

VOICES

The Case for Music in Times of Loss

As a hospice chaplain, I know that the path through grief is mourning. Music can meet us on the path and help us keep walking.

By Chris Sikora

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If we're going to survive this pandemic we need music, more than ever. There is nothing else that can meet us in our heartbreak, elevate our spirits, move us to laughter and let us dream in the way that music can.

I was apprenticed to loss and grief at the age of 17 when my best friend, Brian, died in a car accident on his way home from high school. His uncle, Tom, wrote a beautiful song called "Lake Michigan (for Brian)" soon after that carries the lines, "Hear the sun, hiss into the lake; Hear my heart, feels like it's gonna break." That song spoke for me when I could find no words. It knew my heart better than I did. It didn't try to pull me out, it met me where I was.

Music saved me from drowning in my grief, a buoy that kept me afloat in those dark waters. We are all feeling individual and collective grief for all the losses that Covid-19 has brought: lives, health, plans, rhythms, connection. The path through grief is mourning, and it's music that can meet us on the path and help us keep walking.

As a hospice chaplain and former intensive care unit and palliative care chaplain, I've been at the bedsides of the dying for many years, with music often holding the space when all else has failed. The deepest sense of transcendence I've encountered has been at the times spent listening to the music families put on as they hold vigil. Together, we have heard the rhythms of the patient's breath meld into the rhythms of the music. Sometime I sing, sometimes I listen. Every time I bow in reverence and wonder.

We have a great intuition that music can elevate moments and create sacred space, even amid brokenness and pain. It's Roberto Benigni's character Guido playing the "Barcarolle" in the 1997 film "Life Is Beautiful." It's a jazz band in New Orleans, dressed in their finest suits playing "I'll Fly Away" to acknowledge all those who can't gather for proper funerals during the pandemic. It's the spontaneous concerts that continue to happen in quarantine all over the world by a collective call to music to lift spirits and restore our sense of beauty.

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Jimmy Buffett sings in one of my favorite songs, "if we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane." And he's not wrong. If we're going to stay sane in all of this uncertainty, we're going to need some humor and some creativity.

Music can be our soundtrack, lending us silly songs and crazy characters. It can bring us back in time to ridiculous decisions we can only now laugh about, captured by songs that accompanied us. It can be the lasso to the dance floor for a family dance party that never would have happened in the usual busyness of life.



Music helped the author, Chris Sikora, at right in white pants, deal with the loss of his friend Brian, left, who died when they were teenagers. via Chris Sikora

My friend Brian and I, in the middle of a subzero Chicago winter, would jump in his mom's car, crank up the heater to high, blast tropical songs, and then take off our shirts and drive around town, singing and dancing in the car. We pulled up next to proper adults, who sometimes laughed with us, sometimes laughed at us, and sometimes just gave disapproving snickers — making us laugh all the more.

Music carries dreams. It helps us imagine who we want to become, where we want to be, who we want to be with. Locked down in our houses, uncertain when this pandemic will end, we have to keep dreaming of days ahead. We need love songs. We need songs about hugs and physical touch. We need songs about all the simple things we never knew we were taking for granted as we blew through life. Let these songs fuel our dreams and embolden hope.

If you play an instrument, get it out and play for your neighbors. Spin your old records, or your new ones. But whatever you do, don't wait. In my work in hospice, we remind people that hearing is the last sense to go, so fill your moments with music as long as you can. The soundtrack of these times needs your chorus.

Chris Sikora is a hospice chaplain with Mission Hospice in San Diego.