

“WASN’T THAT A TIME”

My 13-year old niece Sofia sings in the San Francisco Girls Chorus, with the concert, recording, and touring ensemble of the Girls Chorus, *Chorissima*. Their practice and performance schedule is impressive: a minimum of three days a week for two hours, plus one weekend rehearsal each month. My sister Ellen goes to almost every concert; I attend many. I have heard them sing with the San Francisco Symphony at Davies Symphony Hall, at the San Francisco Opera, on campus at Cal, and at many churches in the East Bay. They are adorable, excellent, and the music is always beautiful and spiritedly performed.

Right around Thanksgiving my sister told me that The San Francisco Girls Chorus and The Boys Chorus were invited to sing for Obama’s swearing-in ceremony in Washington on January 20th. How thrilled we all were! But when she begged me to accompany her to the event, I was less thrilled. I hate to fly and I am seriously claustrophobic. Four million people were predicted to be in DC for the event. How could I justify taking time off from work and spending that money, while subjecting myself to such huge, anxiety-provoking crowds?

But yes, sisterhood IS powerful. After weeks of pressure, I gave in, mostly in order to pay my sisterhood dues. (I figured I could earn at least one lifetime of obligations for this one.) And then I prepared. I went to REI for long underwear and woolen socks. I dug out my old woolen hat, pants and ski gloves from 25 years ago when I lived in Denver. I bought a new rolling suitcase at Costco to replace the one that fell over sideways every time it was pulled. I did not buy the adult diapers a friend suggested in case there would be no access to port-o-potties as was rumored. I went to my doctor for anti-anxiety medicine. Ellen arranged everything else.

The choristers had to book a chartered flight because there were 86 of them together with the boys, but family members were not invited to travel with them, as always. My sister and I departed on the Thursday before the Inauguration, on a Southwest flight from Oakland to Baltimore, where my cousin Betty lives. As we lined up for boarding, I noticed that things were unusually lively. People looked at each other, conversations began about where everyone was going, and as everyone was going to the Inauguration, conversations full of excitement began! The flight was full, and the conversations didn’t stop the whole way.

And so it was for the entire week we were in Washington. Traveling on the Metro and buses, at restaurant counters, waiting in lines for hours, during the Inauguration itself (except when the new president spoke), and on the flight back, it was the same celebratory excitement. People started up conversations in the street with strangers, introducing their relatives, telling family histories, talking about the events leading up to the election, sharing jokes, songs, and most universally, tears. It was unlike anything I have ever experienced, not even during the late 1960’s in the big Be-Ins in Central Park. Woodstock, despite the movie presentation of that muddy mess, didn’t come close. People gave their warm attention to one another from the heart. The human warmth was

so warm, it didn't matter that the temperatures never reached above 17 degrees.

The day of the Inauguration, however, seemed to be particularly cold, because we were on line for our section of the National Mall with thousands of others by 5:00 am, and waited without advancing in the dark for hours. Fortunately, my short sister and I were able to use the wind-blocking power of some of the innumerable tall African American men around us. We were very grateful for this kindly coziness, and practically leaned onto these human walls. The presence of the many big guys wasn't so beneficial when we eventually got into position in the Mall itself, as it was impossible to see over, or even around them. Or to breathe. (The time had come for that Xanax to come out of the bag. Just remembering those moments makes me a little breathless.)

Fortunately, someone leaning on a flimsy temporary fence knocked it over, and the terrible pressure of the crowd dissipated as we spread out into a much larger area behind the frozen reflecting pool in front of the Capitol Building. That is quite far from the building itself, but I had an unfettered, direct view from what felt like not much further than from the tops seats of the SF Opera House to the stage, if a building the size of the Capitol Building could fit on the stage! In other words, without the Jumbotrons I wouldn't have been able to see anyone's faces, but because I was standing a few feet from a Jumbotron, it was as if we had a front row seat.

The SFGC choristers had awakened at 2:30am and boarded their bus to the Pentagon by 4:00 am. Their drivers were told "stop for nothing, and pass through all red lights," and the busses were escorted by motorcycle police to DC from where they were staying, about an hour away, in Middleburg Virginia. The boys and girls met at the Senate building to rehearse, and took their places before sunrise next to chairs saved for Yo-Yo Ma, Itzhak Perlman, Anthony McGill and Gabriela Montero, right above where the dignitaries sat and where Barack Obama would take the oath of office at noon. The boys and girls were wearing matching red hats, scarves, and gloves, and dark coats, donated by The Gap to the girls for this occasion, so it was very easy to see them en masse even without the big screens.

At 10:00 am the Boys and Girls Choruses were announced by an appropriately booming professional voice, and they sang in clear, strong, and pure angel voices for about twenty minutes in the freezing air to the crowd of almost two million people. I have never appreciated the song "America" as I did that morning listening to these children sing it in perfect harmony, at the National Mall, at this moment in history. Nor have I ever cried as much listening to it. I have to admit, however, that my section of the crowd were not as attentive as I wished them to be. They seemed to think that this was some kind of warm-up act before the main event. Oh well, they cheered and applauded anyway. My niece later told me that since the wind was blowing, their hats and scarves covered their ears, and everyone in the crowd was wearing thick gloves, the choristers could only hear a muffled thudding ("kind of a long thump") instead of applause. Despite that small disappointment, the few hours they slept the night before, and the bone-chilling hours they stayed on the Capitol steps, Sofia said it was an amazing experience for all of them. Actually, she didn't say "amazing." She couldn't quite find the words. She became a

little breathless herself trying to describe what it was like for her.

The main event, by the way, was pretty good too, and contained a different kind of perfect harmony. People on the Mall did fall silent, finally, during Mr. Obama's part of the day.

When the swearing-in was over and all of the ceremony ended, hundreds of exhausted bodies, including mine, collapsed inside of the Smithsonian Museums surrounding the National Mall. I was practically lying down on the floor of the Museum of the American Indian for a good half hour before the museum guards asked people to get up. It's a great museum, by the way. Don't miss it when you go to Washington DC next. Speaking of travels, the San Francisco Girls Chorus *Chorissima* ensemble is performing at Lincoln Center in Manhattan this April. My sister thinks I should go.

Parts of the choruses' Inaugural performances can be heard at <http://www.sfgirlschorus.org/> and www.sfbc.org. Both websites have also posted very moving photographs from the event.