

Reflect, Restore, Recharge

by Matthew Arau



This article is an adaptation of a NAFME Online Professional Learning Community webinar delivered by the author on April 8, 2021. Its insightful and timely message inspires us to REFLECT on how far we have come, RESTORE our self-belief and sense of purpose, and RECHARGE our passion to CREATE a bright future for music education.

At 12:30 PM, I boarded the commuter plane in Appleton, Wisconsin with mixed excitement and trepidation. I was headed to Parkersburg, West Virginia to conduct a district honor band and lead professional development sessions. This event had been in the making for two years, and my host was understandably eager to see all of his planning and preparation come to fruition. On the morning of my travel, I phoned and asked him a question that I had never asked anyone prior to an honor band before: "Is it safe where you are?"

The date was March 12, 2020, and the Corona virus was spreading rapidly from state to state; but on this day, West Virginia was the only state in the Union that had zero reported cases. My host said, "All clear. We are all set to go."

As I sat in my window seat, I reflected on the importance of music making and the value of playing in an ensemble, and I hoped that although a shadow was moving across our country, this honor band could be a symbol of light. I posted on Facebook how excited I was to be conducting a middle school honor band, and within minutes the comments from band directors and composers began flowing in: "Really?!" "For real?!" "My honor band just got shut down." "This must be the last honor band in America." I smiled, grateful to have this opportunity while so many other groups had been cancelled. I was resolved to make music until absolutely forced to stop, and I hoped that time would never come.

I landed at 5:00 PM and headed to the carousel to grab my luggage. While reaching for my suitcase, I received a text from my host, asking me to give him a call. I could tell by the sound of

his voice when he answered that something was wrong. He said, "I had hoped to tell you this in person, but the superintendent just issued an order cancelling all large group activities, and we have to cancel the honor band. I am so sorry."

I immediately called the Delta Medallion line, but the recorded message said that the wait time was over twelve hours! I sprinted to the check-in line with my bags, hoping there was still a flight back home that evening. The agent said, "Wow! You just made it. A flight leaves in thirty minutes." In the days that followed, schools closed to in-person instruction, and the teaching of music changed drastically.

REFLECT

When the pandemic became a stark reality in mid-March, our first thought was how challenging it would be for students isolated at home, separated from friends, and disconnected from their band, orchestra, and choir families. We went into high gear, figuring out how to reach out to our students and let them know how much they were missed and cared for. Their social/emotional wellbeing became more important to us than their musical progress, and our focus shifted to their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

As usual, music educators went above and beyond, mailing handwritten postcards, sending personalized emails, holding virtual office hours with names like Waffle Wednesday and Band Breakfast, and organizing talent shows, music listening sessions, and games. Students ventured to their front porches to play their school's fight song at 7:00 PM to hear themselves

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connected through music across their neighborhoods. As we all got more adept at virtual instruction, we posted jokes and questions in the chat, and we got to know many of our students in new and deeper ways.

Over one hundred organizations came together under the leadership of the National Federation of State High School Associations to fund scientific research on aerosol virus transmission in music rehearsals. We modified our schedules and locations, learning-on-the-fly how to teach music in online and hybrid modes. We all reached out to each other for help and gladly shared solutions and resources. Membership in Facebook groups such as Music Educators Creating Online Learning and Upbeat Leaders surged as old walls of ego, competition, and insecurity came crumbling down.

Remember how in the beginning, music conferences were cancelled one by one? In a very short time, however, we found ways to hold online conferences that offered inspiration and valuable professional development, while at the same time creating moments for community building. Virtual honor ensembles have been held across the country, rewarding students for their hard work while giving them new ways to interact with composers, conductors, performers, and keynote motivational speakers.

How much more skilled are you at using technology in your classroom now? Here's a short list of technologies that I'll bet many of us weren't even familiar with before the pandemic: Zoom, Google Meet, Acapella, Soundtrap, Upbeat Music, Reaper, MusicFirst, Padlet, Audacity, Kahoot, Peardeck, Flipgrid, SmartMusic, Google Classroom, Boom Cards, ... you get the idea. How many of you have turned part of your house into a studio that would make any podcaster envious?

Every generation is defined by how they respond to a crisis; this is ours. Decades from now, when music educators look back at our efforts, they will give thanks that we kept marching forward one step, one note, one key change at a time. As I reflect on the trials and tribulations of this past year, I am so proud of how far we have come.

The challenges of mask-wearing, of not being able to see smiles and facial expressions of our students, often left us feeling sad and hollow; but we have found that we can smile with our eyes and our body language. With a growing understanding of the trauma our students were experiencing, we focused on the healing power of compassion, care, and music. No matter what was on the news, no matter how much fear was infecting the Internet, our music classes have been our students' refuge and escape.

Take a moment to reflect on the poignant and unexpected moments you've had with your students this year. It may have been when you were teaching a virtual class where no students even turned their videos on, but someone stayed for a moment after everyone had logged off just to say thank you, or even to check in to ask you "How are you holding up?" The resiliency, courage, and creativity of students around the country is inspiring.

At Jeffersonville (IN) High School, band members created signs to be placed in the front yards of incoming ninth grade band students to help them feel welcomed, and other students made personalized videos to eighth graders to tell them all about the high school music program and encourage them to register for high school music. Last spring, band students at Fond du Lac (WI) High School created a "thank you" video to frontline medical workers. Students across the United States have performed outside the windows of senior centers and nursing homes to brighten the day of the residents and the staff.

In Lexington, MA, the high school band took a deep dive into social justice, anti-racism, and discrimination with Omar Thomas's *Of Our New Day Begun*, and they have drafted a Band Program Equity Statement. Many schools have found a way forward to give socially distanced, in-person, and simultaneously live-streamed concerts. Now that the weather is warming up, we are seeing more and more groups rehearsing outside. Belmont (MA) High School band students formed a chamber wind ensemble to rehearse weekly outdoors to provide music for their high school graduation ceremonies.

Wouldn't you agree that it is in our nature as teachers to focus on our students' well-being and growth? What a beautiful trait and characteristic of teachers! However, when we continually do everything we possibly can to lift others up at the expense of our own wellbeing, we may find that eventually we don't have anything left to give. Do you ever feel like you're trying to pour from an empty cup? If you are feeling depleted, you are not alone.

Yes, your students need you, but your own mind, body, and soul need you to take care of YOU. A candle burning from both ends will eventually flame out and be overcome by the darkness. You matter. You make a difference. That's why it is so important to take some time to replenish, so that your own inner light is restored and shines brightly. Pause for a few moments and take a "guided tour of you" by reading and reflecting upon the panel on the next page.

Reconnect

- ♥ Take a brief pause from your busy day just to let go and breathe. Allow yourself to be as you are, in this moment. Take a moment to breathe in your nose and exhale slowly out your mouth and notice the space you are in. Look to your left and, as if you are seeing for the first time, see with a beginner's mind. What do you observe? What do you notice? Look to your right and take it all in. Notice the colors, the shapes, the details. Feel your feet rooted and grounded on the floor. Relax your neck and shoulders and just be.
- ♥ On your next exhale, relax your face and smile. Smile for all that you have overcome. Smile for the loved ones in your life. Smile for how much you care for the wellbeing of your students. Smile for taking time to care for your own wellbeing.
- ♥ Now, take a journey down memory lane to remember when you first fell in love with music. Can you remember how you felt when you got to play your instrument for the first time? Imagine that you are there now, watching the younger version of yourself. Witness your own excitement as you held down the keys and blew into the mouthpiece, held your string instrument, sang in a choir, played the piano keys, or struck a drum for the first time. Feel that joy resonate throughout your entire body, heart, and mind.
- ♥ Next, trace your joy for music from your earliest memories through childhood music education, and observe how that feeling of joy influenced your decision to major in music, devoting your life to becoming a music educator in order to share the gift of music with students so that they could feel what you feel.
- ♥ Realize how much you have inspired your students to experience the unlimited potential felt when practicing, studying, composing, improvising, listening to, conducting, rehearsing, and performing music for others.

RESTORE

Taking a walk at nature reserve not long ago, I paused to soak in the beauty and peace, feeling restored just listening to the birds, and I encountered a goose nesting on newly laid eggs. What a special and rare sight! I felt restored by simply being in nature's wondrous presence. At that moment, I started looking at the word "restore" in a new way. I thought to myself, there are two parts to this word: *re-* and *store*.

Where do you go when you open your refrigerator and there is nothing inside? You head to the store to replenish your food supply and restock. We *re-turn* to the store when we are running out of food, just like our car needs to *re-turn* to the gas station when it is low on fuel. As teachers, we need to *re-turn* to the store of our passion, our desire, our drive, and our enthusiasm. Where is this store? The store is within you.

To "re-store," take time for YOU. Rest. Relax. Breathe. Reflect on what you have accomplished and how far you have come, rather than focusing on everything that didn't happen this year the way you wished it would have. What we focus on grows and expands; our dominant thoughts become our reality. We can certainly find things to bring us down – it's so easy to focus on the negative. But we can choose to shift our mindset in order to focus on the goodness in our lives. As the saying goes, "Being positive isn't pretending everything is good. It's seeing the good in everything."

Give yourself space, grace, permission, and time to "re-store" your faith in the value of WHO YOU ARE and WHAT YOU OFFER. "Re-store" your sense of purpose and self-belief. Every day you make a difference in the lives of your students. For many, you are the reason that they come to school. The community, the sense of family, and the culture of excellence and character that you foster in your music classes – these things matter. It's easy to be negative, but it takes courage to be positive; and courage is contagious. Although it may be hard to see it or feel it at times, you are the guiding light to your students, and they are looking to you to light their way.

RECHARGE

Perhaps your light is dim right now. Some days you may feel like a smartphone on low-power mode, and you desperately need to recharge. Wouldn't it be awesome if we could simply plug ourselves in and get rebooted like in the movie *The Matrix*? Maybe you can't literally plug yourself into an energy center, but there are many ways to charge yourself up to a higher voltage.

Breathing. As music teachers, we're focused on the breath as a performance fundamental; from day one we teach deep breathing, low breathing, full breathing, relaxed breathing, and many of us have used the Breathing Gym videos. The breath for musicians is so important! On another level, though, we can consciously tap into the power of our breath to help us feel more vibrant, grounded, centered, focused, and fully aware.

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Why breathing? Our breath is physiologically coupled to our thoughts and emotions. We know that when we're stressed, our breathing gets tight, shallow, and irregular; but it works in the other direction, too. When we want to return to that calm space to be at our best, where we can work well with others and be solution-finders, changing our breath can take us there. Rather than just telling yourself to stop being upset (which is almost impossible), you can choose to focus on your breath first. When we slow our breath down, the emotions and feelings follow. Isn't that amazing? Here are a few breathing practices to help you recharge.

- **Focus Breath:** Here's a very simple yet effective practice. Just relax wherever you are, whether seated, lying down, or standing. Breathe in through the nose for four counts and out the nose for four counts.
- **Serenity Breath:** The serenity breath is another wonderful breath to really relax yourself; try this one in between classes. Breathe in through your nose for four counts, hold for seven, and out through your mouth for eight.
- **Triangle Breath:** The triangle breath is a great breath as well. There are different variations of the triangle breath, and this is the equilateral triangle. It helps if you're having trouble sleeping. Breathe in through your nose for three counts, hold for three, and breathe out through your mouth for three.
- **Box Breath:** I learned this from Mark Divine, a Navy SEAL commander. If it's good enough for the Navy SEALs, I think it's good enough for any of us. Breathe in through your nose for four, hold for four, breathe out through your nose for four, and hold for four. It makes a square, just like the triangle breath makes a triangle.
- **Gratitude Breath:** My favorite breath is the gratitude breath, because this is an opportunity for us to focus on what we're grateful for in our lives. Think of what you're appreciative of, what you're grateful for, what you're thankful for. Inhale that in for four counts, then release the stress, anxieties, and all the toxic stuff on a big exhale.

Mindfulness. Mindfulness is about becoming more aware of what we're thinking and feeling while navigating through our daily events and situations. It's about being truly present in each "now." If we were to regularly ask ourselves, "Is my attention fully right here, right now?", the honest answer is frequently no. We're often concerned about some imaginary future, or we're replaying something that didn't go well in the past; it's all too rare to just "be," right here in the present.

Consider the phrase "human being." Sometimes I think we

should be called "human doings," because too often that's how we live. Do this, do that, do something else; do, do, do. But when you can pause to embrace a moment, then you get more out of that moment. You can practice mindfulness by paying attention to what you're doing, whether eating, driving, or just walking. And when you truly listen mindfully to the other people in your life, without thinking about what to say in response, it changes EVERYTHING.

Meditation. I also am a huge advocate of meditation. If you haven't tried it yet, go for it. There are so many different meditation apps now, including *Calm*, *Headspace*, and *Waking Up*, among several others; but what it comes down to is sitting comfortably, paying attention to your breathing, and returning your attention to the breath whenever the mind wanders. EVERYBODY'S mind wanders – and that's OK. A lot of people think that meditation means to try emptying your mind of thoughts, and I just want to say, "Be OK with your thoughts." The trick is to just witness them like a bubble rising to the surface and poof, going away, and to be nonjudgmental. As strange as it sounds, the "right" way to do meditation is to let go of the need to "do it right," and gently return your attention to your breathing over and over. This is a really wonderful way to center yourself; a friend of mine calls it a "daily brain scrub." Even five minutes in the morning will help set you up to be more responsive, rather than reactive, for the rest of the day.

CREATE

We invest in ourselves by taking the time to reflect, restore, and recharge; now it is time to take one more step: to create. Rather than yielding to the natural temptation to return to "normal" and teach the way we have always taught, we have the opportunity of a lifetime to reimagine what music education can be. What have we learned about ourselves, our students, and even our content area that could lead to a transformation? It's true that we are often resistant to change, because it makes us feel uncomfortable or uncertain; but what if we all decided to not just embrace change, but BE the change? Dream of the possibilities! We have spent so much energy this year reacting to external circumstances and crafting responses on the fly, but I believe we are now on the threshold where we can script our own lives and compose our own symphonies.

We have changed so much from where we started this roller coaster ride a year ago to where we are now. More than at any other time in the history of our profession, we recognize just how important in-person music making is for ourselves and our students, and we're eager to rekindle that fire and burn

away some of the previous year's pain. But I don't think it's an "either/or" proposition; I believe it's "and." What new methods or modalities of instruction might you hang on to? What can we bring from this past year into the next stage of music education?

- How many of you have created asynchronous teaching videos? Could any of those be used in the future?
- How many of you have created a ton of Google Forms? Could those be used again?
- How many of you created lessons to engage students with improvisation and composition?
- How many of you created lessons that explore the life of a composer or the historical background of a piece?
- How many of you included more listening to music and reflection in your lessons?
- How many of you had students become more independent as musicians because they HAD to?
- How many of you found that you were more actively checking on your students' social and emotional welfare?
- How many of you incorporated more SEL practices and mindfulness into your classes?

How can we create music classrooms, ensembles, and experiences that are more joyous, more diverse, more representative, more inclusive, and more empowering? How can we invite and encourage more students to be part of music in the schools? How can we create a culture that provides a sense of belonging, value, meaning, and significance to each and every one of our students?

IN CONCLUSION

As we take stock of where we have been and how far we have come – as we honor ourselves and take time to reflect, restore, and recharge – we look to a future we can create, where our students are fired up and excited to be a part of our ensembles and music classes. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it is that life is precious, and often it is too short. We can't settle for "good enough" or doing it the way it has always been done. This spring and summer, take time for YOU. Take time to visualize, imagine, and blueprint the kind of experience you want to create for your students. What does it look like, feel like, and sound like?

This past year has been difficult, but while the WAY we have delivered music instruction has changed, our WHY has not. As Simon Sinek shared in his book *Start with Why*, when

you have a strong "why," everything else follows; author and speaker John C. Maxwell says, "when you know your why, the way will reveal itself." We have been so busy that we may not have taken the time to pause, look within, and ask ourselves "What is my 'why'?" Owing and celebrating your "why" gives strength to push through the hard times.

We learn the most when challenged the most, and we come out stronger on the other side. This is definitely one of those challenges and, folks, we are crossing over to the other side. We are literally riding the upbeat to the future of music education. Dream big, aim high, and play music among the stars.

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