

***What I Would Tell You If I Could***

4/23/19

To Mr. Mazzeo

You are a dictator.

Ask anyone in band, or anyone who's had the misfortune of interacting with you, and they'll pause too long, and that silence is your answer. I had planned to stomp into your office and confront you about everything during my last semester of band, but I never mustered the courage. You scared me. That was your most effective tactic: fear. Every scathing criticism, belligerent glare, disgusted expression, and your overall, outright condemnation of anything or anyone less than excellent, has left a legacy that will certainly outlive you.

You've yelled at me about not getting my act together, shamed me for not getting a bathroom pass during rehearsal, and most of the time – and this is undeniably the worst feeling – you hardly look at me. Because I'm the clarinet player who only joined Symphonic (our school's best band) in my *last* year of high school, I don't care enough about music, or can't perform well enough for you to acknowledge my existence. You wince and grunt when my clarinet squeaks or I'm horrendously out-of-tune, but to you, I'm beyond hope. Anyone who doesn't devote every last second of his or her time to your regime is worthless to you.

I know about the freshman girl who dropped out of marching band because you gave her anxiety. I heard about the marching band players who have passed out from dehydration during camp, when you only allowed them two water breaks during eight hours of outdoor rehearsal—in the sweltering heat of late August. I've heard stall doors slam in desperation as humiliated marching band members fled to the bathroom in tears; you berated them for being weak, for lacking the grit to stand, backs straight and knees together, in the sun for hours on end.

I've seen my sister come home early from school because you called her into your office to reprimand her for not prioritizing music, for not choosing to pursue music as a career, for not making All-States as a freshman. I've seen my friends' faces redden as they stammered to justify why they couldn't make sure that high C sharp was in tune. Once, you made the entire band watch Lily, my friend who plays the oboe, try to play a tricky note in tune. I remember you standing over her with your arms crossed, disappointment and disbelief etched onto your face.

You think that by pushing us to our limits, you will unleash some great, unforeseen potential. But students cannot be pushed like that. You drove us beyond our capacities, thinking it would make us excellent. You wanted our fear of you to drive us to achieve the impossible. I'll tell you the truth that maybe sometimes nudges your conscience: too often, you push too hard.

When your back is turned, your cowering students sigh in relief and become human again. A palpable tension unwinds and the whisper, "Mazz isn't here," snakes through the band room, and soon I hear someone hesitantly chuckle, and others follow. Several students will pick up their instruments and improvise their latest jazz piece, pausing between solos, laughing, and blast an outrageously out-of-tune note. A couple woodwinds will pick up their delicate flutes and clarinets and sightread a classic they found online, or maybe a pop song from the radio.

Percussionists will crowd around the snare drum and bass, starting up a beat from something they'd composed at home. The music won't be anything like what you would want from us, precise and perfect, entirely adhering to your lifeless guidelines of the *maestro*, but infused with something that doesn't like to be constrained by rules. It's bouncy and uncaring and energetic, and it's what music is supposed to sound like—full of life.

I don't think fear produces great art. You might think that discipline and rigidity mold the most successful, but I'm convinced you're wrong. The regime you've established in the band room and out on the football field is not creating musicians. It's making people afraid to be musicians.