

The Vintage Voice

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The Parable of the Talents Revisited

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When I was ten years old, my mother sent me down the boulevard clutching a dollar bill to meet with my piano teacher. Under Miss Smith's stern tutelage I learned the difference between a base clef and a treble clef, and how to play with two hands. After each lesson, she wrote in my little brown notebook the material to be practiced in *John Brown's Level One, Elementary Piano Book*. Through the years, my parents continued to support my lessons, going to great lengths to be sure that I spent at least one half-hour each day in tedious practice until, at the end of my high school years, I accomplished Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" and played it in a recital.

Since I was not extraordinarily gifted, it was a struggle, but I played duets with my mother, and heard my father's bass rumble at my ear when I made a special effort to play for him his favorite, "The Bells of St. Mary's."

During my college years, piano playing, of necessity, took a back seat, but when my husband Jack became an ordained clergyman and couldn't afford to pay an organist in his tiny mission church, I took up the study of the pipe organ. By that time, we had brought our four children into the world. The youngest, at sixteen months, sat beside me on the organ bench, entertaining the congregation by unexpectedly performing her own tunes on the pedals by walking up and down.

When Jack passed away, I was taken from my home, leaving behind my piano and stacks of piano and organ music. I went to live in an assisted living facility and began another chapter in my life. Among the memorabilia I brought with me were Jack's copy of the *Armed Forces Hymnal*, my *Oxford Book of Carols* and *The Hymnal 1940*, which comprised my musical library. I discovered an old upright piano and began to play hymns every morning. Because I am arthritic, my fingers are sometimes stiff and sore, and I couldn't always stretch an octave, but my doctor applauded my efforts. I found that piano playing is not only good for the soul, but therapeutic as well.

As time wore on, I gathered a small audience of residents and staff who told me how much they appreciated hearing their favorite songs once again. One man brought me his own collection of worn and tattered hymnals. Among them I discovered an intriguing book that was ecumenical in scope, and my musical horizons broadened. I began to organize the hymns into different categories: folk tunes and Afro-American melodies, Catholic hymns, Jewish hymns,

compositions from Hayden and Bach to Sibelius, and lots of Sunday school hymns. Eventually, I graduated to the baby grand piano in the living room and was formally scheduled on the calendar of events to play for the other residents. I was richly rewarded by applause and words of gratitude. “When can we do this again?” they asked.

“The Parable of the Talents,” in the Gospel of St. Matthew, has become increasingly significant to me. I have been blessed in that when God was handing out talents, he gave me three — music, drawing, and writing. I use my musical talent, such as it is, to share my love for others — guiding and encouraging through my piano. What about the notes I sometimes miss? The four note chords that sometimes shrank to three? “They’ll never be noticed,” advised a nurse, “so long as you play the melody.”

Gradually, I have compiled a fairly respectable repertoire. My library of hymnals has slowly grown as I researched beloved tunes for other residents of my home, providing memories of bygone days and Sunday school and family gatherings around the piano — happier days for many who now need wheelchairs and canes.

“Are you still playing the piano?” asks my doctor at each visit, knowing that my progress at the piano is a barometer of my arthritis. When residents applaud my efforts, I am grateful for this way to keep my talent, however small it may seem to me, alive, and for the opportunity to share my love of “spiritual songs” with others, regardless of religious affiliation. When I play I, too, remember by gone days and feel as if my Jack is back with me through these songs that have become prayers. I have not hidden my talent away, and it has grown and developed into a special ministry.

Everyone has talents, though they are not always obvious. To make the most of hidden talents, one must continually work. “Use it or lose it,” is just another way of explaining the richness of the “Parable of the Talents.”



In addition to her study of hymnody, Janet is writing her memoirs and has exhibited her growing collection of decorated Easter eggs. She tries to find time to walk, water her plants, feed the birds, and retreat to an upstairs “studio” to create pictures in pastels. Her most recent challenge has been learning to send and receive e-mail. Janet has four children and eight-going-on-nine amazing grandchildren.