

On "Unchained Melody"
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

With my deafness, I can't hear music at all, except in my dreams, where I hear it perfectly, magnificently, I'm sorry to wake up. Last night I heard, experienced fully, gloriously, the popular song "Unchained Melody." It wasn't any particular orchestra or band that I heard, or any particular singer, although I took in, lived, every note and every word. It was just the song and me, nothing else existed. It was as though I was hearing the song itself, its essence.

Oh, my love
my darling
I've hungered for your touch
a long lonely time
and time goes by so slowly
and time can do so much
are you still mine?
I need your love
I need your love
Godspeed your love to me

Lonely rivers flow to the sea,
to the sea
to the open arms of the sea
lonely rivers sigh "wait for me, wait for me"
I'll be coming home wait for me

Oh, my love
my darling
I've hungered for your touch
a long lonely time
and time goes by so slowly
and time can do so much
are you still mine?
I need your love
I need your love
Godspeed your love to me

When I woke up, I went back through the song in my imagination. I was touched by the lyrics, but what particularly struck me was the melody, these notes in this order, discordant in places, with abrupt shifts, but yet such a unified whole. It was as if the melody had always existed and that the composer, whoever it was, had discovered it. But of course that's not the way it happened, someone created this melody, and it will always exist because this act of creation occurred. The marvel of creativity: this melody, these words, together in this configuration, never before existed and now exist, and forever. I was particularly taken, going back through it, with the note, high, ethereal, accompanying the word "mine." I wondered about why the song is called "Unchained Melody." "Unchained" doesn't appear in the lyrics, and I couldn't discern any metaphorical connection to its meaning.

I'm not sure why I dreamed this song last night. I remember it as a Righteous Brothers record way back in the 1960s, but I don't remember paying much attention to it in those days. And it was in the movie "Ghost," about 1990, which I saw, but here again, neither the movie nor the song made much of an impression on me at that time. I was saddened and sobered by the recent death of the "Ghost" co-star Patrick Swayze and read the memoir he wrote just before his passing, but that was months ago, and as far as I can tell neither Swayze's death nor how it reminded me of my own mortality has been on my mind recently.

I remember ten or more years ago being touched by Elvis Presley in a documentary film, just a few weeks before his death, sitting alone at the piano looking bloated and unwell and vulnerable and human, ending a concert with "Unchained Melody" and struggling to hit the "mine" note and succeeding and looking gratified with himself for doing it and more at peace than before. I have that image of Elvis clearly in my mind as I write this, but I haven't thought about that image since it came to mind while writing a thought on Elvis a few months ago for this site, which was about him in the last years on stage in Los Vegas when he wasn't well and during a time when I saw one of his Los Vegas performances. I feel a kinship with Elvis as a man, not as an artist, with his humanity beneath the persona, with his struggle to find meaning in life, with the way his childhood

accompanied him into adulthood, with the way he tried to hold it together as it got tougher and tougher to do so, and with the way he hit that high note at the end in spite of it all. But I haven't thought about him at the piano singing "Unchained Melody" since the web site thought, at least consciously.

Lying in bed after awakening this morning, I pondered the mystery of our inner lives, including our dreams. Dreams for me have always been lessons to me in how I am in the world, what's going on with me, what I'm like. Perhaps dreaming this song has to do with my own aloneness if not loneliness now, and my humanity and vulnerability and mortality, and that I don't want to try to keep the show going, that I'm Elvis at the end, although I hope my health is better than his was, that I want to go home, that I want to be at peace, that I hunger for touch, for love.

The dream where I heard music prompted me to reflect on the incredible gifts I was given that I didn't cherish until one of them was gone. Without thinking about it, I assumed that since sound is out there I would have to hear it. Of course that is not the case. I'll never hear music again, only these loud screeching noises inside my head (which were gone in the dream, so wonderful). But I'm truly grateful for having heard music for so long, well into adulthood. Some people never hear music, never hear sound at all. I've heard Beethoven and Mozart and Frank Sinatra, and Elvis, and I remember. Losing a sense has made me more thankful than before for all that I do have, particularly my vision. Never a day goes by that I don't marvel at the fact that I can see, and think about what it would be like if I couldn't. It can all go at any time, my deafness has brought that home to me, and it will all go some time, not tomorrow or next year perhaps--perhaps--but inevitably it will all go. Between now and then, I will live with awareness of how I have been blessed with my senses and my mind and my health, and with my ability to connect with the world, including other human beings, and with the gift of life itself, so precious, so fleeting.

I just now looked it up and found that "Unchained Melody" was the theme for an obscure 1955 prison film called "Unchained" and thus the title. The music was by Alex North and the lyrics by Hy Zaret. Both are gone now, but their song lives on, as will the song I write

with my life.