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“If I Could Die Poor”: In Celebration of the Giving Life

“When I heard music, I heard names of notes. I didn’t know how rare it was; it was something I thought everyone else knew,” my uncle, who wishes to remain anonymous, explains about how he first discovered his ear for music. Though the family story I’d always heard was that he had said of a car horn at age five, “That’s an E,” and had been proved correct, he doesn’t share this story. Whether it’s his modesty or poor memory, I do not know. He does share a less descriptive version of the story: “Once, when I was playing, I must have been five, I was kidding and saying, ‘You keep playing that C note.’ Whoever I was talking to at the time realized something that I never realized, and that was, ‘How did you know that?’ My response was, ‘Doesn’t everybody know that?’ Nevertheless, the discovery of his ear for music has earned my uncle the label of prodigy and the obligation to lead the music at more wedding ceremonies and church events than he could ever desire.

My uncle is an example of how some things in life are simply given to us. Yet, as his life testifies, it’s not so much what we have, but what we give. I have watched him give his entire life away— big things like his money, time, and his right to marry, and smaller things (to him) like cars, lawn mowers, and cellos. One of my earliest memories was of my first Christmas back in the US when my uncle gathered all my cousins in town (about 20 in all) and brought us to the toy store in his big van. When we got there, he told us we could each pick out any gift we wanted. I remember the incredible thrill and fierce contemplation that went into picking out a stationery

set, a gift that would help set a love for writing in my heart, even at age five. Through the years, I have been the recipient many times over of my uncle's generosity, from music lessons to automotive repairs. When asked about giving, he simply says, "If the need is right, and the attitude is right, give it away. Don't calculate it." If his life were a song, this would be the chorus, repeated over and over.

One of the most remarkable gifts my uncle has given away has been music lessons. Though he started giving free lessons as early as his college years, for the last 20 years, his focus has specifically been on giving away music lessons to the kids at his church, Faith Bible Fellowship. So twice a year, in 12-week cycles (12 weeks on/12 weeks off), my uncle teaches roughly 20 students a range of instruments from banjo to dobro to harmonica to violin. A handful of additional teachers (mostly former students) take on others, bringing the total number of students reached each semester up to the mid-thirties. "I reason with them if they can give me 30 minutes a day, five days per week for 12 weeks, then I can teach them a musical talent. I work with each person at their own pace," my uncle explains of the expectations he has for the students.

Though my uncle offers the opportunity to learn music completely free of charge—from the instrument, to the sheet music, his time, and even a \$50 cash prize awarded at the recital to the student who wins the drawing for most consistent practice efforts—it is not without cost to him. Owner of a commercial and residential painting business he started in the mid-'80s, and frequently saddled with more work than he knows what to do with, he leaves work each Monday and Tuesday as early as 2 or 3 p.m. so that he is ready to begin music lessons at 4 p.m. He provides each student with a 20-minute session, though he's often willing to spend more time if needed. He teaches on into the evening, at least until 8 or 9 p.m., without even pause for dinner,

unless, as it frequently, though not formally, occurs, a parent or student brings him a warm plate of food, fresh from their own family dinner table. This occurrence is exactly what my uncle means when he quotes the proverb, “If you learn to give, you will never have to borrow.”

Perhaps what makes the music lessons so unique is my uncle’s philosophy of success and his ability to look past results or reward. “My intent was never to create top notch musicians. I wanted to teach them the skills, I wanted them to find expression, wanted it to be more of an eternal thing. If it [the music lessons] encourages someone, then it’s successful.” Of his own accord, my uncle brought up the topic of hardship and failure. “The real hardship,” he said, “is not doing something for the result. If someone were to write about my life and say, ‘What is your position in life?’ [they would find] there’s nothing in this job that gives me any credential because it’s just hearsay. I can’t say, ‘I’m the chief teacher at so-and-so.’ No, there’s no title at all. There’s no award that can be given, so you have to look past that. Some people do get a title. Some people do it for a job, and that’s right and good. But the eternal is best.”

My uncle is quick to point out his views on self-sacrifice are nothing he has invented, but something he watched many others model for him, particularly his family. He grew up as the son of a preacher in the Ozark foothills in the 1960s and ‘70s, the sixth in the lineup of eight kids. Though money was scarce, somehow my grandparents managed to scrape enough together to purchase a piano and pay for lessons for him and his older sister Ruth, the two children that showed the most musical promise. The piano lessons stopped in the sixth grade when the family moved, but he was able to pick them up again while he attended Markhoma Bible Academy, a boarding high-school in Oklahoma, where he immersed himself in music theory and traveled with the choir. My uncle described how his love for music grew when he realized the power that lyrics could hold and the joy of making music in a group setting: “Words added greatly to the

meaning of music and could not only express an emotion, but a truth; I was burdened to learn [music] so that I could use it in groups, particularly in a camping experience.” Though he strongly considered music as a career, he ultimately decided against it. “I saw how musicians were—dead, closed out from the world. I didn’t want that lifestyle.”

After high school, he worked his way through Moody Bible Institute to earn a Biblical Studies certificate. My uncle explains how his sacrificial lifestyle today was inspired by the anonymous financial assistance he received during his college years. “Often, I would go to my mailbox; I would be at my desperate end, thinking, ‘I either pay this bill or leave school.’ Lord knows I tried to work. We’re all lazy, but I tried my best. I’d just go to my box, and there it’d be. \$100. No one ever said anything. I never knew.”

Upon graduating from Moody, my uncle returned to Arkansas, where he earned a degree in education from UCA. His first job out of school he taught shop classes at North Little Rock High School, a 3-year stint that allowed him to establish relationships with students he still maintains contact with to this day. He describes his philosophy that informs his lifestyle: “Use something that you know, that you are fairly good at, and you may never be the best—there’s always going to be someone better. Make it where your life can offer something to somebody. The idea is that everyone has to figure out how they can be useful.”

I’ve watched my uncle hammer out sacrifice year after year, in a small, quite literally handmade church set off the beaten path in Sherwood. His hands in a leathered-state well beyond calloused, he offers them up. When it’s not music, it’s mechanics. When asked how many students he’s taught throughout years, he simply says, “It’s hard to say, probably a couple hundred.” Yet, anyone who knows him knows what a low estimate this is, for his efforts in music

alone now reach into the second and third generations of teachers who give away lessons. Thousands is probably more like it.

His students are a diverse bunch, young and old, rich and poor, privileged and without. The recital, always in June or December, reveals all—the soaring heights of the good (those who have put in the practice time) the panic-stricken struggle of the bad (those who are bitten with anxiety), and the defeated crash of the ugly (those who failed to meet the minimum practicing requirements). One student, Niki, has gone on to receive praise as a contestant on *American Idol*; others, a clan of four folksy young sisters incorporated as REAL entertainment, are well known in the River Market, Branson, Missouri, and on YouTube. Another one of his former students, my cousin Jody, who began piano at age 12, lived in Mexico last year, where she taught music theory classes in Spanish and took on seven students for private lessons.

“Hello?” He answers his phone. “Tire split? Where are you? OK, I’ll be there.” One hour into our interview, my uncle receives a panicked call from one of his former music students whose car has broken down. Ironically, this was only minutes after my uncle had described his main interest in mechanics was to be able to give away the service to people in need. But he was honest, “This isn’t exactly what I had in mind for a Sunday afternoon, but here I go.”

Before he dashed out, he offered a concession: “It’s an odd way to live, and I’m sure there are flaws all over it. But it’s the way I’ve chosen, and so far it’s worked. Being single, that’s the blessing. If I were married, my wife would say, ‘You gotta charge for that, so we can eat tonight.’ I understand that. But I’ve been put in the perfect situation. Lord knows that I have enough to eat; I need to stop!” A wry laugh, then he looked at me again, serious this time. I notice the wrinkles forming around his eyes and forehead, his solid forearms with paint speckles

on the strands of hair. He's given it all. "It's a higher way to live, I promise you," he says. "The cool part is if could I die poor, then the story would be true."