

My Choice

by Paul Tobey

I have devoted my life to the study of sound. I am not a physicist, a doctor, or an audiologist. I am a master of sound, an accomplished concert pianist. Since the age of eight, I've studied the relationship between the body and the vibration of musical notes. What I couldn't have known is that one day I would deeply yearn for the one note I would never hear again – the note of “no sound.”

Perhaps the tinnitus was caused by all of those over-the-counter decongestants I had taken for my flu, or maybe it was the stress of being at the pinnacle of my performing career, or the news that my wife, Nancy, was giving up a good paying job. Whatever it was, one night I dreamt I was sitting on an airport tarmac between two jet engines. When I woke up, I realized this noise wasn't a dream. It was in my head. I rolled off the bed onto the floor in a fetal position with my hands over my ears.

Over the next few weeks, I begged doctors to help me. The weeks turned into years. What started as a journey of hope turned into a dark and painful life with serious bouts of depression. The tinnitus sabotaged my music, my marriage, and sometimes my desire to live. Because my injury was not visible to the world, people had no appreciation or ability to feel compassion for my suffering. I felt very alone. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe Van Gogh cut

off his ear to make his suffering visible to the world – not because he thought it would stop his tinnitus.

Believing no one could understand my physical pain or my emotional burden, I turned to the Internet. There I found chat groups with more stories of chronic depression and misery. It became clear I wasn't alone, but it didn't make me feel better. That was when my wife ordered me to stay out of the virtual company of these sufferers, and instead to stay abreast of research through the American Tinnitus Association.

I was so busy fighting the tinnitus and struggling to make it through the day. I had no strength to fight the audiologist who sold me “white noise/masking hearing aids” that, despite my hope and full cooperation, didn't work for me. I didn't have the energy to fight other health professionals who tried to help but whose good ideas didn't work. They got my money. I kept the tinnitus.

My last hope – or so I thought – was an audiologist-physician team that specialized in treating musician's hearing problems. Because I have no drug insurance plan, they felt for my situation and gave me a dozen packets of antidepressants. Feeling hopeful that maybe the medication would work, I poured the boxes out on the kitchen table. That's when I noticed my wife's anger and when she gave me the ultimatum: “Paul, either you choose to live your life on antidepressants, or you choose to face your disability and conquer it. If you choose to conquer it, you will live a happy life with me and Adrian [our son]. If you choose the antidepressants, you will miss your music and your family. It'll all be gone.” She stood there with hands on hips and said, “You choose now, because I'm ready to live with whatever you choose.”

With my glimmer of hope turning into rage, I swept the table with my arm, and all the pill boxes flew around the room. My rage turned into deep sorrow, and I cried for the longest time. Nancy never came to comfort me. She watched, standing at a distance, and repeated the words, “You must choose now. It's been four years, and you have to choose what you are going to do.” I sheepishly got up knowing that I would get no sympathy from her now. This was tough love. I

picked up the packets and flushed the pills down the toilet.

I had cried many times before, but this time was different. On this night, I surrendered. I knew that tinnitus would somehow have to become my new best friend.

But I wouldn't be doing it alone. With Nancy and Adrian by my side, my tinnitus healthcare team at the ready, and a new spiritual mentor in my life, I began reading books about the mind, body, and spirit. I kept a journal of what I ate, how I lived, and my thought processes. Over time, I learned through trial and error that I could control the loudness of my tinnitus by eliminating wheat, milk, caffeine, salt, and other foods from my diet, and by eating high-protein foods and green vegetables. I learned that exercise, sex, meditation, and playing the piano kept my mind off of the tinnitus for long stretches of time. I learned that my negative thought processes had kept me focused and addicted to my tinnitus, and that I could control my thoughts to take the focus off of my tinnitus.

Seven years later, I am a completely new person. Tinnitus has transformed my life – in very positive ways. Because of the tinnitus, I walked an 850-kilometer pilgrimage across Spain, produced spiritual films, composed symphony music, became a certified motivational trainer, and am currently writing my first book. I am healthier, wiser, more grounded, humbled, and very grateful for my life.

I now teach people how to find their inner strength and use it to conquer their mind's attachment to illness, vulnerabilities, emotional burdens, and fears. And yet, with all of my professional credits, nothing in my life's journey comes close to my personal accomplishment of conquering tinnitus. I may never experience silence again. But tinnitus now serves as a beacon in my life. It is no longer the cruel enemy that once controlled me.

As a master of sound, I can tell you that the most beautiful sound I've ever heard is the suspended space between two musical notes – that open space of "no sound," of silence. It's such a great gift. But I've learned that other profound gifts do come, and from the strangest forms of suffering. As my loving wife

once said in one desperate attempt to save my life, "It's your choice."

And so I have chosen. 🙏

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