

Above my desk at home, I have a picture with one of my favorite mantras which reads: “Don’t look back. You’re not going that way.” Right next to it is a clipping from a magazine which says “The road less traveled isn’t always a road.”

Last November, I decided to apply to graduate school. It was a huge decision and for someone who researches for weeks before deciding something as simple as what vacuum cleaner to purchase...well, you can imagine the organized chaos of the research I did for this: sticky notes with the top school options, pages with pros and cons for each one, requirement checklists for my applications...In the midst of all this, I became quite stressed and I wasn’t sure what it was I really wanted for my future. For me, writing or journaling is the way I sort out uncertainty. Somehow, the act of putting pen to paper transforms a tangle of thoughts into clarity and insight. In this instance, I discovered two things:

1. My mind likes certainty and predictability, but my heart prefers variety and adventure.
2. I had only one choice and that was between the easy, convenient road and the scary unknown territory.

Understanding this helped me make my decision, but even after I was accepted into the master’s program I wanted, I still had doubts. I’d be lying if I said I was completely confident in my decision. Next month, I be leaving this UU community in which I have made so many friendships and found much connection. I am leaving a wonderful job which provides a stable income, piano students I’ve come to love, a beautiful house and garden that I’m proud of, and my family including my two adorable nieces. Granted, I’ll only be a few hours away. To uproot will be to lose my income and the house and garden. My family, friends, and the connections I’ve made, however, will not be lost.

I’ve spoken much in this community on how music is a core part of my identity and I’m truly thrilled at the prospect of studying music therapy at CSU. I see this new road ahead of me as an accumulation of my experiences in music since childhood. All the roads I’ve travelled have led up to this and it feels right.

I still remember my first exposure to the idea of music’s influence on the mind. As a child, my family would go every summer to visit my grandma in Logan, Utah. On one occasion she gave us some Michael Ballam cassette tapes to listen to on the 6-hour drive home. Michael Ballam is a professor of music at Utah State University and has published much on the topic of music in psychology. I was intrigued by the stories he told about music’s power both to heal and to harm. Listening to him sparked an interest that I’ve been passionate about ever since. I’ve always known my grandmother to be a wonderful musician and lover of music. When she was in her 60’s, she graduated as a non-traditional student from the University of Utah with a bachelors in music therapy. I clearly remember going with her to where she worked in a nursing home where I watched music therapy in action and I was touched by the joy and appreciation the residents found in the music.

Now, music therapy is often criticized as being a pseudoscience; in other words, there is not enough empirical research for it to be recognized as an evidence-based practice. Despite a lack of scientific proof, there is no doubt that music touches each of us personally and often deeply.

Some of the most amazing accounts in music therapy have to do with its ability to form connections. Individuals who have difficulty communicating are able to do express and connect to others through music. People with dementia are able to call up memories when listening to music that is significant to them.

The mind is built on connections. From the moment of earliest brain development, neurons are firing and wiring, making and breaking synaptic connections. Everything we sense, every motor action, every thought and feeling; these are the results of electrical signals traveling along the intricate web of pathways of the nervous system. Music engages the mind in a unique way that touches the depths of emotion, moves us to dance, awakens memories, and encourages communication. Music is connection.

I love it when students ask questions that challenge me to change the way I think about music. One question I get a lot is, “What is it like to read music efficiently without having to think about it?” When you look at a note on a page and play a key on the piano, there is a neuron firing off somewhere in the brain. The more you look at that note and play that key, the more that pathway become used and eventually myelinated. An unmyelinated pathway is like a rocky dirt road whereas a myelinated pathway is an interstate or highway. I am able to sight-read music easily because the pathway for each note on the page is a highway to the spatial awareness and then to the motor activity that allows me to play the correct key on the piano. Interestingly enough, I’m not quite as confident without the music in front of me. Even music I’ve practiced: seeing the notes on the page are still what prompt the motor action of my fingers. Many classically trained musicians find themselves “wired” this way.

With music (as in any activity), early exposure can improve a person’s affinity for learning and making music later on. This is because in early childhood, the brain is in a highly active phase of development—building and breaking connections based on what is relevant in the environment. Throughout our lives, the mind continues to form connections. It is how we are able to understand and relate to an ever-changing environment around us. It is quite possible for a person to learn new skills later in life.

Along with potential for learning, connections that we build both early on and later in life shape our perception of the world we live in, for better or worse. An example of worse could be a phobia—something in the environment that causes extreme anxiety in a person. The best way to overcome a phobia is to re-route the pathways in the mind, breaking the fear connection and replacing it with confidence. Harboring a grudge is another example of a harmful connection. Being unwilling to forgive and move on does more harm to the one holding the grudge than the person their grudge is against. It’s amazing how our minds form and then hang onto these connections.

There is a Sanskrit term called “samskara” which is described as cyclical emotional and mental patterns of energy that can be positive or negative. When a samskara is composed of negative energy it can create a bit of a black hole—or a trap which keeps us from progressing past feelings of resentment, anger, grief, or shame.

Here's an example of how this might work: I'm driving in the car and a song I love comes on the radio. I feel a surge of positive energy as I sing along and enjoy the music. At a stoplight, I notice an offensive bumper sticker on the car in front of me. My positive energy is replaced by thoughts of anger about the bumper sticker and disgust toward whoever thought it was a good idea to display something so offensive. Although my attention has shifted from the song I like, my mind is still conscious of the music and a connection is being formed.

A few days later, I hear the same song come on as I'm shopping in the grocery store. My first thought is "I like this song!" My second thought is about that blasted bumper sticker. Now...I had a choice when I first saw the bumper sticker. I'm all for freedom of expression and the choice to feel offended by another's expression is just that: a choice. I could have let it go in that first moment I saw the bumper sticker. While I'm in the grocery store, I have that same choice. I can either keep feeling angry and thus feed into the negative energy, or I can take a deep breath and recognize that I'm letting myself feel upset over a silly thing like a bumper sticker. I can try to understand that perhaps it holds different meaning to the owner, and I can acknowledge their worth and freedom to express. I can let go. I can remove that connection—that association and give my full attention to the positive energy that comes from loving the song. How empowering this is!

Choosing the road less traveled means first being able to recognize when we start down a highway of thoughts and feelings that are based off connections that have been reinforced with negative energy. Next, using mindful awareness to slow down, look at the situation, and make the choice not on what is automatic and easy, but what is ultimately beneficial for our well-being. This is not easy. Taking the road less traveled may be difficult and rocky, but the more we walk over the pathway, the more worn and smooth it becomes.

It's not going to happen the first time. In the situation of the song and the bumper sticker, I may have to continue to practice letting go every time I hear that song, but eventually the association will fade away. In someone with a phobia, the road less traveled is like a flimsy rope bridge over a bubbling pit of lava. It takes many, many instances of carefully structured exposure methods before the bridge is traversed the first time, but each time, they reinforce it with stronger materials until it's solid and stable.

I'd like to introduce you to something called a relationship graph. In my piano classroom, I explain this graph to the student and the parent within the first couple of lessons with a new student, as well as refer to it at various instances during the process. In the relationship graph, the x-axis represents time. The y-axis represents improvement over time. I explain to my beginning students that they are going to start down here at the bottom. The expectation when developing a new skill should not be a steady and continuous line upward. This is unrealistic. There are valleys, peaks, and plateaus along this journey. Regardless of the ups and downs, the general trend is up. I tell my students that there are going to be days when they feel like they aren't making progress or feel like they don't like to play piano. I explain to both them and their parents that being able to ride out those times is an important part of the learning process.

It's easy to see how the relationship graph extends to relationships outside of learning piano. Indeed, experiencing relationships and commitment with music or another activity is one of the

best ways for a child to learn about riding the ups and downs of relationships in life. Relationships are about being able to see things in perspective. Being able to see where you've been, where you are at, and the potential for growth ahead. This goes for relationships with self, with another person, with a job...with any life endeavor, really. Being able to ride out the valleys in a relationship is what gives us the confidence to explore roads less traveled.

In my experiences teaching, I have noticed that there are some students who are afraid of the valleys—afraid of failure. They prefer to stick to easy music that they know they can play well, being unable or unwilling to see the potential of branching out of their comfort zone. It is my goal as a teacher to foster small successes that contribute to their confidence. These students learn that they are more able than they give themselves credit for, and that even if they aren't as skilled as the youtube sensations they watch, they can acquire the skills to enjoy playing songs they love.

I have other students who approach hugely challenging pieces of music with gusto and determination only to become frustrated when it proves too difficult to master. As a teacher, I gently explain that they don't have the tools yet, but that doesn't mean it's not attainable eventually. Then we try to place stepping stones toward learning that piece—again small successes that boost confidence and, most importantly, foster joy in making music. These students learn that learning piano is a process that requires patience, repetition, and mindful curiosity. When I set out to learn a major work such as a concerto, I must be prepared to dedicate myself to practicing it, an hour or two a day, for several months. The point is that, if we set out to build a connection from the earth to the moon equipped with merely a tiny model rocket, we will fall short. It takes time to develop the skills—time to carve a path through the undergrowth—and even more time to pave it and turn it into a highway.

A big part of mindfulness to be the ability to recognize when the mind is taking off on an interstate that may not be beneficial, and then re-directing traffic to a road less traveled—a road which leads to what we seek and not what drags us down. Mindful awareness is a skill like any other, taking practice, patience, and persistence. Ask any musician and they will affirm that there is no end to learning music. Even the most skilled musicians know that there is something more to accomplish and even after a piece has been mastered, it can still be improved. Likewise, you can ask any mindfulness master and they will agree that there is no end to learning mindfulness.

Just as musicians approach their practice using different methods or prefer different styles and genres, not all mindfulness looks the same. I don't know about you, but I connect the term "mindfulness" to "meditation" and I'm frankly not a fan of sitting still and paying attention to my breathing because all the noise in my head gets louder and creates an anxious environment. Meditating, to me, feels akin to having hundreds of tiny spiders crawling all over me and being told to pay attention to how their little spider feet feel on my skin...uggghh! Meditation is not for me, although I imagine I might, over time, learn to appreciate it. Perhaps it's like jazz music. I'm not a huge fan of jazz, but some of my piano students want to play jazz, so I've learned to be okay with it and even like it just a little.

We can understand meditation as passive mindfulness—passive because it's focused on the skill of training thoughts as they occur while a person is in a controlled physical environment. The

purpose of meditating is to train the skills to develop ability for active mindfulness. Active mindfulness is what occurs in the moment when a person is outside of their controlled meditation environment. For instance, in the case of the song and the bumper sticker: being actively aware of the thoughts and feelings and then being able to re-direct them.

Acceptance is another big part of mindfulness. I want to make it clear that in my analogy of pathways, I'm not suggesting the avoidance of negativity. Avoidance only leads to fear of what we are avoiding and the formation of walls that trap us in that fear. We can't avoid negative energy, but we can let it go through us without getting trapped in a cycle—without forming a samskara. Only when we are able to let go of the negative energy can we allow for the positive energy. If we are thinking about this in terms of roads and paths: Imagine that both you and the energy travel on the roads, but in separate vehicles. You, a conscious being, are separate from the energy—whether it be negative or positive. Most of us are used to following the energy mindlessly.

The first step is to recognize negative energy. When negativity presents itself, it is no good to avoid it. What we can do is watch it as it drives off down the road, then turn and look for a different path. Let's add onto this analogy: The vehicle that the energy travels in is not able to reinforce paths unless your vehicle of consciousness follows it. Maybe the energy is riding a hovercraft and you're in one of those road-roller things...I have no idea what they're called but you get the point. There's no reason to fear undesirable emotions that come with negative energy. They only have power over you if you choose to follow.

Admittedly, it's often easier to follow. Honestly, who wants to go bushwhacking when there's a nice, smooth road already there? And depending on the type and severity of the energy, it can be pretty convincing to follow. Consider the idea of "sweet revenge" which suggests that getting back at someone is satisfying. Even if that's true, failure to forgive and forget only creates discontent in our own lives.

In my case, I used to be convinced that my best poetry, art, and music were created when I went with the negative energy. I'll admit that powerful feelings such as anger or despair often do contribute to the creation of very poignant works. This actually is a valid method of releasing negative energy. The only trap here is that, after it has been released through art, it is still up to the artist to change the connection. I'll use an example of a song I play on piano. It is a Chopin Nocturne and for those familiar with Chopin, his works are quite emotional. I used turn to this piece often when I needed to release some sadness and it did help. The only problem? Whenever I played it, those deep emotions were still connected to it and the act of playing it could put me into a dark place. It took me awhile to figure out how to change this connection. Now when I play it, the sadness is still there, but only in the expression, while I—Jayne, remain separate. It's like a stage scene with different characters. The last chord is the cue for the return of Jayne and the exit of sadness.

When I was young, I attended Sunday School at the LDS church and one of my teachers was an older gentleman—you might say he was a bit of a curmudgeon. He was a farmer and most people knew him for his halting speech and his short temper. I adored him though, because I perceived that there was a softness beneath the rough farmer's exterior. My family would

occasionally go to visit him and bring our music to share. He would always end up teary-eyed and emotional when we played. This gentleman had one major characteristic which made it difficult for people to communicate with him and that is: he would get caught up in a belief and be utterly unable to let it go. He was aware that his harsh opinions and inability to let go had the effect of distancing people, but in his mind, there was only one correct road. He had trouble acknowledging the possibility of alternate roads and frankly didn't want to look at them, much less set foot on one. This sort of inflexibility around beliefs doesn't accomplish anything except to keep a person trapped in a cycle of negative energies.

When a thought or feeling is reinforced by affirming results, it has potential to become a belief. These beliefs influence our attitudes and our behavior or actions. Motivational speaker and author Anthony Robbins says, *"Beliefs have the power to create and the power to destroy. Human beings have the awesome ability to take any experience of their lives and create a meaning that disempowers them or one that can literally save their lives"* Robbins discusses two kinds of beliefs: limiting and empowering. He addresses how beliefs about self can influence a person's ability to flourish.

Beliefs about the world we live in can also be either limiting or empowering. As we touched on earlier, our experiences in our environment create the neurological connections that shape our beliefs. This is especially true in childhood. Beliefs about ourselves and the world that are formed in childhood continue into adulthood and can become a major influence in how we choose to live. When a belief is important to us, we defend it, sometimes stubbornly, refusing to open our ears and hearts to a differing belief. Such black-and-white defensiveness can create barriers that prevent the ability to connect to others in positive relationships.

I'm glad to be a part of this community where our principles recognize the validity in differing beliefs. That is what makes this a community: Our ability to connect with each other despite differences. Our ability to be open and accepting, to stop and recognize that there are many roads here. Our ability to listen and share about our adventures on the roads we have traveled.

In closing, I'd like to share a poem that I wrote at the height of my struggle with mental health. It expresses the fear as I left the road I had been traveling on—as I set out to leave behind the limiting beliefs and embrace the possibility for change. It is a reminder that we are in charge of the beliefs we create, of the paths we chose, and the connections we make. This is called "One Step."

One Step

So far ahead the path stretched on
o'er rocks and ruts into the dawn.
On either side, the thicket green
closes in upon the scene.

The pallid moon high overhead
submits to lonesome morning red.

And fragile light of sun's first rays
is swallowed by uncertain haze.

Here I stand at forest's edge
where darkness shrouds each flowery hedge.
Where time stands still and so do I;
all sound, all motion: petrified.

Impossible to know at all,
or take one step for fear I'll fall.
What lies ahead? What will I find?
Such questions flood my spinning mind.

Accept the fear. Do not despise.
Transform to courage. Open my eyes.
The path ahead, though bitter be,
I am in charge, for I am me.

CONNECTIONS IN ACTION

A few years ago, I watched a TV series called "Touch." A nonverbal autistic boy is able to predict events of the future and communicates through numbers. At one point, a character in the show says: "The universe is made up of precise ratios and patterns where every being and

everyone is connected.” This idea and the story presentation in the show is intriguing, especially for those who believe that everything is interconnected on the web of life. There is so much more to the world than what we perceive through our senses.

This same idea of connection is expressed in a book by one of my all-time favorite authors, Madeline L’Engle. The title of the novel “Troubling a Star” comes from a quote by Loren Eiseley: “One could not pluck a flower without troubling a star.”