

The Answer:

Dear friends. I have found the answer. I wasn't looking for it. I didn't Google it. It just happened. Like so many really important things, it just happened. I was sitting here minding my own business, beginning to write something in the hope that I would get it in to the Paper on time. The splendid publisher of our beloved Banner has been an absolute saint in accepting columns from me long after she could have told me to go fly a kite. So this time I was getting a jump, days early. "I won't test her again." I said to myself.

And then the answer came, the answer for just about everything that needs an answer. It's Chopin. Yup, that's right, Chopin. Pronounced show-pan. Frederick Chopin. He wrote music for the piano. He wrote **such** music for the piano. This guy, I'm telling you, this guy was listening to musical ideas from a completely different galaxy than our own. Anything you can imagine feeling in your truest heart, anything you have hid away or hung on your sleeve, this guy was writing about. Longing that cannot be soothed, triumph in a cause, love realized and not realized, heroism. How can a stranger do that? How can a guy who was born two hundred years ago do that? How can he touch those places deep inside? There was no recorded music then. How did he even know we could listen to him?

Anyway, go to the used CD store and buy one disc of his music. It'll cost a couple of bucks. Get anything that has his Nocturnes, Ballades or Polonaises on it. Give yourself more than ten minutes to listen, without the phone, or your kids, or your parents, or cooking, or answering your mail. Do this for yourself. If the love of your life might be open to such a thing invite her/him along for the ride. Don't do anything but listen. Let the music wash.

So, this Chopin guy. What a piece of work. He was Polish born and middle class. His passion was to be Parisian and Noble. So he left home in his teens and became both. He had tuberculosis for most of his life. He never saw his fortieth birthday. He was completely self-absorbed. I don't think you or I would want to have him over for supper, unless he was playing the piano. He owned a hundred pairs of dress gloves. In those days gentlemen wore gloves whenever they left the house. He never wanted to wear the same pair twice. There is only one photograph of him, taken in the very early days of photography.

It is not a happy picture. He has less than a year to live. He coughs his life out every day, all day. And, in this photo, he looks like it. Profoundly sad. But he is dressed to the nines! He could not imagine himself being documented, no matter how terrible he felt, looking anything less than a million francs.

I think we all have a relative like Chopin, always from the previous generation. Dapper, whatever the circumstances. Graceful, whatever the world is doing around him. Dignified under pressure. The quality of being dignified is so enormously undervalued these days. I think it helps to define courage. What do you think? The next politician who manages to be graceful and strong at the same time will run the table.

But I'm not talking about elections or politics. I'm talking about truth and beauty and peace. This guy knew he was dying. He knew he was dying for most of his life. He chose to deal with that fact by writing the most empathetic, profound, enjoyable piano scores in all of classical music. The next time that I am dealt a bad hand in the big game I'll try to remember his lesson. Grace, under fire.

But, his music is more than that. Whatever you're dealing with, however your day has gone, whatever is on your mind, try Chopin for a few minutes and see if the details, the mundane, the grime and the petty doesn't fall away. He won't pay the bills for you but he sure puts the bills in their place.

I think he's telling us that there is more to life than the day-to-day details. He's telling us that beauty, beautiful music, is more important than so much of the stuff that we value. He's asking us to pay attention to a private voice. The lovely voice in each of us that knows harmony and order and love are the answer to the noise and nonsense that we face every day.

Give him a try. See if he doesn't give you the answer too.