

Help for the Discouraged Singer

Susan Gregory

Last weekend I ran into a singer who has a career most singers would envy—and yet the first words she told of the sadness she feels because her career hasn't done better in the time since we'd last seen each other. This singer is singing lead roles in "A" houses, yet she is still disappointed. I had already received the letter below—so I thought it was time to bring in Susan Gregory, a singer who is also a psychologist. —Editor

Dear Dr. Gregory: Today started out happily, until I opened the newspaper and saw an article about an old colleague of mine. It said that [my friend], with one day's notice- was asked to go onstage in place of a star at the Met... The article goes on to list his triumphs all over the world, and [his] glowing reviews.

I felt like a knife had stabbed me in the heart, literally. The pain was terrible. We used to sing small roles together. I'm happy for him, but I too sang at the Met—but I wasn't promoted: I was demoted gradually, until I had no singing jobs left. The recurring, painful thought is: I AM NOT WANTED. I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

Obviously, my friend is good enough. People, famous and moneyed, have risen right and left to help him. while no one was willing to do that for me.

The truth is. I've been rejected. I can't stand to hear singers or read reviews. It reminds me of what I have lost. The pain is so physical, like a cavern of pain opened up in my chest. Just now, I had to get up suddenly and leave work because I was sobbing so hard.

I trained my whole life for this, gave up everything. I got so close to the pinnacle of success—and then my dream was taken away. I can't find another that matters. Everything pales next to the great pursuit. I spend my days now at work, and then at night lose myself in TV, hoping I won't see or hear a singer. Do you have any ideas? I feel dead inside.—I'm not going to sign this

Dear Singer: I am moved by your letter and want to respond in a way that will be helpful. At the same time. I don't want to offer too simple a solution, since life itself is complex.

If we were in my consulting room right now, sitting across from each other, first of all I would want you to be able to know that I care about the pain you are in, and about your need to find solutions for the genuine life problem you are describing. In my writing to you here, I am trying to be supportively present with you in the larger "consulting room" formed by this community of singers/readers.

You have suffered a loss of considerable magnitude: the fading away of a reward for high achievement, achievement that was hard won and for which you sacrificed greatly. You have suffered the unanticipated withdrawal of work opportunity, and with that, the loss of a defined path into the future. As a result of these losses, you are suffering a kind of

shock, which you fight down by undertaking the duties of everyday living, but which remains close to the surface, ready to spring up at unexpected moments.

It is normal in such a personal emergency that you would experience your pain somatically, through body sensations. If we are to be "somebody," then it is through our body sensations, as well as through our thoughts and emotions, that we experience living. So, to feel "a knife had stabbed me in the heart," as you describe it, is both a palpable experience of the intensity of your pain and a metaphorical expression of the betrayal and grief you feel.

It's normal to feel things in our bodies, yet it is not healthy to go on feeling them without finding ways of resolving them. Your acute feelings of being overwhelmed, alternating with an inner dullness and loss of appetite for living (i.e., vegging out in front of the TV), makes me concerned not to overlook the possibility of depression. Such a form of depression could, I believe, be ameliorated through a safe and supportive therapeutic process of relatively short duration, or through active involvement with a peer support group.

What can you do to move forward? First, recognize and appreciate the strategies you created to get through your initial emergency, such as getting into a new work routine, separating yourself from the source of pain, and withdrawing from uncomfortable stimuli. These strategies, at first helpful in self-mobilizing for survival, may now have become limiting factors in your moving toward what might next be available for you.

What you need now is the slow creation of new strategies that support you in expanding into life again. To get to that phase, I believe you first need to move through the process of mourning your losses.

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Mourning is a process, which takes place over time and is composed of several stages that can bring resolution and relief, if undertaken with the support of others. These others may be friends, sympathetic family members, or empathic professionals.

Doing the work of mourning eventually frees your energy, allowing you to spontaneously rediscover the ongoing richness of your curiosities and interests, including singing, should you so wish.

Mourning is not at all the same as ongoing grief and depression, which recur when unresolved pain goes around and around in an emotional loop (such as your needing to leave work because of sobbing, as you describe in your letter). Paradoxically, the key to resolution of pain is a part of the mourning process, the part in which you activate your righteous anger.

When I say anger. I do not mean uncontrolled rage. Rather, I mean the experience of righteous indignation we all need in order to be aware of when we are being mistreated or lied to. In anger—which we can express in honest, clear sentences and need not involve shouting or other overt acting out—we recover the source of our strength.

In Gestalt therapy, we understand depression to be held-in anger. When we recover our anger in a safe setting, we recover our energy— and we can expect our depression to lift. We call this process "finishing unfinished business."

Usually, the cause of that "dead inside" feeling you mention is the implosion of energy. You are using great quantities of energy to hold in your feelings, thus making it impossible to access very much energy for living.

I do not mean that we need to go and get overtly angry with persons who have hurt us, although sometimes, with support and careful preparation, we may choose to have such a conversation. Rather. I mean experiencing for ourselves, in a safe, appropriate setting, the anger we have been keeping out of our awareness.

When we don't reclaim our righteous anger, we unintentionally prolong our pain and misery. By experiencing anger in a safe environment, we regain our desire for living and creating. A safe environment for undertaking this work could be a sympathetic friend's kitchen table, a cousin's front porch, a picnic blanket in Central Park, a peer support group in your living room, or a professional counselors office.

There's much in your letter that feels hopeful to me. including your first phrase: "today started out happily..." This lets me know that you have enough pleasure in your life to support taking a look at the pain. I see also that you have written cogently and vividly, causing me to feel and understand your plight strongly. Such a writing ability indicates talent and intelligence, pointing toward personal resources you possess to create new possibilities for yourself in life.

When you write: "Everything pales next to the great pursuit." I personally understand what you're saying, and I begin to reflect on the profound agony I was in more than 20 years ago with regard to the circumstances under which I left the New York City Opera. I am moved to want to say to you: "Yes. now...but later..." Yet I hold myself back from saying more, to honor your own journey into the woods, a journey you now have an opportunity to make in order to emerge at the next, higher meadow.

Respectfully.

Susan Gregory

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CS realizes that this singer's experience is not an isolated one. Career disappointment hits us all, and many singers are not able, or do not wish, to access a physical support group. We have created an online support group for singers who are grieving career losses. You can find it at www.classicalsinger.com..