



Musical Minute

A compilation of Musical Minutes
shared during the year 2025

McAllister Memorial
Presbyterian Church
900 N. Alleghany Avenue
Covington, VA 24426

January 2025

McAllister Messenger

Musical Minute:



I recently rediscovered a favorite photograph. It was taken in 1995 at my grandmother's house on the farm in Floyd County on my first trip home after Andy and I moved to the Czech Republic the year prior. In the center is my Grandmother Leitch, Edith Loving Leitch—Edie to my grandfather. Also in the photo is the youngest of my father's siblings, my uncle Marshall, as well as my big brother Nick and my precious sister-in-law, Cathy. My uncle, Beloved UM as I call him, is to my left holding me firmly around my right shoulder while my right hand crosses us both and holds tightly to grandmama's right hand. Grandmama's left hand holds on to sweet Catherine's hand while Cathy holds on to my Nicky's arm and Nicky has his left hand lightly placed on grandmama's hip. Marshall's left arm, while not visible, is, I'm sure, holding on to Nick. It's a photo that makes me happy and I kept it on our bedroom dresser during all the years we lived overseas.

I love this photo for many reasons. We all look incredibly young, for one thing! But mostly I love it because the actors are the same—the same since my birth—and minus a key part (Grandmama passed in 1998.), the same as today. The people pictured are some of the foundation stones of my entire life. I can stare at it for ages—the shape of the faces, the familiarity of the hands, the bright smiles. Each reminds me of something familiar in myself and it brings me such comfort.

My wish for all of you in the new year is everything that I see in this photograph. I hope you have strong, loving arms around you, hands to hold yours, kindred souls who laugh at the same things you do, people who share your point of view and a very few who gently challenge you, in short, people who lift you up, and most importantly, love you. Be well and embrace the next 365 days. They are a gift we're only given once.

Beth

“We keep this love in a photograph...we make these memories for ourselves...where our eyes were never closing, hearts were never broken, times were ever frozen still.”

--Ed Sheeran



February 2025
McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

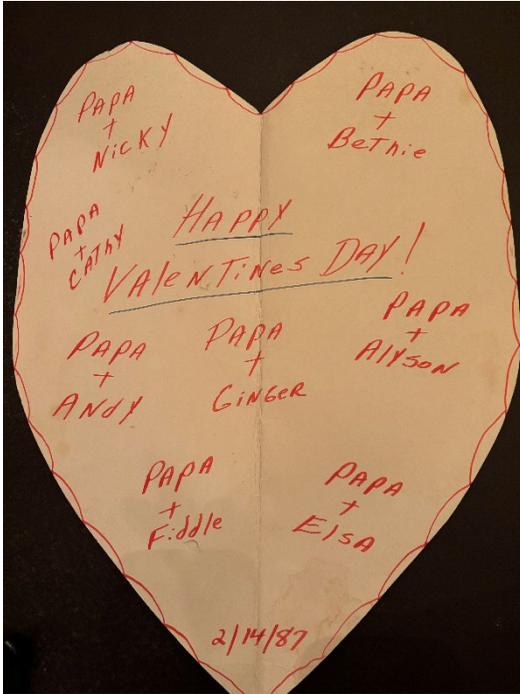
It's only mid-January but the television ads are already aggressively hinting about the way to win your true love's heart. The old standards are there— flowers, jewelry, perfume, and chocolates. But when did a new car become a little token of affection? “I love you, my darling. And in case you don't believe me, here's a new Lexus to prove it.” “Honestly, I hadn't given it much thought until just now, but since you just gifted me a new Lexus, I think I love you, too,” the one being wooed responds. I'd like to think I'm not old enough to be a curmudgeon yet, but I do often find myself looking back with fondness at what I remember to be “simpler times.” I don't know if children still exchange valentines in grade school, but I remember well going to the store in the week leading up to the big day and choosing a flat, cellophane-wrapped box or two, depending on class size, of small cards and accompanying envelopes. Every single child in the class received a valentine, even, at mom's insistence, the little boy who had

cooties or the little girl who had been rather nasty to me just the week before. It was an egalitarian occasion celebrated with cupcakes and Kool-Aid, ending with a stack of colorful little cards with sweet sentiments to take home and look at later. Mom was a relentless “morning person” and somehow managed to accomplish more before 7 AM than many people can manage in an entire day. On Valentine’s Day, that meant the evening’s dessert was already baked and iced and sitting on a pretty platter on the dining room table before we came down to breakfast in the morning. Long before I knew the mystery behind layer cakes, I marveled at the luscious looking heart-shaped cake, usually chocolate with chocolate icing, with a cupid’s arrow (made from folded aluminum foil) magically protruding from either side of the cake. For years I wondered how she managed to stick that arrow through the cake! Dad always had the honor of cutting the first piece of cake following dinner, and I felt profoundly grownup the year I finally realized that while, yes, the cake was for the whole family, mom's primary impetus for getting up well before dawn to bake that cake was the love she had for her high school sweetheart.

While the memory of that cake lives on in my heart, I also have a more concrete Valentine’s Day treasure from my college years. I found it tucked over some pipes in the basement while going through mom and dad’s house on Lexington Avenue after mom passed in 2011. It now lives at our house, and I bring it upstairs for a few days every February. It’s a Valentine’s heart, about 2 by 2 1/2 feet, crafted by dad of bleached board paper (of course). He affixed it to the big mirror that hung in the front hallway before leaving for work one February Friday morning in 1987. On it, in bright red marker, he declared his Valentine’s Day love for everyone who would be in the house that weekend, and when mom brought my friend Alison and I home from college that afternoon, the Valentine was the first thing that greeted us when we walked in the door. Even though he spelled her name a little differently than it was actually spelled, Alison was so touched to be included. Nick and I were there, Nick’s soon to be fiancé, Cathy, my already betrothed, Andy, mom, our irascible terrier mix, Fiddlestix, and Nick’s

elegant white German Shepherd (with shall we say a “sensitive,” yet lovely disposition), Elsa.

Dad wrote the date on that big ‘ole heart that hung on the mirror that weekend and it stuns me now to think that we had dad for not even three whole months longer after he crafted that little piece of love and joy for all of us. Thirty-eight years later, the tape on the back of the heart is yellowed and brittle, and the sign is a little tired, but on the



whole none the worse for the wear and the years that have passed. The love and thoughtfulness behind his gesture still bring tears to my eyes and warm my heart, like a direct communication from papa from beyond space and the decades. By the time you receive this newsletter, winter will be on its way out. Sure—we may have a few snowy, even icy setbacks, but spring is on the way along with the exuberant, colorful joy it brings. Whether you’re a fan of St. Valentine’s Day or not so much, maybe find a way to enjoy the sentiment of this semi-holiday. Snuggle up with your pets, call a friend, reshare an old family story with a sibling or a cousin, or even give your sweetheart a peck on the cheek. Winter is ending and the thaw is coming. It’s time to share some love!

Beth

March 2025

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

Andy and I have long known that we hit the proverbial “neighbor jackpot” when we bought our home twenty years ago, but we were acutely reminded of that fact during January and February’s challenging snow and ice storms. I’d canceled McAllister’s choir rehearsal after Covington’s first major snowstorm of 2025 (which within a matter of hours turned into an impenetrable layer of ice), and I was determined to make it to choir the following week. By then, Andy had been up and down the driveway a few times in his truck and we were both convinced (somewhat) that I could manage the same in my car. Arriving home from the church that evening (with a full load of groceries in the back of the vehicle) I called Andy to let him know I was about to make my ascent. Sadly, about halfway up the drive, the rump of my car slid off the road into an icy ditch. I tried a few times to get “unstuck,” but knew I could easily make matters worse by doing so, and finally I called Andy again to let him know what had happened.

In true gallant fashion, my dear, dear husband pulled my heaviest winter coat from the closet, walked it down the driveway to me, and escorted me up the hill to our toasty-warm home. He then headed out to the barn in the frigid air to get the Gator and some digging implements so he could extricate my Honda. Within two minutes after he left, the doorbell rang! How could that be? There is one way in and one way out of our place. My first thought was that Andy had forgotten the barn keys, but then I thought, “No. He couldn’t possibly have made it to the barn and back in such a short time.” I checked the back door. Nope—no one there. When I opened the front door, there was our neighbor Patrick. With a big smile on his face he asked, “How do you expect me to deliver your packages if you’re going to start parking in the middle of the driveway?!” Pat had come up to deliver a package UPS had dropped off for us at his place since the UPS guy couldn’t get up our driveway either. Pat left his truck behind my car and walked the package up while Andy was in the barn. In the meantime, Andy had returned to my car, found Patrick’s truck but no Pat in it and was concerned that Pat had somehow gotten trapped under one of the vehicles. He was relieved and surprised to see Patrick walking down the driveway a minute or so later. Pat, who had just gotten in from work, went home to change into some warmer clothes, and then, as he has always done, he came

to help. The first order of business was to transport the groceries up the hill in the increasing darkness. It then took an additional hour and a half, at least, for them to get my car out of the ditch. That was Tuesday.

The following Friday, the FedEx driver made his first attempt in two weeks to get up our drive. The driver called us for help when he slid into a ditch not too far from where I'd gone off. Andy sighed and headed out to the barn again for the Gator and some tools . . . About a minute later, the phone rang again. It was Patrick—who had the misfortune to be off from work that day! He'd seen the driver head up our drive, but hadn't seen him come back down. I gave him the bad news. By the time Andy got down the drive, Patrick was waiting and together they rescued the hapless young driver and his van.

In the midst of all this driveway drama, Andy expressed his concern to Patrick about the dwindling level of heating oil in our tank and the upcoming bitter weather that was forecast. He had phoned the oil company several weeks earlier, but until things thawed a bit, the delivery truck couldn't make it up the drive. Normally we heat with wood during the winter months, but for various reasons we've used our oil furnace this year and without a tank refill, it looked like Andy might need to get the woodstove fired up. After helping Andy get the FedEx driver out of the ditch, Patrick stayed for several more hours to help Andy transport wood from the wood pile to the woodshed, so we'd be ready if needed. And Pat didn't stop there. Later that evening he called his brother Dave, a good friend of ours, who called Jason, another mutual friend. About eight o'clock the next morning, Jason pulled up the still treacherous driveway in his powerful white pickup truck, like a hero from a fairy tale on a mighty white steed. In tow he had two hundred gallons of diesel fuel to tide us over until we could get our oil delivery. We were overwhelmed with gratitude.

Famed children's advocate and television personality, Fred Rogers, encouraged children to "look for the helpers" in times of trouble or distress. It was wisdom that his own mother had shared with him when he was just a child. I've always believed that there are helpers all around us. I think I knew it deep in my heart—even before I ever heard Mr. Rogers' mantra. I don't know if this belief stems from naiveté or from the fact that I grew up in a small town where interactions with neighbors and strangers were plentiful and generally, friendly. Usually, my fanciful notion of people's innate kindness proves true. Or to put it a different way, I'd guess that for every, how shall I say, "unpleasant individual" I've encountered, there have been at least 50 nice people who

followed to balance out everything! And I've lost count of the times I've been absolutely stunned by someone's generosity, compassion, and grace.

It seems that where we live, we don't even need to "look for the helpers." Thankfully, they come and find us! May God bless our friends, family, and the strangers who help us along our way. And may we all have opportunities to repay their generosity in kind. And I'm hoping that for every jerk (There—I said it.) you run into this year, there are exponentially more kind people who follow. I'm also hoping that our driveway doesn't get iced over again this winter. I'll bet Patrick is hoping so, too!

Beth

April 2025

McAllister Messenger

Musical Minute:

In mid-March, McAllister hosted a celebration of the life and resurrection of Patsy Arrington Parker, a cherished member and friend of the church, a gifted and beloved member of the choir, a former Sunday School teacher, and an almost lifelong resident of Covington where she contributed in innumerable ways, both professionally and personally. She accomplished much in her lifetime, but I think she would argue that her most significant contributions to the world were her two extraordinary (and loving, hysterically funny, daring, and empathetic) daughters, Rebecca and Susan, whom she raised along with some help from her husband, Orion, or Jr., as many of us knew him. She was also my "Aunt" Patsy, a loving and steadfast fixture in my life since I was a child, and a beacon in my musical upbringing. I can't remember a time in my life without her in it. It was a testament to her life and legacy that, through the efforts of many, we were able to field a chorus of more than 25 singers for her service, with vocalists from throughout the Allegheny Highlands and beyond volunteering their time and talents to a hastily assembled, but ultimately unified, choir. While most singers knew Patsy, there were also several who did not, which tells you much about the close-knit community of musicians in and around Covington. So often, they are called at the last minute to assemble in tribute to the life of someone who had donated their talents in much the same way they continue to do. Remarkably and unflinching, they come. The

music for Patsy's service was glorious, and the sight of the singers in the variously colored choir robes of their home churches was a visual treat.

Before her passing, Patsy specifically expressed a desire to have the anthem "Open Our Eyes" by Will Macfarlane sung at her funeral. I remembered it vaguely from the days when Frances Parker Rupert, Patsy's sister-in-law, was the Minister of Music at McAllister. I would guess that it's not been sung in our sanctuary since the early 1980s at the latest, but Patsy would have known it well. Copyrighted in 1925, it has aged beautifully, in both its message and its harmonies. It has moments of quiet, ethereal wonder and joy followed by thunderous measures that celebrate being in the presence of God. While the musical treatment makes it much longer, the text reads as follows:

"Open our eyes, O loving and compassionate, Jesus, that we may behold Thee walking beside us in our sorrow. Thou hast made death glorious and triumphant, for through its portals we enter into the presence of the Living God. Open our eyes, O loving and compassionate Jesus, that we may see to follow Thee, Jesus our Savior and Redeemer. Amen."

It was perfect for the occasion, as Patsy had known it would be, and members of McAllister's choir and members of the Alleghany Highlands Chorale along with a few unaffiliated singers worked diligently on it at separate rehearsals in the week leading up to the funeral. We all rehearsed together for the first time about two hours before the service and miraculously, we pulled it off.

My greatest find of the entire effort was the historic McAllister gold I discovered early in the week before the service. As I dug into the files of McAllister's ancient music library to find the anthem, I came upon some of Patsy's dear friends and cohorts—friends who would have sung the anthem alongside her in years past. There on the cover page of "Open Our Eyes," I found Helen Laudermilk, Wynona Crush, June Andrews, Loula Ervine, and Jr. Parker, Patsy's sweetheart and life-long partner—all treasured, former members of McAllister's choir. Eventually I found Patsy herself, identified on the front as PAP. I appropriated Patsy's copy for myself, hoping that it would give me strength and confidence as I navigated yet another funeral of a loved one. She had penciled some notes in on the soprano line, a reminder to "breathe," between the words compassionate and Jesus, and then "Me," with an arrow pointing downward, indicating that she with was to move from the dreaded high "g" of the soprano line to the more manageable "d" of the first alto line. As I prepared to play the anthem on the organ for our composite choir, I added my own penciled notes and reminders beneath Patsy's

and I felt a little more secure in a week in which, I confess, I had felt a bit adrift. Patsy and I had this covered. All we needed to do was “breathe” and when something was too uncomfortable, maybe take it down a step or two and make things a little easier on ourselves. “This is beautiful music, not torture,” she seemed to be saying. “We’re going to make it through just fine (even the Hallelujah Chorus at the end of the service).” Thanks for the wise advice, Aunt Patsy. I miss your presence on this earth already. And thank you for all the love . . .

Beth



Thank you also to the many area vocalists who contributed to Patsy’s celebration. Special thanks are due to Ann Scruggs who did a masterful job conducting us all.

May 2025

McAllister Messenger

Musical Minute:

I love Virginia and its four distinct seasons. And if you were to ask me on any given day of the year, I probably would tell you that “today” is my favorite season. I don’t know exactly when it is in a child’s development that we begin to look outward from ourselves and realize the existence and persistence of the changing seasons. Maybe it begins in primary school where we learn that “March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb”; where we repeat after our teacher, “April showers bring May flowers.” While it has more to do with the weather than the seasons, I still remember mom pointing up to the evening sky and teaching me, “Red skies at night, sailors delight. Red skies at morning, sailors take warning.” Maybe we learn even before our early school days, as in our part of the globe at least, we come to relate the excitement of Christmas with the dark, bracing nights of winter, and the celebration of Easter with damp, dewy grass and cool mornings that often morph into glorious, sunny Sunday afternoons.

At some point in our lives, I think most of us come to not only sense the changing seasons, but to welcome each one in its turn. Maybe this is a trait we share with our wild animal counterparts. I’ve noticed that about the time the deer return to nibble on the field behind our home in late winter, I begin to crave all things green. When the deer retreat to the deep woods during the hottest part of the day in the summer, we humans,

too, are inclined to find a shady spot to rest until the evening brings some relief from the scorching sun. Most of us come to know that wonderful sensation of stepping out on the porch after a long string of warm, perhaps even insufferably humid, late summer days and recognizing the undeniable feeling that, “fall is finally in the air.” It’s always a magical moment that puts many of us in pure “pumpkin mode.” The combination of temperature, low humidity, and things indefinable, makes us want to hunt and gather, to nest, to prepare for the cold that is to come. But in the meantime, there is this magnificent “cool,” full of moody anticipation, to enjoy.

Winter is one of my favorite times of year—its stillness, the gray and white sky before the sun sets, and the coziness of coming inside to the warmth and closing the door to the chill outside. I love the blackness of a winter night with the stars sparkling like distant diamonds. This winter had a few tricks up its sleeve, however, and the last six weeks or so I’ve found myself truly longing for my summer flowers on the deck and front porch and in the garden. The most difficult thing for me this time of the year is not to confuse these warm, sunny days we’ve been having with the actual safe planting date for our region. My seeds are all lined up on the counter and ready to go and I’ve even begun to accumulate plants. They’re waiting patiently (more patiently than I) under the grow lights in the basement. I keep turning them, changing their orientation to the light, trying to fend off the inevitable “legginess” that occurs when I purchase plants too early in the season. Our official planting date in the Allegheny Highlands is May 15. As I write this, that’s less than a month away, but when I step out onto the deck this April afternoon and am met by 80-degree temperatures and humidity, I feel like I’ve already fallen a month behind.

When we lived in the Czech Republic, I was surprised to learn that, even though the winters seemed longer and more harsh than the winters to which I was accustomed in Virginia, the actual safe planting date in the region where Andy and I lived was the same as it is in Covington—May 15. My young Czech friend, Martin, who loved sharing fun facts with me about Czech culture, shared that the Czechs remembered the spring planting date by referencing the “three ice men,” the “tři ledoví muži.” The three ice men (or sometimes “frozen men”) turned out to be a reference to the Christian calendar of saints. Existing since at least the middle ages, the calendar of saints associates a particular date of the liturgical calendar with the holy feast date of each saint in the Christian church. (Here’s a fun little aside: Especially in the European Catholic tradition, most infants are given the name of a holy saint upon their birth and baptism. They then celebrate that saint’s feast day as their “name day” each year. This was all new to me when I began dating my future husband in the mid-1980s. In his Polish-

Catholic family, Andrew grew up celebrating his name day [November 30] in addition to his actual birthday [March 9]. And while all of this is fascinating, and it truly is, I'll leave it up to you to learn more about this beautiful tradition of name days. There is much about it on the internet. For now, back to the ice men!

It's probably a blending of Christian and folk traditions, but in Czech lore, as well as other European cultures, one legend of the ice men goes as follows: Three saints (or kings), Pankrác, Servác, and Bonifác, went to sea to fish, but they were frozen solid when the temperature suddenly dropped. (FYI: Their feast dates are May 12, 13, and 14, respectively). Not long after, St. Zofie (feast date May 15) came along. Finding the three saints frozen, she poured boiling water over them to thaw them out. The moral of the story is clear—no planting (or fishing at sea?) before the 15th of May! So, in honor of the three ice men, I'll try to hold off on putting my tender plants and seedlings in the garden for another few weeks. There's not much worse than hoping for the best but getting the worst and finding their droopy, blackened stems after a late frost. It reminds me of another adage I learned as a child, "Good things come to those who wait." For those of you who still plant a garden, I wish you all the best during the coming growing season. We all appreciate it when you bring your excess bounty to church on Sunday morning! Whether it's homegrown, gifted, or purchased, I hope we each have at least one perfectly ripened tomato on our plate this summer! Happy spring!

Beth

June 2025

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

Andy and I decided to celebrate the upcoming Memorial Day holiday by heading to the Farmer's Market in Lexington yesterday. The unofficial start to summer and the fact that Andy was recently freed from his neck support collar following surgery in April gave us reason to truly celebrate. We've had some gorgeous, almost August-like weather recently, but yesterday's weather was a bit of a comeuppance for those of us in search of a summer vibe. The drive to Lexington was drizzly, misty, and even downright foggy in one spot and while we'd had some sunny breaks in Covington before we departed, there was not a single ray that broke through the clouds our whole trip over. Still, when we arrived in the heart of Lexington, we could see the billowing umbrellas at the market, and we knew things were in full swing. The early spring market doesn't have the bounty

of a peak summer market, of course, but there were still plenty of vendors selling young plants for the flower garden, vegetable starts, freshly baked sweet treats, dense, dark European-style bread loaves, recently cut spring bouquets with the morning's dew and rain still on the petals, honey, preserves, and pretty much anything one needs to set a beautiful and tasty spring table -- appealing to the eye as well as the tummy.

Farmer's Markets, it seems to me, are full of optimists. At the market, you find people who trust age-old processes—plant a seed and it will grow; add some yeast or other leavening, and your bread will rise; make sure you remember the pectin, and your jams and jellies will set up just right. Just the same, none of these processes are foolproof. Even the most experienced bakers, gardeners, etc., occasionally have a failure, but they have faith that most of the time, things will work just the way they're supposed to, the way they always have. What can dampen the spirit of and create lack of confidence in someone new to a task is wisely considered by those with more experience to be “just one of those days.” I still remember the first time I attempted to make English muffins from scratch in the mid-1990s. There were delicious breads in the Czech Republic, but no English muffins and I had a serious hankering for them. A dear friend shared her “fail-proof” recipe with me so I could try my hand at making my own muffins. I had a little experience with baking with yeast at that point in our marriage, but admittedly, not much. I mixed the dough and left it to rise—and left it to rise a little longer—and left it to rise even longer, but no luck. A few hours later I threw the contents of the bowl into the swing-top trash can that sat near the window in our little kitchen, somewhat deflated like my dough, but with the tenacity to try again the next day. Later that afternoon, I attempted to throw something in the trash can, but was met with resistance when I pushed the lid. All of you experienced bakers out there can guess what had happened! The warm environment of the trash bag, enhanced by the sun shining through the window had finally caused the dough to rise—and how! --what a sticky mess. However, lesson learned: a chilly kitchen slows the rise of your dough. I was heartened and better prepared to tackle my muffins the following day. They were a bit tedious to make, but they turned out darned near perfect. (Still, I am ever so happy to purchase them at Food Lion these days.)

But back to our journey to Lexington . . . By the time we made our purchases and chatted with a few of the sellers, it was time for lunch. We were partially frozen, and our shirts were unpleasantly damp thanks to the constant misting rain that had accompanied us all through the market. Still determined to celebrate summer, we ordered salads for lunch even though the cream of tomato soup had been calling to us from its place on the menu. The salads were yummy, but not particularly warming, and

by the time we were finished eating, we were no longer partially frozen, but fully so. It was time to reset our summertime expectations and learn our lesson. We finished our meal with steaming, hot mugs of English Breakfast tea. It wasn't what we set out to do, but it was a perfect ending to a perfect adventure. It's a tall order, but here's hoping that the upcoming summer meets all of our expectations, and if it doesn't, let's roll with the punches and have a cup of tea, iced or otherwise.

Beth

July 2025

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

I came across a wonderful black and white photo in one of my home magazines the other day. It captured the very essence of summer and took me back to warm, sunny days spent at the camp my parents rented on the Jackson River for a number of years. The picture showed seven or eight teenagers jumping out of a grand, old tree leaning over a shady waterhole. There were several platforms built at varying heights around the tree trunk allowing the kids to jump simultaneously without crashing into one another mid-air. The photographer managed to catch each teen suspended against the sky. While their faces are hidden, I can imagine their expressions—exhilaration, fearlessness, unfettered freedom, and unfiltered joy. I can picture their beautiful, beaming countenances and wide, sparkling eyes shining through the sepia tones as though I saw them jump myself just this afternoon. That old tree, while covered in leaves, reminded me of a weathered, dead snag that used to hang over the river slightly north of and opposite our cabin on the Dunbrack Road side of the water. There was a great swimming hole on that side where many of the youngsters from Dunbrack Road spent their summer afternoons, and brother Nick and I would sometimes head across the river to swim when we saw kids we recognized. It was on my first visit to “the other side” that I saw that old snag up close. I was probably 10 or so at the time, and I’d watched the older kids shimmying up the snag and jumping into the river from far above all summer long. While seeing that snag up close was intimidating, I became convinced as the days passed that I was ready to take the plunge from what appeared to me to be a dizzying height. (I’m sure there are several at McAllister who spent a few summer days cooling off in this exact swimming hole. I’m prepared for you to set me straight on how low that snag actually hung over the water. To me it seemed gravity defying!)

I finally informed Nicky one afternoon that “today is the day.” I was prepared to make the climb and risk death. I’m not sure if he let mom know, but at some point she swam across the river and joined us to provide some motherly moral support for me and probably to gather up the pieces, literally or figuratively, if anything went wrong. There were several kids who stayed around to see me make my first jump from the snag, shouting support as I scooted up the length of the snag. As you may have already guessed, I wasn’t nearly as brave once I got out over the water as I had been on the riverbank below. I simply froze. I’m not even sure that I felt embarrassed. All I remember is being overcome by terror and realizing that I didn’t know how to climb down the snag backwards. The other children hung around for a while, patiently continuing to shout encouragement, then finally begging me to “just jump,” and then gradually slipping away to go home to dinner since I appeared to be hopelessly stuck. (Plus, my stonelike presence was dominating the very feature that made the swimming hole so much fun. And I’m not exaggerating—I think this whole situation went on for more than an hour, at least.) The last memory I have is of looking down at the water and seeing mom and Nick treading water, both freezing and blue-lipped from the cold. Then I felt the shock of the cold water and heard whoops of joy and congratulations coming from mom and Nick. They were so proud (and more than ready to return to our side of the river!). Mom asked me through chattering teeth, “What made you brave enough to jump, Bethie?” I couldn’t really answer her. In fact, I was myself puzzled at how I ended up in the water. But I knew for a fact that I hadn’t made a “decision” to jump. In the end, I believe to this day that I wound up in the water at the end of that endless afternoon simply because I fell asleep and in turn fell out of the snag. I’ve long wondered if there was a lesson to be learned from this incident . . .

I’ve been told that it’s always good to sleep on big decisions, but I don’t think that means you should already be stuck up a tree before you decide to take a nap. Maybe the lesson is that we shouldn’t tackle big projects before we’ve considered all of the potential outcomes. But if that were the case, no one would ever tackle anything new. Maybe the lesson is that we should listen to our inner, insistent voice that tells us we’re not yet prepared for something, but that sort of leads back to the same conclusion. No one would ever, ever experience anything noteworthy if we all waited until we felt completely prepared.

I think the lesson here is this: When you decide to take big steps, it’s nice to have a support network around—maybe not right beside you (You’ve gotta take some first steps on your own, right?), but some folks who care about you, folks there to cheer you on the

way, pat you on the back when you succeed, help you pick up the pieces if you fail, and most importantly, keep you from drowning if you fall asleep in a dead tree hanging over moving water and inadvertently fall in! Have a wonderful summer and remember: Don't swim solo!

Beth

August 2025

McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

I guess it's the nature of my work at McAllister that I have a playlist of hymns constantly streaming through my head. A golden oldie came to mind when I finally got out to the garden after the recent rains and saw the veggies beginning to flourish, along with a seemingly insurmountable tangle of weeds. I hope you'll not consider it sacrilege, but as we approach the height of summer and the garden finally gets down to business, I've modified the lyrics to this treasured tune to suit my current circumstances.

I sing because I'm happy.
I sing because I'm free!
His eye is on the sparrow,
But He doesn't weed for me!

Nor should He. He gave me the garden. It's up to me to tend it! So that's where you'll find me during the coming steamy weeks of August—out in the garden tending our little piece of Eden (albeit with groundhogs, this year . . .). And if you're out in your garden this month, make sure you look to the sky on the evening of August ninth to take in the beauty of the Full Sturgeon Moon.

Beth

September 2025
McAllister Messenger



Musical Minute:

By the time you're holding this newsletter in your hands, I will have already celebrated my 60th birthday in late August. What a mind-boggling milestone for me! I'm not complaining, mind you, I'm just slightly stunned that my "first" sixty years have ripped along at such a breakneck pace. I decided almost forty years ago when Dad passed suddenly at the too-young age of 51 that I would never lament my birthdays but instead celebrate each one for the gift that it is. No black balloons for me! This year was no exception, but I confess that I have been more reflective in the lead up to my birthday this time around. With Andy's younger brother, George, passing unexpectedly in early July, his youngest brother Mark's ordeal with kidney cancer, my brother Nick's cancer scare over the last year, Andy's surgeries this year, and my "friend of longest standing" Lisa's triumph over cervical cancer after many, many daunting months, the realization that our time on this marvelous orb is limited has hit me with alarming precision and "oomph." And so, I've been thinking . . . (Dangerous, I know.) But if you'd be so kind as to indulge me, I thought I'd share with you a few of my musings to come out of the last 55 years or so, and a couple of additional ones from just the last year. I'm sure I'm not telling you anything that you don't already know, but here goes.

My lifetime, thus far, has taught me . . .

By Beth

Being born to loving parents is a truly exceptional gift—one to be cherished, and one that lays the foundation for a lifetime of other loving, trusting relationships.

Having an extraordinary sibling (or two, or even five or more, I would imagine) is the gift your family gives you that keeps on giving. And if you're particularly lucky, as I have been, your sibling will partner up with someone equally extraordinary, who will enhance your life even more.

The Girl Scout campfire song about friends is ever so true:

"Make new friends but keep the old.

The one is silver, the other gold . . .

You have one hand. I have the other.

Put them together. We have each other . . ."

(All friends are gold, in my opinion, especially mine. I won't name names, but I hope that you know who you are.)

Your church family, if you're blessed to have one, IS your family. Full stop . . . (We love you, McAllister family. There are simply not enough words of thanks and appreciation for how you care for us and for one another.)

And from just the last year, here are my main takeaways:

The worst thing about surgery is attempting to escape from the hospital after it is done. Sigh . . .

I have the best choir ever in the history of choirs. Your dedication to your church is remarkable. Your support of me is unparalleled. You bolster me up at every turn, you tickle me, you are a true joy in my life and my heart.

All pre-marital counseling, whether secular or in the church, should include a unit on compression stockings. If you can't manage to put them on your partner or you don't have the patience to allow your partner to put them on you, the union should not proceed. (I'm speaking from experience here.) Just saying . . .

I married a wonderful man, the one that is perfect just for me. I'll (attempt) to put compression hose on him any day of the week! (I love you, precious Andrew. Laughing and getting silly with you makes my heart happy. So glad you're feeling better.)

And there concludes my . . . let's be positive, and call it wisdom, shall we?! I hope to get back with you in another twenty years or so to share what else I've gleaned along the way. And one more thing—I love autumn! Happy September to all of you.

Beth



October 2025

McAllister Messenger

Musical Minute:

Great gourds! Here we stand on the threshold of October 2025. Where has the year gone? In only ten brief weeks we will welcome Advent, one of my favorite seasons in the church calendar. The music and hymns of anticipation are lyrical and magical. But let's not rush things. The Christ Child will be on his way soon enough . . . Let's get back to those pumpkins, winter squash, and their knobby kin, the gourd family. Since our years in Austria, fall for me is inevitably associated with pumpkin seed oil. Living in the region of Styria, or Steiermark, as it was called in Austria, Andy and I watched each fall as the distinctive pumpkins grown in the area—deep green when young, and gradually green and orange striped from stem to bottom, and about basketball-sized when mature—ripened in the fields. As the vines eventually dried out signaling the end of the growing season, the pumpkins appeared from underneath their leafy privacy sporting their dazzling fall finery. Once ripened, they lay in the fields only a few days before they were gathered together in an orderly pile and the field was cleared. It was a glorious sight to behold, all of those pumpkin brethren soaking up the sun on a clear blue-sky, late fall kind of day and I always felt lucky when my timing was just right and I got to see them before they met their violent demise, usually right there in the very field where they had grown. One day after seeing them cheerfully laid out in the field on my way into town, I returned home to see only their carcasses strewn in a heap, a couple of ladies with kerchiefs covering their gray hair and tied under their chins, sitting in straight-backed wooden chairs and bearing long knives, clearly the culprits of the massacre. The pumpkins had all been halved and their innards scraped out and their seeds harvested for oil, Styrian gold as it was sometimes called by the locals.

When the seeds are pressed, the resulting oil is a rich, mossy green, almost like melted dark chocolate if chocolate were green instead of brown. The scent is earthy and deeply nutty. Pumpkin seed oil's presence on the table in the region where we lived was as ubiquitous to the area as the scent and presence of lavender in Provence. It has a very low smoke point and so is used only as a finishing oil for soups and such, or as an ingredient in salad dressings. A traditional salad in Steiermark is made of Käferbohnen (beetle beans in translation), a type of scarlet runner bean. A deep purple to brown bean with black spots, two to three times the size of a lima bean, they're meaty and delicious and hold their shape and color beautifully when cooked. They grew in many of

our neighbors' gardens, their striking flowers climbing up the tripods supporting them. Cooked and mixed with thinly sliced onion, apple cider vinegar (Apples are another agricultural specialty of the region.), and pumpkin seed oil, the bean salad is a delectable taste of the terrain where we lived and my luggage destined for the U.S. always held bottles of pumpkin seed oil and dried Käferbohnen to bring to family and friends as gifts. With its unique flavor and nutty aroma, the only downside to pumpkin seed oil is the stain it leaves when dripped onto a silk tie or a fancy blouse or slacks! That flavorful, chocolatey green oil has made its mark, literally, on centuries of lunch and dinner attire. Our Austrian friends swore to us that the only way to remove the stain was to place the item in bright sunlight until it faded and eventually disappeared. There was certainly some truth to the home remedy, but I discovered that it was helped along by a couple of squirts of laundry stain remover, when the fabric allowed.

We were blessed to be surrounded by small family farms in the settlement where we lived north of Austria's second largest city, Graz. We heard the rumble of and were treated to the sight of tractors, vintage and modern, during all the months that the ground was workable. Our closest "neighbors" were free-roam chickens (including a rather nasty-tempered rooster), and a beautiful breed of long-horned cattle owned by our nearest human neighbors, with an occasional visit from some sweet-faced yellow ducks who lived somewhere up the road. Our Black Russian Terrier, Mila, was always delighted in the spring when the cows returned to the pasture that abutted our backyard. For Mila, having the cows back was better than live TV and smelled more interesting, too. Whether full-fledged farmers, or home or apartment dwellers, most Austrians seem to have an affinity for gardening. All summer long we enjoyed the sight of bountiful flower and vegetable plots and abundant flower boxes hanging from windows. In the fall, there were fields of corn (most destined for animal fodder), sunflowers, rapeseed, and pumpkins, and there were signs at the crossroads of the many country lanes that intersected the "main" unlined road announcing the sale of honey, free-roam eggs, pumpkin seed oil, farm bread, butter, and other homemade and homegrown products. It was a charming and picturesque place, not a village actually as there were no shops or services, just a magical spot inhabited by hardworking farmers and a few of us who made our livelihood in the city (about thirty minutes away) who were lucky enough to be their neighbors.

In all of our years in Edelsgrub, our idyllic, bucolic settlement, I had only one dangerous encounter with a local pumpkin—a sneak attack that occurred under cover of darkness. And it took a bit of sleuthing to solve. Andy was traveling and we didn't yet have our Mila-girl, so I was home alone when I opened the back door to the terrace one late

summer morning to discover one of my prized terra cotta flower pots—a gorgeous, shapely urn from Crete that I’d purchased from a garden shop in Graz—upturned and smashed, the flowers and trailing vines mangled and broken. Nothing else seemed to have been touched. My heart beat quickly and my first thought was, “Who would do such a thing?” Then I thought of our neighbors. We’d been treated with nothing but kindness (or shyness, at the very worst) since our arrival in Edelsgrub. No one who lived near would have done this. Then I thought of the local wildlife—also improbable. It was a large, heavy pot. This damage certainly wasn’t caused by a rabbit or a fox (unless they had all ganged up to do it). The deer in our fields were pretty scarce and also quite petite compared to Virginia’s White-tailed deer. Unless a whole herd had run through, it was unlikely. Still in my bathrobe, I patrolled the perimeter of our terrace. Everything was in its place. Then I saw it . . . Something orange and gooey stuck on the terrace curb about twenty feet from the smashed pot. What could it be? The color was unmistakable. It had to be pumpkin goo. Exploring further, I looked down the hill from the terrace edge and aha! There it lay—smashed and looking slightly embarrassed, if one can say that about a pumpkin. Busted—and in more ways than one, actually—truly busted and also nabbed! My best guess is that the pumpkin in question came from our neighbor’s pumpkin patch, located on a steep hill (kind of like from McAllister’s choir room door on the back of the church to the road below) above our back door. While unintended, the havoc it wrought was real. But I’ve never been able to hold a grudge against a pumpkin. So, I cleaned up the pot shards, replanted the broken plant bits, said a quick blessing over the guilty pumpkin and threw the remains to the cows in the field below.

There used to be a specialty oil shop, Oliveto, in Roanoke where I could get my pumpkin seed oil fix, but since it closed a year or so ago, the internet is now my best source. Still, I have a wonderful souvenir of Graz and its pumpkin culture in the form of a beautiful ceramic candleholder made by a young Austrian friend. In the shape of a striped Styrian pumpkin it sits on our dining room table each fall, its smiling, cheerful face and glowing light reminding us of friends and pumpkins past. Wishing you all a wonderful fall season!

Beth





November 2025

McAllister Messenger

Musical Minute:

Every time I pull a jacket or coat from the closet this time of year, I can't help but think about my mom. When she'd retrieve an item from the closet after not wearing it for a number of months, she was always so excited to find something of value tucked and forgotten in a pocket. It was a goofy and endearing trait. "Look, I found a mint," she'd say, or "Look, a cherry cough drop!" Even more exciting was, "I found a dollar! What do you wanna go do?!" Back in the day, I'm not sure what a dollar might have purchased—maybe a small soft drink to share at The Burger House at the bottom of Town Hill. Finding a five- or ten-dollar bill was rare, but was the ultimate bonanza worthy of a real celebration. Usually when I wear something that I've not worn in a while, I find a crumpled tissue in the pocket from the previous winter, but I can't help but think of her when I stick my hand in a pocket and find a quarter. I guess the more we use cards and our phones rather than cash to pay for things, the opportunity to find a surprise stash in a coat pocket will become less frequent, but I still have to smile when I think of mom's optimism at even the smallest things.

I'm a regular visitor to Covington's recycling drop-off across from the middle school. I know that many of you are, too, as I often run into McAllister members on my frequent trips. More and more I see that people are leaving items along the edges of the collection bins that they think could be of use to someone—picture frames, a highchair that's seen better days, but still looks safe enough, a used kitchen or bathroom fixture left over from a renovation . . . And I've noticed lately that there are often "prospectors" combing through the bags and other items in the dumpsters, proving true the adage that "one man's trash is another man's treasure." One day last fall I found a gentleman who was pleased as punch to have found an almost full pack of zip ties. "These are so useful! Can you believe someone just threw them away?" he exclaimed. "I know," I replied. "My husband uses them all of the time, too." His wife was sitting in the truck just shaking her head.

A couple of weeks ago there was a guy hanging over the edge of the dumpsters when I arrived. We exchanged pleasantries as I dropped off my plastics and cans. As I wished him a good afternoon and returned to my car, he suddenly shouted, "Can you believe it? People are throwing away money!" I looked back to see him holding up a well-worn backpack and a crumpled bill. "It's a dollar," he said. "And there's fifty cents, too," he said, shaking the backpack. I was tickled for him and mom's phrase floated through my head, "What do you wanna go do?!"

Andy and I have so much for which to be thankful this year and I'm approaching the upcoming holiday season with a great deal of relief and a whole lot of gratitude. I'm channeling mom's excitement and hopefulness: It's a crisp, sunny day. "What do you wanna go do?!" It's a rainy, dreary day, but we need the rain so badly. "What do you wanna go do?!" We have our health, a warm house, and food in the fridge. "What do you wanna go do?!" Maybe just stay home and enjoy . . . and be exceedingly grateful. Happy Thanksgiving to all of you!

Beth



December 2025

McAllister Messenger

Musical Minute:

Earlier this week I was downstairs in the basement looking through a box of Christmas decorations from mom and dad's house. I was looking for a particular piece that mom used to hang on the den door during the holidays. Made of red felt and embellished with red-sequined poinsettias and other symbols of the season, she attached to it all of the Christmas cards that we received each year. I didn't find the hanging, but as I should have expected, I found a treasure trove of other items from my childhood. First of all was the box itself. I remember it not just because it's been in Andy's and my possession now for a number of years, but I actually remember when it was still used as a gift box in

our family. It's from the 1970s maybe, when boxes were made of stouter stuff than they are today. They weren't sold collapsed at the corners and flat as we might purchase a set of gift boxes today. It's a good quality box with sturdy glued corners and an equally sturdy lid. To put it politely, the lid is "slightly" garish, but so colorful with pink, green, black, orange, yellow, and white graphics depicting table centerpieces with candles. Even with the unconventional colors, it IS Christmassy and I've adored it since I was a child. Judging from its heft and the quality of the printing on the lid, I'm guessing that it may have come from the Leggett store on Main Street, or even the Heironimus store in Roanoke back in the day. It's larger than a shirt box—maybe meant for a lady's long, fluffy robe, or some bed linens or towels— but it's not too terribly deep and mom eventually retired it from gift-giving and used it to store Christmas stockings and other flat decorations.

I've dug into it several times since I retrieved it from the attic at mom and dad's, but this year was the first time I went deeply enough to see what was between the sheets of heavy-duty foil layered in the bottom of the box. In addition to the vinyl silhouette decals that used to magically stick in the kitchen windows each Christmas, I was delighted to find two paper advent calendars from decades ago. If you had asked me last year, or even last week, the exact theme of my family's most-used advent calendar when I was young, I couldn't have given you the exact details, other than that it was a small village with tiny windows cut into the building facades. But when I opened it up today, I was stunned to find how familiar it all was. The tabletop-sized calendar unfolds into an L-shape to which there is another L-shaped attachment that opens in the opposite direction. The effect is one of a typical European walled city, only this bewitching city is blanketed in snow and enhanced by gold glitter details. Except for the glitter, it could easily be a wintry village near where we lived in the Czech Republic or Austria. The charming images hidden behind the perforated windows are printed on a translucent sheet adhered to the stiffer cardboard of the calendar—an angel, St. Nicholas, a young chorister with her mouth open in song, a good dog receiving a treat, a songbird in a cage . . . Nick and I were allowed to peel open the tiny windows on opposite days, Nick one day and I the next. On the dusky evenings leading up to Christmas, I was mesmerized by the small Christmas vignettes behind the diminutive windows, imagining what life must have been like inside the "rooms" displayed in the windows, scenes warmly lit by the soft glow of the lamp that mom had placed behind the calendar.

Last night I dimmed the lights in the living room and put my lit cellphone behind the calendar, picturing each space behind the tiny window shutters in my mind's eye. In no time I was transported back to Lexington Avenue at about eight years of age. Christmas

carols played in the background—probably Nick on the piano in the living room. Mom and dad talked quietly in the kitchen. I felt safe, warm, happy, and completely at ease. I wish you all the same as we await the arrival of the Christ Child. Have a very merry Christmas.

Beth

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

This collection includes all of the Musical Minute messages that I wrote during the year 2025 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 2026.

Beth
Elizabeth Leitch Dreszer
Organist and Choir Director