

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

2009 BYU ORGAN WORKSHOP

Keynote Address by Bonnie L. Goodliffe

August 4, 2009

Poco a poco

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am humbled at the prospect of speaking to you today. I pray that I may say something helpful to each of you.

I was in my senior year at BYU when this building first opened. I walked by the construction site almost every day before it was completed. I spent three additional years roaming these halls as a graduate student. I have many sweet memories tied to this building. Most of the special faculty members that I knew are gone now. Even people I went to school with who were on the faculty are retired now. People younger than I am are running the department. This continues to astonish me. I still think of myself as being about 29, maybe 31.

I feel that I have been very fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time to have had the experiences that I have had. I have had excellent teachers, indispensable family encouragement and support, wonderful mentors, and unlikely opportunities. I never expected to be able to spend so much time in musical activities. I have, for some reason, been given the chance to do many of the things that I would have thought to be impossible.

I believe that one of the things which has made these experiences possible is my topic today. Let me illustrate with three seemingly unrelated items. I hope you will see the connection by the time I finish this talk, or I will be very embarrassed.

#1 Some years ago I read a Dear Abby column which had a great influence on me. It must have affected many others too, judging by the letters which were printed as a result. The column has been re-printed numerous times. It deals with a decision to go to medical school, but that is irrelevant here.

"Dear Abby: I am a 36-year-old college dropout whose lifelong ambition was to be a physician. I have a very good job selling pharmaceutical supplies, but my heart is still in the practice of medicine. I do volunteer work at the local hospital on my time off, and people tell me I would have been a wonderful doctor.

"If I go back to college and get my degree, then go to medical school, do my internship and finally get into the practice of medicine, it will take me seven years. But Abby, in seven years I will be 43 years old! What do you think?"

(Signed) "Unfulfilled in Philly"

(She answers) "Dear Unfulfilled: And how old will you be in seven years if you don't do it?"

#2 Years ago I saw an article in the newspaper about making lists to accomplish certain goals. Since I am a professional-caliber list maker, this appealed to me in a big way. Here is the gist: make a list of 100 things you want to do. (This is harder than you might think.) They can be things to buy, places to go, projects to complete, whatever. Then start working on them. Cross off each item as you complete it, and replace it with a new goal. I have my list in a spiral notebook, with 25 lines to a sheet. I draw a single line through the listing and date it when I complete an item, so I have a record of what I have done. Then I use that number for a new item. I, of course, have made several sub-lists grouping my 100 things into categories such as simple purchases, large-scale travel, household improvements, things which require time but no money, that sort of thing. One of the sub-categories I call "poco a poco – things which can be done a little at a time."

#3 1993 was the centennial year of the Salt Lake Temple. As you may know, it took 40 years to build. I never doubted this fact; I just didn't consider the implications. During that centennial year, the temple construction was talked about at General Conference, written about in church magazines and various other books, documented in a special church motion picture, and featured in a wonderful exhibit at the church museum of history and art. Some of the details of the building problems finally made me realize what a stupendous project the temple was. I was stunned to learn that the entire foundation had to be dug up and re-done after the episode with Johnson's Army. Cracks were found which necessitated virtually starting over. Elder Boyd K. Packer's conference talk that April related that it took an ox team approximately one week to leave the Salt Lake Valley, arrive at the granite quarry, load one single block of granite, and travel back to the temple site in Salt Lake City. One week if nothing went wrong. If there were problems, of course it took longer than one week. I'm afraid that I would have found the situation so discouraging that I would have just given up on the whole thing. I would have said, "this is hopeless; we won't live long enough to see this temple built." Or "what a crazy idea; any realistic person can see that this is just a pipedream." Fortunately for the church, I wasn't there. Fortunately a prophet was in charge, a prophet who wasn't limited by what was reasonable, or logical, or possible within an allotted time period. He just had the vision. And a mere forty years later, the temple was completed.

Now to bring these three ideas together. I had realized that large-scale projects, including musical ones, could be effectively worked on a little at a time, but I had applied the concept only to known, near-term performances. I hadn't envisioned how effective the idea could be with long-term musical goals.

I belong to a group which calls itself the Piano Club. It was in existence long before I moved to Salt Lake City, and I am one of the younger members. It is an informal group of ladies who meet once a month during the school year and perform for each other. Sometimes, and by some people, the performances are very polished; some are less polished. We try things out on each other, sometimes before we are actually ready. Over the years I have played an assortment of things, mostly dredged up from my student days. But in 1985, the Bach year, I decided to revive the Bach B flat partita, which I like very much and which I had performed in high school. Many years before. I did just one movement each month. I really wasn't practicing the piano much at the time. I enjoyed it so much, I decided to learn the second partita, which I had never completed. Then I did the third. And so on. So, in the spring of 1992 I realized that I had learned all six partitas and the overture in the French style. I hadn't really set out to do that; it just sort of happened. But it was like a revelation to me. One of my musical life goals was to

learn all the partitas. I hadn't really conceived of how or when that might happen. It was just a nebulous idea out there in space. But there it was, suddenly, done.

I did the French Suites next. Since that time, I have also completed the Well-tempered Clavier, Book 1; the Goldberg Variations; and the English suites. I am now working on the Well-tempered Clavier, Book 2.

Now it seems like almost nothing to learn just one movement of a Bach partita. Okay, that is an overstatement; a few of them are long and quite difficult, but most are just one or two pages. It is no gigantic accomplishment to learn one movement in a month. But the cumulative effect was remarkable to me. When I realized that I would complete the set, I thought of Abby's answer. How old would I have been in 1992 if I hadn't learned all the Bach partitas. I thought, "How many other musical things can I work on this way? How many non-musical things can I work on this way?" I came up with a long list (and sub-lists, of course.)

You may think that you are not interested in this type of commitment. But remember there is no penalty for not accomplishing all that you hope for. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Count only the successful efforts, and forget the rest. The times you miss do not lessen the accomplishments of the past or the future. Close the door on any past lapses or failures, and move forward from wherever you are. You don't have to commit never to miss a practice session in order to have practicing pay off for you.

Ongoing diligence will improve your abilities. Whatever your musical circumstances, you can learn new things. Look for instance at the 1985 hymnbook. Are you familiar with all the newer things in it, or is it still like the sealed portion of the golden plates to you? Could you learn one new hymn or mark one pedal part every month?

How old will you be in 5 years if you don't make such an effort? If you don't use any initiative in your music calling? If you just squeak by week after week, collecting ideas and possibilities, but never applying them. The days and months and years will pass by just the same. But, one step a week or even one a month adds up to a fair distance down the road after a while. The cumulative effect can be impressive. But it does require a decision to make the effort, a decision about what direction to take.

I have long been inspired by a statement of Elder Neal Maxwell's. He wrote, "eternal things are always done in the process of time. . . . Direction is initially more important than speed." (Of One Heart. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975, p.35) At least most of the time, try to be going in the right direction. I also like to remind myself of Alma's admonition "by small and simple things are great things brought to pass." (Alma 37:6)

With regard to inching forward in the right direction, I hope you will allow me to share some things I have learned about preparation and attitude.

I believe very strongly in careful preparation of your music. Thorough preparation is probably my best skill. It has saved me on many occasions. I know that if I work through every conceivable problem mentally, beforehand, I can overcome or eliminate the great majority of problems. I can even overcome a certain amount of performance anxiety ahead of time.

Keep in mind that thorough preparation cannot be forced. I like this comment by the violinist Itzhak Perlman: "If you learn something fast you often forget it just as fast.

You need to give it time, let yourself grow with it, let it become a part of you. I don't like practicing under pressure. I like to give a piece about a year, doing ten minutes here, twenty minutes there, letting the whole thing mature organically." ("All Play is Work" (an interview with Itzhak Perlman by Jeremy Siepmann) BBC Music Magazine, May 1995, p. 22) Perlman refers to this as the "baking" method – putting something in the oven and coming back later when it's ready to take out. A slow process, much like building the Salt Lake Temple one granite block at a time.

In your performances, do not rely on your emotions. Emotion is not a legitimate substitute for technical skill. Do not rely on inspiration. The Lord can magnify your abilities but not if you have done nothing first. Remember that Nephi asked the Lord where to go to find ore. He didn't ask the Lord to drop a set of ship-building tools into his tent. Even in church service, the angels may attend you, but they do not practice for you.

I have a philosophy about working in church music which has been very successful for me. It is this: Take all the blame yourself. Never accuse anyone else of causing poor results. If your choir director never gives you music ahead of time, perhaps you could say to him or her, "I wish I had the skills to be able to do justice to this without so much practice, but I am so far just unable to do it." If you don't get the hymns ahead of time, offer to choose them yourself. Offer to come to the music director's house to pick up the schedule. Ask which day you should telephone to find out what the music will be. If the musical numbers are inadequate or inappropriate, offer to line up some better ones. Don't complain unless you are prepared to do something constructive to improve the situation. Do everything in your power to be a positive influence: on the quality of the music, on the quality of the presentation, on the testimonies of those you work with, and on the spirituality of the worship service. Remember that sometimes the most positive thing you can do is keep quiet.

I would like to tell you two stories. True stories. A prominent citizen passed away. An equally prominent organist was asked to provide music at the funeral services. The organist arrived at the chapel, inspected the instrument, and declared it inadequate. The organist played the piano instead. I think this is a very sad story. I can hardly imagine any justification for such arrogance. I think it is a terrible insult to the grieving family. I have played some pretty poor instruments myself. I have played funeral music which I thought was quite inappropriate. But, I say, if the family wants it and the bishop approves it, then who am I to dictate to them? I have played – at funerals – *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, *When the Saints Go Marchin' In*, and even *Help Me Make it Through the Night*. Don't think that you are too good to play a particular instrument or a piece of music. Pride is a sin much worse than musical ignorance.

The second story happened to me. I took my organ shoes to a shoe repair shop to have the suede soles glued back on. I explained to the young woman who was helping me that I was an organist and the significance of the suede soles. She actually seemed rather interested. Finally she said, "Have you ever played anyplace really big? Like a baseball game?" I smiled and said, "No, I'm sorry. I guess I haven't."

If you find yourself thinking that you are quite accomplished, or quite important, or at least superior to those with less training and taste, remember the shoe repair shop. It will bring you back to reality.

On one of my morning walks I was thinking about this talk and about goals and accomplishments and what was really possible in this lifetime. I had this bizarre idea.

What if, in the next life, I don't get to work on all the things that I have been putting off until then. What if I get there, and there is a rule that I can only continue to work on projects that I have already started. What if I can't begin anything brand new? What would happen if I protested and showed a long list of all the music I was planning to learn and all the skills I was planning to develop and the gatekeeper angel asked for some evidence that those things are truly important to me. I am going to feel pretty terrible about all those things I didn't even try to accomplish--all those things on my list of 100 that just got shelved until I had that mythical chunk of free time. I am comforted to know that the Lord knows my heart and my mind, but what do my actions show?

I have for many years loved Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken". I like it even more since I learned Randall Thompson's musical setting of the text, which I played on my very first broadcast of Music and the Spoken Word in 1988. I would like to share it with you in closing.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

(A Pocket Book of Robert Frost's Poems, p.223. New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1963.)

For me, and perhaps for many of you, church music in general and playing the organ in particular have become the road taken, and it has made all the difference. I wish you success in all your musical ambitions, and I am grateful that we are travelling companions on that road.

Bonnie L. Goodliffe
August 4, 2009