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Introduction

Regina, Saskatchewan, was in the throes of the Great Depression when I was confronted at the age of sixteen with the stern necessity of making a living. Looking at the available options for young women in those days, I faced closed doors. What about becoming a nurse? One had to be eighteen to enter training. A teacher? One had to be eighteen to enter Teacher's College, then known as Normal School. What about office work? Even if one acquired skills by taking a business course, only persons with experience had a hope of being hired. What was left?

At least half of my sixteen years had been filled with violin lessons, piano lessons, orchestras, glee clubs, recitals and lots of exams. Exams! Here was something. Having been precocious as well as very active, I had acquired an associate degree from Toronto Conservatory of Music (ATCM, later known as ARCT). Holding this enabled me to teach. Hmm—teach violin? “Well,” I said to myself, “okay, maybe just for a couple of years, until something else comes along.” In this undramatic way I embarked on what was to be a fifty-year journey.

In the 1930s violin pupils were a rarity. Piano pupils were plentiful. This forced me to work for a piano teaching degree matching the violin degree from the Toronto Conservatory of Music. My decision was purely economic, but it proved to be fruitful in other ways. When I

discovered that piano pedagogy was far ahead of that for the violin, I was moved to search for improvements for the violin field. I even created a few improvements myself.

Meanwhile, the years blurred by with pupils, exams, festivals, recitals, and summer courses. I liked the summers best. Each summer found me in some big city. There I could study with a master teacher, attend great concerts, and explore huge music stores in my ongoing search for better violin material.

The years went by in this manner and then it was the 1950s. Regina's music life experienced a shift. The University of Saskatchewan, based at Saskatoon, decided it was time to have a Regina campus. As a result, the Regina Conservatory of Music became affiliated with the university. I, along with several other senior teachers in the conservatory, was offered a university appointment. My task would be to direct all junior violin work and to teach forty hours a week. This was a reasonable work load for me and I was delighted.

Then there was another shift. As a member of the university faculty I was asked to be a part of the University String Quartet. Since it already had a fine cellist and two violin-playing men who were determined to be first and second violins, all they needed was a violist. My invitation to be part of the quartet hinged on my learning to play the viola. This was no small task, but my enthusiasm for quartet playing led me to say yes.

This opened up one of the most exciting periods of my life. As I developed viola skills I became principal viola in the symphony, the string orchestra, and the opera orchestra. All of this was in addition to the demands from the quartet. The quartet performed frequent concerts as well as a weekly half-hour TV show and a series of CBC broadcasts. This necessitated much private practice and quartet rehearsals as well as rehearsals for every other group with which I was involved. This was in addition to the forty hours of teaching each week.

I was swamped. I could not seem to cut down anywhere. At last, with British Columbia beckoning, this Prairie Chicken fled the Regina scene and began anew in British Columbia.

The start of my professional life in Victoria was mercifully slow. I was soon playing in the Victoria Symphony and I had a smattering of pupils, both violin and piano, which kept growing.

In 1964 my preoccupation with improving violin pedagogy brought me to learn of Shinichi Suzuki. This revolutionary Japanese violin teacher and a group of his students had visited the Juilliard School of Music the year before. That prestigious place had been enthralled with him. He was now about to do his first North American workshop at Oberlin University. I heard about it Saturday and arrived for the start Tuesday morning.

For the next three weeks, for five hours a day, I

absorbed what Suzuki had to teach. By the end of that time I had turned a corner. In him I found the kindred spirit I needed. Many teaching techniques for pupils that I had invented, he was using plus many more I would have used had I thought of them. Here was a supreme teacher, tirelessly searching for better ways. Even more important, he had this uncanny gift of expressing each fresh idea in such a form that a child could understand it instantly. I saturated myself with his teaching—violinistically, psychologically, and philosophically. None of it felt foreign to me. Rather it felt in tune with my own ideas, but Suzuki went still further. When the workshop was over I knew just where I was going and what I had to do.

At that time, no one in Victoria knew anything about Suzuki's work. Since some of my procedures now reflected his style, I was looked on with distrust. Pioneering is never easy, and it was not easy for me. It took several years for my new approach to be accepted, but when it was the response was like an explosion. Now, after my period of calm following the Saskatchewan period, I was again inundated with work. Though I taught only violin, the hours were filled to overflowing. That this was more exciting than tiring was due, I think, to the perspective I now had—a new awareness of what it really meant to be an educator. I had acquired a background from which I could put this new awareness into practice.

From my first beginnings in teaching I was a schoolgirl with no vision—a schoolgirl who aspired only to “teach for a year or two until something else came along.” Gradually, it seems, some vision did come. The years brought many twists and turns, many hills and valleys. I had a few opportunities for “something else.” Why did I hang on? I think quite early I was caught in the fascination of what teaching can really do. But the full potential of this was not revealed to me all at once. It was many years before the entire realization could unfold.

My greatest learning as an educator began only when I started working with the very young—four-, five-, and six-year-olds. At last, I was mature enough to give them what they needed, and they rewarded my efforts a hundredfold. Their transparent natures taught me psychological and spiritual truths beyond what I could have learned in any other way.

It is my hope that with these little stories, I am able to share something of my experiences.

Prologue: Does the Teaching Enervate or Vitalize?

The world in which we live presses upon us in stressful ways, demanding that we exhort children to achieve higher and higher standards. It is difficult for teachers and parents living under this bombardment to resist its coloring their attitudes and consequently their behavior toward their own children. It takes watchfulness and certain acts of will to hold to an additional and different set of values—values that will keep children healthy and happy and that, paradoxically, also lead to a “high standard.”

These questionable values that press in on us so powerfully and so constantly did influence my earliest teaching years. I thought it was allowable to teach mentioning only those things that had to be “fixed.” I’m ashamed to admit that I actually thought it unnecessary to remark about the things that didn’t need fixing. It is no

The Dark and the Light

People used to ask me, “Where did you get your training?” Perhaps they expected an answer such as Toronto Conservatory of Music or McGill University, but it amused me to answer rather differently. I spoke out of a vivid memory of two childhood teachers whose effect on me was so powerful and so contrasted that their influence stayed with me throughout my teaching years. By exposure to these two teachers, I learned how deeply children can think and how indelibly they carry the effects of the way they are treated.

My first learning along these lines came at the age of nine through a violin teacher, a dour Scot. His patience and the time he was willing to give me were very limited.

It did not help either of us that I seldom prepared a lesson adequately. It was no wonder I approached each encounter with a premonition of impending disaster.

One lesson, I brought him a shoebox full of crocuses.