Life is like a Banjo String:
How Life Imitates Art

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson that said: “To the illuminated mind the whole world burns and sparkles with light.” Truer words were never spoken. In the story “Life is like a Banjo String” by Shi Tiesheng, life for a blind man becomes not measured in days, but in beautiful moments. This story was truly inspiring from beginning to end with antidotal thoughts and dreams to the hardships of life. The old storyteller not only appears real to the young lad in the story, but also he comes alive to the reader breeding introspection, power, struggle, and love. Life is like Banjo string not only shows the struggle in an old blind story teller’s life, but how the beauty of being alive can change everything for the better.

From the very beginning, while teaching his “young lad” the banjo, he always denoted that he was not a beggar-but a self-sufficient human being. He said: “But we are not beggars, we have a skill” (Tiesheng 416). This is very important because though the man was very modest in his surroundings he always sought for the better. It’s kind of that notion of seeing the glass as “half-full” rather than “half-empty.” Often times in life it is very hard to see things in the world as positive, especially in this man’s position. But the overcoming of his own disability led him to believe that he was in fact someone who could depend on himself, and that he needed no one’s sympathy or help.

In today’s world it’s very easy to believe we are stricken by disability. It is however our ability to overcome our struggles that make us truly great. A lot of times people will give up; this is simply not acceptable. It is said that “losers let it happen, while winners make it happen.” This is true in this case. It’s easy to give up, it’s easy to accept sympathy and be on your way. But how honorable is it really? Being self-
sufficient is one of the most honorable things one can do to make a living in the world. But how you look at it, your ability or blessing to be able to work is also figured in. It is just not simply the act of going to work, but how you go to work and your attitude. The old blind storyteller had an attitude of faith. In the story, the old storyteller would play and play his banjo. His goal was to break 1,000 strings as to find a “potion” to cure his blindness. It was the old storyteller’s faith that proved to be truly inspiring.

Fifty years! Fifty hard-scrabble years, over countless mountains, down endless miles of roads, in stifling heat and freezing cold, through untold sorrow and grief—through it all he had played, night after night, ever mindful that he must put his whole heart and soul into every note, or the broken strings would mean nothing (417).

The man’s faithfulness showed that he had what it took to go on, and that he did not fear the end, but worked as only as means to an end.

Faithfulness is something that in this country we often lack. How many times have we picked up a book and never finished it? How many times did we make a promise and break it? How many times did we make a promise and break it? For most of us, it is quite often. Faithfulness is often defined as someone who is devoted and adhering to a cause, a person or an ideal. In society, we see people that work hard but lack in other areas like family or social life. What does it take to be faithful in our society? The storyteller even told himself: “I must see it before I go…If not, what then? Just die like this?” (426) Faithfulness means different things to different people, but for the old storyteller it meant working hard, graciously and passionately until his job was done.

Passion plays a very key role in the story of “Life is like a Banjo.” Passion can take us to places that no other emotion can; it opens the eyes of the soul and breeds life
into everything that is seen or touched. In the story, the old blind storyteller gave everything he had into playing each note, and song with passion and heart. Sometimes it was as if he was another person, in a trance, his music took him places his eyes could not.

What magic lay in his fingertips! From the softest murmur to a thundering cadence, with carefree elegance or passionate abandon, his playing conjured up the sun, the moon, and a whole world of its own inhabited by creatures large and small. And with his voice he could bring forth every sound on earth, from human, be it male or female, to animal be they beasts on land or in the air, to the sound of the wind howling, of raindrops splashing (418-419).

The old storyteller’s passion leapt into every part of his life. He gave everything into his work and that not only proved he was a hard worker, but that he was a hard worker that was passionate about what he did.

To be passionate about something, one must have an open heart and a willing mind. With everyday life becoming more and more rushed its easy to get lost and not enjoy life for what it really is. Being passionate means giving it your all. How can we take the old storyteller’s passion and turn it into something for ourselves? Only we can do it, only we can make something our own, give the world our all and do with everything we’ve got. Just like the story teller did; just like the storyteller played each note with so much heart and love, waiting for each string to slowly break away, filing each of his listener’s hearts and minds with beautiful sound. But above all else, it was the storyteller’s compassion that filled the hearts of the not only the listeners of his music, but the readers of the story.

Compassion is a trait among many that we can all achieve to strive for. In this story, the compassion that the old storyteller felt for those around rose above himself and touched the lives of everyone. Firstly, the storyteller’s dedication to give people
entertainment. He sought to give people something that they probably have never heard.

One thing that the story noted was when he sung he said: “...Good folks of the village, pray, what is your pleasure?” (418) This allowed the villagers to choose what they desired. For these people, it probably amounted to a lot since they had no other type of entertainment in their own village. Secondly, the old storyteller showed compassion for the young lad. This is seen in many different places in the story but some of the highlights were when he said: “Take my advice, it’ll do you no harm” (418). This was when the old storyteller tried to give the boy advice on seeing a girl in the village.

Lastly, it was at the end of the story. This is when the old storyteller after finding out there was nothing on his prescription for which he broke 1,000 strings for, pulled himself together to find and help the young lad. “For the sake of the boy he tried to brace himself, to pull himself together” (429).

Compassion isn’t something that comes easy to most people. The old storyteller at any moment could have given up, said his fate was sealed and let the past be past. But the storyteller rose above his struggles, rose above the hurt, the pain that had befallen him in his life and showed compassion. It isn’t often in these times that you see much compassion. Some say this is only a trait characterized by one of true moral character like that of Mother Theresa; but true compassion is achievable by all people.

Compassion starts out as a tool to teach, develops into love, and finally into an unselfish longing and desire to help those in need. “Deep in the mountains, the old man finally came upon his apprentice. The lad had fallen to the ground. Lying motionless in the snow, he was waiting for death to take him away. The old man knew how deep and
genuine was his grief” (429). The old storyteller’s compassion reigned true when this happened. He showed that he could overcome himself and reach out to the young lad.

Throughout the story we can see the true development of the character of the old blind storyteller. Through his love, his faithfulness, being self-sufficient, compassionate, and passionate filled the character of the storyteller. Through the evolution of the story we can not only follow the storyteller and his journey to break a thousand strengths but also, we feel his pain, sing his praise, and hear the beauty of song. This story is truly an inspirational and enduring story for the soul. “Remember life is like a banjo string. It must be taut before you can play it well. And when you have played it well, that is all that matters…”(429).

Works Cited
Tiesheng, Shi. “Life is Like a Banjo String.” IAH 211b Course Pack. Pgs. 405-430