

# Sing my heart joyful art

Carol Ann Weaver

**J**oy is not something you find by looking for it. It is not a commodity, available on request, received as payment for labour, or earned by our efforts. Joy may come to us through unjoyful events—an extraordinary loss, an honest glimpse into our dysfunctions, a breakdown, a tragic death, a failure to obtain what we thought we deserved, when only a miracle can heal.

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When joy catches us up, we hear it like the first call of a migrating spring warbler. We accept its vibrant song, are carried by its forgiving wings, become free of our moorings, and know we have received a gift that cannot be contained or bought or explained or deserved. We call this a miracle.

But there are ways to welcome rather than fear joy's journeys and challenges; there are ways to be attentive to it, to open ourselves toward receiving it. The channels through which it may come, the paths that must be taken, the isolation and honesty sometimes required, may resemble the dark night of the soul rather than the bright light of happiness.

When I was not yet two, my father, Melvin Weaver, was killed in a plane accident. My mother, Miriam L. Weaver, had "Lift your Glad Voices" sung at his funeral, showing us how to reach out for joy in the midst of tragedy. This response lives within me.

I have repeatedly gone to music not to seek joy but to find a way toward its discovery, in whatever forms that may take. Writing music has been for me a form of meditation, a kind of

prayer without words, a place where I go in order to see without eyes, hear without ears, and feel without emotions. Writing music is a place where joy may be revealed, but rarely without the attendant release of burdens; the surrender to healing; and the quest for vision, honesty, and forgiveness. In a time of extreme pain I wrote “Dancing, Dancing River” to provide a needed mantra for my life.

*There is a river a flowing for me  
There is a river a for you  
There is a river for everyone,  
Come to the dancing, dancing river.*

I wanted love, joy, peace, empowerment, dignity and worth. But first:

*Come lay your burdens upon the sea,  
Come lay your burdens down forever  
Come let your burdens float down the stream  
Come to the dancing, dancing river.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Listening deep for the original jive of freedom**

Sometimes as children we reach the purest joy, unobscured by angst or complications. Possibly my first musical joy (besides hearing my mother’s soft voice singing lullabies, or her unswerving alto at church) was my grandfather playing Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite* on the phonograph as I rode my kiddy car faster and faster around on the linoleum floor, in time to the music. For me, joy was in the movement of music—nothing to resolve or desire, no doubts lurking, no forgiveness to be sought. All was whole, loved, and received as sheer gift.

Later, while riding my tricycle down the sidewalk, I heard a sound that compelled me to race into the house. The only music in our Mennonite surroundings was a cappella singing and classical music from Grandpa’s rich 78-cum-33 collection. Ragtime, jazz, rock ’n’ roll, or popular music was turned off immediately whenever it came on the radio, stuck between news and the weather. But here was ragtime coming from *our* piano. I had never heard anything so happy, liberating, upbeat, invigorating. Joy had come via the forbidden rag—the black-keyed version of “Chopsticks”! This was a joy I didn’t know existed, like an exotic new

fruit. My favourite hymns, march-like and athletic, such as “Onward, Christian Soldiers” or “We’re Marching to Zion,” compelled and commandeered. But ragtime, stemming from the most poignant of pasts, stirred up within me new synapses—resplendent and rollicking. Many years later I discovered I could still be a Mennonite and play jazz and teach it at a Mennonite college! When I compose music, I listen deep within for that original jive of freedom, that intoxicating joy of release so vividly remembered from “Chopsticks”!

The first jazz-inflected song I wrote rode with me all the way from Virginia to Manitoba. As I sang it nonstop during the twenty-four-hour drive, my questions evaporated, my fears dissipated, and my angers melted into love. “Greeting Song,”<sup>2</sup> sung in multiple gatherings and performances, brings joy to “brothers, sisters, meadows, oceans, the planet, every creature.”

### **Lured by the crazy symmetries of African art**

Somewhere in my twenties I was lured by the crazy symmetries of African visual art and traditional music, and pulled by heart-rending South African freedom songs, knowing my life was gradually moving toward Africa. My role model, Aunt Esther Lehman, had already loved Africa thoroughly and actively, taking college students to Ethiopia on what must have been their first African study term,<sup>3</sup> and she later spent a year teaching teachers in Botswana. On her return, she sat me down at the piano and made me, against my will, play through “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” (now part of South Africa’s national anthem), her warbly soprano wending pathways through the Zulu wordscape. The song caught in my throat.

Within it I heard the pain of people living in bondage who were somehow finding joy in the smallest fragments of hope. When I was first able to travel to South Africa, still under apartheid, and see dilapidated shacks and hovels, I was surprised to see flowers painted on some of the outside walls. Even through pain and oppression, people were expressing a joie de vivre. I wanted to know more.

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I went to Africa to discover something about joy. Despite racial, ethnic, cultural, national differences, many Africans, continentally, seem to share a common musical buoyancy. How could they dance their music into sound, again and again? How could the continual frustrations of poverty, health problems, political crises, ongoing wars, family separations, and near-impossible living conditions bring forth music, which expresses the epitome of joy? My Xhosa friend Prince Bulo explained what my mother also understood: “Our music is joyful so that we can embrace our sorrows.” In Africa I invariably feel this joy, thicker than granite, lighter than air, stronger than steel, more flowing than water.

I was in Kenya for a year of research, musical exposure, writing, and composing, along with my husband Lyle Friesen and our daughter, Myra. Our first venture out to hear Benga Beat<sup>4</sup> music

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was prefaced by searing questions: To whom do we entrust our two-year old? How do we get there? Will we be safe? Seconds after Myra fell asleep, cared for by our Luhya friend Kargeyha, our taxi arrived. Lyle and I rode with fear and questioning. Was Myra OK? Would we be mugged? Were we safe?

When we arrived at Nairobi’s famous Bombax Club, we were the only white people there. Fear was instantly erased as we were welcomed and offered two of the precious few chairs in the crowded, smoky room. The music was utterly transporting—lithe, multilayered, ethereal, throbbing, earthy, transcendent. I had never felt a wall of joy like the one that came from those musicians and that exuberant crowd. When two women asked me—a shy Mennonite for whom dancing was next to ungodliness—to dance, I had no choice. Before I knew it, I was pulled into the sway of the crowd, which moved to the music as one body. Communion. I had never experienced anything so unabashedly joyful. We danced for hours. The glow never left!

A few months later we drove our tired and untrustworthy Fiat to Kenya’s Meru Game Park for a safari, singing Christmas songs to the lions and cheetah. On leaving the park, the front wheel broke off the axel. There we were, only a few paces outside this

wilderness park where animals roamed freely, and many miles from the main highway. Our car was irreparably broken; we were trapped. We couldn't walk to the highway before dark, nor were we safe staying with a broken-down car after dark. Instinct taught us that *we* could not break down. We couldn't even talk. But for Myra, blissfully oblivious to lurking danger, this was an adventure! We rigged up a blanket shield against the relentless sun, and we waited. Hours went by—no vehicles. Then a Meru Park truck lumbered by, promising us a mechanic by the end of the day. We waited. Myra and I helped a Meru farmer weed her garden.

Finally at dusk, stranded there on that darkening road, we began to hear a distant sound of singing coming closer and closer—angels or mortals? When the truck appeared, thirty-some workers were standing on the back, singing their way home for the night, like saints marching home, creating a surprising moment of joy in the midst of perceived peril. Charles, mechanical genius (and saint), jumped from the truck, and with a handle-less saw, carved a necessary hole through a piece of hard metal to reattach the wheel. As he reassembled our car and drove with us toward the highway, we held our breath. Sure enough, it broke again, but his second fix held for the rest of the year. The angels had sung us enough joy to carry us home that night.

### **Learning to fly**

Later on, I received that kind of musical joy firsthand, by playing music with African jazz musicians. At the turn of the millennium, well after the lifting of apartheid, we went to Durban, South Africa, locating in a cottage at University of KwaZulu Natal, and placing our daughter in a Catholic school across the road. I both feared for and envied her in a school with Zulu, East Indian, and only three white children. To allay my fears and assuage my guilt for bringing her across the globe, I wrote her “Learning to Fly,” which acknowledged my own fears and the need to trust:

*you may find some barricades stumbling up your joy  
walking on your hopes and dreams  
threatening to destroy.  
Singing your sorrows  
singing your pain  
singing your heartbreaks*

*singing in the rain.  
There may be some fear in you  
hiding in your ride  
there may be some risk involved  
trusting the skies  
there may be some wings in you  
folded up inside  
as you open up your hold  
you may start to glide  
as you open up your hold  
you may start to fly.*

Another song, “Beyond the Water,” spoke of healing:

*Carry me healing water  
let me float in your tides  
wash me still gentle rhythms  
flowing out to join the sea.  
Wash me gentle where I’m broken  
where I’ve parted from my own way  
let your currents carry laughter  
laughing, shimmering across the bay.*

*Warm me gentle where I’m broken  
where my journey has come away  
melt me golden as the sunlight  
golden laughter within my day.*

All along, I felt I was waiting for Africa to unfold. Many appointments ended up with merely waiting. In the meantime, I went to dilapidated university practice rooms with broken windows, stuck piano keys, wobbly benches, missing door handles, and I eked out tunes and texts revealing my own waiting. In “Waiting Birth” I was waiting for a Mozambican timbila (marimba) to survive the great floods of 1999 and arrive in Durban. During this flood women gave birth in trees. Many people died. I was waiting for a kind of birth.

*Sing my heart  
shrouded art  
rhythm slowly meting  
waiting birth*

*touching earth  
where my heart is beating*

*Mother earth  
giving birth  
as I give you greeting  
You who hold  
and enfold  
secrets of my being.*

*Sing my heart  
joyful art  
rhythm slowly meeting  
many sounds  
touching ground  
where my heart is beating.*

Finally, the music came together. I was joined by East Indians—singer Natalie Rungan, jazz guitarist Mageshan Naido—and Zulus—drummer Lebohang Mothabeng, bassist Bongani Sokhela, and singer Thandeka Mazibuko—for my first-ever African concert, and later compact disc recording.<sup>5</sup> Cultural differences seemed to add a zest to our music, allowing for an exuberance I had only dreamed of. “Dancing, Dancing River” became our theme song. Joy bubbled as we brought our musical worlds together. Playing jazz with these Africans released me from the boundaries of classical music, allowing me to trust my new mentors. This journey would continue.

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### **Finding subterranean joy through the pain**

Surely not all journeys lead directly to bliss. Some must be taken in order to explore pain, loss, death, and sadness. But even in these difficult journeys, in the least expected times and places, I have often found a subterranean level of joy which can only be found through the pain.

In 2006, hearing that five Amish girls had been shot in a small schoolroom at Nickel Mines, near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, I was stopped in my tracks. How could these innocent, pure-minded

girls be taken so violently, without cause? I felt a grief for them as if my own daughter had been taken. And I grieved for their mothers, knowing their loss was searing and indescribable. A few years earlier I had created a large music drama, *Quietly Landed?*<sup>6</sup> which pulled together various Mennonite women's voices and featured Julia Kasdorf's poem "Floating on the Lobsang." In it she explains how these long tones of praise are sounded in each Amish service, whether for Sunday worship, weddings, or funerals.

I knew the Amish would forgive the killer, finding ways to reconcile his acts, while singing praise. So I wrote my own "Lobsang" (praise song) for the five Amish girls, which my singer friend Rebecca Campbell and I took to Lancaster the next year. My solo pilgrimage to the school site—the building itself had been razed—was a solemn event. While I stood there in the cool drizzle of a late October day, an Amish farmer rode by in his buggy. He

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didn't know me, but he knew *why* I was there—a brief moment of recognition and bonding, a wave of the hand, a sharing of love, an unexpected joy.

My most recent piece, "The Leaving," for soprano saxophone and piano, was composed in memory of a young nephew whose life was too heavy for his slender frame. His choice to pass up his life brought anguish and horrendous sorrow to those who knew and loved

him. It took me almost two years to write this piece. First I listened for his voice, but time stopped, so I composed that sound. Then, as I listened, he seemed to be telling me he was happy and in a good place—we no longer needed to mourn. I called that part "The Release," knowing that the leaving was his, but the release was ours to do. It would be mockery to say that joy was a goal for this music. But I trust joy is finding us in its own time, as we are able to release our hold on pain. While the pain of the leaving will never be forgotten, the joy of release remains a promise—"the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."<sup>7</sup> On hearing this music, his mother told me she hadn't been that happy since his death.

We are all composing sounds, writing stories, creating images, divining pathways that may bring us closer to the mysteries of joy.



Though there are no guideposts, roadmaps, or protocols to assure us safe passage and sure arrival, we know we can always release our burdens to the dancing river. And the still, small voice of the spirit whispers to each of us, almost inaudibly and in languages yet unknown. In the end, the word *joy* may be too limiting for that release, that voice, that miracle!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The song alludes to the river mentioned in Rev. 22:1.

<sup>2</sup> Published in *Assembly Songs* (Scottsdale, 1983), recorded on *We Are an Offering* CD by Lifted Voices (Kitchener, ON), and recently sung by request on Easter Sunday 2014 at Rockway Mennonite Church, Kitchener.

<sup>3</sup> Esther Lehman taught at Eastern Mennonite College (now Eastern Mennonite University) in Harrisonburg, VA.

<sup>4</sup> An invigorating popular Kenyan dance music with vocals, twin guitars, horns, percussion, and bass, similar to Congolese soukous music.

<sup>5</sup> *Dancing Rivers—from South Africa to Canada* (2000) was recorded in Durban with these musicians.

<sup>6</sup> For the Quiet in the Land conference on Mennonite women at Millersville, PA, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Heb. 11:1; KJV.

## About the author

Carol Ann Weaver is an eclectic composer, performing pianist, and professor emerita of music at Conrad Grebel University College/University of Waterloo (Ontario), where she taught composition, theory, jazz, women and music, and African music. She also led student groups to South Africa. Her genre-bending music results in new fusions of roots and art music, often coloured by African music. Her seven CDs include songs for those whose stories speak of struggle and hope. She has directed three Sound in the Land festival/conferences on Mennonite music; the most recent one on music and the environment is seen at <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/sound-land-2014>. Her book *Departure and Return* (Waterloo: Stonegarden Studios, 2014) gives perspectives on growing up in a Mennonite setting, leaving for Africa, and returning.