

My Life as a Musical Composition

0 to 10

Listen to your life. A life is a musical composition. And it begins with being attuned to sound, the music of God's calling us by name.

The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.

Isaiah 49:1 (Eu-nice = happy victory)

We are called from the womb.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . . My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them yet existed. . . I come to the end, I am still with you.

Psalms 130:13-16

You have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, even when you turn gray, I will carry you. I have made and I will bear. Isaiah 46:3,4

God set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace. Galatians 1:15



Dad holding me outside the Ashland church, my brother Phil looking on

What are those sounds in the womb one hears during those nine months? Mothers sometimes intentionally play music to bring soothing to the unborn child within. Certainly there are reverberations—such as Elizabeth felt when Mary, mother of Jesus, came to her and the babe “leaped in her womb.”

For me, I was born into a sense of calling. My father, legally blind from birth, was pressured forward by his anxious parents to achieve—first music—the violin in high school, and then propelled to Harvard for college, and then to Harvard Law School in the hope that a career in law could sustain him with his handicap. But along the way, the year after graduating from college, God met him as he traveled through the Midwest on a long train trip to visit friends and relatives. Reading the hotel room Bibles, he came upon a lifesaving verse solving the riddle of his life purpose, beset with the handicap of limited sight: “This light affliction is but for a moment, but it works toward the eternal weight of glory, for we look not at the things that are seen, but at the unseen, which is eternal.” Sitting in the Union Station at Omaha, waiting to board a train, he meditated on the meaning of this verse—and almost missed his train, until a kindly African American porter intuited the dilemma, and helped him board the train just as it began to move out of the station—and into a life that unfolded into a call to ministry—not the law.

I was born of a mother whose sense of calling was strong. She was someone born before her time in some ways—taking on the values and customs of a later generation that would choose to go back to nature, wear peasant-like (hippie?) clothing, eat healthy food, not bother with makeup. She moved out of her farm home in Maine, turned down a proposal of marriage, and came to Boston to prepare to become a missionary. She spent summers in western Canada astride a horse, preaching in churches and visiting folks. For this she needed to be ordained, and so long before mainline churches accepted women clergy, my mother was there. And when she and my Dad met and fell in love at Gordon College, then located on the Fenway in Boston, they began a life of ministry together, for her practical skills and strength were needed to support my father in his pastoral duties. She drove him everywhere, taught Sunday school, formed women's prayer groups.



Mother holding me in the yard at Epsom the spring after I was born, Phil not yet aware of being displaced!

So I grew up in a parsonage, woven into the fabric of a joint calling that felt utterly natural and fulfilling.



As I grew, three scenes: left, on the path into the woods in Epsom; center, with my brother in the side yard in Northwood, New Hampshire; and right, outside our home in Wheaton, Illinois in 1937.



10 to 20

We are called to play in a key right for us. We develop a philosophy of life, something that is deeper than simply finding a field of work. You are the instrument playing the music of your life, but you need the right key, and the right genre.

When I was 12, I was introduced to a girls' club organization that ran summer camps. It was in Camp Cherith that I learned a life philosophy that has lasted: Its motto was "Christ in every phase of a girl's life." In that context it meant that all of life was permeated with joy and the sense of the abundant life Jesus said he came to bring. I knew church camps and conferences separated the religious part from the secular; kids sat in rows and heard someone give a talk about the Bible, itching to get to the noon meal and then rush out onto the playground for baseball—often in teenage years, the boys playing and girls watching around the edges in those un-liberated days.



Camp Cherith was different. We clustered in small cabin groups with a counselor only slightly older, and spent the day learning to paddle canoes, hike through the woods, learn to shoot arrows in archery, build fires and lay trails, sing folk songs lustily around the dinner table, gather around a campfire at night to hear stories, and gather as a cabin group to pray and explore Scripture. The unity of sacred and secular was lived out.

As a sixteen-year old, I had articulated a philosophy of life corresponding to that slogan "Christ in every phase of a girl's life" and made it my own. It formed a strong core in me that lasts to this day: an integrated life. All of life converges in this one goal: "For me to live is Christ" and that means "practicing the presence of God" all day long.

Above, flag raising in Colorado Camp Cherith, near right, two colleagues during a retreat in northern Wisconsin; far right, Phyl Cunningham sounding reveille at Ohio Camp Cherith.



20 to 30

We choose the right musicians to accompany us. The context of the workplace we land in may be just as or more crucial than the content of the work.



This is because people in the work place shape us, and especially in that first decade after college. I chose to work in the organization that had sponsored my camp experiences, because I believed in its philosophy, and I simply wanted to be with people who were in tune with that.



I was hilariously happy, even in mundane tasks like running the mimeograph machine and licking stamps and stuffing newsletters, as well as writing program materials that went into our mailings. I was closely identified with my work—something characteristic of me throughout my life.

In this case, I took on the task of writing the philosophy of the organization as my graduate school thesis at the end of this decade.



outside headquarters in 1955



from top:

*Joy Mackay, my boss at Pioneer Girls in 1951 - 1960
two field representatives for Pioneer Girls—Virginia Anderson,
my college roommate senior year before being New England rep,
and Jeanne Sherrow, Wheaton alumna, and Michigan rep
Louise Troup, my junior high literature teacher and early mentor,
co-founder of Pioneer Girls, missionary nurse in South Africa,
and executive director of Pioneer Girls from 1960-1970.*



*treating my M. A. diploma in 1959
with varying degrees of pride*

30 to 40

Attend to the performer of the music—the music is no better than the one performing it.

The hazard of a nonprofit organization, and especially of a religious nonprofit, and even more particularly of a Christian religious nonprofit organization, is that it gathers together “true believers” in the underlying goals and philosophy who then make huge assumptions about how well everyone will get long with each other. The purpose is so basic and important, that it overrides concerns about each individual part of the organization.

In my case, conflicts arose in the leadership at one point, cresting to events that swirled around me in distressing circles, and sometimes caught me in the eddy of its flow, creating disillusionment and heartache.

It is a deep truth that knowing God and loving God are inextricable. It is equally true that loving oneself and knowing oneself are just as tied together. And I suppose that it follows that loving one’s neighbor and knowing one’s neighbor are likewise essentially connected. So since my life’s goal was clear—to love God with all my heart and mind and soul and to love my neighbor as myself—I had to attend to my failure to attend to my self, a self that at the age of 37, was in despair and unhappiness—an unfamiliar state in previous years.

It was the unhappiness that led me to seek out help. (That name I had been given—Eu-nice—was asking for redemption.) And so it was that I was born again in therapy. I say born again, because there was someone inside me—a true self—waiting to get out. And on an April day in 1967, at the age of 37, I was given a sweet experience that signaled an inner change I cannot to this day adequately explain. It was a moment in time, after a session with the therapist, when some locked door gave way and something ineffably sweet and powerful surged through my body. And I went to the mirror and looked, and did not recognize the face that looked back at me, radiant and fresh like a child who knew herself to be a woman. Yes, sexuality was part of the transformation—receiving that repressed part of myself that did not know how to love myself, so how could I possibly love a neighbor, say nothing of a husband?



A few months after that big change in therapy, at a co-ed summer camp in California, reveling in being dunked into the water

40 to 50

Music is meant to be heard, given to others.

When you are “full of yourself” maybe that is not so bad, because it simply means that you have enough to give to others. In my case, that was how I approached marriage, which is what I was ready for now. Today we get obsessed with “finding the right one” but I learned to say, “Forget that, and give attention to *becoming the right one* yourself.” Besides, all your effort on searching may not be the best way. After all it was the Lord who “saw that it was not good for man to be alone” so that must mean that God is more concerned than we are. And of course his first step is to put us to sleep, as he did Adam, so that he can awaken us to his choice.

I felt pretty wide awake, and my enlivened state was part of what attracted someone to my side. It happened over several months in which I learned that this Jewish poet/artist/musician was on a spiritual quest that had taken him to visit a monastery to consider a monastic vocation—his answer a resounding no. Don was devoted to his writing—“religious poetry,” he cautioned, in case I would take offense! It took a moment where I needed his protection and care to elicit his strong arms of concern and caring one day when we simply started being together from that moment on.



*left: on the lake during our
honeymoon in a northern
Wisconsin cottage*



*right: at home, the delight in a
four-course breakfast!*

This decade was spent enjoying our marriage and its fruits—working together with others to found an organization committed to work in the world of the 1970s abroil with many concerns: the racial divide in Chicago, the white flight into the suburbs, the isolation of Christian college students from urban concerns, the Vietnam war, the rising tide of the women’s movement, and a deep distrust of authority on many levels. Thus the Urban life Center was born as my husband and I worked with a dozen others likeminded friends.

Over the decade, when I turned 47, something began stirring restlessly within, signaling a need for change. There is something about the “sevens” that I can mark as significant in my life—when I turn 17, or 27, or 37, or 47 – something that has continued to my eighth decade of life. Whenever that restlessness comes to haunt me, I have learned to pay attention. God is taking me to the side of the mountain and showing me my burning bush that *I must turn aside to see* as Moses did, because there is something I need to pay attention to.



A man for many seasons—

and most of all, many hats!

50 to 60

Be aware of new rhythms in the music, the place of rests, and of silence—just as powerful as the notes.

For women, there is something about 50 that heralds a new consciousness. Our body tells us that something is letting go and dying, and another energy is taking its place. It is the time when both men and women enter what Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot calls *The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk and Adventure in the Years 50 to 75*. Many people shift to a new perception of the way they are to live out their calling. Richard Rohr calls it *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Second Half of Life*.

It is a time when we begin to see the pattern behind the tapestry of our life, the continuity of certain threads, the break-off of others. To use the musical analogy, it is a time we pick up another instrument, or even discover the *a capella* mode rather than needing so much interplay with others.

In my case, I had a prescient moment before leaving Chicago where I had spent most of my life. I wrote these words, as I prepared for another movement in our symphony of life in Boston:

Will I find my new future in some exploration of self, rather than service to society? Is this the deeper, more daring trip? I am taught that it is weaker, escapist, self-centered. I must be very sure before I embark on this Second Journey.

". . .the images and symbols of our minds introduce us to a wider world than that of our actual historic life."

Perhaps some answers will come to me through the life of the imagination as I set my sails, and remain open to the winds that blow. Winds of the Spirit. Winds of my dreams.

The threads that came together for me were my intense interest in the meaning of my own inner life and the way that worked itself out in work, and my fascination with the way this process could take place in others. I wanted others to be able to piece together the fragments of music of their lives and sing their own unique song.

Don and I met an Episcopal priest named Richard Faxon and we decided God was leading us to work together to birth something new. And so Life/Work Direction was born—in a storefront in Dorchester—a place in the city that was near where Scott Walker lived and soon Louise came to join him in marriage.



*Eastern Point, off Gloucester
where I spent many times on silent retreat*



I knew I was to embark on an “inner journey”—unfamiliar to me, always activist in nature. And it was to include silence—also new to me. I began going on retreats, reading the mystics, and worshipping in a sacramental community that honored the silence as well as the song.



*The mix of forest and ocean and lake
impelled me to take my camera and record the
seamless beauty of earth and sea and sky.*

60 to 70

Silences in music are as powerful as the notes.

Perhaps it was those silences I was learning to appreciate that opened me to receiving something that began to happen in our work—people approaching me to work with them individually after the vocational process was over.

This sent me into another kind of crisis (starting at age 57, of course). How could I do this work, never having been trained? So I went for help again, and was drawn into the deepest place I had yet been. I thought I knew darkness from 20 years before. This was different, and more compelling, for it came through dreams and body symptoms, neither of which can I control, and both of which always reliably speak truth to us.

It was at the beginning of this decade that Scott and Louise Walker invited Don and me to move with them to the Jamaica Plain house they were buying, and to place the Life/Work Direction on the ground floor. We reserved the living room as the “Common Room” where in later years it housed groups and couples, as well as times for staff prayer together.

God’s word to me was strong: *Without me, you can do nothing*. It was the need for silence in the music of my life. I was always an eager performer, quick to jump on stage, to raise my baton, or pick up an instrument and play. Now I was to learn listening in silence, waiting for God to speak in and to and through me.

It felt like a different rhythm.



Woven into our life since 1990 has been this remarkable couple—Scott and Louise Walker, who bought this home to house both Don and me and Life/Work Direction—allowing us all to be knit together in our complementary callings.

Their sensibilities coincided with ours—continuing with the round table for meeting two-with-one participant on an equal level.

And they added the soft ring of chimes outside the “Poustinia” window where “spiritual companioning” goes on day by day.



70 to 80

Experiment with seeing how the music sounds by **letting others interpret the score.**

Starting something takes courage. Letting go of what you have started takes humility. And gratitude. By the time I turned 75, it was time for a gracious entrance of Scott and Louise Walker and their conceived creation of the “Threshold” group experience. Over the decade, their melodies and lyrics melded with what Don and I had composed, until the resulting symphony carried many of the strong bass notes and chords of the original, but picked up some of the rhythms and color of the 21st century that resonated with participants now continuing to walk through the doors of Life/Work Direction.

As I turned 77—that seventh-year birthday again!—realization dawned that I would benefit from being more identified with a special “orchestra” of which I was clearly a part. I decided to enter the Shalem Program of Spiritual Guidance to become acquainted with the varieties of music possible in this vocation.

I learned the underlying themes of the music I was playing in my work as Spiritual Companion in my Poustinia* room at Life/Work Direction. I grasped the necessary harmonies, but simultaneously discovered serendipitous places for dissonance, and times for



dystonic intervals.



Above all, I embraced the necessity of the musical rest—silence. Even John Cage’s daring *Four Minutes and 30 Seconds of Silence* took on new significance. So much more happens either alone or with another when we are still.

**Poustinia—a Russian word referring to a place set aside for silence—and often, solitude. it may be a hut in the wilderness, or a room in a city apartment, or just a space set apart within a room anywhere.*

80 to 90

Listening more closely to the Symphonic Conductor as the musical tones are allowed to linger, then fade over time—reverberating in a host of new ways.

The 80 marker forced me to recognize that I must now modify the tempo of the music, and recognize the reasons for the “rest” signature beside the quarter notes and arpeggios. I joined a Health Club; I let a surgeon replace my left knee; I began sorting through my trove of accumulated writings.

After publishing Life/Work Direction’s story in a book, *Intricately Woven*, the time came for “recessional chords” to be struck, and a collaborative process began to help me release some of my tasks and roles, so that we could welcome new younger voices into the chorus. I developed an interest in the stages of aging—eager to apply our cherished philosophy of “lifelong learning” to this rapidly growing age cohort bubbling up in the culture.

Someone gave me these lines recently:

I Am Not Old

*I am not old...she said
I am rare.
I am the standing ovation
At the end of the play.
I am the retrospective
Of my life as art
I am the hours
Connected like dots
Into good sense
I am the fullness
Of existing.
You think I am waiting to die...
But I am waiting to be found
I am a treasure.
I am a map.
And these wrinkles are
Imprints of my journey
Ask me anything.*

- Samantha Reynolds

90-100

It is now time for someone else to compose this tune. For myself, I only intend to sing it—a bit off-key at times, but with fervency and adjusted volume (for the hard of hearing).