classes despite the disruptive students. Several times, Mr. Walsh asked me to play the piano while he conducted songs. I recall playing *Proud Mary* over and over until Frank Dusbaba sang the chorus correct. I enjoyed helping Mr. Walsh in music classes. He made me feel part of the orchestra. One time, Mr. Walsh asked me to play all the piano accompaniment parts for the Christmas concert. My parents were proud to be in the audience of this concert.

I still think about Mr. Walsh. I can still see his right hand banging the beats on top of the piano while continuing to play the piano with his left hand. I can still hear him yell at the top of his lungs to Paul about articulating the t's at the end of words. I can still feel the volcanic eruption that occurred when he raised both his hands to bang a discord on the piano. He used to say that when everyone had an instrument it doubled the sound in the room. But at times, Mr. Walsh was frustrated in music classes because he said it seemed like he spent more time disciplining us than making music. But he did not realize that I was intrigued by these music classes. When he would

line up the choir on the risers in the gym, I smiled with pride. I raised my head up high and was excited about singing. I fussed over performing clothes and polished my black shoes. Mr. Walsh encouraged us to perform with pride. I appreciated his sternness when groups prepared for concerts. I appreciated his anger when telling students they were wasting time. I appreciated his fear when songs were not ready to be performed. I appreciated his happiness at the end of performances. He made music a passionate experience.

Mr. Walsh does not realize how significant those musical experiences were to me. I remember him as the best music teacher I ever had. His music classes were alive, exciting, invigorating, and exhilarating. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to teach music like him. I wanted my students to feel the excitement in music that he gave me.

Through the BCTF office I learned that Mr. Walsh was still teaching. I felt a stirring in my heart when I heard his voice on my answering machine. When we spoke on the phone, he most graciously listened to my story. At one point, he said, "I remember you." These words I cherish for he was my Mr. Peter Walsh, my favorite music teacher.

My phone conversation with Mr. Walsh was enlightening. I discovered that he still taught music. I discovered that he was in his 29th year of teaching. I explained my research interests and found him deeply involved with my topic. His background was not in performing music but of a general music interest. He told me the story of how he was hired to teach music. He states that because he played the piano, the school district coordinator wanted him to teach music. He said he had not been trained to teach music. In fact, when he was my teacher, he just began his teaching career. He had just moved to Vancouver from Australia. He does not consider himself a professional musician and has not been musically

trained in a professional music school. I mentioned the identity conflicts of musicians and how many opt to leave the profession of teaching music in schools. Mr. Walsh did not seem surprised and stated that one problem of teaching music was that most music teachers still implemented the didactic method of teaching. He considers this method old-fashioned and very authoritarianism. As usual, I found Mr. Walsh's comments enlightening.

He agreed to meet for coffee with me and continue our conversation. I expressed a deep gratitude for his inspiration and told him I still think of him every time I hear the song, *Proud Mary*. He laughed with inward joy. I somehow felt a deep connection to this teacher. Was it because he inspired me to pursue the career I currently have?

My desire to question why many music teachers leave the profession still haunts me. Indeed Mr. Walsh had not left the profession of teaching music. Though he indicates he teaches less music classes than during the 70's, he talked of concerts, assemblies, with deep passion. I believe it is his commitment to the teaching of music that I long to share with pre-service music teachers. In this time frame of life, where music education is in desperate need to be justified, I'm gratified in knowing that Mr. Walsh still teaches music. I look forward to a lengthy discussion with him. Perhaps his insight might illuminate the current tensions in the arts. What was it about his voice that resonated with me? How has his voice continued to sing over all these years?

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California 94707, USA