

THE WARD ORGANIST

William Morris

Never learn to play the organ, the old woman told me. I should call her Sister something, but I don't remember her last name. Never learn to play, she told me. Once you do you're stuck.

I don't remember what I replied. Probably said something like, it doesn't sound so bad. Said there were worse things to be.

I was in my mid-twenties. I was unmarried and working as a database manager for a small nonprofit, so I guess they thought I had the time to learn.

They weren't wrong.

Never learn to play the organ, the old woman told me. Not unless you can commit to it. Sure, you may find yourself in a ward with another organist to split time with, she said. You might get a different calling from time to time. But make no mistake, once you go down the path of becoming a ward organist, that's what you'll be until you die.

I'm sure I had second thoughts at that point.

I don't remember what they were.

I had second thoughts about a lot of things back then.

It's your choice, the old woman said. I don't care what the bishop says about it. If you aren't ready for this, speak up now. I don't need you wasting my time. And I don't want to waste yours either. You're young. You can do plenty of things besides learn to play the organ, so if you're not sure about this, you can say still say no. Or you can say, yes. But if you say yes, the old woman told me, you show up for every lesson with me, and you practice the rest of the week, and you understand that saying yes means saying yes for life.

I'm sure I said something like, it's fine. I'm fine with it.

That's what I was like back then.

By then I knew I'd probably never get to use my art history degree professionally. And I didn't know but strongly suspected that I'd probably never marry. Not in this life. I was looking at a future of things being fine.

Just . . . fine.



I'm still fine.

The angels cluster around my ceiling at night. They circle, a damp glow in the room, golden as plates.

They don't keep me awake.

They never have.

They also don't say anything. The only sounds they make are indistinct whispers, strange susurrations. If they are messengers from God, the messages aren't for me.

I'm pretty sure they're heavenly beings, although I've never asked to shake any of their darting, quicksilver hands.

I just watch them until I fall asleep.

Most nights I fall asleep just fine.

Some nights I lay awake.

But that never has anything to do with the angels.

They are gone when I wake up in the morning. And so I arise and start my day as the advancement services director of a larger nonprofit than the one I worked for back when I learned to play the organ.

On my lunch break and in those Zoom meetings I don't have to pay much attention to, I fill private Pinterest boards with images that remind me of them. And I don't stick with art from the Christian tradition. Sure, I have plenty of pins of Orthodox icons and Renaissance paintings, but I also track down representations of buddhas and bodhisattvas; Islamic gilded metalwork and enameled glass; drawings and paintings of demons, gods, and demigods from everywhere from Bali

to Finland; anime and video game characters; photos of lava flows, organic honey, and lens flare effects—anything that reminds me of them in some way.

One Pinterest board is named Almost Accurate Representations. Another is called Way Off But Interesting Nonetheless. Another is called Gold Tones That Are Reminiscent. Another is called A Big Mood (That Shall Soon Pass).

Maybe I'll make the boards public one day. When things get bad. Really bad. Not just the terrible but bearable bad everything is now.

Sometimes when I hear them whispering, I wonder what they're talking about.

But I don't ask them that.

Because I'm pretty sure I know what they're whispering about.

I see it on Facebook and Twitter. I read it in the email newsletters that fill up my Gmail account. I see it on everyone's faces. Even on the faces of those who are masked.

Especially on their faces.



You say, yes, it means showing up for every meeting, the old woman told me. It means showing up for every meeting *early*.

I do that anyway, I said. Probably said. It was true back then.

It's mostly still true.

Although I had to really think about it when the bishop asked me to come back to in-person church.

What about Sister Mathis, I said.

The Mathises moved back to Idaho, he said.

Everybody is moving back to Idaho and Utah.

It doesn't affect me much because the few members I'm friendly with are the ones who, like me, like it here or are stuck here. But I do

miss seeing the kids around. Miss being asked to play the piano at baptisms. We're becoming one of those wards where all the children are either in the nursery and Sunbeams or are teenagers, only half of whom are active.

I thought about telling the bishop no. But I was fully vaccinated and still in my forties and the nice thing about being an organist is you are automatically social distanced from everyone else, and when I'm not playing the organ, I sit in one of the choir chairs that is behind the organ. It means the Martinez boy has to side shuffle a bit to bring me the sacrament, but he hasn't hit puberty yet, so we don't come close to banging knees.

At first, I was upset that the other boys always make him take the stand, but I know his parents are vaccinated, and he wears a good mask and isn't one of those fidgety deacons who is always fiddling with his mask and then touching everything.



Don't be one of those organists who goes and sits in the audience with their family, the old woman told me. You don't want to be calling too much attention to yourself. And you want to be ready in case the presiding authority changes things up. It doesn't happen much. But you don't want to be caught flat-footed that one time it does.

That's not an issue for me.

I've never had family to sit with.

The first couple of Sundays back, I left right after sacrament meeting. Fled out the nearest door like Joseph yeeting himself away from Potiphar's wife.

Now I stay.

I just don't go to second hour.

I'm sure that'll come up in ward council at some point, but so far no one has come up to me, their face scrunched in concern, their voice

soft as feathers. They have more pressing concerns. Other sheep who have wandered much further away.

I sit in the padded armchair that's in the east-facing foyer across from the floral-patterned couch and next to the floral-patterned love-seat and scroll through my private Pinterest boards, my face bent down to the screen as if in an attitude of worship or prayer.

During quarantine, I installed one of those apps to limit my screen time, but then I never set it up.

I do cut off my screen time in the evening, though. I don't check my phone after nine and turn off my TV no later than ten.

I used to stay up and watch the local news. But I don't care about local news anymore. If the past five years has taught me anything, it's that our lives are subject to much larger, stronger currents and forces than ever before.

So at night I trade the blue glow for a golden one.

Although sometimes they seem more like brass or even copper.

I don't know what determines that.

I kept a journal for a while that documented the changes in their hues, but when I tried to cross-compare it with what was happening—to me, on social media, with the Church, with the country, with the world—there was no discernible pattern. Perhaps there's just too much data. Perhaps they mix it up simply for my benefit, for aesthetic reasons.

Whatever the reason I appreciate the variegation. It spurs me to find even more images to add to my Pinterest boards.

And I suppose one tender mercy of this whole thing is several museums have opened up their digital collections to the general public.

I thought about starting a Twitter account that highlights all the resources that are out there, but every time I attempt to create a new account, I have a stupor of thought over what the username should be. I'm choosing to take that as a sign I should stick to my private Pinterest boards for now.

I do have a main Twitter account, but it's on private, and I don't follow anybody. Instead, I use lists to keep track of what's going on in all the different ecosystems I'm interested in: art history academics, angel art enthusiasts, chefs and food personalities (especially former *Top Chef* and *Great British Bake Off* contestants), Mormon influencers (broadly speaking—not just the Instagram mommy blogger ones), and any of the writers, journalists, and academics who seem to have good takes on things.

I know it's not good for me, but there's part of me that wants to know what's going on, and I can't seem to turn it off.

Maybe if I understood what the angels were whispering about, I could delete my account.

But really, it's not that bad. I'm mostly fine.

Although . . .

Sometimes I am tempted to post something. Go off private and enter the conversation.

I think I would be good at it. I'm pretty funny. I'm a good writer. I can be pithy.

But I'm afraid of making a mistake and getting piled on.

Nobody wants to be the main character of the day on Twitter.



The old woman told me, she said, you can make little mistakes and only a few people will know, but you make a big mistake, and everyone knows.

She told me about a time that a general authority was visiting, and she wanted to make sure the congregation was properly paying attention, so she cranked the volume up for the rest hymn but cranked it up too high and dang near blew out the ear drums of everyone on the stand. She said she'd never been so embarrassed in her life.

But she had this wry smile as she said it, a thin-lipped smile.

That's all I really remember about her, her thin, pale lips coated with a pink, waxy lipstick that probably should have been several shades darker; her bony hand tapping my right thigh when it was time to use the pedals.

I'll practice a lot, I said. And I won't mind if I make a mistake. I have a thick skin.

It'll get thinner as you age, the old woman said, with a sharp bark of a laugh and a wink.

So far, the only thing my skin has done is develop eczema.

I don't know if it was the stress or being indoors all the time or what. Maybe it was that when I got sick in early February before we were sure it had arrived to US shores, it wasn't the flu flu and now my immune system is messed up. Maybe all of those.

It started with a patch on my neck then crept up my cheeks until it reached my eyebrows. There's also a patch on the side of my right knee that stretches around to the back. I have a couple of small scars there now. I was disciplined enough to not scratch my face, but behind the knee? I just couldn't stop myself.

It didn't help that I didn't see a dermatologist for a year.

I was afraid to.

Then I was afraid not to.

So I finally made an appointment and went. Luckily, my case is mild enough it's been easy to treat, and now my skin is mostly fine.

I lay in my bed at night colloidal oatmeal thick as the dews of heaven across my face and neck and knee.

I ask the angels sometimes if they can help with it. It's amusing to me. To ask for something so small, something that doesn't really even bother me that much.

So far, the angels haven't responded.

Well, there was that one time when I asked, and they suddenly left, and I had a hard time getting to sleep because the room was too dark.

But they came back the next night. Perhaps a little more coppery than normal—but that may have just been my imagination.

I was happy they came back.

I enjoy their visitations.



I've only played one funeral since March 2020. I played both the viewing and the funeral.

The old woman told me that was her favorite part of being a ward organist. The hymns on the programs are the ones everyone knows. The ones that really mean something. People are reverent at funerals. And they actually sing. The veil is thinner. You're playing for both the people in attendance and the attending angels, she said. And you get lunch afterwards.

The funeral was for Brother Park.

It was just last month. He was only in his fifties. The bishop didn't tell me what he died from, and I'm not friends with the ward members who always seem to know that kind of thing.

Heck, I didn't even find out that Sister Wells had left her inactive husband until last week when she mentioned it in her testimony.

I don't bear my testimony in church. Only when I give a talk or the one time I filled in as Gospel Doctrine teacher.

The walk from behind the organ to the podium just seems too short to gather your thoughts. And I don't have anything to talk about other than the angels. And I know to not talk about them.

Some things are both sacred and secret.

It's not that I don't have a testimony. It's that I don't know what to say about it.

I'm not going to repeat the same old lines. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just not for me. They really don't have anything to do with what I believe. Or maybe it'd be better to say that they have nothing to do with how I believe.

Besides, the old woman told me that I shouldn't feel pressure to stand up if there's a long lull during fast and testimony meeting just because I'm already so close to the pulpit.

Every time we play should be a testimony, she said. Every time *is* a testimony if you play with feeling, she said.

She told me that a lot of ward organists don't play with feeling. Not real feeling. They play hesitantly because they don't have technical proficiency. Or they play with too much confidence because they are technically proficient. Those ones always play too loud and fast, she said. Which is worse than playing too slow as torturous as that can be. It's worse because you can tell they aren't approaching the organ with enough reverence. With a measure of awe.

You have to pretend it's a not quite fully broken horse, she told me. You have to approach it that way every single time. Approach it with caution and respect and a bit of fear, but also with confidence and the knowledge that comes with practice.

I didn't practice for six months. From March through August 2020. Then the bishop asked me to practice so I'd be sharp whenever I felt like I could come back.

So I did.

At five thirty in the morning every Saturday.

That way I could get at least an hour and a half of practice in by the time people arrived to clean the building.

There was this one time I didn't leave right away.

Shortly after seven, some sullen teenage boy from the other ward stumbled into the chapel with a vacuum cleaner, the cord dragging

behind him, the hood on his hoodie up, hiding the over-the-ear headphones he was wearing.

But I saw them.

And I stayed and played while he vacuumed.

I don't know what he was listening to. Maybe it was something appropriate.

But I kept playing in case it wasn't, the sound of the vacuum providing a constant roar against "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," which I was practicing for the upcoming Easter program.

Heard all together it sounded like the rushing of angels. Or what I imagine that to sound like. My angels are silent except for the whispers.

You'd think those early morning practices in the chapel is when I'd see the angels. But nope. They come to the bedroom of my reasonably priced when I purchased it now appreciated in value and either about to skyrocket or crash in value suburban town home and swirl around the popcorn ceiling like koi or mosquitoes or internet discourse. Many eyed not because they're seraphim or a meme of seraphim but because they're in constant motion.

I call them my investors.

I have no idea what they're investing in. But the appellation seems rather apt to me.



I only tried to quit the lessons once. I called the old woman up and told her I had changed my mind.

You can't quit, she said. I've already invested a lot of time in you.

It's only been three weeks of lessons, I said.

Three weeks is a lot when you have as little time left as I do, she said. But, she told me, if that's what you have to do, you should do it. You have your agency even if you don't know what to do with it.

Old women are scary.

I hope to be half that scary when I'm old.

But that's not why I kept going. I kept going because for all that I had a hard time making up my mind about things, I sensed I needed something beyond my work and my hobbies. Something that made me uncomfortable but that could also tie me to others.

Not that I'm super tied to others.

Oh, I'm friendly enough with numerous people in the ward. And there are a handful I could and would call on in a time of actual need and they'd help me out.

But I do sometimes think other ward members resent me.

The men because I can choose to work for nonprofits that pay me enough to support my comfortable but not luxurious lifestyle and provide me with meaningful work that makes a difference in the world.

The women because I spent my twenties and thirties mastering the organ, learning Italian and Japanese cooking, traveling to Europe or Asia every three to five years (I'm overdue for another trip abroad), and collecting modestly priced art to fill my modest townhome.

Sometimes I think they pity me.

I have no spouse or children. I live alone far away from the rest of my family. I have no close friends. No pets. And I have no apparent worldly achievements.

Yes, I can cook and play beautifully and live surrounded by beautiful things, but I wonder if they tell themselves they'd have done more things, done great things with my life circumstances and apparent talents and training.

They're wrong.

They wouldn't have done anything more with their life than I have. Probably less.

But the thing is, the old woman was right when she told me when I returned to the lessons that she would have respected me more if I hadn't picked the lessons back up again because at least I would have shown that I knew how to make a choice. She was also right when she

said agency is wasted on the youth, especially today's youth. Everything I have and do I just kind of fell into. I like it. But I don't know how much I chose it, really chose it. How much have I actually exercised my agency?

Maybe that's why I have the angels.

Maybe the Father (or the Mother [or both!]) sent them to me so I have something meaningfully different in my life. Not a compensation, but a reminder there really is something there for me in the next life even if church leaders are vague and sometimes condescending about what that might be.

Maybe the angels are a reminder that we really don't know anything about what's to come.

That not all choices are made in mortality and not all choices need to be difficult to be real choices.

And that's fine.



Sometimes I do wonder if the angels are trying to communicate with me. Wonder if the different colors and patterns mean something.

I have to be careful with this train of thought.

I know the risks of social isolation.

I understand that my master's degree has taught me to look for esoteric patterns.

I am all too aware—we all are (or should be aware by now)—that the mind can all too easily go down certain paths, seeing things that aren't there, making connections of things that have nothing to do with each other in service of a narrative we want to be true but isn't true—or maybe not even want to be true but can't help from coming to see as true because we want something in the world that feels like it all fits together. A narrative we can use as a touchstone.

So other than that one spurt of documentation, I am careful to not let my mind attempt to create order from my visitations, from my swirling investors.

The Pinterest boards remain impressionistic. No narratives there.

I do sometimes let my thoughts wander as I read the scriptures. And sometimes I find myself turning to Isaiah and Revelations and Daniel and certain sections of the Doctrine and Covenants a bit too often.

I even downloaded Swedenborg's *The Earths in Our Solar System Which are called Planets and the Earths in the Starry Heaven, and Their Inhabitants; Also the Spirits and Angels There From Things Heard and Seen* to my Kindle a couple of months ago.

But I haven't opened it yet.

I'm content placing my angels firmly within Joseph Smith's world-view, especially since I do think the angels were there when I received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

I was nine. My parents were only intermittently active. They wouldn't become active until a few years later. But they were active enough to finally get around to getting me baptized. My uncle baptized and confirmed me. When he said, receive the Holy Ghost, I opened my eyes and rolled them as far upwards as I could. Maybe it was a trick of the light. Maybe the light was bouncing off of the watches of all the men who had their hands on my head, but I saw glimmers of gold and at least one blurry eye or shape of an eye up towards the ceiling.

Thinking back now, perhaps that experience is how I ended up majoring in art history, even though I didn't focus on religious art in my master's degree program. My thesis was on the influence of innovations in textile manufacturing on both representational and nonrepresentational painting, photography, and mixed media in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art.

My parents were active until they died. Half my siblings no longer are. And I'm worried about my youngest brother. He and his wife are having a hard time right now. I don't know the details. I can just tell from certain subtle changes to their Instagram posts. They're not openly expressing doubts. It's more that they've become interested in the things that so often go along with those doubts.

I worry about them, but not about myself.

I'm fine.

I don't have doubts.

Or rather, not the kind of doubts that'll cause me to leave the Church.

If I ever go inactive, it's because I'm just too tired to play the organ anymore.



They'll wear you out, the old woman told me. If you get good enough, it won't just be sacrament meetings. It'll be baptisms, funerals, stake meetings. They'll get more ambitious with Christmas and Easter programs. If they get greedy or no one else in the ward can play, they'll make you choir accompanist, and they'll ask you to sub in primary. And the better you get at the organ, the more they'll want you on the piano even though you and I know they're two different instruments, she said. You'll become the go-to for all the special musical performances, which means either practices during the week or late Saturday evening or early Sunday morning.

She was prophetic. Or rather, she knew from experience how certain archetypes work in the Church. Some folks are always leaders. Some men are always clerks. Some women are always in Young Women's. A few lucky souls are teachers.

Ward organists are made—not born, not foreordained, she told me.

It's possible she was just trying to get me understand the importance of practicing every week.

Perhaps she really did want to make sure it was a choice I was making for myself and wasn't being pressured into it.

It really is about the only out of character choice I've made in my life.

I'm not a natural at music.

There are times when I regret it. I sit on the bench, my feet resting on the wooden pedals, my hands by my side, wondering why I'm here in this place again.

But then I play.

Slower than I'd like to, but quicker, in my experience, than most other ward organists across the US and Canada.

I play, and the congregation follows.

The old woman told me there may be some exceptions you run into—some you'll love and some who will drive you crazy—but for the most part you're the one who keeps the time of the hymn and not the chorister. The chorister follows you, she said. And so does the congregation. They don't actually need the music you're playing. They know the hymns. Your role is to kick them into the right pace. The members will do the rest.

And so they do.

There have been times lately when I wonder about my pace. Am I rushing my playing? Is it a tad slower than it was before?

I can't quite tell.

I worry that my internal clock is off.

But wherever the pace is at it seems to be working. The congregation is singing well even with their masks on.

And my playing is as steady as it ever was.

Not that that's a surprise.

Steady is what I do.

I have my nonprofit job. My cooking and my art. My townhome.

I have my early morning practices. I have my playing during sacrament meeting and my foyer meditations during second hour.

And I have my angels at night.

I may not have used my agency all that much.

I may just be passing the time until the world completely falls apart.

But I'm good at keeping time.

And I'm fine.

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