

A Traumatic Transcendental Experience

Like one condemned to the gallows, I mounted the well-worn steps leading to the suspended loft. The choir loft, an isolated, lonely place akin to purgatory, an existence between God in His heaven and man bound to earth, was to be where I faced the terrible specter of technology, even technology now centuries old.

Only within the past week had I received my sentence: "You must play the organ at church next Sunday," declared my piano teacher, Sister Fabiola, a nun who would not be denied. She-Who-Must-Be-Obedied apparently had no awareness of the technology gap between a piano and a pipe organ, which I estimated to span several light years! Had she never seen the silent movie version of "The Phantom of the Opera"? Surely she would have noticed the array of stops and levers, the dual ivory-laden keyboards, and the grid of foot pedals consuming the attentions of the phantom! How could an inexperienced, fearful, 13-year old possibly master five hymns and sung responses in five days time, much less this terrible, complex mechanism?

And, what type of spirit being could have inspired my mother to then send my younger brother, Jon, to church with me to witness this horrifying event? Is fulfilling a 7-year-old boy's Sunday obligation truly of such eternal importance that Jon, so innocent and trusting, had to be witness to The Fall?

So, I ascended the steep, narrow stairwell with only shadows lighting my way, a foreboding sense of a sure and sudden descent to depths unknown building with each faltering step. Emerging from the tomblike stairwell, Jon and I entered the long, narrow place of judgment, the choir loft. Directly ahead of us lay the dreaded, yet mandatory tool, the pipe organ console. The bare, solid oak choir benches to our left and the formidable, dark oak banister to our right held us captive as we walked the 25-foot path to the console. The waist-high barrier at our right hand overlooked the massive sanctuary below and crouched beneath the expansive, vaulted ceilings, denying with all finality any intercessions for help from either heaven or earth.

Diminutive in comparison to the vertically positioned, dual, 21-pipe cylinders that would reveal the true depth or dearth of my dexterity and keyboard skills, the organ console slept quietly until awakened to work according to God's design and purpose. A hard, wooden bench alone supported the commissioned musical agent. Once perched atop the unyielding bench, the musician was faced with a myriad of controls, keyboards, and pedals, all holding the promise of divine melodies, but only if properly and deftly coordinated. So unlike the piano keyboard with three foot pedals, only one of which the advanced beginner-intermediate player would ever have need to employ!

It was here, at this altar, that I took my place. The blessed, little Jon to my right, the Divine above, and the faceless, nameless faithful below in the sanctuary. As with one voice, the 200 reverent parishioners that day communicated one simple mandate to me, an anxious, ill-prepared 8th grader, that being nothing short of the musical perfection fit for the house of God!

I stumbled through the opening song. I played the responses to the Scripture readings without breathing. I steeled myself to face the offertory hymn. I hurried through the next set of responses. All the while, my heart raced, my blood pressure soared, my breathing became difficult, labored, fitful.

And then, the time came.

I placed my hands on the keyboard and lead the congregation into the Communion hymn. Soon my arms were shaking as my fingers trembled on the keys. Did my quaking arms give rise to those dizzy digits, or did

the shuddering originate from those little, inept fingers, the shock waves then coursing through the rest of my body? Whatever the sequence, I was in position for a transcendental experience.

Midway through the Communion hymn, during the most personally sacred time of the service, the time when the true believer is deep in fellowship with his or her God, I blacked out. I didn't faint; I just lost contact with who I was, where I was ... with what I was doing! I was looking directly at the music but I saw no notes, no staff, no verses!

"Why did you stop? Start playing! Start playing the song," Jon cried, perceiving that something was terribly amiss.

"I don't know where I am. I've lost my place in the music. I don't know what to play," I uttered from the dark pit of the lost.

"Play! Start playing," Jon pleaded again in hushed tones.

In my trance-like state, I could see the entire congregation, in one accord and in the unity of the Spirit, turn their eyes not heavenward, but backward and at a 30° - 45° incline! A holy hush existed before the Communion hymn began, but the silence that followed the abrupt interruption of the musical flow of heavenly mysteries was deafening! Here in this place of eternal forgiveness, I knew that none would be forthcoming from the offended believers.

I begged Jon to show me where I ought to be in the music. I implored him to deliver me out of this terrible trial! With unceasing prayer and supplication, I asked a 2nd grader to read words of hope and victory embedded within musical notation! It was regrettable that we weren't singing a hymn entitled, "See Spot Run." At least then, I might have been able to count on human intervention!

After what seemed to be time immemorial, life and light were mercifully restored to me. I found my place in the music and resumed playing, this time under what seemed to be a surreal anointing of peace and transcendence! My much-relieved younger charge re-entered a place of comfort, spirit, soul, and body, now that I was once more in control of my faculties and limbs. The faithful returned their gaze to the dedicated altar, leaving me to offer up divine worship at whatever spiritual (and earthly) level possible, now that perfection for this service had been lost, all thanks be to ... well, um ... me!

Sister Mary Don't-Even-Think-About-Trying-to-Get-Out-of-This scheduled me to play for Sunday Mass for three more years. While I haven't experienced any similar events since that time, today, as an adult, I insist on playing the acoustic piano - no digitized, electric, synthesized keyboards for me. I prefer my technology simple - strings, keys, hammers, and pedals, the makings of a plain old spinet piano. I don't require an instrument of Gothic proportions or output to command God's attention.

Users of technology ought to appropriately match devices to his or her skill. While technologies may appear similar, the user is advised to be self-aware, knowing, appreciating, and accommodating his or her own preferences and abilities to achieve the best results from any given device.

May the God of all mercy and grace look down upon us, the users of technology! Amen.

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