

The Committee Meets, and I Go On Singing

After many years in recess, The Committee gets together enough members for a meeting. By the urgency of the members' voices, I think it's an emergency meeting. "Stop him before it's too late." seems to be the entire agenda.

Many years ago, my creative writing instructor, John Gardner, explained that the voices of discouragement his students had been hearing inside their heads were from The Committee that exists to limit our achievements in this world.

He said The Committee is composed of critics and censors we remember and internalize. We carry their voices around until we learn to overcome the power of their negative comments or until we give up and let them win. If our parents were critical, their voices will be there, along with teachers who voiced negative thoughts and anyone who planted doubts about our abilities as we grew up. Some of us still listen to and internalize voices when we become adults.

The voices say, "You can't do that," or "You don't know anything about that subject," or "Those places take much higher-quality work than you are capable of," or "You are too old to learn that. People who know how to do that have been learning all their lives," or other discouraging comments about the creative, self-motivated work we attempt. Those of us who listen to The Committee members and believe what they say quit trying and fall by the wayside.

I didn't have as much trouble with The Committee as some had. I kept writing regardless of what voices in my mind said against my ability to do well, while many other writers quit. I didn't pay much attention to what discouraging voices outside my head said, either. The voices' thoughts and criticisms echoed in my mind and tried to erode my confidence that I could do what was necessary to achieve my goals, but a stronger force dimmed their negative effect.

I was on fire with creative energy. I used that energy to learn to write and to live a creative enough life to have something to write about. As I lived, I

wrote essays, stories, poems, and books. I achieved publications, and I knew I would continue writing and trying for publications throughout my existence on this material earth.

When I was thirty, I acquired a good guitar because it was offered to me at a price I couldn't pass up. Through the years, I learned a few chords, and I wrote songs, more because I had a good guitar than because I thought of myself as musical.

Songs came into my mind, and I played and sang them and wrote them down. The songs that came to me often weren't like the songs I heard on the radio or on CDs. My songs don't usually have repetitive choruses nor repetitive, regular music. The chord patterns I pick for my songs are often unorthodox.

I know my songs are different from mainstream songs more because of what people who understand music told me about them than because of my own knowledge. I don't have the education in music, the knowledge of music to articulate, in the language of the medium, what I'm doing with my music nor to articulate how what I'm doing differs from more mainstream songs. That lack of knowledge doesn't concern me. I'm not interested in creating songs of regular forms nor in explaining what I'm doing with my music.

I am interested in capturing the songs that come to me out of the life I live. Through the years, I played and sang songs I created enough to secure them in my memory and to have some music. I didn't worry if I didn't perform my songs well enough to put them on the radio. I didn't plan to put them on the radio. I didn't have any plans for them except to have them in my songbook and in my head and to perform them for family and friends who were interested in hearing them.

I stayed busy enough earning money to pay my family's way through the world, helping raise and educate my daughters, writing, and living, that I didn't have a lot of time to learn to play the guitar well and sing well.

Our daughters grew up and went into the world on their own. I left most efforts to earn money behind. I write less now, and I invest more time in my music. I practice most days, and I record some of my songs. I listen to the recordings to see how my performance compares with what I thought I was performing. I recognize mistakes I've made, and I find ways to come closer

in my performances to the songs I hear in my head, closer to what would be, to my ears, ideal performances of those songs. Recording my music also makes it possible to share with friends and family who might be interested in what I'm doing with my songs but who live at some distance.

I built a website, to make my writing and some by other people available. I put some of my songs on the website, those that were coming closest to sounding the way I thought they should sound. Songs I put on my website stirred more interest than I thought they would, judging by statistics that tell me what pages or recordings people go to on the website and how long they spend on my website. I've decided to put downloadable songs on my website, as soon as I'm ready. I want my songs to be available to interested listeners, and some income might be possible from my efforts. Income wouldn't actually harm Laura and me as we pay rent, buy groceries, and pay all the bills we acquire by living.

Now the Committee meets in emergency sessions. Members voice questions about why I'm doing what I'm doing. "You're not going to earn money nor please crowds doing that, so why do it?" They say, "The lawn needs mowing. You should paint the inside of this house. Your lawn could be greener. Compare it to your neighbors' lawns. Do you want everyone to think you're a slacker? Books you've started to write need to be finished. There are dozens of essays, stories, and poems you should write. There are hundreds of books you should read before you leave this material world. You don't have time to do everything. Now that you have self-published books, you should devote your time to marketing them. You should devote your energy to these more practical matters. Don't you agree?"

Not all the voices are from the committee. An acquaintance asked to hear some songs. After he heard me sing several songs, he suggested that I get rid of my guitar and stop singing. His voice blends well with voices of The Committee.

He didn't realize it, but he immediately became a member of the committee. He flunked Mrs. Griego's Support 101 class. Mrs. Griego taught her class, "It's all right, in the interest of honesty, to say, 'Your work doesn't appeal to my tastes,' but we also must say something like 'But I admire and support your willingness to put energy into the effort to be creative, and in whatever way I can, I encourage you to go forward with your efforts.' We

may not know when our personal taste is too narrow to encompass what we are judging, and we must be sure that our contributions to the creative force in the universe are always positive, always encouraging creative effort.”

It took study and effort, but I eventually understood what Mrs. Griego meant and got an A in her class. I had to learn to overcome training by the family I grew up in and learning I acquired when I went into the world on my own before I could always encourage and support creativity without being dishonest. I eventually understood it is immoral and uncreative to participate in crushing creative effort. I also learned not to try to crush the crushers, but to show, not by direct criticism, but by gentle example, that their way may not be the most effective way to approach creative effort. I learned to help bind the wounds of the crushed who had just experienced an attack from an insensitive crusher.

I think the acquaintance who suggested I give up music and other members of The Committee make the mistake, common to contemporary consumers, of thinking that creative works must be of professional quality, of regular and customary form, and they must be potential money earners to be worth creating.

I enjoy the solitary practice of my songs, and I enjoy recording them. I enjoy the learning that comes to me from recording and listening to my recordings. With practice, my music becomes more pleasant to my ears. A few people enjoy my songs, and I share with them when they ask me to. That my songs don't adhere to more standard forms seems to add to the enjoyment my music brings to my small group of fans. It adds to my enjoyment.

Most of all, the life force, the power that drives the universe, seems to me to be strongly in favor of creativity. Playing my guitar and singing reflects and respects creativity. So, even as they had to do years ago, when I started learning to write, members of The Committee will have to talk to each other. I'm going to practice several songs and start writing down one that's been growing in my thoughts lately. I won't have time nor interest enough to listen to The Committee nor to people around me who try to discourage my creative efforts.

People who encourage me to stop singing and to sell my guitar don't

remain my friends, not as much because I resent and therefore shed them after they give me negative feedback, but more because their approach testifies to an important difference in the way we look at and interact with the world and especially with people in our lives. That difference leads to a rapidly-widening gap in the directions we're going. Before long, they walk in one direction, and I walk in another. We exit each other's lives.

If you find my approach to music interesting, you're welcome to listen to some of my recordings or to a live performance. If you don't find my music interesting, please shut the door as you leave. If you pass The Committee as you walk away, you will notice that the members' conversation has deteriorated to desultory comments about the weather as they have gradually realized that their most earnest efforts aren't making any difference in what I do.