

## *Halley's Comment*

**Paul Halley's Keynote address to the Plenary Session of the  
Royal Canadian College of Organist 2010 Convention, Victoria, BC**  
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### **The Examined Life**

Good morning. It is an honour to be here with all of you and it is a pleasure to be back in Victoria. I spent almost a year in this lovely city from the summer of 1976 through the spring of 1977 when I was an economics student at the University of Victoria and assistant organist at Christ Church Cathedral under Beal Thomas. That year was particularly interesting for me since along with my studies at the university and my work at the Cathedral I spent my first two months in Victoria living with the Butterfield family who are one of those great families that leave an indelible mark on one's personality. If you haven't moved in with the Butterfield family for an extended stay you haven't lived. At a time when I felt I needed a safe, secure and well-ordered environment they provided me with a level of wildly creative disorder that possibly saved my life.

During my year in Victoria I kept my mind alive with various activities. I had a jazz quartet of sorts. I rented a house on Piers Island which involved getting to and from the mainland in a 14' aluminum boat with a 6 hp outboard that would only move properly through the water if I lay down along the thwarts, facing forward and steering by shifting my body weight. Since I was filling the long night hours by playing lounge piano in a restaurant/bar in Swartz Bay, getting home to Piers Island at 2 AM by means of that conveyance proved especially fascinating. Perhaps it was this style of commuting that convinced me there was little future in lounge piano work and so I offered my talents to Greater Victoria as a taxi driver. My first fare resulted in my owing the cab company twenty-five cents and that experience sowed the early seeds of doubt in my mind regarding the place of taxi cabs in my career. It was during this period that I was offered the position of Organist & Choirmaster at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and I also got married. But I must get back to the beginning.

Prior to my arrival at St. Matthew's, Ottawa, as an 8-year-old probationary chorister I had arrived at Romford, England as a plump 10 lb newborn into a solid British working-class home with two Baptist parents, a piano, and a radio. Among the earliest influences in my life as a musician, two stand out. The first, although my recollection is dim since I would have been a year old, must have been hearing Queen Elizabeth's Coronation Service on the radio while my diaper was being changed. I think Parry's "I Was Glad" has informed most of my work as a composer – basically writing pieces for choir – preferably two or three of them simultaneously – and accompanying them with loud and reasonably complicated organ parts. The second major influence at this time was my father, who trained as a pianist at the Royal College of Music. I received from my father what might best be described as a mixed blessing, which was

the need to constantly question what one is doing with one's life – What is the point of this? Is it of any use? Is it true? To this day I continue to ask these questions.

When I was three, my father taught me my first piano piece – “Tea for Two”. He and my mother were card-carrying members of a sector of British society that I believe has, sadly, all but disappeared – the working-class intelligentsia. My parents and their friends seemed to spend much of their free time talking about politics, religion, economics, philosophy, education – never about shopping or health issues or life-styles. They did a great deal of singing around the piano. They were avid radio listeners – especially the “Goon Show” and later, “Beyond the Fringe”, and of course the BBC broadcasts of King's “Nine Lessons & Carols”. When these programs were on it was best for the younger element to possibly be seen but definitely not heard. I think these were the times when my listening skills were first developed.

I emphasize this aspect of my childhood because those influences are still very much with me. When my wife, Meg and I, and our six kids were living in Connecticut, a dinner never went by without good food, wine, heady conversations and often heated debates about the things that matter in life. And there was always a great deal of live music-making as well as deep listening to the radio or to CDs. And now that I am working at King's College in Halifax I find myself once again surrounded by teachers and students who take their collective education very seriously, whose opinions are considered and are debated. King's reminds me of G. K. Chesterton's counsel. “Let us, then, go upon a long journey and enter on a dreadful search. Let us, at least dig and seek till we have discovered our own opinions. This may spare us from the one thing that is infinitely more absurd and unpractical than burning a man for his philosophy. This is the habit of saying that his philosophy does not matter, and this is done universally in the twentieth century, in the decadence of the great revolutionary period.” That was written at the beginning of the twentieth century and is even more pertinent at the beginning of the twenty-first.

My family emigrated from England to Ottawa when I was five. I remember the new house rang with the sounds of Glenn Gould, Oscar Peterson and the ubiquitous King's College Cambridge. Soon I was sent off to piano lessons with teachers for whom “Tea for Two” did not constitute part of the canon. Eventually, at the age of eight, I found myself studying with Gerald Wheeler who was then the Organist & Choirmaster at St. Matthew's Anglican Church. Gerald wasn't just a fine director. He was also a savvy recruiter. Once Gerald had established himself in my parents' minds as the only viable piano teacher for their son he announced that he had a policy whereby any student of his who was a boy with an unchanged voice had to join his choir at St. Matthew's. I'm pretty sure this was a policy that he made up on the spot. In any case it placed my parents in a very difficult denominational position. As Baptists they knew that allowing their son to sing in an Anglican church choir was tantamount to sending him off to the Pope for indoctrination. But they also knew the training I would receive and the music I would sing were

not to be found in any of the non-conformist churches. Good sense prevailed, and I joined the choir.

My early days at St. Matthew's were filled with wonder and mystery. First of all there were the smells, novel smells to a kid from the suburban West End – like garlic, communion wine, old wood, the occasional incense and sweaty cassocks.

There were the sights; the church itself, which I thought at the time, was huge; the marvelous pipe organ with those horizontal trumpet pipes (inspired by the recently installed Hill, Norman & Beard at St. John's Cambridge); the sexton, who looked like a cross between Charlie Chaplin and Alfred Hitchcock, and his old tennis racquet that he always carried in case of bats. There was the tunnel under the church that led from the choir room all the way to Jefferson Hall and had so many hiding places in its nooks and alcoves and secret doors that I thought if I got lost it would have been days before anyone found me.

And there was the music. Gibbons, Tallis, Byrd, Victoria, Palestrina, Stanford, Howells, Britten – a whole new universe into which I leapt and never wanted to leave. And the boys, who were so different from the ones at the school I attended in the West End. These boys seemed simultaneously rough and sophisticated. And the men were so interesting to look at. Several were university professors. Many had beards. One was an actual voyageur, a real canoe-master, posing as a student. Some were recent arrivals from the treble section – their changed voices now qualifying them as “men”. It seemed to me that all the men under the age of eighteen looked like one or other of the Beatles. My sister acquired a deep and lasting taste for Evensong which puzzled me. I knew she wasn't remotely religious.

By the time I reached my senior year in the trebles, Gerald Wheeler had moved on to Christ Church Cathedral, Montreal, and his successor, Brian Law arrived in great style. Brian seemed awfully young to us older boys, but we couldn't deny he was extremely good and when he wasn't driving us like a coliseum charioteer, he was also a hell of a lot of fun. Brian was obsessed with getting the most vibrant and electric sound out of us that he possibly could. He used every trick in the book to achieve this, from an ice-cold stare to jumping around and flailing his arms in such a way that Leonard Bernstein could have taken his correspondence course. And he succeeded in developing what was one of the best choirs in the country at that time. Many years later, when I was at the Cathedral in New York, Brian brought the St. Matthew's choir down to sing Evensong. They blew everyone away. There wasn't a choir in New York City at that time that could sing the way they did.

When my voice changed about a year later, I became the assistant organist playing for all the services except for the occasional Festal Evensong when Ian Barber, an old friend of Brian's from the RSCM, would accompany the choir. Ian was a phenomenal accompanist – the kind who won't let a bar go by without a change in registration if it helps put the music across, all the while lending support to the choir and never taking his eyes off the conductor or his ears off the ensemble. I learned practically all I know about accompanying from Brian and Ian. It was

always crystal clear that my job on the organ was to make the choir sound terrific and give everyone the impression that they were attending a service at Westminster Abbey on a good day.

Brian was a taskmaster. If the Preces and Responses had gone sharp or flat, I had to adjust accordingly and play the Psalm chant in the new key, or there would be hell to pay after the service. If I was one millisecond out with the choir, I got the look. Forget wrong notes. And registration! The sounds had to be just so. Every crescendo, every diminuendo had to be seamless. I learned during those years how to make an organ sound like a musical, and not a mechanical instrument. It had to sing – just like the choir. And I had to learn oodles of repertoire, not just the organ pieces but all the great anthem accompaniments and the canticles, including Tippett's St. John's Service, which I memorized. A couple of years ago, Noel Edison and the Elora Festival Singers were recording a CD for Naxos. Noel, who is a genius, neglected to let me know what he had in mind for the first recording session. The tape was rolling when Noel announced to the choir that we would be doing the Bryan Kelly Mag & Nunc in C – you know, the slightly quirky "Caribbean" one? If I had had to sight-read that for the recording it would have involved several takes. As it turned out I had played it as a youngster at St. Matthew's and all those notes were still in the fingers 40 years later. That's the kind of learning I gained from St. Matthew's.

That choir under Brian's direction produced some amazing talent – Gerald Finley, Daniel Taylor, Matthew White amongst others. It gave countless men and boys the chance to engage with masterful composers not just by hearing about them but by singing their music with true understanding and, I think what's terribly important, it gave them the opportunity to sing that music within the context for which it was written – the liturgy of the church. Significantly, Brian himself has returned to his first love. After years spent conducting choral societies, chamber choirs, orchestras, operas and TV specials, he is now the Organist & Choirmaster at the Cathedral in Christchurch New Zealand where he has a wonderful choir of men & boys.

I have spent so much time talking about my St. Matthew's years because they constituted the most significant part of my "formal" education. Nothing else came close. And St. Matthew's is the reason the training of young musicians has been such a major part of my life to this day. The sad fact however is that when I was a chorister at St. Matthew's there were at least six other Men & Boys Choirs in Ottawa, including, of course the Cathedral Choir, our arch rivals. In fact we choirboys had a baseball league and a hockey league all of our own. St. Mark's would play St. Luke's who would play the Cathedral etc. Can you imagine it?

I would like to pause here and reflect on what has happened so far. I want to ask the questions – the ones I learned from my father. What is the point of this? Is it of any use? Is it true?

First question – what is the point of this? What is the point of the kind of education I received at home and at St. Matthew's during my early years? There are so many good answers to this question but let me just offer three.

Perhaps the first thing I learned from my parents was how to listen – how to listen to music, to the spoken word, to God. I encountered the Old Testament story of Samuel, whose name means “God has heard”. At the critical age of 13 having been placed in the care of Eli, a priest, Samuel heard a voice calling his name. Eli, the priest, or as I think of him – the Church, told him it was God’s voice and to return to his room and if he heard the voice again, to answer, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is *listening*.” What is the point of this? If we don’t know how to listen, to listen deeply, then we are destined to lead a life that can only be experienced and understood as a child. Wendell Berry, one of our brightest and fiercest social critics says he is not so much worried about the loss of childhood today as the loss of adulthood.

During my years at St. Matthew’s I was brought into direct contact with greatness and beauty – my horizons were expanded beyond my wildest imaginings. How could they not be when I was playing the music of Bach and César Franck, singing the texts of George Herbert and John Milton, and praying the words of Cranmer’s Prayer Book? And inevitably this led me to a glimpse of the greatness and beauty of God. There is something very healthy and liberating for a young person to understand in his gut that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Church music at its best brings that home with enormous force.

Then there is the business of sound. Brian Law’s constant demands for a vibrant and heartfelt sound were critically important. If the grandeur of God is what we are singing about, if the church choir really does embody the ministry of the angels, then the most energized and galvanizing sound would seem to be required. Charles Ives, in what I hope was a weak attempt at humour, once asked, “What has sound to do with music?” Obviously – everything. This obsession with the quality of the sound of my choirs has stayed with me all my life. I am vastly more interested in sound than I am in dynamics. When I heard the choir of Westminster Cathedral at Woolsey Hall at Yale University a few years ago, one of the people sitting next to me complained that the choir had a dynamic range that covered the gamut from **f** to **ff**. I asked him if that was why he had been sitting on the edge of his seat for the entire concert.

Second question – is it of any use? This is a question I wasn’t mature enough to ask or answer when I was young. I can now, but it has taken me most of my life to get there. For the moment I would like to offer a couple of perspectives on the usefulness of deep listening and deep engagement with beauty and greatness. Here is an excerpt from a review in The Economist of a recent book called “The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains”.

“Neurological research has demolished the myth of the static brain. Neural networks can be rapidly reorganized in response to new experiences such as going on the web. The author surveys current knowledge about the effects on thinking of “hypermedia” – in particular clicking, skipping, skimming – and especially [the effects] on working and deep memory. There is evidence that digital technology is already damaging the long-term memory consolidation that is the basis for true intelligence. Only by combining data stored deep within our brains can we forge new ideas. No amount of magpie assemblage can

compensate for this slow, *synthetic* creativity. [Slow, *synthetic* creativity is the very stuff of the artistic life and indeed of the meaningful religious life.] Hyperlinks and overstimulation mean the brain must give most of its attention to short-term decisions. Little makes it through the fragile transfer into deeper processing. Clearly, argues the author, this is a radical upending of the “literate mind” that has been the hallmark of civilization for more than 1,000 years. From a society that valued the creation of a unique storehouse of ideas in each individual, man is moving to a socially constructed mind that values speed and group approval over originality and creativity.”

Does this sound familiar? Now, I am not a Luddite. Like all new technologies, the internet presents possibilities for good and for bad. That's *our* choice. But the issue is whether we are equipped to make a reasonable, well-informed choice. I believe we are totally ill-equipped if we have not learned how to think analytically, and that requires deep listening skills, as well as deep engagement with beauty and greatness. If we haven't encountered and engaged with beauty and greatness, against what do we measure the usefulness of anything? This kind of learning is experiential and very time-consuming. It cannot be acquired from surfing the internet.

I would like to take this further. If the kind of education I received at St. Matthew's is useful in this world, then what does that say about the current usefulness of the Church? If the world has gone so far down the path of secular humanism that it is approaching a place of numbness and vapidness, if we really do live in a celebrity culture, a consumer culture, a culture of instant gratification, a culture of “clicking, skipping and skimming”, then what is the Church's mission? I believe it is first and foremost to bring people back to the adoration of the Divine – to convert us, to turn us around, from the adoration of the body, of the merely novel and worse, the adoration of ourselves – to deliver us from a type of loneliness that is a slow death. And the primary vehicle for this conversion is great music. It *has* to be great in order to engage the hearts and minds and souls of the lost in the deepest understanding of the love and beauty which is God. The Church cannot begin to accomplish this awesome task by offering the same trite and offhand stuff that surrounds us in “the shallows”. The question isn't how do we make the Church relevant, but how do we make the Church useful? I know the Church is currently struggling with all kinds of political issues, but I am convinced that these must take second place to the most urgent issue of all, which is how do we return to our first love? How do we return to the worship of God? This is the most urgent issue because all that is worthwhile flows from it. It is conceivable that we will look back on this period in our Church's history as not being so much about gender and sexuality issues, or about saving the planet, but as being more about the abandonment of beauty. Why did this happen? Because the great challenge in “worshipping the Lord in the beauty of Holiness” is that it takes enormous amounts of time, dedication, resources and tremendous leadership. That level of commitment will only be worthwhile depending on the last question – is it true? Or – is it real?

I am often criticized for not watching television or keeping up with the latest news in the media. These critics feel I am not in touch with the “real world”. I recall a quote from Ben Hecht, the American author. “Trying to determine what is going on in the world by reading newspapers is like trying to tell the time by watching the second hand of a clock.” This was written long before the age of the internet. It is even more apt today. The media can’t possibly represent the real world. At best it represents the exceptions to the real world. You will never read a headline that says, “Wal-Mart reports no burglaries this week”. What I consider real is what I have learned over many years of encounters with humans in all walks of life from widely divergent backgrounds. This experience of reality tells me that all humans yearn for meaning in their lives and that meaning is rooted in religion, which according to the likes of Joseph Campbell and St. Augustine literally means to “re-connect” – to re-connect creatures with their Creator. I believe this to be true and therefore I believe my education at St. Matthew’s was and continues to be, true. OK. End of sermon. Meanwhile, back in Ottawa.

When I was sixteen I decided to work towards winning an organ scholarship to one of the Cambridge Colleges. (I had wanted to be organ scholar at King’s since I was twelve.) Thanks to vast amounts of assistance from Dr. Derek Holman, who I think is second only to J. S. Bach in his understanding of invertible counterpoint, I managed to get through the rather difficult entrance exams at Cambridge. In which high school was I going to learn how to write *Lieder* in the style of Wolf, or complete a five-part motet in the style of Palestrina, or orchestrate a piano piece in the style of Beethoven? I was lucky and ended up with the organ scholarship at Trinity College, working under Richard Marlowe.

My three years at Cambridge were exciting and confusing. I made many friends, most of them, like me coming from that British working-class intellectual background. They were studying law, languages, medicine – very few were studying music. We lived in the marvelous “courts” at the College. For my last year I lived in what had been Lord Byron’s rooms. The discussions I had with my fellow students well into the wee hours were the most important part of my time at Cambridge. The organ in the Chapel was the one that Sir Charles Villiers Stanford played when he was Director of Music, and my improvising on that instrument received mixed reviews, although much was forgiven since I was technically a “colonial”.

I have said that my time at Trinity was exciting *and* confusing. The confusion came from my asking that second question – is it of any use? I couldn’t see it. First of all there were so many young people who were so talented and skilled in the same areas as me that I felt rather superfluous. Secondly I was beginning to develop those thoughts about saving the world that are entirely appropriate, if not necessary for a twenty-year-old to think. What was the use of all this lovely music in a world where people were starving to death or suffering from all manner of disease? Amazingly I was invited to stay on at Cambridge for post-graduate work but I declined and signed up for CUSO (Canadian University Services Overseas) as a volunteer teacher of English.

I spent a year back in Montreal taking English courses at McGill including "teaching English as a second language" which was required by CUSO. That year is still a bit of a blur for me. I was assistant organist at the Cathedral. I gave piano lessons to suburban housewives to stave off their ennui. I was a "Big Brother" to a little lad from a dysfunctional home. I took him to Place des Arts for several symphony concerts. He was mesmerized by the orchestra and particularly loved Ravel and Debussy even though he'd had no formal music instruction. That made an impression on me which didn't rise to my consciousness for a few years. I also washed dishes at a Hungarian catering firm.

Finally word came through from CUSO. My placement was in a village in Western Nigeria where even fresh water was in limited supply. However, a few months before my departure, having told my friends and family, with not a little pride, that I was off to save at least a small part of the world, there was a coup in Nigeria. General Yakubu Gowon announced there were to be no more foreigners coming into his country and I felt it best to comply with his wishes. At this point there were very few positions left for CUSO workers and only one for which I was qualified and that was teaching music in Jamaica. Although this seemed to me about as useful as teaching Eskimos how to make ice cubes, I had to go somewhere since I'd made such a public fuss of my do-gooding future. Besides I had enough immunization shots to safely visit the moon!

My two years in Jamaica were pretty much as exciting and confusing as my time at Cambridge. I taught at a high school in the poorest part of the country. Many of the students walked, barefoot, to school – sometimes coming from several miles away, and that was after they'd dealt with the goats and whatever else needed to be looked after at home. This was not the Jamaica of the tourist brochures. It was also not the friendliest place on the planet since times were tough and the locals were not so taken with the calibre tourist they had encountered haggling at the market. Haggling with the vendors in the market was highly recommended in those same tourist brochures as a delightful way to spend your afternoon. In addition, those years from 1974 – 1976 were politically and economically fraught. Bob Marley was the national hero and he sang about guns and ganja which were the two items tearing apart the country at that time. Possession of either landed you in Gun Court, as it was known, where no questions were asked, no evidence given and your stay as a guest of the Jamaican government was of indeterminate length.

Given all this it was a wonder that the students were so understanding and cooperative. I know they were mystified by my presence there when I could have been earning ten times as much simply by staying home and working at McDonald's, but they gave me the benefit of the doubt. We had a great choir and a very respectable little orchestra, but after a couple of months I decided to tackle the literacy problem head on. There were about 30 students of various ages, all in grade 7, the lowest grade at the school, who were unable to read or write English. They were pretty much left to their own devices, attending school when it was convenient but helping out at home when that was required. I persuaded the headmaster to



give me an outdoor classroom and I set about devising a curriculum that might interest the students sufficiently to entice them into literacy, sort of by the back door. The music at the school continued with a fellow staff member, but I reduced my musical activities to after-school hours. It all worked out surprisingly well. I think over the two years half of the kids in my literacy class had acquired basic skills in reading and writing, and the school's choir managed to do well at various music festivals and the like. Their repertoire consisted of a mix of classical, jazz, and Jamaican folksong. I remember costumes and dance were a major part of the performances. In addition to the school job I was also the organist at the Anglican Church in the local town, which actually had a little two-manual tracker. I also formed a community choir and our most adventurous and probably insane concert was a performance of "Messiah" for which I had to borrow several minibuses in order to import players from Kingston which was about three hours away on the other side of the island.

Looking back on those years I realize there were two important things going on. One was that I was speeding up my run from music. I considered music to be ornamental, not fundamental and I was interested in helping with the fundamentals – in being useful. On the other hand there was a nagging contradiction in this thinking, since clearly the kids at the school and the folks in the community choir had so little, and yet music was critically important to them. For one thing, singing happened everywhere – not just in choirs. It happened in the fields, on the roads, in homes, in churches, and always on the radio. Reggae was huge and it was infectious. Even if the lyrics spoke to the suffering in life, the music spoke to the joy, and no one could stand still while there was reggae playing, which was most of the time.

When I left Jamaica I was eager to get into economic development. I got in touch with the University of Victoria and after the usual round of form-filling and exaggerations concerning my past accomplishments I was accepted into the Economic Development Program and enrolled in the fall.

Most of what happened that year in Victoria you now know. The really surprising part of it happened towards the end, in May, when Christ Church Cathedral hosted the annual conference of North American Cathedral Deans. In a whole series of surprises and upsets the first was the arrival of Jim Morton, the Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. No one expected him to show up because it was widely known that he disdained such gatherings. The word on the street was that unless elephants, tight-rope walkers, civil rights protesters or Mahatma Gandhi were involved, he wasn't interested. The odds of finding any of these in Victoria in 1977 were extremely slim. The entire Anglican Communion was mystified. It was immediately decided that he should be put up at the Butterfields' since nobody else would know what to make of him. Then to add to the confusion Jim showed up at the Sunday Eucharist at the Cathedral, which struck some as odd given that he was not understood to be a particularly religious man. I was playing the organ at that service, and when it came time to vaporize during communion, I fell into a sort of Buxtehude mode for reasons that escape me at

the moment. After the service Jim approached me at coffee hour and said how much he enjoyed the music at the service, particularly that piece I played at the communion which sounded like Buxtehude but he couldn't place it. While I was choking on my coffee, he asked if we could sort of hang out that evening. When I explained that I would be playing at a jazz club of dubious reputation he said he'd be delighted to join me there. We talked into the small hours and the next thing I knew he was suggesting I come to the Cathedral in New York to audition and interview for the position of Organist & Choirmaster which had recently become vacant. I explained that I was well on my way to solving the world's problems, at least the economic side of them, but Jim was and is a very persuasive man. He also happens to be a deeply religious man of almost saintly power. He just isn't the slightest bit pious.

If I were to give you any more than a cursory glance at my next thirteen years at the Cathedral in New York, we would certainly run into lunch and possibly dinner. But here are some highlights, starting with the headline in the Arts section of the Ottawa Citizen which ran, "Local Boy Goes To Harlem Cathedral". Since most New Yorkers did not subscribe to the Ottawa Citizen this piece of misinformation went largely unnoticed.

I had heard the Cathedral Choristers back in May when I was auditioning for the position. This group of 25 children, boys and girls, were a rather motley crew. Since they all attended the Cathedral School – a day school for children of all faiths – they looked terrific – rather like a United Nations poster for an adopt-a-child program – but they sounded awful. I remember sitting in the choir stalls after one of our early Evensongs with my head in my hands, wondering what I was going to do with this bunch, when a tour guide came by with his group from Japan and announced, "This is where the Cathedral Choir sits. It is the best choir in the world." My groans echoed in that space for a full eleven seconds. However, within about two years the choristers were sounding like something almost worthy of that great building. And here the sound issue was paramount. Without a full-bodied, bright and edgy sound, the singers were wasting their time in that acoustic. The men were top notch and we had developed a fine staff in the music department. The other choir, the Cathedral Singers consisted of about 20 pros which I had re-auditioned after a couple of years. We started a third choir of volunteers since there were so many highly-qualified students and nine-to-five professionals who wanted to sing. So our normal Sunday morning configuration consisted of the altar in the crossing with the Choristers and Men on the steps behind the altar facing west and the other two choirs singing east from behind the congregation on either side. It was marvelous surround sound, and it was efficient since the mass setting and the anthems and the motets could be divided up among the three choirs, saving the full ensemble for the big effect.

And then there was the organ which was every bit as magnificent as everyone says. In fact there was a fair amount of mythology surrounding it. My favourite was the comment of another tour guide who, describing the wind pressure required to drive the horizontal state trumpets in the west end gallery said, "If they weren't bolted to the parapet they would fly the

length of the Cathedral and possibly impale one of the priests at the high altar." What wasn't mythological was the red phone at the console which was a direct line to the desk at the west end of the Cathedral under the trumpets. It was incumbent on the organist to alert the people at the desk if he were planning to use the trumpets so as to avoid heart attacks or fainting should there be any elderly tourists wandering about back there.

During my time at the Cathedral my reputation among my colleagues either soared or plummeted depending on their viewpoint. Aside from the service music which attained a very high level, we put on countless concerts – staged St. John Passions, Verdi Requiems, Messiahs, you name it. And the Cathedral was a second home to many world-class musicians from all genres – Zubin Mehta, James Taylor, Ravi Shankar, Jessye Norman, the New York Philharmonic and on and on. This was not my doing. This was all because of the Dean, Jim Morton, who was determined that the Cathedral should take its cue from the great medieval cathedrals and be the centre of the city's cultural and spiritual life.

Jim also brought in actors and dancers – I remember conducting the Kodály *Missa Brevis* with the Alvin Ailey Company interpreting it in beautiful movement on a giant stage. Jim even brought in the most famous high-wire artist on the planet, Philippe Petit, who, one Ascension Day, walked the wire from the floor of the Cathedral's west end to the top of the dome in the crossing while I played Messiaen's *L'Ascension*. And there were so many groups in residence, many of them occupying spaces in the crypt, that I couldn't keep track of them all. There was Ralph Lee, creator of the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade and his troupe of puppeteers and pranksters. There were poets, sculptors, book binders, African Dance & Percussion Ensembles, early music groups, the entire cast of *Godspell* and the Big Apple Circus. The guest preachers included Nelson Mandela, Nicolai Gorbachev, the Dalai Lama and so on. It was incredibly invigorating and it was incredibly exhausting.

But in the midst of it all, my running from music resumed. Once the choir programs and the liturgy and the concert series were going along smoothly, I signed up at Columbia to take the pre-med courses required to study medicine. Was I crazy? I don't know. I was still concerned about that "useful" business. I believed what the Cathedral was doing was right and good, but what I needed was a feeling of true purpose and usefulness. I sensed the love and joy that the Cathedral expressed in a myriad ways, but it was the suffering that was tugging at me I suppose.

Well the next arrival on the Cathedral scene was the Paul Winter Consort. At the invitation of the Dean, Paul and I improvised in the Cathedral one late November night. I had never improvised *with* someone else. I wasn't expecting much from it because I like my improvisations to have form and shape if at all possible. I wasn't too concerned about wrong notes, but I was concerned about shapeless meanderings. I need not have worried. After that first encounter Paul asked me to join the Consort and I had to choose between medicine and music. I opted to put my medical plans on hold for the moment. That was the last I saw of them.

If you ever find yourself at a dinner party stuck for a good story, sign up for a week with the Paul Winter Consort. That group of brilliant musicians didn't just tell good stories, they lived them. We played all over the world, from the Grand Canyon to Lake Baikal in Siberia to the Japanese Alps. We played most of the major concert halls in North America and many in Europe and Asia. Most of those halls had fine pipe organs and there was always a place in the concert for the big organ blow-out. Many members of our audiences had never heard a pipe organ live. It was a revelation to them, and it convinced me that the actual audience for organ music was far greater than most of us realized.

Once the Consort had taken up residence at the Cathedral, the Dean commissioned the *Missa Gaia* or *Earth Mass* as it is better known. The mass movements were based on melodies provided by non-human creatures – the *Kyrie* was developed from the call of a timber wolf, the *Sanctus* from the song of a humpback whale and the *Agnus* used recordings of Antarctic fur seals. The music was written collaboratively, each of us contributing to the overall effect. The first performance was given at the Eucharist on Mother's Day (in honour of Mother Earth) in 1981 complete with a vast procession of animals, led by an elephant. At the rehearsal the night before the *Sanctus* had still to be written. We had decided to plug in a Palestrina setting, but with a rhythmic figure provided by the producer and guitarist, Oscar Castro-Neves, and the recording of the humpback whale, I stayed up all night and wrote the *Sanctus* and handed out the parts at the rehearsal prior to the service the next morning. The choir and the Consort members were ridiculous sight-readers. The *Earth Mass* became something of a minor hit and now that it is published it is performed all over the world. I believe it is still performed liturgically at St. John the Divine every year around St. Francis' Day, with the elephant in the lead.

The concert tour that changed my life happened in 1984. We were giving performances in what was then the Soviet Union. We wound up in Moscow and during one of our days off were taken to the dingiest part of what seemed to me the dingiest city in the world. We entered an old decrepit building, went down into the basement where everything was grey and grimy and walked into a little room where the Pokrovsky Ensemble were rehearsing. Dmitri Pokrovsky was perhaps the most passionate musician I have ever met. He put together a group of twelve or so young people, taught them how to sing the ancient Russian music, both folk songs and the sacred repertoire, and then sent them all over the Soviet Union in pairs into villages and towns where they lived for a number of months and learned the musical traditions and dance and costumes and even cooking of whichever region they were in. Then they would all regroup and put together a series of concert programs that they would present to their large and devoted following. All of this was highly illegal. The Soviet government was not interested in preserving the old Russian traditions and it certainly wasn't keen on supporting any kind of religious revival. All of their activities, including the concerts were underground – below the government radar.

After we were introduced, those of us in the Consort sat down and the Pokrovskies began to sing. I will never forget that sound. It was so powerful I felt the molecules of my body

were being rearranged. Their singing was full of yearning and deep desire. It was the sound of love and suffering all mixed up and it hit me like a ton of bricks. That was the moment of my conversion – my returning. These people had nothing – nothing but a grey featureless life that they could lose at any moment. And yet they sang. They were singing for their lives. I had been given so much – so much in fact that I took it for granted. And I saw now that music, my calling, was not ornamental – it truly was fundamental. It was utterly essential.

Years later, we toured with the Pokrovskies in the States for six weeks without a single night off. I never tired of hearing those voices. I could never get enough. It was as though *I* was the starving person – *I* was the diseased. And that was of course precisely true.

I feel I must apologize at this point for having dwelt so much on the period of my life leading up to this watershed moment. I suppose I am particularly concerned with young musicians and how they must struggle with these same questions – What is the point of this? Is it of any use? Is it true? And I know that much of what I have told you could be perceived as “extra-musical”, but it really isn't, because what goes into the musical life is all our experience, all our joys and all our sufferings. And although the Grammys are lovely and the big successes are gratifying, what really matters is that work which is private and sometimes lonely, but completely necessary.

When I left the Cathedral in New York, I moved to the hills of Northwestern Connecticut, where I took a year off to slow down and hibernate a little. I was going through a divorce and my touring with the Consort was coming to a close. I suppose I was feeling a little sorry for myself but my kids would have none of it and constantly badgered me about starting a children's choir. I called it *Chorus Angelicus*. At the first auditions for this group I met the woman who was to become my future wife. Together we built the non-profit organization, *Joyful Noise*, which comprised the children's choir, a chamber choir and a chamber orchestra. I poured my heart and soul into that enterprise and it was well worth it. All that I had learned I applied to this undertaking with a passion. *Chorus Angelicus* developed a sound that was so enticing it converted hundreds of new people to a love of choral music. Over the sixteen years of my involvement we gave about 25 concerts a year, most of them sold out, and recorded five CDs. But the main gift for me was the transformation I saw in the lives of the singers. Most of the kids coming into *Chorus Angelicus* had little or no experience with the great masters. They would have assumed Palestrina was a new shape in pasta. By the time they left most of them had developed a life-long passion for the finest offerings of our great tradition, and an ability to listen, and to engage in the pursuit of beauty in all its forms. I spent a lot of time and energy appealing to parents, friends, audience members and patrons. I would try to convert them. I told them how today's society encourages young people to say “no”. How they are told to say “no” to drugs; to say “no” to drinking; to say “no” to sex; to say “no” to unhealthy foods and on and on. They are also told, in subtle ways to say “no” to solitude; to say “no” to being different; to say “no” to self-knowledge and therefore to say “no” to their Creator. I told them the hearts and minds of

your J.S. Bachs, your Rembrandts, your Stravinskys, your Nelson Mandelas could never have survived such an onslaught of nay-saying. We are not, and cannot be driven by negativity. Sooner or later the dead end of fear will either paralyze us or force us to rebel. I told them we must offer young people something to which they can say a resounding “yes” – and that something is the yearning of the human spirit to reconnect with its source, and the sound of that yearning is great music. I told them all this and some of them heard and understood.

During our Connecticut years, Meg and I founded Pelagos, a sheet music and recordings and arts management company. Pelagos is an ancient Greek word meaning “the deep”, as in the deep blue waters of the ocean. This name clearly reflected our love of sailing and all things pertaining to the sea. But I think it also came from a constant need to avoid the shallows and to seek the deep. I think that was the main reason for the move to Halifax three years ago. I found that in Halifax there are people for whom the deep is home.

I took on three positions on my arrival – University Musician at Atlantic School of Theology, Director of Music at St. George's Anglican Church and Director of Chapel Music at the University of King's College. In the case of King's and St. George's I found I had returned to the same Book of Common Prayer that formed my development as a child at St. Matthew's. I felt a sense of coming home not just to the liturgy but to the words of my youth. Once again I could sing the psalms in the translation that had become part of my bones. But this homecoming was not a turning back. It was a radical revisiting of all the things I held dear. The kind of learning I benefited from at St. Matthew's, the kind of learning I have espoused and ranted about for the last twenty-five years, is precisely what goes on at King's College in Halifax. You wouldn't believe the intensity of questioning and searching at that place. It is so out of sync with the times that the professors are only interested in teaching and the students are only interested in learning. And the Chapel community is central to all of that. The Chaplain, Gary Thorne happens to be one of the finest theologians today. The choristers in the Chapel Choir join knowing next to nothing about the Western and Eastern liturgical traditions they encounter, but because things are done so well and with such integrity they are hooked within a matter of weeks. The King's community is totally counter-cultural. It is so committed to grappling with our intellectual heritage that it is cutting-edge. One of the professors at Atlantic School of Theology made this observation about King's. “What you are doing here is making a radical assault on the banality of modernity”. So in light of my experience so far at King's, what are the answers to the questions?

What is the point of this? It is the only point that matters. It is the point where heaven meets earth.

Is it of any use? It is so useful it is essential.

Is it true? It is so true it is breath-taking.

My son Nick moved up to Halifax from the States two years ago, partly to help out his old man as assistant, but partly to engage in the vital life at King's. This past February he started a new Men & Boys Choir – the first Halifax has seen in many, many years. So the circle continues.

And what of the future? I have many plans, and they seem to mostly revolve around education. I would love to see a School of Sacred Music start up in Halifax. This school would have at its core the rigorous training of young people in the music, theology and history of our great tradition. I would like to see this school producing church musicians of the highest calibre. Once that program is firmly established, and only then, I would like to invite musicians and artists from other traditions – particularly the Eastern Church, the Jewish traditions and Islamic traditions – to come to Halifax and share with us the greatness of their sacred art, so that all would come to the table bearing the finest gifts. This is my idea of true interfaith dialogue – the highlighting of the very best we can offer. That is where we will find common ground. That is where there is ample room for greatness, for beauty for the opportunity to reconnect with our Creator.

Thank you for your patience. At least none of you can accuse me of leading an unexamined life. Socrates would have been pleased.

Paul Halley

July 19th 2010