

“The problem was that I wasn’t equal to the task.”

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“Trombones”

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The old joke about how do you get to Carnegie Hall now can be rephrased as how do you get to Danville? Practice, man, practice. Years of talent honed by practice were on display the other week when internationally celebrated trombonists came to town for a series of special concerts. The concert we attended was the Faculty Recital of this International Trombone Summit. The five professional trombonists, accompanied by an equally accomplished pianist, performed twelve pieces, ten of which showcased individual talent. A composition by Gounod was featured for the first time in the United States. The faculty recital included the world premiere of the locally composed “Fanfare for 5 Trombones.”

My only wish was that I could have appreciated the trombone performances with a better ear for music. Forget ‘better.’ Any ear would do. I envy those who demonstrate any hint of musical talent. How can it be that all the women in our family are fantastic, gifted singers? The men, however, are not. The Andrews pew at the back of the Fanwood Presbyterian Church received many a turned head and chuckle. After my second Sunday leading worship at Grove Church, the choir director took me aside and suggested I could step away from the microphone during the hymns. Her honest humor was one of the reasons I loved serving at Grove. In my first congregation, I exasperated the organ tuner so much that he began acting like Moe from the Three Stooges dealing with Curly. He griped how the piano tuner wasn’t tuning the piano properly. He spent half an hour trying to get me to hear the difference. I couldn’t.

My musical deficiency has been infamous for decades. Reality first arrived at a first grade concert when we played our flutophones for our parents. There’s a concert they must have looked forward to attending – Lord, what parents endure for the sake of their children. Four first grade classroom playing squealing flutophones. How many parents brought earplugs? Just before we began, the music teacher came up to me and leaned over. She whispered: “Pretend.” The next reality revelation took place in third grade when all children were invited to learn to play an instrument. Homemaker mom accompanied me to the school assembly where they showcased the different instruments. Prokofiev’s “Peter and the Wolf” comes to mind. I fell in love with the cello, mayhaps because of its melancholy tone. Despite what I could only suppose were my parents’ private reservations about my talent, they made sure I had the opportunity. They supported me wanting to try, just as they had with Larry wanting to learn to play the drums and Ricky the trumpet. We could afford renting the instrument. We had the means to help third grade me transport the instrument. We had the space where I could practice the instrument without two brothers and two sisters whining. We even owned a RCA cabinet record player where I could listen to mom’s collection of classical music.

My circumstances were such that I had the opportunity to become the next great cellist, as great as Pablo Casals. The problem was that I wasn’t equal to the task. Three months later the string music teacher thought it best I stopped holding the rest of the class back, three girls learning the violin. Not all, one comes to realize, are equally gifted. Equality in chances is one thing, equality in abilities is altogether another. I’ve begun to wonder if at LaGrande Elementary School there was some nascent

Pablo Casals or Yo-Yo-Ma who could have become a master cellist if only they had the opportunities and privileges I had.

The real trick is in helping each other have the chance to discover their talents and be able to develop them. Consider all the talent we can experience in just this little county. We can experience such gems as those terrific trombonists who visited our region, we can enjoy amazing home-grown talent. An interesting, indeed, haunting study would be to enlarge upon how the local alumni association tracks our school graduates so we can hear which of our graduates have been able to discover and use their talents, whether in the arts, sciences, trades, business, military, sports, agriculture, religion, government, just to name a few areas. Who gets the chance, who doesn't, and why?

At least I had the chance to try. Even though I failed mastering the cello, my failure shaped my journey in trying to figure out where other talents lay.