

Perfect Pitch

I've only recently come to personal grips with the fact that terrible things can happen to the best people. For surely that's what happened when melanoma struck my serene, sweet-tempered and widely loved sister.

Since I haven't been able to redirect my sadness in some useful and productive way, such as baking a sweet potato pie, I've done the only thing I could do: I've thought nonstop about Marge and about our lives in a stream of consciousness that is as close to organized cognition as I ever get.

For starters I'm acutely aware that I'm the last person alive who awakened every Midwestern morning to the sound of a young Margery Bowes practicing the piano. In due course she would play organs in churches and a syncopated ukulele around summer campfires along the St. Lawrence River. But it was chiefly through a classical repertoire for piano (ideally alongside Bill and his clarinet) that Marge expressed her lifelong love of music.

I've also recalled with amusement a comment that I don't think I was supposed to "hear." The occasion was a Bigelow wedding; that is to say a wedding on our mother's side of the family. I was toasting the bride and groom and for some inexplicable reason including a short history of Italian pastry about which I still know next to nothing. By chance I saw Marge turn to a cousin and ask, in words I could read on her lips, "I wonder where he's going with this."

On balance Marge's remark--"I wonder where he's going with this."--captures the essence of our 70 treasured years as involuntary siblings and voluntary friends. Marge was unfailingly patient whenever I arrived with some arcane fact or bizarre notion and dropped it at her feet. She schooled herself to express interest in my serial enthusiasms. And she was tickled genuinely the day I introduced her to the operatic rockabilly of Roy Orbison. We never tired of sharing glimpses of the human condition in all its fallibility and humor, and we both loved word play. "Hi! This is your sister," she would always say when I answered the telephone, and away we'd go.

Somewhere in far upstate New York there's a diner called the Chat and Chew. A quarter of a century has passed since we chuckled at that silly name which Marge had noticed beside some highway and later dropped at *my* feet. Yet "Chat and Chew" has come to mind often during the final months of her illness. That humble diner's name somehow summons all the civilized conversations we had over her artfully tossed salads. Each chat was an occasion when, if I listened with half the acuity that Marge brought to the table, I came away with sensitive, durable insights of the sort for which she was so respected.

Moreover, Marge brought respect instinctively to virtually every encounter. Whether one had a fat wallet and a full deck of social tickets, or whether fate had constrained one's horizons and opportunities, Marge honored each unique being by paying attention as if they were delivering the most important news on earth. I don't suppose there's a genetic component to that trait, but

our father Urban Bowes had it, too.

I may have stacked the deck a bit when I suggested to Marge's evening nurse, Cassandra, a few weeks ago that my sister was a genuinely endearing person. Cassandra replied, and I quote: "Your sister is twice as sick as many others I see, but she never demands and she never complains. Mrs. Dakin is great and I ain't just jivin'." Amen, Cassandra. I ain't just jivin' either--and neither are the hundreds of friends and admirers who lately have expressed their deep affection for this courageous lady.

By now you're wondering, as Marge so often did, "... where he's *going* with this." Well, the young journalist in this old body is searching for his "lede." He's been riffling through memory for a *leitmotif*, for a way to take the measure of this journey we were privileged to share with Marge. See what y'all think of this:

Marge Dakin lived a life in perfect pitch.

As those of us who sang or played duets with Marge certainly learned, she had technically perfect pitch for the manifold sounds of this world. She once let it slip that she could identify the musical key of anything, even car horns. To which I naturally had to ask with brotherly impudence: What about someone blowing his nose? She gave me that familiar feigned look of disapproval and confessed that she could nail noses, too!

Yet Marge's perfect pitch didn't end with musicianship. It merely began there. She had a gifted ear for French. She majored in Romance Languages at Radcliffe College, at that time the neighbor of and always (to my mind) the intellectual equal of Harvard. And there's more. Over and over, it seems to me, her relationships were distinguished by perfect pitch of an *interpersonal* nature.

As a child at Ogontz White Mountain Camp in New Hampshire, Marge was named camp-wide "Honor Girl" twice in successive summers--a level of recognition that was simply unheard of at least until then. Not by dint of any athletic prowess. And not because she was a WASP princess. Rather, Marge's decency and simpatico *already* amounted to perfect pitch.

Decades later, when the Junior League of Pelham, N.Y., was weighing the prospect of racial integration, its members took thoroughly prudent action. They elected Marge Dakin president. Not because she had sketched a road map either for or against social change. Rather, it was because all hands (including candidates vetted for membership) could trust her innate fairness as an honest broker in an anxious time. Perfect pitch.

Finally, let the record show that there were limits to Marge's tolerance for her only brother's addiction to novelty. About a year ago I pulled out a bandanna of dark, conservative blue. "Where did *that* come from?" she asked in her nearly noncommittal way. I explained that once upon a time, at a Washington dinner party, I had met the elderly Francis Biddle. I explained how my world wobbled on its axis when a Philadelphia Biddle who had been Franklin D. Roosevelt's attorney general pulled a red bandanna from his trouser pocket!

Marge listened as I babbled on about my conversion to bandannas as if I'd been on some sartorial Road to Damascus. "I have a favor to ask," she said finally. Anything! I replied, realizing that she was changing the subject ever so slightly. "Would you please carry a *white* handkerchief to my funeral?" It seems I had teetered close to some precipice; my alert and all too mortal sister had grabbed the back of my britches, figuratively speaking, and was pulling me to safety one last time.

I assured dear Marge that "if things ever come to that"--a funeral-- I'd be not only willing but proud to carry a white handkerchief. What else could I possibly have replied in the presence of such perfect pitch? I don't expect to ever hear it again. I'm going to miss it in the worst way.

--David B. Bowes
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