



Musical Minute

A compilation of Musical Minutes
shared during the year 2024

McAllister Memorial
Presbyterian Church

900 N. Alleghany
Avenue
Covington, VA 24426

January 2024

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

My dear friend Nell once told me that her very favorite part of any gift was the box in which it came. Until the ribbon, wrap, and box top were removed, she explained, the box had the potential to hold anything, be it a pair of warm gloves, tickets to a special vacation or event, a book that could transport the giftee to places only dreamed of, or completely unheard of, or even a sentimental gift from a family member or dear friend, perhaps something infinitely more valuable and meaningful than the price paid for it. An unopened box holds promise— of things not yet known or seen, of something not yet experienced, of something that can possibly delight, educate, or even improve us—rather like the blank slate of a new year.

I'm writing this on the 26th of December 2023, seated by our Christmas tree, listening to seasonal music and the rain lightly falling outside the window. It is an afternoon of perfect, gray, calm following the busy weeks leading up to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The only thing to improve it would be a light snowfall, but this year I'm perfectly happy to see the rain knowing it will help the low water tables in the Alleghany Highlands and enhance the beauty of spring in a few short months. After the winter solstice last week, the days are already lengthening, ever so slightly, but still noticeably. Spring will arrive before we know it, and summer will follow hot on its heels, literally, not too long thereafter.

I'll bet that many of us are already thinking ahead, planning out our year, and admittedly, we have to. There are activities and events to schedule, and tasks to complete. But in my own experience, planning too far ahead causes me to overlook the present. Planning weeks and sometimes even months ahead makes those same weeks and months fly by, almost unnoticed, as I anticipate what comes next. Sitting here this afternoon, I know that I have only a little over 365 days before 2025 arrives and I'm another year older. Over the last weeks, I've thought of what I had hoped to accomplish this past year. There were many necessary things that I did get done, but there were other things that I thought I had prioritized at the start of the year that weren't even touched—favorite hobbies that I'd hoped to get back to, letters to distant friends and family that needed to be written, and people that I wanted and needed to see, but didn't. I'm thrilled to be here to welcome 2024, but this year I'm going to try to take the lid off of this "box" of potential earlier. I hope to dig into its bottomless contents a little deeper and a little more purposefully so that all of its marvelous

possibilities don't just slip away. I'll let you know the results this time next year . . . which, as you know all too well, is just around the corner! Best wishes for a blessed New Year!

Beth

February 2024

McAllister Messenger

Musical Minute:

"In a way, winter is the real spring, the time when the inner things happen, the resurgence of nature." Edna O'Brien, Irish Novelist.

Shortly on the heels of the last Christmas card received, as eagerly opened as the first one of the season, the post-holiday lull sets in. For some, it may bring relief—a time to get the house back in order, return to a normal schedule, and finally take a deep breath after the frantic pace of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year activities. For some, including me, it brings a tinge, just a tinge, of melancholy. I think it's more connected to the advent of another year, or more truthfully, the passing of the previous year, rather than a post-holiday let-down. A bright spot for me in this little puddle of melancholy is always the arrival of the new seed catalogs. It's as though the USPS, sensing my malaise, declares, "It's time to get these catalogs into the hands of gardeners. Let's give these people some inspiration!"

The first catalog might arrive the last week of December, but by the early weeks of January they're arriving in earnest, sometimes two to three each day. There's Burpee, of course, a staple in the world of seed purveyors for decades, but also the Territorial Seed Company, Select Seeds, and John Scheepers, plus myriad others. Their pages hold the promise of summer joy, deep in the heart of winter and spending a few minutes each day browsing the enticing offerings lightens my mood.

Whether you're dreaming of flowers or vegetables, you're sure to find something to suit your tastes, from old standards to intriguing novelties and new introductions for the adventurous gardener. In the next week, I hope to get my orders placed. I've got to have my cosmos, as well as zinnias in various shades. Next on the list is nasturtiums in every color I can find, beautiful in the garden as well as tasty in salads and as a garnish on most anything. As far as vegetables go, I always have several

cucumbers. Many of the young fruits are devoured in the garden and never even make it to the kitchen. More than ten years ago I fell in love with swiss chard and now always grow the Bright Lights variety. It's a gorgeous, green leafy plant, relatively pest resistant and its red, yellow, orange, and white stems look beautiful in the garden and taste great in soups and stir-fries. Next on the list of veggies is my must-have zucchini, Zucchini Rampicante, also known as Zucchini Tromboncino. The beautiful pale green fruits grow in the shape of a French horn and are meaty and delicious, great for grilling, cooking on the stovetop or eating fresh. Plus, they're just cute, even when they get huge. Also—you can loop them over your arm to carry them into the house—a weighty endeavor by late in the season!

Don't even get me started on lettuces! What will it be this year? Flashy Trout's Back Romaine, Green Deer Tongue Looseleaf, maybe some Pomegranate Crunch? And tomatoes?! Oh my! The choices are nearly endless and although I grow several favorites each year, mostly cherry varieties, I also try to experiment with a new tomato or two every growing season.

Even as I write this, I find my mood brightened and I can almost hear the chirps of our little tree frogs and the song of the crickets. And—oh no! – memories of humidity and gnats just intruded into my perfect summer revelry! I think for now, I'll order my seeds, put my summer dreams aside for a month or so, and enjoy the peace and beauty of winter –"the time when the inner things happen."

Stay warm and safe and I hope to see you next Sunday!

Beth

April 2024

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

Thank goodness for bygone gardeners. The evidence of their toil is all around us this time of year—the clump of daffodils by the old stone stairs that now lead to nowhere, the forsythia bush blooming exuberantly by the sagging porch of a long-abandoned home, the patch of iris that springs from seemingly barren earth. Thank goodness for the hands that worked the dirt, and for the faith and heart of the individual who said to themselves, “Here I will plant something beautiful.”

Because of where we live on Potts Creek, when Andy and I head to Roanoke, we usually take the “back way” to Eagle Rock, a scenic, winding drive which takes us through Hays Gap, Roaring Run, and Craigs Creek. Especially along the Craigs Creek stretch of the drive there are clusters of bright yellow daffodils in early spring marking the sites of former homeplaces, either collapsed and long gone or standing vacant. When we turn from Roaring Run onto the creek there is a sizable swath of the golden-hued flowers, I assume swept from nearby garden plots and flower beds and deposited in the rich soil by the side of the creek during times of flooding. It’s a marvel to see them bloom each year with no human assistance or attention, volunteering on a schedule that only the bulbs know. By the time their strappy leaves begin to yellow, the roadside weeds will be so tall the flowers won’t even be visible, having disappeared to rest up and surprise us again next spring.

As newlyweds, Andy and I lived in the Rosedale neighborhood of Covington. We were delighted the first summer when the fuzzy stems and leaves that had been growing along the side fence line separating us from our dear neighbors, Homer and Hela Young, turned out to be poppies, almost the size of dinner plates when fully opened and brilliant orange with striking dark centers. Later in the summer we were thrilled to learn that we had hundreds of daylilies in the backyard. We never learned who had planted these flowers or when, but we certainly relished their beauty. Another Rosedale neighbor, Martha Hudson, walked down the alley and into the backyard one day when she saw me arriving home from work. She asked how our rhubarb was doing and if I planned on using it. To be honest I’m not sure that I’d even noticed at that point that we had a rhubarb patch, and if I’d seen it I’m not sure I would have recognized it, much less had the faintest idea what to do with it. That conversation with Martha turned out to be a bargain for both of us. She got the

rhubarb, and we got a homemade pie! All because a previous steward of our home and garden had a hankering for rhubarb.

We moved from Rosedale to Richmond in 1988—a big move for this small-town girl. We were the first owners of our newly built home in the suburbs, and while there were gorgeous old-growth trees that hugged the back of our lot, the front was a long blank slate, newly seeded with grass, down to the cul-de-sac below. It was up to us to be the first stewards of this garden. During our almost six years in Richmond, Andrew planted shrubs and laid out flower beds for roses, colorful caladiums, liatris, sundrops, and other perennials as money allowed. The year before we moved to the Czech Republic, before we knew we'd be leaving Richmond, Andy planted a beautiful ornamental tree and placed a statuesque lamppost in the front yard, finishing it all off with a beautiful brick path to the front door. We left that home in 1994 and never returned until mom and I decided in 2008 to take a detour on a weekend trip back to Covington from Williamsburg to sneak a peek at our former home on Sunset Hills Court. The neighborhood had aged well, but I still held my breath as we approached the house. Yet there was the tree that Andy had planted, all grown up and just gorgeous. The handsome lamppost still stood tall; the long search Andy had undertaken for the perfect lamp to top it in pre-internet shopping days well worth it. It still looked like our home—the house and the plantings just more established—more “settled” and mature with the years.

When we purchased our current home, we were still living overseas. While there were some improvements we couldn't undertake until we came home a number of years later, my husband, the former forester, knew one thing that could happen in our absence—things could grow! We started yet again with a blank slate, save for the pokeweed that topped the windows on the front of the house. With the help of W.L. Dressler, plantsman extraordinaire, we started planting shrubs and trees (deer resistant, of course!) and daffodils and lavender. We returned to Virginia in 2010, and Andy began to explore (and reclaim) the land surrounding the house. He discovered a partial chimney and the remnants of a foundation of what was once a home or cabin. On further inspection, he discovered the long-hidden gifts of one of those bygone gardeners—a patch of daffodils and the swordlike leaves of yucca plants. He left a few to mark the spot of the old homeplace, but transplanted some near our home where we enjoy the blooms and foliage through the year—silently thanking the gardener whose hands originally planted them and wondering just how many years their roots have stretched into the earth that is ours for this moment. Wishing you a blessed spring season full of nature's surprises.

Beth



Musical Minute:

Humbled, or humbling, derived from the word humble:

1. To make (someone) humble in spirit or manner
2. To destroy the power, independence, or prestige of
(merriam-webster.com)

About six months ago I unwittingly began what I am now referring to as my 58,000 mile tune up! And if I can be honest with you, it's been humbling. It began with retina surgery last October, was expanded with the addition of oral surgery following Thanksgiving and continues with the aftermath of foot surgery that took place in mid-February. There's nothing like wearing a patch with a thick plastic disc over it, irritatingly taped to your hairline over your dominant eye, or sporting a clunky, stiff post-op shoe for eight weeks and counting to "destroy" one's sense of "power and independence." I'm not complaining. I feel thankful and blessed to be in a situation where I can have repaired what ails me. What has surprised me, however, is the sense of total helplessness I've sometimes felt during these last months, knowing that I have been, at times, completely reliant on others, both those who love and care for me, as well as complete strangers. There's no other word for it. It's all been "humbling."

I know that most of this is not new to many of you who have undergone far more serious and intrusive procedures than what I've experienced. But these "adventures" introduced me to a whole new world—the world of corporate medicine, pre-op lab tests, and EKGS. Until recently, I had been under anesthesia only one time and that was for a routine health screening. It was unsettling to be under "twilight" sedation for the eye surgery. It started out as a rather pleasant morning with helpful and compassionate medical staff, low lights, an electrolyte IV, and heated blankets, but I was alarmed an hour or so later when a nurse came in and brightly commented, "It won't be long now. The doctor's on his way." "On his way?!", I thought. "He should have been here since early this morning, poring over a large tome about how to flawlessly execute retina surgery—MY retina surgery!" The thought of him stuck in traffic, seething behind the knucklehead who had just cut him off, growing increasingly agitated as the minutes passed made my heart race. He did arrive, only a few moments later, and was reassuringly calm when he came to check on me.

Apparently, his commute hadn't been as fraught as I'd imagined! He was prepared and professional and repeated to me that he had performed this exact surgery dozens upon dozens of times. He said that those assisting him were some of the best he'd ever worked with. I relaxed again, humbled by his competence and expertise. Of course, he knew what he was doing . . .

But my hackles raised again when the whole show got underway. Two nurses came to collect me from the cozy pre-op space. It was a scary, blurry rollercoaster ride as I was wheeled down an unfamiliar hallway, taking corners at what seemed like a breakneck pace, completely disoriented since I had no glasses or contact lenses. Although I couldn't see who it was, I was ready to slug the person who asked me, for perhaps the 30th time, as I lay flat on my back, "Could you please tell us your name and birthdate?" IF YOU DON'T KNOW BY NOW—what am I doing here?! I know I gritted my teeth when I replied, "My name is xxxxxx. My birthdate is xxxxx." The doctor put his hand on my right shoulder and assured me this would be the last time anyone asked. I talked with my brother on the way home from surgery, who confirmed that this was completely normal procedure. "These are the failsafes they have in place, Bethie. This is the way they avoid mistakes." I was humbled—and felt badly about my terse response in the operating room.

By the time I reported for foot surgery in February, I was prepared for all of the inquiries. There were so many helpful attendants in and out as the prep began. And yes, they each asked me to confirm my name and birthdate, as well as which foot was to be operated on—slightly alarming, to be sure! (I thought about the failsafes Nick had mentioned. It was all part of the process designed to avoid mistakes. Take deep breaths, Beth.) The doctor came in to check in on things, sign some documents, and confirm on which foot he'd be working—whew! —and then the whole whirlwind journey down the strange hallway repeated itself. In the OR I recognized only the doc and the anesthesiologist who had introduced herself (and asked about my name and birthdate) earlier that morning. Before I knew it, the whole process was over, and I was awakened by a tall nurse with an empathetic face who introduced himself as Rick. Too late to back out now, I realized. My new friend Rick accompanied me back to the recovery area, repeatedly reminding me not to rub my weepy, burning eyes, apparently a side effect of the anesthesia. Rick brought me something to drink and soon, my sweetheart Andy was escorted back by another nurse to help me get dressed.

I was in the capable and caring hands of many that day, from the kind-hearted receptionist who checked me in and let Andrew know that he'd be welcome to stay with me during the pre-op process, to the various nurses and technicians who

introduced themselves and explained what they were about to do (and asked me to confirm my name and birthdate!), to those I never met who tended to me in my unconscious state. Considering the weeks of dread I'd experienced leading up to the surgery, the whole ordeal was over quickly—well, all but the healing. The humility and sense of helplessness I felt along the journey have brought a deep sense of gratitude—gratitude for the hands and intellects that aided me physically, gratitude for my dear husband who has so lovingly cared for me these many weeks (and years!), gratitude for my big brother who encouraged me to take some long overdue steps and who also helped cover my church responsibilities, gratitude for the love of friends, for my church and choir family whose cards, calls and prayers buoyed my spirits, and gratitude for Pastor Jim who took the time to pray with me before both surgeries, calming the anxious voices in my head. The past months were unsettling, but they also gave gifts of humility and gratitude. But if you want to know my name and birthdate, I'm not telling. You can look it up in the church directory!

With sincere thanks and much love—Beth

June 2024

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

Hummingbirds, thrashers, and titmice, oh my! Spring has officially arrived, and its warbling harbingers are outside the window each morning announcing the dawn of every beautiful, new day. There's no need for an alarm of late—we just let the chitter chatter of the wrens and house sparrows living in the dentils under the eaves on the corners of the house tell us when to awaken. For more than three weeks we had the pleasure of a particularly talented (and vigorous) whippoorwill. He serenaded us in the early hours of the morning, well before our appointed wake-up time, but we appreciated his beautiful call and stamina. Just as suddenly as he arrived, he disappeared, and we're hopeful that he found a worthy mate and set up housekeeping nearby.

Andy spotted the first turkey babies just last evening as their mother warily shepherded them along the forest edge. We've had three young wrens on the back deck, exploring their big, new world and attempting to discern what's edible and what's not. They're delightful to watch, their pert little tails stuck up in the air as they stare at each new object and puzzle over its purpose in their universe. We've yet to

see our first fawn, but if the past is any indicator, many have already been born and their mamas are keeping them safely hidden until they're old enough to come out and forage. It shouldn't be long before we hear the first young ones mewing for mama to return to the woods. We've got box turtles in the garden, toads by the garage, peepers and tree frogs singing in the evenings and lizards of all stripes (literally) skittering across the deck and front porch and up the brick walls. Thanks to the earlier arrival of warm temperatures this year, we already have swiss chard, kale, and lettuce in the vegetable garden. Soon the deck will be populated with pots of herbs and flowers and the garden will be producing tomatoes, squash and cucumbers. I can't wait! It's been a glorious spring with the recent rains and seeing the flora and fauna renew itself right outside the window is a miraculous gift.

With the helpful assistance of our avian friends, I've been awake well before dawn for several weeks, but this morning was the first time that I woke up with "Let All Things Now Living," one of my favorite hymns, running through my mind. The choir learned this one a couple of years ago and has sung it several times by now. Though it's often associated with the Thanksgiving season, I think it's just as appropriate for spring. The text is joyful and the Welsh tune ASH GROVE with which it is paired is just as jaunty. If you can't remember the tune, just ask a choir member, or even easier, look it up online and hum along as you read the words and celebrate the arrival of spring!

"Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving to God our Creator triumphantly raise; Who fashioned and made us, protected and stayed us, by guiding us on to the end of our days. God's banners are o'er us, pure light goes before us, a pillar of fire shining forth in the night; Till shadows have vanished, all fearfulness banished as forward we travel from light into light.

By law God enforces the stars in their courses, the sun in its orbit obediently shine; The hills and the mountains, the rivers and fountains, the depths of the ocean proclaim God divine. We, too, should be voicing our love and rejoicing with glad adoration, a song let us raise; Till all things now living unite in thanksgiving, to God in the highest, hosanna and praise."

Wishing you warm summer days filled with gentle rains, birdsong, and bounty!

Beth

July 2024

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

A spring evening more than four decades ago will forever be inextricably linked in my mind with the Fourth of July. Half the inhabitants of Covington it seemed, including my mom, dad, and big brother Nick, had just finished up a successful three-night run of the “New Minstrel Show” in Curfman Hall at the former Covington High School. The other half of Covington’s inhabitants had graciously filled the audience each night of the comedy/musical performance, laughing at the goofy jokes of the 6 endmen and the interlocutor, and humming along to familiar tunes sung by dozens of gifted chorus members.

Everyone was in high spirits after the final performance, reveling in the success of the sold-out event and relieved that after months of rehearsals they would all have some free weeknights and Sunday afternoons. The school’s custodial staff, show participants, and the stage crew, made up of high school age volunteers, boisterously broke down the stage props and cleared out dressing rooms to leave the school auditorium as tidy as they’d found it earlier in the week. I don’t think I was more than ten or eleven years old that night—old enough to help a bit, but not old enough to participate in any of the goings on. Brother Nick and his good friends, Karl and Todd, part of the show as well as the stage crew, made multiple trips to our family’s Jeep, carrying out drink coolers, costumes, and other odds and ends used on stage that were brought from home or borrowed from the community. At some point in all of the cheerful chaos, one of the boys came in and whispered something to mom (not dad, mind you). She discreetly followed him outside. Being the nosey little sister, I of course followed to see what was up. Nick’s friend Todd was just outside the stage door facing the wall, hands widely spaced on the brick as he slowly banged his forehead against the building. Things were getting more interesting by the minute; to be sure . . . Nick and Karl were standing next to the Jeep, looking pale and slightly ill. Other than the boys’ odd demeanor and the look on mom’s face, all seemed well to me. The Jeep was packed up and ready to roll—mission accomplished. Then I followed mom to the front of the vehicle, where we saw the tip of the American flag that up until an hour or so before had graced the stage in all its starry glory—protruding through the windshield. Whoops . . . The boys, on the cusp of manhood in their brute strength, but still full of youthful exuberance, had loaded the Jeep until there was no visible evidence of the flagpole underneath that was meant to jut out the open back window for the trip home. They hadn’t been able

to shut the rear gate on the vehicle and so they, all three, put their shoulders into it and gave it a not so subtle shove. Success! Followed by the sober realization that they'd just pushed a flagpole through Pookie's front window. Mom, being the mother of one of the offenders and the wife of the affronted party, was the fortunate one designated to let dad know what had transpired.

We waited outside . . . A few endless moments later, dad emerged through the stage door, marched down the stairs, and stared in disbelief at the front of the Jeep. And then, to paraphrase "The Night Before Christmas," he "spoke not a word . . . and turned with a jerk," and briskly headed on foot toward the old armory, hanging a right that brought him to Lexington Avenue where he headed south. I wasn't sure what to think. It was as though he'd suddenly remembered an engagement for which he was late. I didn't catch sight of him again until he rounded the corner from Craig Avenue, heading from behind Burton Field back toward all of us who nervously waited on the stairs at the auditorium. But no, he passed us by and made another round. I can't remember how many turns around the block he made that night, but it was a good while before he made his way back. Peculiar, indeed . . . Many years later I realized his intent. Dad, who had a notoriously long fuse, who rarely, if ever, raised his voice to his family, who, my life-long was the parent I told first when I "erred" because I knew he wouldn't get angry—was counting to the proverbial ten—although I believe on this particular evening, it was more like 1000. He eventually returned to us, if not in the high spirits of earlier in the evening, with his temper well in check. Thankfully, no young lives were harmed! I'm sure during his "spirited" walk, he gained some perspective on the night's calamity, recalling some of the knuckleheaded things he had done in his youth.

So, when I see our country's glorious flag, of course I'm grateful for the fragile existence of our young democracy and the many who fought to make it a reality and those who fight still to preserve it. The sight of our flag stirs my heart and I feel pride in the country I am blessed to call home. But sometimes when I see "Old Glory" I can't help thinking about that flagpole sticking through the windshield of our old Jeep, and I remember that May night, my father, my brother, and my mother. And that stirs my heart, too. Happy Fourth of July to you and happy official start to summer. (And I hope that all of the flags you see on the Fourth are flying free and at a distance, not sticking through your car's window!)

Beth

August 2024
McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

With the extreme heat and lack of rainfall, our garden has gotten off to a slow start this summer. Finally, just in the last week, I've been able to harvest a cucumber or two every few days, pick a scant handful of cherry tomatoes and grab a zucchini for dinner. I love my garden and am always thrilled when I can bring something into the kitchen that we've grown for ourselves, but sometimes I think I like the idea of gardening better than the actual hard work of gardening itself.

When we lived in Austria, we were just outside of the city of Graz, a university town and Austria's second largest city. It was a scenic city with a laid-back vibe (or at least as laid-back as Austria gets . . .) located in the foothills of the alps, surrounded by rolling countryside and fertile farmland. Thanks to the myriad small farmers in the surrounding area, it boasted a number of thriving farmers markets almost year-round. The largest market, the Kaiser-Josef Platz market, was located downtown across the street from the Opera House. Double or more the size of a football field, it featured some permanent structures—a fishmonger, a stall for bread and other baked goods, a fruit stall, stalls selling locally made specialties like pumpkin seed oil, etc., that were open Monday through Friday and a half day on Saturday. But it was in high summer that the market shone its brightest. At least two days a week, farmers from the outskirts of the city came in droves, their tables piled high with garden delicacies, jams and jellies, cakes, dense country-style breads, freshly made cheeses, handmade and molded herbal soaps, and fresh-cut flowers. On those days the market was truly a sight to behold. The locals were rightfully proud of the city's market culture and the one by the Opera House, a vibrant symbol of Austrian tradition and full of local specialties, was often a stop on the list of must-see sights for newcomers or visitors. I was taken to the market by new friends and acquaintances on several occasions when we first moved to Graz. I was always there as an appreciative bystander and other than smiling and saying hello, I didn't interact with the vendors selling their wares.

That all changed about a year into our adventure when I found the courage to make my first foray to the market alone. I drove into the city, parked in the multi-floor basement garage under the Opera House, found my way out of said multi-floor garage, and crossed multiple lanes of busy city traffic (and scary bike lanes) to get to the market. I was equipped with two large tote bags, a purse full of euros, a big,

friendly (probably over-friendly) American smile, and the best German I could muster. The market was a riot of color and conversation, but I figured I'd traveled this far, so I took a deep breath and jumped in.

The farmers couldn't have been more kind, many surprised to find a foreigner braving the market on her own. I was treated to samples, informed about the history of the Gugelhupf, a traditional turban-shaped cake baked in a ridged pan, taught about local heirloom bean varieties and how to best prepare them . . . It was information overload, but a ton of fun. Still, though these people may have seemed humble farmers, they were also expert salespeople. They were toughened to the hard work of farming, but equally trained in the "art of the deal." And I think they saw in me, well, to put it nicely, a greenhorn. And I was a greenhorn who, at the time, didn't know how to buy anything in a smaller quantity than a kilo! For those who've forgotten that brief introduction to the metric system that many of us had in elementary school, a kilo is 2.2 pounds. So yes, I quickly amassed a kilo of beautiful young potatoes, a kilo of lovely freshly picked green beans, a kilo of not so lovely, not so freshly picked green beans from the sad countenanced grandmotherly farmer at the next booth, a kilo of slightly shriveled potatoes from the sad countenanced grandmotherly farmer at the next booth, a whole carrot Gugelhupf (I saw later at another booth that one could, in fact, buy a half Gugelhupf.), a kilo of zucchini, a kilo of cucumbers, a bundle of zinnias You get the picture. I could feel my arms stretching by the minute as I lugged my purchases around the market. I finally found my way out of the maze of stalls to the street. I still had the gauntlet to run—the bike lanes, the wide multi-laned street (possibly wider now than when I'd arrived?), the walk to the Opera House and the long journey to find my car in the bowels of the parking garage.

My German teacher Heinz, with whom I shared the bounty of my trip to the market the following day, found it hysterical that I'd purchased a kilo of everything I bought. "They saw you coming," he laughed! He immediately changed his lesson plans for that day and instead taught this market-green American about dekagrams—how to buy things in 100th of a kilo increments. Heinz was a great teacher, but this was one of the most useful things he ever taught me! As summer peaks in the coming months, I wish you all bounty from the garden on your plates, perky green beans that snap when you bend them, zucchini smaller than baseball bats, and as much Gugelhupf as your heart desires. If you need me, I'll be in the garden looking for cherry tomatoes.

Beth

September 2024
McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

I got tickled during Pastor Jim's sermon a couple of weeks ago when he spoke about car trips with his parents and two older brothers when he was a boy. As the youngest, he was always left to sit atop the hump in the middle of the back seat while both brothers were entitled, due to their advanced age and enhanced standing in the family, no doubt, to the window seats on either side. Although there were only two children in the backseat of the "Leitch Mobile" it seemed that no matter how wide the backseat was (and they could be cavernous back in the day) it often wasn't wide enough for two squabbling siblings. An invisible line was drawn hundreds of times over the years accompanied by an admonishment through gritted teeth, "DO NOT CROSS THAT LINE!"

One thing Jim mentioned from back in the day that I hadn't thought about in years was the car radio. There were no Walkmans, no iPods, no smart phones, and no earbuds, much less a video entertainment system. If a car's inhabitants listened to the radio, they all listened to the same thing. I still have vague memories of the wide numbered tuner with its stubby presets below located to the right of the even wider steering wheel. The tuning bar located within was a magic conduit to the world outside the car. In the early days before the average car could pick up distant signals, especially during the day, when we drove around Covington the bar was always tuned to WKEY. The programming and the DJs were as familiar as the sounds of our own home. (Actually, they *were* the sounds of our own home as the radio was often on in the kitchen in the mornings.) The recurring programs (Anyone remember the theme to The Kitchen Club?) told us the time of day just as definitively as if we'd been looking at a clock on the wall. When we traveled further afield, the very same tuner connected us to unknown stations and strange voices as we passed through unfamiliar communities, turning the knob on the console as though we were adjusting a huge telescope that reached out into the universe. It didn't matter if we were as near as Lewisburg or Lexington, or as far as Myrtle Beach or Denver, the tuner would crackle until it finally picked up a somewhat clear signal, where maybe we'd hear familiar tunes, or, disorientingly, unfamiliar voices with dialects unlike our own.

When I was deemed old enough, mom and dad gave me my first transistor radio. I'd lie in bed at night slowly turning and turning the knob, first one way and then back to

the other in search of faraway locales, looking for someplace to land that was clear enough to hear the music or the talk. I was thrilled one summer when I was able to tune in New Orleans most nights. How exotic and dangerous it all seemed listening to the disembodied voices and fresh new music in the darkness of my room!

These days most of us have alternative sources for our music and other entertainment. It was so exciting transitioning from cassette tapes and albums to CDs in the late 1980s. I was certain those silver discs would be with us for the rest of my life, just as 45s and LPs had been a fixture of my childhood. Boy was I wrong! I still have CDs, but most of them have been downloaded to our computer. I can now walk into most any room in my house and using my phone or iPad wirelessly call up a favorite CD to play whenever I want. If I choose to, I can have a different CD, radio station, livestream or podcast playing in six areas of the house all at the same time. A cacophony, yes, but amazing! That's not even taking into account that we can now download the latest pop "albums" within minutes of their release. Taylor Swift, anyone?

Which brings me back to my beloved old radio . . . When my family was listening to WKEY at home and in the car in the 1960s and '70s, so was most of Alleghany County. Whether it was music or some significant news event, we all shared what we heard, even if we weren't in the same space when we heard it. When I walked up Main Street in 1978 to buy a "single" or an album it was usually because I'd first heard it on the radio. And I'd likely run into friends who were there to buy the very same album. We were given a common gift in the music that shaped our childhoods and our teen years—something that made that time unique to us and no one else. It unified and identified us. The way our music is delivered these days is so different than in the past and many of us rarely, if ever, listen to an actual radio station. If we choose, we can all listen to exactly *what* we want to hear *when* we want to hear it. But I hope we always continue to share some common musical ground—some pieces that when we hear them, at a reunion, at a wedding reception, at a church potluck, we'll all get up to dance or sing. I hope we'll always have a "common chord." So go turn on your radio, stick a favorite CD into the player, put an LP on the turntable, or get your phone and stream some tunes. Sing along and dance your happy dance! While I've got the seventies in mind I'm going online to find "September" by Earth, Wind, and Fire. (Best.Song.Ever.) And then I'm gonna dance like no one's watching!

Beth

October 2024
McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

Here's a question for you. What's white, green, and sometimes red, maybe 4 inches tall, occasionally fierce-tempered, with an insatiable appetite for something sweet, and oh—it weighs about as much as a marshmallow (0.1 to 0.2 ounces in adulthood to be exact)? If you guessed *Archilochus colubris*, or the ruby-throated hummingbird, you'd be correct! These fiery little birds are one of God and Mother Nature's finest collaborations.

We've spent much of the summer admiring the tiny ruby-throated hummingbirds outside our windows and on our front porch. While we always see hummingbirds in the summer, this year we've had them all day, every day, thanks to the ornamental salvia in hues of red, fuschia, and blue, and various basil varieties I potted up for our back deck. There's a sugar water feeder, too, for good measure. For all of their beauty, agility, and diminutive size, they are unlikely warriors, scaring the daylight out of us when we're on the deck with a morning cup of tea or coffee—screaming around our heads and squealing like a miniature out-of-control motorcycle careening around a tight corner, all this commotion in pursuit of a second intruding hummer bold enough to attempt a sip of nectar from a favorite bloom. What attitude! We marvel at the speed of their aerial acrobatics, their ability to fly backward and to hover, and simply the thought that something so miniscule can survive and seemingly thrive with so many larger birds and other predators around. I read on one website that a hummer's brain makes up 4% of its body weight and that it remembers every single flower and feeder it visits. If this is true, it would explain the accusing glare we get when we hang a fern where a begonia hung the year before!

I had an acquaintance in Lewisburg, WVA, who had the opportunity to witness the miraculousness of these feisty avian friends from an even closer vantage point when he spotted a nest outside one of his dormer windows while checking his gutters. In order to avoid disturbing the nestlings, he'd take a mirror and hold it outside the open window so he could observe their development. He was delighted one day when he was treated to the sight of their first clumsy attempts at fledging. He said they looked like feathered nickels as they rose, hovered, and settled back into the nest.

And speaking of their nests—wow! I was inspired this summer to do a little reading about our neighbors just outside the window. Their nests are made of soft plant

matter (“thistle and dandelion down” was one poetic description) and spider silk. (I suspect they also contain some fairy dust and perhaps a hair or two from the mane of a unicorn . . .) Most hummer nests are only a smidge over an inch in diameter. It’s the mother’s job to build the nest and incubate the eggs. She forms the rim of the nest by pressing it between her neck and chest and then stomps down the material to form the bowl. The spider silk enables the nest to expand as the baby birds grow. Astonishing!

I know the remaining days with our iridescent friends are limited. The exquisite ruby-throats, North America's only hummer to breed in the east, will soon embark on their epic migration to warmer climes for the winter. They’ll head out individually, not in large protective flocks. (Apparently, they’re not much for fellowship and gathering. Maybe that’s why we Presbyterians see so few of them at potlucks . . .) These amazing, ferocious beauties will head to Mexico and Central America in search of sweet plant nectar and small insects. For many, their journey will cover 500 miles across the Gulf of Mexico, not even counting the miles they covered to get to the southern coast of the United States. (And they aren’t even four inches from head to heel!) In the meantime, I’m taking every opportunity to enjoy them “up close.” I’m looking forward to winter and I’d love to have some snow this year, but I’ll be happy to see our feisty friends return next spring!

Beth

November 2024

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

I was in the sanctuary by myself a number of years ago preparing for Sunday’s service when I heard a persistent knock on the outside door near the pastor’s former study. I’d only been back at McAllister a month or two and was anxious about opening the door while I was alone in the church, but I assumed the anonymous visitor was a member who’d forgotten their key. I tried to peek out the upper windows of the door, but couldn’t see anyone and when I did push the door open there was a lovely, bright-eyed young woman, maybe mid-twenties, standing before me.

I had never in my life seen her before and I don’t believe I’ve ever seen her since. Without missing a beat, she quickly told me how pleased she was that I was there

and had finally opened the door. She shared that she lived in Clifton Forge and had been out all morning running errands (If I remember correctly, I think she had a young child or two in school.) and didn't realize how famished she was until she was almost home and started to feel queasy. When she arrived home, she grabbed the quickest and easiest thing she could think of to eat—a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She said that as she sat in her kitchen eating that sandwich, she felt so much better. She told me how much she relished the taste of that familiar combination, and how overwhelmingly happy such a simple thing made her feel. She decided right then that as much as she could make it possible, everyone should share in that same happiness! She finished that delicious PB&J sandwich and went right out and bought as many cases of peanut butter as she could afford on that day! Half of the peanut butter she dropped off at a food bank in Clifton and the other half she brought to McAllister's Food Pantry. I helped her carry in the peanut butter from the trunk of her car, both of us chatting all the while, and after we finished, she shared with me that she'd lost her father not too long before. She asked if I could play a couple of his favorite hymns on the organ while she sat and listened. She had already won me over with her charm and enthusiasm, so I of course obliged. She sat quietly on the front pew and listened. Afterward, she thanked me, we hugged, and just as unexpectedly as she'd arrived, she was gone.

I've thought of Peanut Butter Girl often in the intervening years and I hope that life has been as kind to her as her gentle and tender heart deserves. Pastor Jim often encourages us before McAllister's Sunday morning offering to "give with glad and joyful hearts." That phrase is the very embodiment of the young lady who dropped by that day. She was pure sunshine. Her utter joy in the everyday, her gratitude, her generosity, her compassion, and her empathy in seeing the needs of others in addition to her own, made a lasting impression on me. It was a brief interaction, maybe twenty minutes in all, but one I will never forget. I wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving.

Beth

December 2024

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute

It didn't take me too long to realize after Andy's and my 1994 arrival in the Czech Republic that flowers were a REALLY BIG DEAL in Czech culture. As the new Westvaco plant was being built, we were often invited into the homes of local officials, contractors, and other people who were involved in the construction of what would become Westvaco Svitavy. We soon saw that while a box of chocolates or a bottle of wine were always gratefully received, proper etiquette required that visitors bring flowers for the host. It could be a single long-stemmed rose, a colorful Asiatic lily, a few gerbera daisies paired with some greenery, or a small mixed bouquet, but no matter how humble the flower, it was always wrapped in a big pouf of cellophane and tied with a decorative ribbon. Bringing flowers was a cultural necessity. Through this tradition, I got to meet my first "real" Czech friend, Antonie. Antonie worked in the flower shop located just below the town's newly renovated historic town square, and my need to procure the occasional bouquet pushed me beyond my comfort zone into the humid, tropical environment of the floral shop. It was long before I was equipped to ask for the exact components I wanted in an arrangement. Thankfully, Antonie was there to welcome me.

I spoke very little Czech at that point, but Westvaco had provided us with a one-week cultural immersion course in NYC a couple of months before we made the big move. There I learned the basics: hello, goodbye, please, and thank you. I learned how to ask for directions (but not necessarily understand what I was told). I could ask what time it was (but not necessarily understand what I was told . . .) and I had a basic understanding of numbers (but not necessarily understand—well, you get the picture . . .). My first solo visit to the květinářství, or florist, was daunting for me. Czech shopkeepers always greet visitors upon their entrance. And after I said, "Dobrý den," or good day, my conversation was pretty much over. About then, a bright-eyed, young redhead stepped from behind the counter and came toward me with a big smile. (I later discovered that she had already guessed who I was. I was one of only six Americans in town at the time, for one thing, and the house next door to her best friend from grade school was already being renovated to be Andy's and my future home. It turns out I'd been spotted by her friend on a couple of occasions as I was trying to tidy up the overgrown garden in our soon-to-be backyard.)

While Antonie and I had very little in common language-wise, our friendship grew out of our mutual interest to get to know one another and our love of flowers. She eagerly taught me the names of flowers in Czech and I attempted to repeat them back to her. She tested my memory each time I entered the shop, asking me to name flowers she'd taught me over previous visits, and while there was still some pointing and pantomime involved in my bouquets, I began to pick up some of her language and she mine. When Antonie wasn't there, the other ladies in the shop were just as patient with me and before I knew it, there were people in town who recognized and greeted me when I was out and about. If the employees were taking a coffee break when I came in, they unfailingly included me in the ritual. Gradually, I didn't feel so very far from home. In time, Antonie invited me to her home to meet her mother, Paní Širůčková. Mrs. Širůčková was on disability and unable to get around very well, but on my first visit, it was immediately apparent where Antonie got her sparkle and warm disposition. Maybe because she was so limited to the confines of her home, Antonie's mom was eager to hear every detail about me, my family, and the United States. We enjoyed several afternoons together, some with Antonie and even a few without, before her health became too compromised to receive visitors.

A few days before our first Christmas in our new home, Antonie's family invited us to spend Christmas Eve with them. It was an unexpected honor. We knew that Christmas Eve in the Czech Republic was the primary day of the Christmas celebration. It was the same for Andrew's family from Poland. In both countries, Christmas Eve is the main event—the evening on which the feast is served, the tree is lit for the first time, and gifts are opened. We'd been told that in the Czech Republic, it is only for the closest family. More distant relations—cousins, aunts and uncles, even grandparents, and friends are visited the following day, December 25th. The Christmas Eve celebration is for the nuclear family—mother, father, and children. We were stunned by the invitation, but touched by their generosity, so we accepted. We took a bouquet, of course, and a few other little goodies, and Andy spent the afternoon of the 24th baking his mother's yeasted poppy seed roll, makowiec, a Polish Christmas tradition in his home.

The mood around the table was warm and jolly as we sat with Antonie, her parents, and her brother. The food was delicious and plentiful, my first experience with Christmas carp prepared the way it should be—crispy fried and steaming hot, hot, hot—accompanied by a huge bowl of potato salad dotted with bright green peas. The conversation came easily enough with a little effort from all involved (and a lot of gesturing!), and the lighting of the candles on the tree following dinner was absolutely magical—and a little frightening, considering there was live flame on a real tree. The beauty of the candle-lit tree and the brevity of the time it stayed lit made it all the more special.

Following the meal, dessert, and the lighting of the tree, it came time to open gifts. Andy and I expected to be observers in this part of the evening, and we were, until we were each handed a wrapped gift. I think we both knew it as we unwrapped the presents, but we didn't discuss it until the drive home. It was clear by the nature of the items that each had originally been intended for Antonie and her brother—young twenty-somethings at the time. It makes me tear up even today as I write this. This beautiful family shared not only their personal Christmas celebration with us, creating a lasting and poignant memory in our hearts, but they also shared with us what they had intended to give to their own children—just to make us feel part of the evening, just to make us feel loved. They simply wanted to share their warm home and celebrate the joy of Christmas with two visitors, two strangers, who were far from the love and traditions of their own families. By the end of that evening, I felt as if I'd lived my own version of the original Christmas story. I wish you all a blessed Christmas full of love and generosity—love and generosity that you give and also that you receive.

Beth



**Dear members and friends
of McAllister Memorial Presbyterian Church**

This slender collection includes all of the Musical Minute messages that I wrote during the year 2024 for inclusion in the McAllister Messenger, a newsletter sent monthly to the congregation and extended family of McAllister Memorial Presbyterian Church, located in Covington, Va. Among its contents, I hope you can find a little something that speaks to you or even makes you smile. Thank you for reading! Best wishes for 2025.

Beth
Elizabeth Leitch Dreszer
Organist and Choir Director