
NON-FICTION | FALL 2016

Changelings and the Barroness: Notes from a Journey of Enlightenment

By Kaja Weeks

How did I ever survive the night with that little boy . . . heavy metal braces on his legs, brace on his back, tethered to his crib, crying, crying for his mother, crying for his life, I think. All I had, at 18, was nauseating fear. How could they have left me to keep *this Changeling, this fragile, alien-like being?*

Sweating, my haunches gripped a wooden chair in the glow of his night-light. He whimpered and I sang, my voice creaky. What else, what other paltry thing, could I have done? He seemed to find moments of peace in my fearful singing, but mostly his agony prevailed and I wanted no part of it. Back on campus I sobbed with relief and vowed never to subject myself to such a thing again.

Yet decades later, week after week I have welcomed multiply-impaired children -- developmentally, emotionally, physically, sometimes with braces and all -- into a small clinic room, and like with that first little boy, I am singing. Years of training under the architects of the developmental approach known as “Floortime,” in which warm, child-led relationships form foundations, provided understanding of emotional, cognitive and sensory aspects critical to healthy growth. Musical elements, such as tempo, rhythmic steadiness or surprise, and the color of my voice provide powerful tools, but the child’s uniqueness shines through relational tactics, and I am able to integrate singing at the core of playful, hopeful intervention.

But the journey, sparked with the first little boy, who in a moment of desperate fear I had regarded as nearly alien, like a changeling, had all started in music school with Madame Lorrain. Althea Lorrain -- tall, handsome, regal in stance. She had steel blue eyes, so intense, she could possess anyone with her gaze. Her face was scarred, framed by silver hair pulled back and knotted high on the crown. I was petrified of her. Yet she became central to a journey that began as if on opaque water where, though life teems below, only a dark surface is revealed. It changed everything about my rigid, fearful responses to children with disabilities, allowed me to truly consider them, and to find their strength and beauty despite great challenges. To convey her influence, one needs to understand more about this extraordinary woman.

She was my teacher for an esoteric class, Foreign Language Diction for Singers. We sight-read French, German, Italian and Latin passages from arias, lieder, and choral works, transforming -- right in the moment -- odd little symbols of the International Phonetic

Alphabet into a stream of perfectly spoken language. It was extraordinarily demanding, but perfection was her standard.

I will never forget our class, suspended in fear, when she asked poor Andy Taylor, a hulk of a boy from Alabama to read a Latin verse. From the top of the terraced lecture hall Andy's resounding voice fell in waves, "Glow-reee-ah een egg-shell-seees day-oh-uu." (That was supposed to be "*Gloria in excelsis Deo.*") Madame Lorrain's figure expanded like a balloon as she drew in her breath at this. I don't recall how many times Andy tried, with corrections about mouth and jaw, lips and tongue. But suddenly, Madame Lorrain, in her long tweed skirt, leapt up the wide steps and ended in front of Andy with her two fingers in his mouth! "*Here!*" she said, "*Do you not feel ziss?*" Her fingers jabbed the roof of his mouth. Andy turned moon pale, eyes frozen – keeping his mouth ajar so as not to accidentally bite Madame Lorrain.

I perfected the International Phonetic Alphabet and planned never to make a mistake or be alone in her presence. One winter evening I stood upon a balcony overlooking the iron gates of Campus Drive. I inhaled the chilly air with a kind of melancholy that infused my college years. Silently, in darkness, a figure slid next to me. All breath stilled in my throat as I recognized Madame Lorrain.

First, a polite inquiry about class, but then her request that I recite something! Dazed, cogent thoughts unreachable, a sound-image of Madame Lorrain formed – the way she opened every single class with Schiller's "Ode to Joy" in German – words from the magnificent choral finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. So, like her, I raised one outstretched arm, streamed a dark, low voice and gave it all I had, my best diction and intonation: "*Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium.*" But that was it -- that's all I could remember! So, I repeated it, "*Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium.*" With gravitas, I turned to her. She was caressing her face between the palms of her hands, "Ach!" she murmured with a satisfied quiver.

But, it was a bait and switch. For immediately, she seized me, lamented about a young child who was multiply-, severely-handicapped. "The parents are exhausted from constant care and most urgently require a time out." Her hand touched my arm. "I am certain *you* would be a good caregiver for him."

Why me? Did she intuit some untapped compassion? Had she sensed my own vulnerabilities? I never knew, but from weakness, fleeting imagined compassion and sheer fear of her, I capitulated immediately. That is how I came to spend one of the most terrifying but heart-wrenching nights of my life. I didn't understand it then, but once the parents walked out and as I felt utterly powerless in front of that crib, I nearly negated this small child's humanity in order to bear my own agony, for I identified him as an "other." In my eyes a boy, most likely with severe multiple sclerosis, became a "wounded creature" of whom I was terrified, in actuality because I couldn't reach him – a terrible warped circle of thinking/feeling. It is not altogether surprising, in that light, to see how alien, other-worldly, changeling myths could arise as primitive states of mind. This insight into a liability of human nature begs to be countered by strong, comprehensive support – emotional, educational, economic and spiritual -- for parents and caregivers of children with severe challenges. Broadly, it is also true in particular developing societies and cultures where systemic societal disregard for children with

special needs still prevails. The journey of change is practical, but also one of the mind and heart.

Madame Lorrain had understood the significance of the respite-mission, and for me it became a kind of insemination, dropped deep for gradual activation. Life forces came to mingle fatefully and a journey mapped: that first child with his unforgettable, heart-wrenching suffering; then the slow heat of shame over my primitive revulsions; realizations that a musical gift I had, especially if backed by training, could possibly be life-altering; finding mercy, empathy and true connections with the children; sustaining courage, compassion.

Then, there were more revelations about Madame, who actually turned out to be a Baroness. I found out that she bore many more horrific scars, not only on her face, but all over her back as well. In fact, Althea Lorrain, Austrian by birth, had been a young woman in the French Resistance during World War II. Arrested by Nazis, she had been severely tortured. But her moral and courageous undercover pursuits saved countless lives.

Given her history, I came to understand something profound. Each time she had so soberly proclaimed in German, *“Freude, schöner Götterfunken”* (Joy, bright spark of the divine) we became onlookers to her defiance in the face of defeat, witnesses to her hurling transcendent light right back into darkness. She pulled me in toward the light. And as anchored delusions of “fragile aliens” – like the subconscious myths of changeling-children – dissipated, my personal sung Odes-of-Joy rose, dove into opaque waters, but rose again. They were imperfect, but resilient even in fear.

Today, decades after my first seminal encounter, I practice in a music room under the wings of interdisciplinary pediatric therapists. A girl -- speech slurred, her shaking limbs held in braces -- can be found reaching toward my lips. They are open in loving song.

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FALL 2016 INTIMA | CONTRIBUTORS



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