

ZEN AND THE ART OF MARCHING PERCUSSION

It's August 11th, 2007. I'm standing in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, wearing a dark blue uniform with reflective silver lining and a metallic black helmet. There's a 20-pound Yamaha snare drum strapped on my chest and two Innovative Percussion snare drum sticks in my hands. I'm surrounded by 134 other musicians and dancers, and together we are about to give the audience of some 35,000 people the show of our lives. We have been working our asses off for 90 straight days, rehearsing up to 12 hours a day to learn, clean, and perfect our 11-minute performance entitled "Criminal." This is it. This is the 2007 Drum Corps International World Championships. I am a snare drummer for The Bluecoats Drum and Bugle Corps from Canton, Ohio. I am in one of the best drumlines in the world, and we are about to perform together for the last time. Adrenaline, emotion, and anxiety are at work. Breathe, I remind myself, just breathe. Quiet the mind; calm the inner voice. Here we go.

During each summer for the past five years, I learned about passion. I learned about hard work, sacrifice, physical pain, and mental anguish. It's called drum and bugle corps, an activity that can best be described as professional marching band: a combination of what you watched (or ignored) at halftime of your high school football games, the Army Rangers, and the Olympics. Drum corps are intensely competitive musical groups comprised of performers ages 16 to 21. Those interested endure a stringent audition process in the winter months in order to be chosen for membership in the early spring. Then in early May, the 150 members move in together to rehearse 12 hours every day for an entire month. After the grueling spring training process, the corps hits the road, moving into a fleet of tour buses and spending a few hours each night sleeping on high school gym floors. For two months drum corps' tour schedules consist of practicing during the day and performing at night. Drum Corps International (DCI), an intensely competitive drum corps circuit, regulates these shows. The climax of the season every summer is DCI Finals, a well-attended week-long series of performances held in a different city each year. The winning drum corps takes the gold medal, along with sponsorships, endorsements, bragging rights, and a place in marching music history.

If at any point in the last five years someone asked me what the single most important aspect of my life was, I would have unhesitatingly answered drum corps. Perfecting the art of rudimental snare drumming, figuring out how to play incredibly difficult patterns at the exact same time as 20 other dudes, all while wearing your drum and running around a football field making drill formations that thematically relate to the musical concept; it's a doozy. I have spent hours upon countless hours practicing by myself, and ten times that long practicing with other players. The payoff? Life-long friendships, problem-solving skills applicable to many different activities, super fast hands, the best tan you will ever have, and the admiration of high school band students everywhere. Not to mention the girls.

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Now you may be wondering, what the heck is this egotistical band geek talking about? I'm talking about opportunity, potential, hard work, and accomplishment. I'm trying to convey just how deep of a bond you can have with people you live with for three months, doing literally everything together, from sleeping to rehearsing to showering to performing. There is a feeling of connectedness and unity that I have experienced from playing perfectly together those around me. I have lost myself in the moment playing drums, making music, performing for the crowd, on the whole loving it.

In these moments, my individual sense of self is absorbed into the collective consciousness. Due to the exact, precise synchronicity by which we carry out our actions, magic happens; magic that is simultaneously spiritual, abstract, physical, and concrete. It is a mind-body combination of athleticism and meaning, something that takes years to develop yet can slip away in an instant. It involves both complete self-awareness and a total loss of self-identity. Nouns become verbs, subjects become predicates, and life becomes **live**. This is how to live. It is as refreshing as it is addicting, and after my first taste nothing could keep me away. Performance, drumming, and music were my religious rituals, the vehicles by which I obtained temporary Enlightenment.

In *What the Buddha Taught*, the great Buddhist monk and scholar Walpola Rahula writes about the relationship between self and action:

The moment you think 'I am doing this', you become self-conscious, and then you do not live in the action, but you live in the idea 'I am', and consequently your work too is spoilt. You should forget yourself completely, and lose yourself in what you do. ... All great work—artistic, poetic, intellectual or spiritual—is produced at those moments when its creators are lost completely in their actions, when they forget themselves altogether, and are free from self-consciousness. (72)

Similarly, Zen teaches that bringing the self to your actions in order to be successful is delusion; the self will only hinder progress. Rather, allow your actions to encompass the self, and as the self is forgotten, the actions become pure, genuine experience. Losing myself in the pure experience of music and life: that's where I want to be.