



May 2023

## Are you there, Terry Gross? It's me, Linda.

A friend once told me that Leonard Cohen wrote the soundtrack to her life. We were parked along the northern California coast listening to the CD of his recent release “Old Ideas.” (Her car had an amazing sound system.) My father had recently died and my friend suggested spending a weekend at Asilomar. When the song “Going Home” played (Going home without my burden/Going home behind the curtain/Going home without the costume that I wore) I was immediately taken to the night before my father’s death when I laid next to him, kissed his bald head, and whispered: “It’s time to go home.” My father died in 2012.

Leonard Cohen died two weeks after the death of my friend in 2016, he was 82 and she was 69. Until that moment, until listening to Leonard Cohen and her declaration, I had never thought about how lives have soundtracks: Nursery rhymes, lullabies, hymns, camp songs, the songs of our parents and then the songs that we choose and the songs and music that find us. But a soundtrack is more than songs, it is a track of the curiosities and attractions of a life, of places and people and serendipity. Do I continue to sing along to Patsy Cline because she was a favorite of my dad’s? Do I always smile and get

up and dance when I hear “The Twist” by Chubby Checkers because my mom taught me how to do the twist? Do I often listen to Leonard Cohen because he wrote the soundtrack to my friend’s life?

I turned 65 this year and while listening to Jennifer Warnes sing Leonard Cohen songs I thought about my life’s soundtrack. If my friend were still alive, I would tell her that the radio program “Fresh Air” and Terry Gross created—and still create—the soundtrack of my adult life.

I cannot remember the exact time and place I first heard Terry’s voice, but it must have been sometime in 1985. I was a faithful NPR listener and “Fresh Air” was broadcast every week night at 7 p.m. on KQED-FM. But I do remember my initial response to her voice: too high, not the kind of radio voice I was used to hearing. But she drew me in—with her questions, her curiosity, her listening, and with the depth of her preparation. Although I cannot remember the specific interview, Terry became a person whose interests and curiosities and sensibilities I trusted. (Although, sometimes, our sensibilities differ, dramatically. And, sometimes, she neglects to ask the questions I want answers to! Why didn’t she ask Doris Day what it was like to record with Andre Previn and dance up and down the staircase with Gene Nelson in “Lullaby of Broadway”?)

How many writers and books have I read because Terry read them too? How many musicians have I listened to or seen perform because Terry did too? How many movies, TV shows, articles, plays, and podcasts connect me to her and others who listen to Fresh Air? And how many people have captured my interest? After I listened to guest host Sedge Thomson’s interview with Shelley Winters and Shelley thanking him for “respecting my intelligence and my work,” I became a Sedge fan. I will always remember his interview with Linda Hunt at the Herbst Theatre in San Francisco. I can still see the diminutive Hunt reach up to give the tall Thomson a hug during the waves and waves of applause before they walked off the stage. Or the evening I sat

in the lounge of the Heathman Hotel and listened to Dave Frishberg play “Someone to Watch Over Me” at my request—because I first heard him on Fresh Air. Or the email I received from Sigrid Nunez months after I listened to Terry’s 2019 conversation about Sigrid’s experiences with Susan Sontag.

Terry’s interview gave me the courage to send Sigrid the link to my master’s thesis: “Point of View and the Art of Narrative in Susan Sontag’s ‘The Volcano Lover’.” I never had the courage to send it to Susan when she was alive. Before I sent the link to Sigrid I read every one of her novels and all the essays I could find. I carry this sentiment from “The Friend” with me and share it with others: “What we miss—what we lose and what we mourn—isn’t it this that makes us who, deep down, we truly are.” Her books are miracles. I’m so grateful to Terry for sharing Sigrid Nunez with her audience.

Terry gave me Joan Didion’s “The Year of Magical Thinking” just when I needed it. And Julie Otsuka’s “The Swimmer.” When asked why knowing of her mother’s dementia diagnosis earlier would have made a difference, Julie replied: “We would have had more compassion for her earlier on.” Yes, I said to no one. I voiced the same feeling after realizing the extent of my mother’s dementia, a mother I had initially started not to recognize in her 60s. What parts were my mother and what parts were the disease and all the drugs doctors prescribed?

Terry gave me insight into one of my favorite artists who I learned had no formal training. “I don’t even try to achieve any kind of formal painting style or technique other than to paint really with my heart, to paint emotionally as opposed to technically.” When Terry asked Maira Kalman how she started drawing, she said “I thought it would be fun. . . . The motivation is if you really want to do it, you do it and what happens happens. There’s no judgement about whether it’s good or bad, it’s whether something in you is satisfied in doing it.” Hear, hear!

Terry gave me the poets Marie Howe (Poetry holds the knowledge that we are alive and that we know we're going to die), Joy Harjo (I was a thought, a dream, a fish, a wing/And then a human being), Sharon Olds (Maybe one reason I do not wear makeup is to scare people), Billy Collins (The name of the author is the first to go), Ocean Vuong (On earth we're briefly gorgeous. Sometimes when I can't sleep I imagine VanGogh singing Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' into his cut ear and feeling peace), Nikki Giovanni (I am she who writes the poem), Linda McCarriston (Divorced, 50, she took the first good job that offered itself/Outfitted a pickup and drove alone to Alaska/ It was not her myth/ It was a man's myth), and so many others.

She gave me Susannah McCorkle, Blossom Dearie, Nellie McKay, Sheila Jordan, Rebecca Gilgore and most recently Samara Joy in concert. She gave me Wesla Whitfield and Mike Greensill, whom I saw perform a number of times. Terry has showcased so many wonderful composers, musicians and singers who revel in the American Songbook, a songbook that so many believe, as I believe, is one of America's greatest gifts to the world—and to the soundtrack of my life. Billie Holiday, Mel Torme, Cassandra Wilson, Charlie Haden, Abby Lincoln, Rosemary Clooney, Barbara Carroll, Cleo Laine, Etta James, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Doris Day, Barbra Streisand, Nina Simone, Bette Midler, Frank Sinatra, Bucky and John Pizzarelli, and many others.

Terry also let me reconnect with singers and musicians I'd let fall off my radar. K.D. Lang and Tony Bennett. Burt Bacharach and Elvis Costello. Loudon Wainwright and Kate McGarrigle. Gladys Knight, Betty Carter and Mavis Staple. Al Green, Jimmy Scott and Gil Scott-Heron, who I saw perform at Yoshi's in the mid-90's. She let me love the Carpenters again and rage against the world that ended Karen's talent too, too young.

Because of the internet there now exists a Fresh Air archive where anyone can discover “over 40 years of interviews with the voices that shape our

world.” They are the voices of my life, the voices that have brought me music and poetry, journalism and fiction, laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, rage and anger, and hope. They are the voices that have given me the courage to reach out and write a letter, to protest injustice, to explore and learn about people and places and ideas that are other. Their voices, their stories, their experiences and imaginations fill my bookshelves and help me to think, pause, consider, reconsider, reflect and live a meaningful life.

In 2016, a friend chose “to die with dignity” rather than suffer the end stages of pancreatic cancer and be a burden to others. (California passed its right to die legislation in 2015.) But when I learned of her act, I felt conflicted. I knew that she had cared for her mother ravaged by stomach cancer and her ex-husband by AIDS, but I did not want her to end her life before her body was ready, and the “end of life” cocktail requires that a person must be able to swallow and keep down the drugs that have been dissolved in water. Which means a person can still be coherent and funny and intentional.

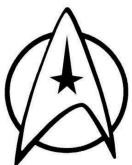
Terry has interviewed a number of people about the “right to die,” from journalist Andrew H. Malcolm, Biomedical ethicists Arthur Caplan and Margaret Battin to novelist Amy Bloom, whose memoir “In Love: A Memoir of Love and Loss” chronicles a marriage, her husband’s Alzheimer diagnosis and his decision to end his life when he is still himself. Strangely enough, I wrote a “right to die” bill as a high school assignment in 1975. It is a subject that has interested me since seeing how dementia ended my great-grandmother’s life in a facility reeking of urine and lost souls sitting in wheel chairs crying out to die. It is a topic Terry explores with sensitivity but also directness, which I appreciated in her recent interview with Dr. Sandeep Jauhar.

On April 12, 2023, Terry interviewed Dr. Sandeep Jauhar about caring for his father with Alzheimer’s and his memoir “My Father’s Brain.” Unlike his siblings, Jauhar wanted his father alive for as long as his body breathed. At the end of the interview, Terry asks him: “Do you not want your children to

have to be caregivers?” Jauhar replies: “No. You know, it involves so much difficulty and pain and sacrifice that, you know, I don't want that. You know, my parents grew up in a culture where sons took care of aging parents. And it's just part of the culture of, you know, sort of Indian, South Asian culture. . . . I mean, it's almost a trope of sorts, but I don't want to be a burden to my family.” I cared for my father suffering from liver cancer at his home until the moment he died. And I, too, do not want to be a burden. But until then, I will continue to listen to Terry Gross and Fresh Air and “the voices that shape our world.”

An interview of Terry’s I love and that brought me to tears was her last interview with Maurice Sendak in 2011. It was a beautiful evocation of being old, losing people you love and nearing death. At the end of the interview, after praising Terry for her skills and insight, he said: “I’ll go before you. And I won’t have to miss you.” I do not know if I will go before Terry but even in my after life you will know that I am missing Terry and that she and the voices she broadcast to the world “made me, deep down, who I truly am.”

What’s the soundtrack to your life?



P.S. I do not think Terry Gross is a trekkie, but since childhood “Star Trek” (*To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before.*) has been a part of my life. It, too, has created a soundtrack and “made me, deep down, who I truly am.”