



Learning Love, Liszt, and Rowing



I had what I can only describe as a breakdown at the start of 2020, of which I still consider myself to be recovering from, and am still being treated for.

It forced me to examine things closely, in a desperate attempt to understand what happened. I may never know the truth, but here is my current theory.

When I look back now...

I was always an anxious person and prone to low mood. It was so much my way of being, that I didn't realise that

life didn't have to be that way. By sheer force of personality, I tried for it to not to get in the way too much but eventually, it overcame me, and it prevented me from functioning.

I think that I had previously managed my anxiety by setting high targets for myself that required an obsessive focus. This kept my brain and body occupied, but it created different anxiety and wasn't always fun - and shouldn't life be as fun as possible? I now believe that I was striving so hard to prove that I was good enough: to family, society, and to myself, and I think that being born with a visual impairment was why I felt I had so much to prove.

Bizarrely, although I strived hard and often achieved (although never enough in my eyes), I was so embarrassed of my achievements, that I was often shy of talking about them. It took years after graduating until I could tell people that I had completed a PhD without apologising for mentioning it, and it was three years before I put it on my email signature (due to someone's questioning of my background). I would downplay the things I have accomplished, thinking they were never good enough. I experienced (and still experience) impostor syndrome at work: the belief that it is a mistake that I am in my job, and I still await someone to see through me and uncover my inadequacies to the world. To counter this, a streak of perfectionism can take over, to counterbalance my limitations.

I certainly didn't think that I would ever be worthy of anyone's love: I neither invited it expected it or accepted it.

Love

I was jolted out of my way of being by unexpectedly, stunningly and wonderfully falling in love, at the ripe age of 46.

Apart from the joy that my beloved brought to me, it gave me a new way of being. I didn't want to strive anymore: I wanted to enjoy life with him at my side. Having love like this for the first time in my life was truly life changing. I learned to accept more of who I was, and stopped trying for perfection.



Yet, I believe the space where my mind had previously been occupied by striving so hard, left a gap for my underlying anxiety to grow like a monster from the deep and for once in my life; I truly had something that I couldn't bear to be taken from me. I really had something precious to be anxious about now. Without achievements to strive for, my mind could run away freely with all the tragedies that were now a possibility. As I plunged the depths of generalised anxiety disorder, the only place I felt safe was in bed, where I would endlessly tell myself that it would be ok.

Liszt

As the medications started to support me to function better, my mind turned to something I shared with my beloved: the piano. As a child I had trained as a classical pianist, although I was never good enough to completely earn a living from it. I hadn't played the piano properly in nearly 20 years, eschewing the hours of practise it requires as giving up on a bad job.

It was through my beloved's encouragement that I started to practise again. To my surprise, I wasn't quite as bad as I thought I would be after all these years, and didn't have to start from scratch – although all the old technical issues were still there!

Because of COVID-19 and not being able to deliver presents to people last Christmas, I decided to learn a piece, record it and share it. This was a big step for me: it meant getting over my shyness about what I can do, and also being able to share something that isn't perfect. The beloved managed to persuade me that people would not find it arrogant, or think it was rubbish because it isn't performed and recorded to a professional standard on a concert piano. I was merely sharing a beautiful piece, however imperfect I thought my performance was, and that some people might appreciate that.

I comforted myself that whatever people thought of me and my recording, in my heart I knew of the hundreds of hours I had put in to practising it, and the patience my beloved had shown recording it dozens of times to try and get the best version. That meant something to me and what the people I shared it with mean to me, if nothing else.

It is part of my ongoing recovery to share this link with you now. It is me accepting who I am: the good bits, and the bad bits. That it is ok to be proud of something and it is also ok not to be perfect.

And it is not perfect: there is a wrong note right at the end, and I am not happy with the "pedalling" (use of the pedals of a piano, organ, etc., especially in a particular style) but a fellow musician (for I have finally accepted that I am a musician of sorts!) told me that there are carpet makers in the Middle East who always deliberately create a flaw in even their most beautiful carpets, as only God is perfect. Although I don't have a faith, I like that!

If you choose to listen to it, it is best played through Bluetooth speakers or head phones rather than computer speakers.

[Liszt Consolation No 3 in D flat - Liszt 2 - YouTube](#)



And Rowing!

Finally, to the other new love in my life: rowing!

In April this year after refusing to give up running throughout the pandemic despite limping due to Achilles problems, a physio finally signed me off running for a few months. Bored of the indoor rowing machine that I was using as an alternative, I joined a **Learn to Row** course at Edgbaston Reservoir, thinking that this would keep me going just until I could run again.

It is technically much harder than it looks, but I am hooked! I love the early weekend mornings, the team work, the light on the water, and the fun and laughter I have with new found friends.

The best thing though, is it proves the personal transformation that is integral to my recovery. I am really not very good at it (I was one of only two people on my course to capsize!), but I don't care what I, or anyone else thinks! If I ever compete, I won't care if I come last, as I am doing it purely for the love.

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