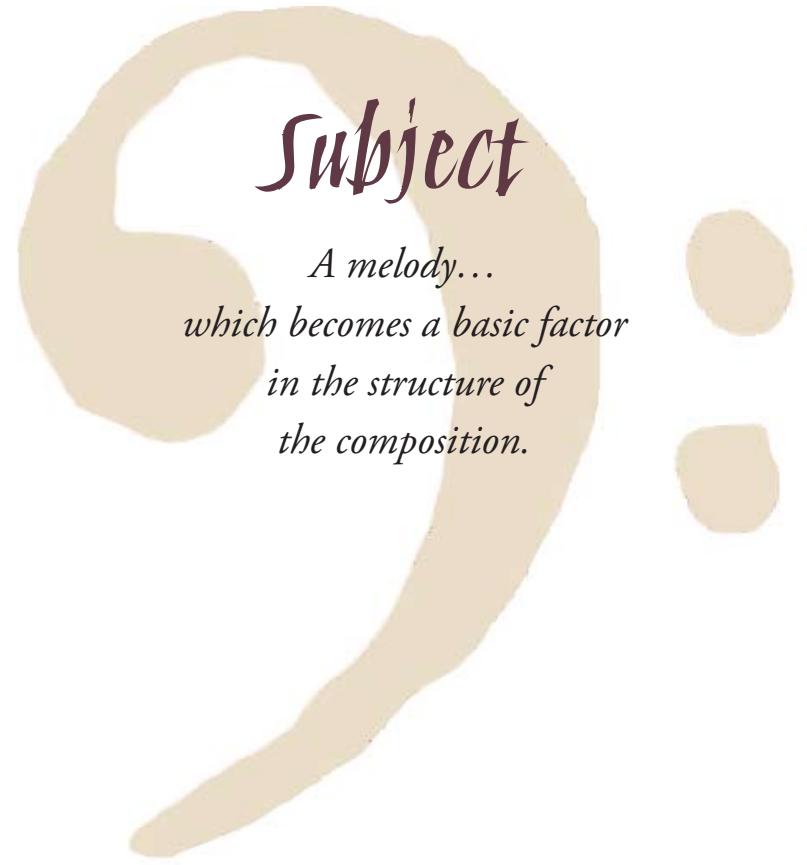


IT'S NEVER
TOO LATE
TO BE
WHO
YOU ARE



Subject

*A melody...
which becomes a basic factor
in the structure of
the composition.*



LOVE BELIEVES ALL THINGS,
BELIEVES ALL THINGS,
HOPES ALL THINGS,
ENDURES ALL THINGS.
LOVE NEVER FAILS.
I CORINTHIANS



The Splendors and Splinters of Love

Love is a many-splendored thing...

—PAUL F. WEBSTER

That's the familiar refrain, and anyone lucky enough to experience the heady, energizing, wondrous state of loving and being loved will wax poetic about love's many splendors.

Alas, love is also a many-splintered thing. Before love, we had only ourselves to consider and care for. When we love, other agendas encroach on our own. Not only do our lives become more meaningful and joyful, but they also become more complicated and demand difficult choices. These choices involve not only what is good for us personally, but also what is good for those we love, and those things are not always compatible. The many divergent needs and wishes of even the most loving couple or family render all sorts of plans, dreams, and good intentions into splinters. Yet, somehow, we persevere. Love's compensations and promise overshadow its drawbacks and beckon us onward.

It sounds so simple, this romantic concept that is love, as if the good and wonderful parts easily obliterate the limiting and difficult parts. Would that it was so, but the ineffable pleasures of love do not come without a price. We cannot have the joys of intimacy without its burdens. We cannot experience the delights of togetherness without also chafing at its constrictions now and then.

As a twenty-something, I became accustomed to going wherever I wanted, whenever I wanted. The only one to consult when deciding

whether to buy something was my checkbook. I enjoyed the break from the complicated dynamics of living with my family and trying to please everyone. But—there is always a “but,” isn’t there? —I was also lonely and often daydreamed about sharing life with someone I loved.

Fast forward to married with children: I was no longer lonely; indeed, I was never alone. I could go nowhere without planning the logistics beforehand. Money decisions were exponentially more complicated. Now there were mouths to feed, house payments to make, and Responsibilities, capital R! Fast forward, again: teenagers needing attention, from the logistical to the philosophical. But what about me? Where did I fit in?

I am often accused of being a “Pollyanna,” of having an insufferable and incurable silver-lining approach to life. “Get real,” says a friend. “Admit that you’re mad, you’re unhappy, you’re frustrated. Be like everybody else and acknowledge that you have moments of wanting to bag everything, go sit on an island with palm trees and soft ocean breezes and let someone else figure out how to deal with things.”

Mea culpa. I certainly have felt anger, frustration, sadness, and anxiety, all these feelings hopelessly muddled and confused by guilt. Major guilt. You know the scenario: it’s a variation on the how-can-you-not-eat-your-spinach-when-people-are-starving-in-Africa argument. It goes like this: here I am, a privileged, healthy, educated, white middle-class woman with a loving husband, wonderful children, a nice home, good friends, and ample food and warmth. How can I not be totally content with my life? How dare I ask, even in the stark, dark privacy of my own inner soul: Is this all there is? Why am I so selfish, not in actions—aha, a chink in the argument, since I never hesitate to do what needs to be done—but in ungrateful thoughts?

What is the source of this insidious dichotomy? Looking back, I think my inability to face negative thoughts is the dark side of having been taught to be so thoroughly positive and upbeat when I was a child. Perhaps it was a legacy from my parents’ foothold in the Victorian era. My family, like many a fifties’ family, danced around issues and maintained civility at almost any cost. Anger was frowned upon. Pouting, if silent, was tacitly allowed. Customary niceties like six o’clock family dinners took place on schedule with pasted-on smiles, regardless of how people were feeling or what domestic calamities had taken place. I didn’t know how to deal with conflict because I grew up learning to avoid it. I was a sensitive child; un-

pleasantness and arguing (one person’s discussion is another person’s argument) left me feeling inordinately unsettled and threatened. My security, my sense of a safe haven in my surroundings, depended on my being able to make everyone happy. Can-do cheerfulness is certainly worth cultivating, but when it transforms from an attitude into a desperate necessity, it is unsustainable. No one can be all things to all people. No one, really, when all is said and done, can make anyone else “happy.”

It’s all so very complicated, especially since, as I look at families today, I see that many of them could use a good dose of simple civility. The crass, in-your-face, tell-it-all vulgarity pervasive in today’s culture seems even more problematic than the false cheeriness that was the standard in my childhood household. Indefatigable cup-half-full optimism is probably the reason my mother lived to be ninety-eight; she was frail, wheelchair-bound, and in a nursing home—but cheerful. I am very, very thankful I was taught the importance of civility and respect for others. I just wish that honest communication skills had been part of the package.

At the time, it seemed that either you were polite or all hell would break loose; either you were well-mannered and courteous or you were headed for divorce court. I didn’t know how to find middle ground, so my default behavior was avoidance of conflict. I was woefully unprepared for the inevitable frictions anyone would feel when experiencing the mixed blessings of a wonderful relationship that also rearranges and alters your personal parameters.

My first breakthrough was to name this problem. It took me a good long time to be able to admit that even something as wondrous as love has its thorns, demanding cautious handling or removal. We do not solve what we cannot name, and we do not name what we are afraid to face. If we can put aside fear and listen to our inner truths, we can name our demons and begin to find ways to tame them. If we dare to seek truth, we will be liberated from illusory limitations. We will be free in ways we’ve never been free in the time before we risked being totally honest with ourselves.

In time, I have come to see love’s splinters as blessings in disguise. The same thorns that might seem to be tearing two people apart alternately can be used as building blocks on the road to wholeness, if only we can figure out how to listen to them, work with them, and incorporate their messages into some sort of personal cohesion. We must not allow niggling, negative thoughts to threaten us. We need to drag them out in the open, let the

light of day shine on them, and figure out how to reframe them and work with them instead of denying them!

Are you beset with feelings of lost privacy, of wishing you had your own space, a “room of your own” in which to be messy, to create, to read, to cry, to do whatever you please without being asked what you are doing? If so, you need to say so, if only in the privacy of your own mind. It is important to look such thoughts straight in the eye, admit them, and then ask yourself how you can compensate or compromise or find alternatives that address your concerns. We stunt our ability to grow and to cope when we try to pretend our concerns are not frustrating and daunting. You aren’t a bad person because you have downbeat thoughts or because you see the problems and challenges as well as the blessings; you’re human.

What eluded me was the realization that I did not need to be perfect. After all, wholeness means all the parts, not just the good parts. Chafing at restrictions in a relationship does not mean that you love someone any less. In the timeless words of Shakespeare, “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.” Love simply is. It does not ask, nor does it require. It bears all things, including a little show of temper now and then. Love leads to endless possibilities if you can surrender to it humbly, knowing that your best effort will be “good enough.”

Splendors and splinters: you can’t have one without the other. Together they form the melody underlying everything you think, feel, and do. Indeed, splendors and splinters are the “subject,” the most basic factors in the composition that is your life. Any attempt to achieve balance must begin with acceptance and appreciation of this paradoxical dichotomy.

*Love, the supreme musician,
is always playing in our souls.*

—RUMI

MAKE FRIENDS
WITH FREEDOM
AND UNCERTAINTY

SARK

