



# SEEDS

February 2015

GOOD NEWS *Associates*

13730 15th Ave NE , A302, Seattle, WA 98125

[www.goodnewsassoc.org](http://www.goodnewsassoc.org)

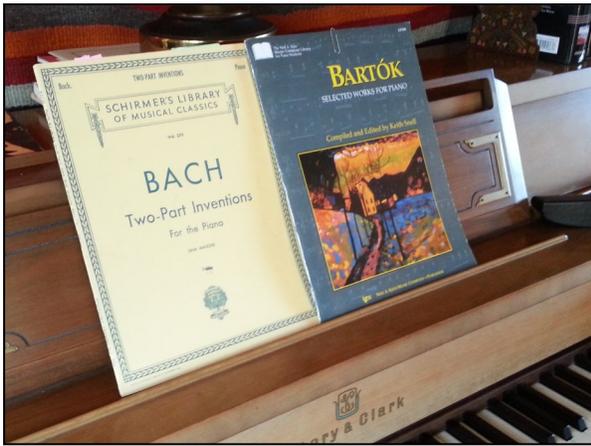
---

## Practice and Music

by Margery Post Abbott

Haven't done this for a while – just sit here and listen. The refrigerator and the perpetual ringing in my ears are the dominant sounds. So aware of Joanne over at Providence hospital. This time, this round of treatments, her body is reacting much more strongly so she can get only one treatment a day instead of three or four. Sent her a card – afraid I drained too much of her energy the last time I was there.

What is my state? Longing for the mystical contact again. Afraid? Reluctant to settle into the deep quiet that allows that awareness. Noticing at Worship on Sunday how I was holding back from dropping deep. Having slowed down substantially in the last three weeks, I am at least more open to the possibility of God's presence. As I seek to find ease, I am reminded of my old rule that at least three weeks are needed for a real vacation, for decompression.



All photos courtesy of Margery Post Abbott.

Another piano lesson today – it is the third week that I have mainly spent on three Bach “Two-Part Inventions” which I am so slow to be able to play at all, much less master. Lots of scales and other basic exercises, yet lovely to play/hear even in half-baked ways and full of music which I want to be able to convey better. The question of the difference between hitting the notes and creating music is one dynamic of piano lessons which engages me deeply. I don't understand what makes music happen yet can feel it so clearly in my ears and throughout my body when it occurs.

Practicing the piano provides me some lessons as I seek to be faithful to the discipline and grace of ministry. The very physical nature of the piano gives me a way to access the spiritual discipline and guidance which is so hard to explain to those who have never experienced the divine touch. The sheet music in front of me conveys some guidance to releasing the beauty that can fill the heart; but all my best intentions and longings to set the music free still lead to a series of notes without connection. The discipline of simply sitting at the piano each day and training my fingers how to move is essential, but the more I try to control the process, the more the notes sound mechanical and graceless.

As I gain competence in this discipline, I notice how I extend notes in sequences Bach wrote as evenly paced, how I provide pauses when none are marked but which echo how I hear it in my head. More often I am conscious of how my fingers stumble over the notes. Trying to find the next note and fumbling around is not a good way to move towards music. Learning to still the mind so that I might better listen for the motion of the Spirit, or listen with a full heart to the person next to me has much of this same awkwardness and fumbling. The reality of repetition and the patience to try again is such an obvious component of practice and discipline in the piano. I know I have to train my fingers to reach the notes. I am amazed at how hard it is for me to even figure out the recommended fingering – my mind struggles to read the notes, the fingering, the markings for volume or flow, especially when I have to use both hands. One hand can feel very easy and free, then I try to match it with the other and it all falls apart and I stumble and fumble again. Repetition. Repetition until finally the notes are internalized and music begins to emerge. Is this not what I find happening in my times of daily prayer when my mind wants to follow its own merry way? The more I resist and attempt to manage what happens in my head the more rigidity sets in and distractions seem to take hold. Yet as I gently hold the intention to let go the angst, there is a moment when my mind shifts and a peace opens within.



It is quite valuable if I can analyze the music and notice where phrases are repeated, or the full octave jumps that appear multiple times in some of these. Memorization makes the biggest difference and I haven't been very active in memorizing these pieces. Piano as I study it (as opposed to improve) is so much about playing what someone else wrote in a way similar to what they might have intended.

How does any of this apply to listening for the word of God? Or responding to the gentle movement of the Spirit? As I first sat with this question, the answer was “nothing”! Yet I know that the process of composing and of interpretation, the creative process, is integral to ministry. At the heart of ministry is the willingness to listen to the deepest core of being and beyond, to that place where we can feel God raising up hope, possibility. It is possible to sense a new direction, yet one that is not really new. In many ways the act of prophetic ministry is one of repeating a message that has been told again and again, but repeating it in one's own voice for one's own time and place. So the stumbling fingers are part of it, and the slightly shifted beat. Each pianist has their own understanding of what is loud or soft – pianissimo or forte. Certainly as I do workshops, it takes several tries to gain any kind of fluency – as was so clear this spring with the prophetic ministry work. Gaining the basic vocabulary and concepts was all I could work on at Multnomah or Way of the Spirit. I was reaching for something more at Pendle Hill, but stumbling around badly over my own limitations and the strong feelings which push me around.

In piano work, practice is needed to bring my left hand to anywhere near the same capability as my right – brain chemistry says this affects the way the two sides of the brain function. Bringing together the two hands in any kind of competent, much less musical, way is almost beyond my capacity. It certainly takes trying again and again and again if the music is of any complexity as the music of Bach is. Then there is attempting to play at the speed the composer intended. Bartok's sheet music for children lists the number of seconds it should take to play a piece. When I time myself, I'm usually at half speed even when I think I have mastered the piece. Very discouraging and a sign of how much I have to learn, and how much I have to train my body to function within the demands of the music.

Some of this music makes it all sound rote – and very distant from the open, freeing feeling I associate with the Holy. At times, I feel caught in that practicing, that almost mechanical skill learning dimension. Obviously I will never be a concert pianist – it is clear that they have an amazing freedom within the discipline. So too those who do a lot of improvisation and who I know have mastered the instrument; they have gained this feel for how it sounds as they make different movements and hit or stroke it in different ways.

Even as a beginner, this practice becomes part of my life. The music sounds in my head, and I often fall asleep at night with it echoing through me as a prayer. Even when I feel lost or have neglected this discipline, coming back to playing scales or the simplest of the music I have learned helps me center. This process of returning to what is basic reminds me of my practice of returning to the Psalms in the darkness, a practice that opens up my heart. Such things are a balm to the soul.

### QUERIES FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Where do you find joy in the everyday rhythm of your life?

What helps you sustain your spiritual practices during times of dryness or discouragement?  
How do you find your way back when you are lost?

I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand. Fear not. I will help you. ~ Isaiah 41.13

I have indelibly imprinted a picture of you on the palm of each of my hands. ~ Isaiah 49.16

The Lord of Hosts is with me. The God of Jacob is my refuge, High Tower, and stronghold. ~ Psalm 46.11

I have put you in a cleft in the rock and covered you with my hand. You are mine. ~ Exodus 33.22



Margery Post Abbott has been released by Multnomah Monthly Meeting for a ministry of teaching and writing about Friends. She has published several books, most recently *To Be Broken and Tender: A Quaker Theology for Today* (Western Friend, 2010) and a revised and expanded second edition of the *Historical Dictionary of the Friends* in fall 2011 (Scarecrow Press, 2003).

To subscribe or unsubscribe to *SEEDS*, click here:

<http://goodnewsassoc.org/seeds/>