

Finally free to belt out a tune

By Ruth Ostrow

I REMEMBER my nana's beautiful face as she was singing. She would throw her head back ever so slightly and smile before warbling out some old-fashioned number from the war years. "Don't go down in the mines, dad ..." was one of her favourites about a boy pleading with his dad in an English mining town not to go into the mines after an accident killed another child's father.

"We'll meet again ..." was the romantic ballad she loved after being separated from my grandfather during World War II when he was sent off to Madagascar.

The sound she made when she was singing is never used now. A sort of wobbly, fragile, high-pitched sound that suited the era of silent movies and gramophones. It was so sweet and innocent.

I have tried many times since she died to sing her songs but find I can't get through a verse without crying. Memories come flooding back of my childhood with her, of her gentle hands knitting and sewing, but mostly of her stroking my face as she sang me her precious songs. And though I've tried valiantly to sing my daughter the lullabies nana sang to me, red-eyed and red-faced I've been forced to abandon my efforts.

My husband has never understood my reaction to Little Brown Seedo, a lullaby about a poppy flower seed in the ground talking to his brother seed: "What you're a sunflower how I shall miss you when you grow golden and high, but I shall send all the bees up to kiss you, little brown brother goodbye."

"Try and finish it," he has always urged as I have hiccupped my way through the first verse. He's been desperate to hear the punchline that so breaks my heart. It is simply this. Although I'm a woman in her late 30s, a mother and an adult, I miss my nana. In the end I have reverted to singing my child the less beautiful, less meaningful lullabies of today.

So it was a poignant moment for me to meet women with a similar problem. We were strangers sharing a room at a singing, songwriting camp at Lake Ainsworth in northern NSW last week, led by award-winning US singer-songwriter Kristina Olsen and renowned Australian-based choir leader and composer Tony Backhouse.

The camp, the first of its kind in Australia, was a five-day retreat to help us reconnect with our voices, our creative talents and the joy of music.

Although music is so important to most of us, we tend to shut down our listening, dancing, singing, rejoicing and our childhood passion for song as we get sucked up into the day-to-day grind of life.

As Backhouse says, we forget to lift our voices, to move our feet, to open our ears and hearts to song, and in doing so we lose something that can be found in the black gospel churches of the US, the villages of Europe, the native cultures of the world, and in my nana's world where, without TV, music became the after-dinner liqueur that bound a nation.

Anyway, one night at camp when a group of us were getting into our bunks, one of the women, a professional singer, said that her favourite songs were those her grandmother used to sing. But she could never perform them onstage because of the tears.

Another said her grandmother used to sing a whimsical song called You'll Miss Me When I'm Gone, which she sobbed out at her grandma's funeral. And suddenly we were lovingly and respectfully speaking the words of the songs we had been too scared to sing for fear of awakening a deluge of grief.

Music is such a powerful force, and I realised that the reason I was at the camp was to get back in touch with those memories of childhood captured in my nana's songs. Her music was so precious to her because it reminded her of her lost world, and now it reminds me of mine.

But I also wanted to get in touch with all the music of my life, because song is perhaps the most direct route back to the heart. For many it is smell that can conjure the beauty and colour of the past. A lover's perfume, the smell of a flower, or the grass. For others it is photos or the visual reminder that's so potent. For me it is music that most transports me to love affairs long gone, travels, exciting moments, sad times and friendships.

Being at music camp put me back in touch with the camps of my youth, sitting around the fire singing songs of peace, singing Joan Baez, Cat Stevens, Bob Dylan, and strumming guitar badly.

It reconnected me to my father, a marvellous musician, who'd play his guitar in the toilet because he loved the acoustics in there. I'd sing along with him and play the guitar he bought me for my 12th birthday. After he died, I never picked up that guitar again.

But being among musicians and singers has helped me reopen a locked door and remember how to sing, and how to listen. How to celebrate life but also to celebrate loss by allowing it to be.

It is the way with music. So intense. Some people use it to remind them of loss because they want to purge and heal. Some people just want to rock around the clock, stuck in a time warp, which is why movies such as *The Big Chill* are so popular with nostalgic baby boomers.

Others, like me, have shut down the music because of the lost opportunities and the lost loves that it represents.

But during camp, Backhouse got me into the music of gospel churches where song is used to celebrate the spiritual world, mourn loss, deal with pain and prejudice, and then rejoice.

In pounding out hymns, I suddenly felt the circle of life complete for me. Creation and death, joy and sadness, all part of the great cycle of things. Music is the golden thread too valuable to lose from our lives.

Camp is over but I have decided to do something for my daughter tonight. I will lift my voice and sing the lullaby *Little Brown Seed* without tears. I will bellow it out as if in a gospel church, sing it with attitude, love and joy, while stomping my feet and clapping my hands. And my nana, looking down, will know that her grandchild is all right.

www.ruthostrow.com

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