

TWO WOMEN AND A CELLIST

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This service I'm bringing you today is really for me. It came together because of my need to understand my feelings about this war we are all involved in. I am not a pacifist—this is a war we must fight. Neither am I a hawk, eager to bring the head of bin Laden home on a silver platter.

I suppose I share the feelings of many of you—feelings of ambivalence—feelings strongly, strongly patriotic—proud of my land; proud of my people; proud of our freedoms—those very freedoms that, no doubt, allowed terrorists to enter our country in the first place and learn our skills.

But, on the other hand, feelings of intense grief over what is happening or will happen to our planet—our fragile little home rock travelling in space—that may be consumed in hatred.

But, on the third hand, fear—fear of what may become of my lifestyle that I love; fear of what we may lose in personal freedom; fear of what happens if this hatred explodes and magnifies and envelopes us all.

But, on the fourth hand, sorrow for the people who have died, and even more sorrow for those who must live with bombs dropping day and night over their homes; sorrow for those who suffer helplessly, hopelessly.

This time today is far too short to really express all these hands. So, I've settled on three stories. These stories reduce war to the lives of these three people—not heroes or villains or soldiers—just three people.

I see truth and validity in each story. I can understand their emotions. I can understand what they did. They are stories of people just like me, struggling to bring some sense to what is happening all around us, in a situation, that, like this war, a situation over which these three people have no control, and so they do what they can.

I've heard over and over that this is a war like no other. This is not a conventional war, they say. I suppose for the generals and the soldiers, that may be true. But for those who face the bombing, those who leave their homes and flee to safer ground, this is just the same as all the other wars they have seen. They suffer, they run, they clean up the debris, they begin all over again.

The first story I'm borrowing from Robert Fulghum, a part-time UU minister in the state of Washington. Mr. Fulghum is perhaps better known to you as the author of Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.

The Story of Vedran Smailovic

From “Maybe (Maybe Not): Second Thoughts From a Secret Life” by Robert Fulghum

It is the year 2050. In a large eastern European city—one that has survived the vicissitudes of more than a thousand years of human activity—in an open square in the city center—there is a rather odd civic monument. A bronze statue.

Not a soldier or a politician.

Not a general on a horse or a king on a throne.

Instead, the figure of a somewhat common man, sitting in a chair. Playing his cello.

Around the pedestal on which the statue sits, there are bouquets of flowers. If you count, you will always find twenty-two flowers in each bunch.

The cellist is a national hero.

If you ask to hear the story of this statue, you will be told of a time of civil war in this city. Demagogues lit bonfires of hatred between citizens who belonged to different religions and ethnic groups.

Everyone became an enemy of somebody else. None was exempt or safe. Men, women, children, babies, grandparents—old and young—strong and weak—partisan and innocent—all, all were victims in the end.

Many were maimed. Many were killed. Those who did not die lived like animals in the ruins of the city.

Except one man. A musician. A cellist.

He came to a certain street corner every day. Dressed in formal black evening clothes, sitting in a fire-charred chair, he played his cello.

Knowing he might be shot or beaten, still he played. Day after day he came. To play the most beautiful music he knew.

For day after day after day. For twenty-two days.

His music was stronger than hate. His courage, stronger than fear.

And in time, other musicians were captured by his spirit, and they took their places in the street beside him. These acts of courage were contagious.

Anyone who could play an instrument or sing found a place at a street intersection somewhere in the city and made music.

In time, the fighting stopped.

The music and the city and the people lived on.

A nice fable. A lovely story. Something adults might make up to inspire children. A tale of the kind found in mythmaking? The real world does not work this way. We all know that. Cellists seldom become civic heroes—music doesn't affect wars.

Vedran Smailovic does not agree.

In The New York Times Magazine, July, 1992, his photograph appeared.

Middle-aged, longish hair, great bushy moustache. He is dressed in formal evening clothes. Sitting in a café chair in the middle of the street.

In front of a bakery where mortar fire struck a breadline in late May, killing twenty-two people. He is playing his cello. As a member of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra, there is little he can do about hate and war—it has been going on in Sarajevo for centuries.

Even so, every day for twenty-two days, he has braved sniper and artillery fire to play Albinoni's profoundly moving Adagio in G Minor.

I wonder if he chose this piece of music knowing it was constructed from a manuscript fragment found in the ruins of Dresden after the Second World War? The music survived the firebombing.

Perhaps that is why he played it there in the scarred street in Sarajevo, where people died waiting in line for bread. Something must triumph over horror.

Is this man crazy? Maybe. Is his gesture futile? Yes, in a conventional sense, yes, of course. But what can a cellist do? What madness to go out alone in the streets and address the world with a wooden box and a hair-strung bow. What can a cellist do?

All he knows how to do. Speaking softly with his cello, one note at a time, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, calling out the rats that infest the human spirit.

Vedran Smailovic is a real person. What he did is true. Neither the breadline nor the mortar shell nor the music is fiction.

For all the fairy tales, these acts do take place in the world in which we live. Sometimes history knocks at the most ordinary door to see if anyone is at home. Sometimes someone is.

Most everyone in Sarajevo knows now what a cellist can do—for the place where Vedran played has become an informal shrine, a place of honor. Croats, Serbs, Muslims, Christians alike—they all know his name and face.

They place flowers where he played. Commemorating the hope that must never die—that someday, somehow, the best of humanity shall overcome the worst, not through unexpected miracles but through the expected acts of the many.

Sarajevo is not the only place where Vedran Smailovic is known. An artist in Seattle, Washington, saw his picture and read the story. Her name is Beliz Brother. Real person—real name. What could an artist do?

She organized twenty-two cellists to play in twenty-two public places in Seattle for twenty-two days, and on the final day, all twenty-two played together in one place in front of a store window displaying burnt-out bread pans, twenty-two loaves of bread and twenty-two roses.

People came. Newspaper reporters and television cameras were there. The story and the pictures were fed into the news networks of the world. And passed back to Vedran Smailovic that he might know his music had been heard and passed on.

Millions of people saw Vedran's story in The New York Times. Millions have seen and heard the continuing story picked up by the media.

Now you, too, know. Tell it to someone. This is urgent news. Keep it alive in the world.

As for the end of the story, who among us shall insist the rest of the story cannot come true? Who shall say the monument in the park in Sarajevo will never come to pass?

The cynic who lives in a dark hole in my most secret mind says one cellist cannot stop a war, and music can ultimately be only a dirge played over the unimaginable.

But somewhere in my soul I know otherwise.

Listen.

Never, ever, regret or apologize for believing that when one man or one woman decides to risk addressing the world with truth, the world may stop what it is doing and hear. There is too much evidence to the contrary. When we cease believing this, the music will surely stop.

The myth of the impossible dream is more powerful than all the facts of history. In my imagination, I lay flowers at the statue memorializing Vedran Smailovic—a monument that has not yet been built, but may be. Meanwhile, a cellist plays in the streets in Sarajevo.

{Play Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor}

The next two stories you will hear at the same time. It is the story of two women whose lives are caught up in a war. The war could be the Jewish Uprising against the Romans in the first century, or the American Civil War, or the war over a village in Yugoslavia, or somewhere in Afghanistan.

{These stories are read by one woman with a ragged shawl over her head, speaking very softly and humbly, and the other woman with a fur stole and cocktail dress, speaking like a snob. They over-talk each other, that is, at the same time less a split hair, certainly not a finger space, one woman is saying the last word in her line, the next is saying the first word in her next line. It's like they are unaware of each other and each is separately speaking to the audience.}

I am a woman.

I am a woman.

I am a woman born of a woman, whose man owned a factory.

I am a woman born of a woman, whose man labored in a factory.

I am a woman whose man wore silk suits, who constantly watched his weight.

I am a woman whose man wore tattered clothing, whose heart was constantly strangled by hunger.

I am a woman who watched two babies grow into beautiful children.

I am a woman who watched two babies die because there was no milk.

I am a woman who watched twins grow into popular students with summers abroad.

I am a woman who watched three children grow, but with bellies stretched from no food.

But then there was a man...

But then there was a man...

And he talked about the peasants getting richer by my family getting poorer.

And he told me of days that would be better, and he made the days better.

We had to eat rice.

We had rice!

We had to eat beans.

We had beans!

My children were no longer given summer visas to Europe.

My children no longer cried themselves to sleep.

And I felt like a peasant.

And I felt like a woman.

A peasant with a dull, hard, unexciting life.

Like a woman with a life that sometimes allowed a song.

And I saw a man.

And I saw a man.

And together we began to plot with the hope of the return to freedom.

I saw his heart begin to beat with hope of freedom, at last.

Someday, the return to freedom.

Someday freedom.

And then,

But then,

One day,

One day,

There were planes overhead and guns firing close by.

There were planes overhead, and guns firing in the distance.

I gathered my children and went home.

I gathered my children and ran.

But the guns moved farther and farther away.

But the guns moved closer and closer.

And then, they announced that freedom had been restored!

And then, they came, young boys really...

They came into my home along with my man.

They came and found my man.

Those men whose money was almost gone—

They found all of the men whose lives were almost their own.

And we all had drinks to celebrate.

And they shot them all.

The most wonderful martinis.

They shot my man.

And then they asked us to dance.

And then they came for us.

Me.

For me, the woman.

And my sisters.

For my sisters.

And then they took us.

Then they took us.

They took us to dinner at a small, private club.

They stripped from us the dignity we had gained.

And they treated us to beef.

And then they raped us.
It was one course after another.
One after the other they came at us.
We nearly burst we were so full.
Lunging, plunging...sisters bleeding, sisters dying...
It was magnificent to be free again!
It was hardly a relief to have survived.
And then we gathered the children together.
And then, they took our children—
And he gave them some good wine.
And they took their scissors—
And then we gave them a party.
And then they took the hands of our children...
(Pause)
The beans have almost disappeared now.
The beans have disappeared.
The rice—I've replaced it with chicken or steak.
The rice, I cannot find it.
And the parties continue, night after night to make up for all the time wasted.
And my silent tears are joined once more by the midnight cries of my children.
And I feel like a woman again.
They say I am a woman.

I think we need to hear that cellist one more time.