

The sounds of my mother's typewriter

Lying in bed and listening, I heard devotion. And creativity. And mystery.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue



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As a child, I often woke to the sound of my mother typing. I'd hear a spatter of sound, a pause, a tentative tap or two, some silence, then more taps. With the staccato music of the typewriter coming through the wall as the first light brightened my window, it was as if my mother were composing the day itself.

Some mornings, she was typing her term papers. Having left college after her sophomore year to put my father through the rest of his education, she gradually finished her bachelor's one class at a time at the college where my father had his first job as a professor. When I was a teenager, she drove a couple of days a week to a university an hour away where she earned a master's in English literature. By the time she began working on her doctorate, I was out of the house and trying to follow in her footsteps, typing my own term papers on a manual typewriter until the day of

the personal computer arrived.

On other mornings, my mother was writing in response not to a teacher's assignment but to something inside herself. I remember her telling me that she'd had a teacher who encouraged her to write first thing in the morning, while the house was still quiet—to show up every day at the typewriter whether she thought she had something to say or not. Do that, her teacher told her, and you'll find that you have quite a bit to say. And so a stack of pages in her middle desk drawer grew higher and higher, filled with her observations of the world around her and the stories that her engagement with the world inspired.

Every once in a while, I would slip into the living room, pull out my mother's middle desk drawer as silently as I could, and read those pages—a trespass I've only recently confessed to her. I remember the startling feeling of having access to a part of my mother's life that seemed to have nothing to do with me. I also remember the way certain sentences, certain combinations of words, shone on the page. Those places were the traces of moments in which my mother had broken through to something precise, something beautiful, something that sounded the way she wanted it to sound. Her words made me want to get up early too, and try to put my world into language.

Those bursts of sound and ribbons of silence were the sounds of my mother thinking, creating. They were the sounds of her experimentation with words and her commitment to making room in her life for the creative work she loved. They were the sounds of her showing up, day after day, so that she would be there when something unexpected broke through. They were the sounds of faithfulness, the sounds of devotion.

Of course, I didn't think about this as a child in my bed. I turned over and went back to sleep. But the sound of my mother showing up each day to think, to imagine, and to write remains an indelible part of the soundtrack of my childhood that reached me even as I slept.

Why are we so drawn to the sight—or sound—of another person alone and absorbed by something they love? St. Augustine remembered observing Ambrose of Milan reading silently to himself, so immersed that he didn't notice he was being watched. Augustine remembered sitting with his friends in the silence Ambrose cast about him as he read, letting themselves be drawn into the bishop's stillness. Years later, now

a bishop himself, Augustine was still wondering about that scene of silent reading, still drawing on that memory as he pondered what it means to be human, what it means to be a restless soul seeking rest in God.

With their attention fixed on something that is not us, the person alone and absorbed is both the person we know and more than the person we know. I wonder if one of the reasons I remember the sound of my mother's typewriter so clearly is that it was also the sound of this mystery—the mystery of who we are when we are alone, thinking and creating. The woman at her typewriter was not just the mother who kept me fed and loved and safe; she was a pilgrim on her own journey. Alone, absorbed, and working with words, she was both my mother and more than my mother. And the sound of her typewriter was teaching me, whether I knew it or not, that there might be more possibilities within me—within anyone—than I knew.

By the time I woke up for real, my mother was busy doing all the things that would make it possible for us all to get out the door on time, her attention running along multiple lines. But she had left the sound of her typewriter echoing in our sleepy heads, teaching us that making time to encounter ourselves alone and to honor our creation in the image of God by trying ourselves to be creative was as much a part of human life as breakfast, a capacity that belongs to us all.

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