

To Jim, from Fiji

Katrina Hays

A braided epistolary essay, “To Jim, from Fiji,” explores three kinds of relationships: how musicians share music; the relationship of an artist to art itself; and human interaction with the divine via music. The article begins as a personal letter to the writer’s Jungian therapist, then tells the story of a trip to Fiji, where music became the entryway to a deep and connective experience. The sections weave together to develop an inquiry into how humans use music to relate with each other and with a numinous reality, where the artist can become “vassal and vessel both.”

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Dear Jim,

How splendid both of us had the opportunity to hightail off to the South Pacific simultaneously. I hope your Hawaii weeks were what was needed to restore body and soul after months of ministering to your clients. My time in Fiji was too short, but I found being unburdened by computer and telephone on a remote island in Fiji was a good way to lighten my soul and find respite from the frenetic pace of life at home.

You repeatedly ask me (tell, direct, cajole, demand-request-needle-plead) to *write*. Write every day. Write all the time. You insist, and my dreams concur, that writing is as necessary to me as breathing; and when I do not write I diminish. My soul dies, just a little.

In our last session, you scared me when you said, yes, my writing itself could effectively die. I could kill it, as I came close to killing the white dog in my dream, by virtue of neglect. This idea causes my body literally to shrink in upon itself, the area below heart and breastbone going fluttery and unpleasantly liquid. To lose that aspect of myself is a terrifying notion, especially inasmuch as I have already lost, or misplaced for decades at a time, other art forms in which I am gifted. I must not also kill my writing.

I would like to tell you the story of Suli and Sepo, two musicians at the resort on Taveuni Island where Steve and I landed for a short week of diving this month.

Suli and Sepo sat out on the grass, largely in darkness, separate from the soft overhead lights under which the resort guests dined. Music from their guitars floated out, a gentle aural flavoring that was unobtrusive—unless you are someone who really listens to music, especially live music, whenever it is present.

They played traditional Fijian songs and some resort standards such as “Margaritaville” and “Hotel California.” Then came a Paul Simon song from the album *Graceland* that lifted me up and out of my chair, carrying me through the darkness to kneel by them and sing.

*This is the story of how we begin to remember
This is the powerful pulsing of love in the vein
After the dream of falling and calling your name out
These are the roots of rhythm
And the roots of rhythm remain.* (Simon, 1986)

The bigger man played a battered nylon string guitar. He faltered a little when I joined, perhaps startled at my appearing like a pale *jinni* at his feet, but his light tenor voice quickly steadied. The slighter man to his left cradled a large black steel string guitar in his wiry arms and leaned in towards me, his baritone harmony soft. I closed my eyes and listened hard, trying to blend my voice with theirs. As a freshly minted trio, we dove into the next verse.

The night before Steve and I left for Fiji, that very

song had come on the radio. I sat across from him in our living room, luggage packed and piled next to us, and sang to him, saying, “Listen to this lyric—it is so great: *‘This is the story of how we begin to remember.’*”

What can I tell you of a power that moves your body with no conscious volition on your part? . . . These are the moments when one becomes vassal and vessel both: simultaneously in service to the divine and a basin in which you are all-too-infrequently filled with presence.

Sometimes I feel a bit like a character in a novel who remembers in reverse, stumbling across ideas that feel utterly new each time they appear, but are actually as ingrained as gravity in the body. For instance, I am startled again and again at how much I love to sing and what great gifts I was given; both in my voice and in my cellular understanding of music. Despite a constant misplacement of the fact in my conscious mind, music is in me, and I am perhaps at my very best when I am at its feet.

Music is what compelled me to leave the 17 other guests who had also just arrived that day at Paradise Taveuni Resort for a week of diving. It was the force that plucked me from my seat so fast I wasn't even aware I was moving until I was singing in the darkness with the Fijian men.

What can I tell you of a power that moves your body with no conscious volition on your part? I think this is where the gods and goddesses are involved. These are the moments when one becomes vassal and vessel both: simultaneously in service to the divine and a basin into which you are all-too-infrequently filled with presence.

Jim, other safe havens of therapy than yours held this particular story of mine over the years, but I know you understand it took me years to recognize that my musical gifts put me squarely in service to music, instead of music existing to serve me. It was a hard and humbling lesson to absorb. I suffered as a result of my massive ego about my voice; and those agonies of loss and regret at last taught me to *offer* my voice, never assuming it has any reflection upon me as a person. My voice is a rare and splendid gift, bestowed upon me by the divine.

This knowledge was what allowed me to kneel (I imagine you would say, "in unconscious submission") and join the musicians that night. I listened harder to them than to myself. I tried to find the right timbre in my dark instrument to intertwine with their lighter, untrained voices. I strove, without feeling I was striving, to become one with them. Submission to the art found at long last. Not, as I had hoped so desperately when I was in my twenties, achieved on the stages of La Scala, the Met, or the War Memorial, but found rather with two guys in the tropical darkness of a Fijian night when nobody was listening. Except those same gods and goddesses that live, in Jungian tradition, within me. Except the great *other*, the divine that resides in every cell of my structure and being.

Suliamo Tabualevu (Suli, 58) and Iosefo Tabualevu (Sepo, 48) are cousins who live in Vuna Village, which lies on the southernmost tip of Taveuni Island, the third-largest island in Fiji (a nation comprised of over 300 islands). They have been playing music together since they were kids. Using borrowed instruments, they formed a band when they were just teenagers.

"Oh, you know, we wanted to play European music, American music, rock and roll," Suli told me.

No one else in their group played bass, so Suli taught himself. After a while, he and Sepo decided they needed to buy their own guitars, so for a year they cut sugarcane on nearby Vanua Levu Island, an hour boat ride from their village across Samosomo Strait. Cutting cane is hard, dangerous work. One day, Suli lifted a bundle of sugarcane above his head to load it into the back of the truck, and a coworker's machete, quickly trimming the cane branches so they would lie in neat bundles for shipping, sliced nearly through the middle finger of Suli's left hand. There was no surgery. It healed. But the sliced tendon contracted, leaving the finger curled protectively and permanently against the palm.

"I played bass, so it was okay, *neh*?" Suli said, holding out his damaged hand and looking dispassionately at the bent digit. "But it was a little harder when we started playing at the resort and I had to learn to play lead." His face crinkled into a wide, gap-toothed grin and he held up his right hand, which must be agile for the finger-picking required from a lead guitarist. "I take good care of this hand, I tell you."

I couldn't help but smile back at him. A Fijian's smile is something to behold, lacking in any sort of guile, irony, or agenda. They are unreserved, those smiles, and reside completely in the present moment. They are a gift, each one.

That first night, after they finished the last chord of Simon's "Under African Skies," Suli flung both of his hands out to me. "Oh, thank you! Thank you!" he said, holding onto my hands tightly. "That was such a gift. You have such a voice! Thank you for coming out."

Sepo reached out a hand, took mine. Less naturally ebullient than his cousin, he said quietly, "Yes. Thank you. Not many people come to sing with us."

Steve stood nearby, beaming. I introduced him to my new musician friends, and then Suli asked me to sing something for them. I was happy to oblige and sang a Bill Staines ballad called "Roseville Fair" that suits moonlit nights by water very well.

*Oh, the night was clear, and the stars were shining.
The moon came up so quiet in the sky.
And we danced all night to the fiddle and banjo.
Their drifting tunes seemed to fill the air.
So long ago, but I can still remember
how we fell in love at the Roseville Fair.¹*

The next night, after a day spent diving on the astounding reef in Samosomo Strait, the resort put on a traditional kava night. We dined on meats cooked in a *lovo* pit with hot rocks, watched slinky-hipped and gorgeous

young men and women dance, and then moved out to a large covered area where an enormous woven mat had been spread. We sat on the ground and Suli and Sepo brought out a *tanoa*—a large wooden bowl with four legs. Sepo explained the kava ritual to us, and Suli, with great gravitas, washed the sides of the *tanoa* down with fresh water. His head was bent, and I thought he prayed as Sepo spoke. Sepo handed Suli a small paper bag filled with *yaquona* (kava), and Suli dumped the ground dried pepper plant roots into a cloth bag, then began swishing the bag through the water, repeatedly wringing out the bag and washing down the sides of the *tanoa*. I was fascinated. To be the leader of the ceremony was clearly a role that meant something to him, no matter how many times he did it for tourists who come to play, not pray, on his island.

After we drank, some of us more than others, clapping our hands and exclaiming “*Bula!*” after each gulp from the *bilo*, half of a coconut shell that

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held the bitter drink, Sepo told us that an informal kava night is largely about sharing stories and songs. Thus, that evening of music became a natural extension of the night before. Greg, another member of our group, borrowed Suli's guitar and sang rocking and rude tunes that got us laughing. I taught the group a Stephen Foster refrain that encourages inebriated and out-of-tune bellowing. Greg the guitarist knew some songs that I knew, and I knew some he knew, and we harmonized back and forth. The small group of us (most

people faded away after the first polite bowl of kava and a song or two) sang and laughed and talked. Then Sepo said, “Katrina. Do you know ‘Amazing Grace?’” I do. I had not sung it in years, but the lyrics were right there, present in my head.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Greg accompanied me on Suli's guitar. Sepo and Suli leaned in as if receiving something precious. For the space of a song, something large and powerful was held within the group. I cannot describe it exactly; I can say only that I tried to be of service to that old song, tried hard to be a gift and give the listeners something they clearly valued.

Jim—what *is* it about music? Yes, yes, it is the universal language and all that, and I certainly found it to be a means of communicating more deeply and richly with Suli and Sepo than I would have, had music not gathered us together, but is there something more? Is there some great mysterious *thing* that moves in those of us who are present to it? (I think it moves even in those for whom music doesn't ostensibly mean much.)

Is music the Higgs boson of our conscious human selves? By this I mean: Does music work in us, adding something invisible but substantive? Whether or not we are aware of it, whether or not we particularly care at all, does music increase in us our humanity or intensify our connection to the divine?

Let's talk about this when we meet again.

The last full day of our stay at the resort so aptly named "Paradise," most of the group planned on taking a guided trip to waterfalls on the northern tip of the island. I was less interested in that plan than in going to nearby Vuna Village to see where Suli and Sepo lived. Waterfalls, Steve and I had decided, were something we had plenty of in Oregon. A Fijian village was unique.

I mentioned this to Suli. His wide, expressive face crinkled with worry. "Don't you want to be with your group?" he asked. No, I told him. I wanted to go the village. Suli looked down at his hands. He told me we must have a guide. We would see nothing of importance in the village if we walked there by ourselves. I assured him we just wanted to go. We didn't need special treatment. What I did not say was the lovely and intoxicating resort made me feel—with its nighttime security guards and fenced perimeter—somewhat at a distance. I was tired of the barrier and wanted something more authentic, something closer to what I found when I sang with the men.

Suli took a deep breath. "If you could perhaps come early?" he asked. "Before I have to go to work at noon? Then I could show you the village." I felt flustered and abruptly aware that I had unintentionally put him in a position of responsibility for Steve and me. I also realized I needed to say yes, with gratitude, which I did. And then spent the rest of the evening stewing a little.

The next morning, we were late getting to breakfast. And we were late leaving the resort. And the three-mile walk took longer than anticipated, my feet blistering badly in my new sandals. Despite pounding along the sand road in haste, moving past cattle and chickens, great swaths of coconut trees

and the occasional car, both of us sweating profusely in the tropical humidity, we did not arrive at the village until after ten, shortly before Suli should have been getting on his bicycle to ride to work at the resort.

As we walked into the village, there came a great shout. "Katrina! Steve!" And here was Suli, striding down the path, swinging a small plastic bag with a few small fish in it. He was dressed in a black T-shirt and ragged shorts, looking very different from the deferential man who worked at the resort. He seemed taller, broader, more male. We greeted him with relief and many apologies for being late.

"Oh, it is no problem," he said. "I called the resort and took the morning off to meet you. I told them it was Easter weekend and I needed to spend time at home today."

Oh, Jim. I was flooded with an admixture of gratitude, embarrassment, shame, and wonder. Gratitude to see him. Embarrassment at being late. Shame that my blind determination to see his village had essentially forced him into lying to his employer, and that he would make less money because of my actions. Wonder that he would do that for us. There is nothing in such a situation to do but honor the gift given. To honor in this case was to be as present as possible, to soak up every molecule of the experience. In the face of such generosity, such expansiveness of spirit, the best and only thing to do is humble the ego and submit. Amazing grace, indeed.

And what a bounteous few hours it turned out to be! Suli first took us to his house to rest after our walk. His house was a solid, tidy structure with doors propped perpetually open as if they were constructional afterthoughts. He invited us to sit on the wall-to-wall mat that covered the floor. A small child appeared, was introduced as a granddaughter. A soft murmur in Fijian, and she disappeared, and reappeared, clutching two battered and thin cushions for us to sit on. A daughter-in-law was introduced, then a son. Suli, a good host, asked if our walk to his village had been pleasant. He was gracious, eager to put us at our ease; relaxed and as expansive as if the setting had been palatial. We chatted. The daughter-in-law brought out a tray with three tiny glasses and a small pitcher.

"This is lemonade made with lemons from our lemon tree," Suli told us. He poured us out careful glasses. It was cool and sweet, and eased the sticky heat in my body.

I asked him questions about the village, its population and history, trying to get at the essence of the place. Among other things, he told us the village water bore had dried the previous year, and fresh water was very scarce now. I looked down at the empty glass in my hand. Again came the admixture feeling. Again, the realization there was nothing for me to do but surrender to the gift offered. Honor by being present.

Suli is a handsome man. His face is broad and dark, clean-shaven. His eyes are brown-black and very clear. He is missing a couple of teeth and gold flashes in his mouth when he grins. Old tattoos can be seen on his forearms.

There was a radio on a shelf on one wall, playing softly. Suli's guitar leaned next to it. He told us he had been practicing while he waited for us. He hopped up, went to another room, and returned carrying an armful of notebooks. Sheets of worn white binder paper, the kind schoolchildren use, edged out. I paged through them, looking at handwritten page after handwritten page of lyrics in a neat schoolboy hand, with notes on chords scrawled haphazardly along the edges.

I mentally flashed on my own musician's library: shelves of opera and musical theatre scores and librettos; collection after collection of the lieder of Brahms, Schubert, Faure; the songs of Porter, Gershwin, and Berlin. Thousands of dollars of music are in my library. Very few edges of paper have been worn to soft tatters, as had the pages I held.

I was in the presence of something sacred. It was clearly a life's work I was looking at. Here was the center of Suli, in notebooks at my feet. I looked into his eyes. I know exactly how much work goes into learning even one song. How much attention is paid both overtly and covertly. How much of one's waking and sleeping self is required to absorb a song into deep memory.

"I love it, you know?" he said. "I think about the music all the time. I just want to play all the time." He laughed, a little helplessly. "It makes my wife crazy, she tells me to work, but . . ." His voice faded off.

I got it. I was in the presence of an artist. To be an artist is to be held under a compulsion to do the art at whatever cost to one's life (or hand) or relationships with others or standing in one's community. It is a wonderful compulsion—and a terrible one. To *not* do the art is to die a little. To not spend at least a fraction of one's day in communion with that particular kind of mystery is to become quickly miserable. *Fractious*, Steve calls it. And then comes the discontent, the drear; the dreams of things displaced, of things lost or dying.

"It is the best thing we do," I said, and Suli's face lit up. "Yes! Yes, it is. It's the only thing, really," he said. He picked up a notebook, turned some pages.

I am always curious about how people go about learning music. I took a very traditional path: piano lessons beginning at age six, school choirs, and an undergraduate degree in music that came with private piano and voice lessons. I am a classically trained musician. I read music, I know my circle of fifths, understand basic Western musical theory. However, I am sadly lacking in the ability to learn music by ear; to jump in on a song, find the structure of it and play it immediately, as a good guitarist can do easily.

I asked Suli how he learned his music. He said when he and Sepo were young, the American Top Forty show would come on the radio on Thursday afternoons. They would hunch over the radio, sheets of paper and pencils at the ready. Then, when the song they wanted to learn came on, Suli would write the first line, Sepo the second, and so forth until the song ended. Over the next six days they would make a clean copy and figure out where the gaps were. The next Thursday, they would listen for the song and try to capture the rest of it.

“We knew the song would come again and we would get it, *neh*? Because it was the Top Forty show, the song would be there for us to learn.”

I looked down at those notebooks in my hands. If I had to learn every single song that way, would I have had that determination? That passion? I like to think so, but I wonder . . .

Suli hopped to his feet. “Would you like to see the rest of the village?”

We thanked his family and walked through the packed-sand streets. He showed us the new school with great pride, and took us by the medical clinic, open twice a week. What did they do if they needed help? “Oh, we drive to the other end of the island. Or call for a doctor. It takes a few hours for them to get here, but it’s better than it used to be when we didn’t have the clinic. It’s much better now.” He told us there had been several cases of dengue fever in the village recently. “Nobody died, but they were very sick, *neh*?” Steve and I looked at each other and simultaneously began to scratch uncomfortably at our many mosquito bites. It occurred to me the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention travel advisory site, which said there was no dengue fever in Fiji, would be very interested in hearing this.

We went to a young woman’s house where I bought some tapa cloth, which is handmade paper with traditional shapes inked onto one side. We went to a house where kava roots were drying on a rack in the sun and watched the roots being ground to powder in an enormous hand-operated mortar and pestle. The work!

Suli then took us to meet a daughter who was a caretaker for a big house near the reef. We were given more small glasses of cool and precious water. A small child, another granddaughter, leapt into his arms, wrapping her arms possessively around his neck. He bounced her absently as we went along the path above the reef. Suli showed us the bathing areas for the men and women, separated by 100 feet of black volcanic shoreline.

“We are traditional here, *neh*?” Suli told us. “Men and women do not bathe together.”

We walked towards the entrance to the village. We thanked him, said it was time for us to go back. And Jim—*he invited us to stay for lunch*. Remember, he had been carrying some very small fish in a bag. Each fish

had been no bigger than my hand. And he invited us to share food. We declined, saying the resort was expecting us for lunch, which was true, but a deeper truth was we were filled to the brim with his expansive generosity and truly could not find another centimeter of space within us for more. The walk back to the resort, the talking between us to come to the beginning of an understanding of Suli's gift, the silence of walking and thinking—all this was needed before we could consume even one bite of physical food.

That night, our last of this Fiji trip, the resort offered another informal kava ceremony. More people came, more sang and told stories. In an interesting change, most of the staff came and tucked themselves behind Sepo and Suli and the *tanoa*. They drank the kava, the women a little bashful. They seemed to be waiting for something. After the night deepened, after more singing and the kava-filled *bilo* circling the group several times, Sepo said, "Katrina. The staff would like you to sing 'Amazing Grace.'"

As I have thought about this, I am struck by the varying ways in which faith is shown. In our culture, a relationship with God often seems to be largely an idea, an intellectual construct to be taken out and conversed on. We do not have the ability to communicate well about the experience of being in relationship with a divine presence. We talk around it. We argue about it or flat-out deny it. If we believe, we know how to intellectually defend the belief, because our culture demands it of us. Our dealings with the divine in community are more of the head than the heart.

That last night on Taveuni, I saw the semicircle of dark faces looking expectantly at me and I remembered again: that simple song—written 230 years ago by a man who had made a living selling the bodies of people whose skin color matched the Fijians⁷—is an anthem to the forgiveness and redemption to be had from a relationship with the divine. But what I felt for the first time that night was for the Fijians, the song was not just a song. It was God, present in the words, present in the music, present in my voice. It was belief uncontaminated by intellect or irony or fear or fabrication. Simple. Direct. A straight pipeline to the gift that is Mystery.

Did I hesitate? Yes, I did. I was not conscious in the moment of all I have written here, but I knew something large was in the space, and I feared disappointing them. Simultaneously, I knew my voice has never disappointed anyone. The voice itself is simple. Direct and beautiful. It is a gift freely given to me to be given freely to others. So I closed my eyes, said the prayer I always say before singing—*May I be a gift*—and began.

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun.*

*We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.*

Amazing Grace. How sweet the sound.

Thanks for reading all of this, Jim, and for encouraging me to write the story. Perhaps it is odd to write a letter to one's therapist, but that oddity is easily contained within the mystery of the Jungian tradition, and the magic of how you have helped me gain grace, self-acceptance, and joy as a result of our work together.

With much love and respect,
Katrina

NOTE

1. "Roseville Fair" reprinted with permission of Bill Staines.

Katrina Hays was an opera singer and river guide before finding her way to writing. Her poetry and essays have appeared in Bellingham Review, Apalachee Review, Crab Creek Review, Sea Stories, Classical Singer, and Cruising World. In 2011 her work was nominated for a Pushcart. She is the founding editor of Soundings: The Journal of the Rainier Writing Workshop, and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University (2010). She lives in Bend, Oregon.

FURTHER READING

Simon, P. (1986). *Under African skies*. On *Graceland* [CD]. Johannesburg, South Africa: Warner Brothers Records.