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GENERATION TO GENERATION: FOLK MUSIC, MENTORING, AND A CALL FOR FATHERS TO SING

*Thomas Fickley, father, musician, and schoolmaster,
realizes the gift of his fathers in music.*

My great-grandmother, Anna Viola Virelli, was the daughter of a first-generation Italian immigrant named Dominic — he was a barber. Like most Italian Catholic ladies, Mamaw insisted on keeping close to her family. My memories of her end just before I turned 13, when she entered her eternal rest. Before that year, I took for granted a part of my family culture I didn't realize was unusual. Our entire extended family from Mamaw's side met at her house outside of Washington, D.C., or at one of her children's houses, once per month to celebrate all of

the family birthdays from that month. My family had to drive two hours each way in the same day to attend, but it was important for us to be there.

I spent most of those visits playing with cousins in any field or backyard we could find. Kick the can, tackle football, various and sundry forms of trading cards, and that mostly forgotten '90s game called "pogs," filled the visits before cake, ice-cream, and the wrapping paper tornado marked the beginning of the end of the celebration. Most of the activities from those events are a blur, and many I would not care to pass on to my own children at a similar gathering. Pogs were admittedly ephemeral.

The glaring exception is the activity that rounded out the end of each party. The men of my father's generation would disappear briefly before reemerging with an assortment of stringed instruments. After the guitars, mandolins, fiddles, and banjos were in tune, the men would commence to play bluegrass and folk songs for the remainder of the party. Fiddle tunes like "Red Haired Boy" and "Blackberry Blossom" were the highlight for me. Hearing my uncles blaze their way through each break was exhilarating, and clearly what they were doing was a feat. Some would pull out harmonicas to add their embellishments, and I remember a mountain dulcimer that made an appearance or two. But everyone was a part of that music, because everyone sang. There were a few songs we all knew the words to, and we let them fly in unison. John Prine's "Bottomless Lake," and the folk classic "The Monkey and the Engineer" kept us laughing. My grandfather, a

long-time pastor and now Anglican Priest, sang "Spanish Pipedream" with a glint in his eye. Other more somber tunes like the Civil War era ballad, "Lorena" were more staid. But on the whole, these musical events were memorable to me because everyone was at it together.

I didn't start playing the banjo until the year Mamaw died. I saw my grandfather's Earl Scruggs Signature Gibson sitting out on the stand in his living room one afternoon while helping my dad build a new awning over the front door, and I asked Granddad if he would show me a few rolls. I played until my fingers blistered. A few weeks later he gifted me a Washburn B10 5 string banjo, and over the next few years, whenever we would get together, he would hand me tabs, teach me phrases, and show me how to trade breaks with a group. My twin brother started to learn how to flat-pick from my uncle Bruce, a talented guitarist.

It would be hard to overstate how much my grandfather's gift meant to me. It isn't the banjo I'm speaking of (years later my family gifted me a nicer one), but the mentoring he gave me then, and over the next decade, as we continued to meet occasionally to play together. Folk music is one of the best intergenerational glues to bind people together. It has its own traditions, its own stories, its own lore, that is handed-off most effectively on a front porch, or in a living room, or around a fire. My grandfather handed folk music down to me (and at 80 years old continues to do so), and I now have the joy of passing it along to my sons and daughter. Folk music is best learned in a community. It is the people's music, not raw entertainment like pop music, or high-culture that's at its best when it's done by the best, as is the case with classical music.

This isn't to disparage high-culture. The works of the classical composers are canonical — they set a standard for us to reach for. The formation we receive through classical music, whether playing or listening to it, elevates our souls in unique ways. As Douglas Adams quipped, "Beethoven tells you what it's like to be Beethoven and Mozart tells you what it's like to be human. Bach tells you what it's like to be the universe."

But we can't feel the weight of the whole universe all the time — or even humanity, for that matter. Sometimes, just feeling what it's like to be our locality suffices. Folk music is rooted uniquely in local places. When he composed the

line, “Flow gently sweet Afton, among thy green Braes,” Robert Burns was drawing from the spirit not of an entire solar system, but of a particular river in Scotland, that he loved enough to enshrine in verse. The unknown Virginian who wrote “Old Home Place” mentions my hometown by name. The lover singing of “Annie Laurie” remembers with reverence the particular site in Maxwellton where his love first pledged her troth. Folk music ties us to a place.

It can also tie us to our place. The folk ballads of the American past blend together the traditions of a variety of immigrants, bind their pasts together, and give us a way of transmitting the right kind of loves and affections to the next generation.

My friend Ken Myers is fond of saying, “Moderns are as confused about music as they are about sex and for the same reasons.” If the music we choose to interact with is simply a matter of personal preference and proclivities, then what we listen to doesn’t matter. The Romans were rumored to say *De gustibus non est disputandum* (“In matters of taste there can be no disputes.”) and we can see them shrugging as they propose the excuse. But if the music we listen to and play together has a deep and profound impact on the common good, then there are implications for how we should engage with music. From Plato to Allan Bloom, the tradition of the West has taught that music has a more formative impact on our souls than almost any other cultural ingredient. Music forms our loves and our affections. It orients us towards the good or it turns us away from it. We ought to take heed here. Music matters. And just abstaining from certain forms of music isn’t enough. As C.S. Lewis pointed out in his essay “Learning in War Time,” we aren’t going to read no books. If we don’t read good literature, we will read bad literature. Similarly, we aren’t going to listen to nothing. So we ought to be intentional about our listening habits, and we should begin with the lowest form, without which the highest cannot stand. Fathers, if you aren’t singing in your home, it is time to begin.

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If you have no musical background or training, fear not. Folk music is the gateway to music. It is simple enough for even the youngest children to sing and the remarkably young (who are not prodigies like Mozart) can begin to play it. I’ve been watching this in my own family. My eldest sons (9, 7, and 5 years

old) have all begun learning at least one folk instrument. They aren’t ready for the Grand Ole Opry, but I have no aspirations for them to perform anyway. My hope for them is that each will have the confidence

and repertoire to lead his family in song one day. Folk music is something that any family can produce for themselves, and it is one of the few family goods that are not consumed in the using. Music begets joy, and the joy spills over into every facet of the home’s economy. It’s relatively inexpensive to get started, but what’s more, music enriches every setting, and pays for itself with large dividends of peace, unity, and concord. My friend Ken’s definition of musical harmony hints at this: “harmony is love made audible.”

It really isn’t too late to get started with Folk music. At 33 years old, I’m probably too old to begin serious study of the piano. But a new folk instrument is within reach. My wife grew up singing in choir, but never had an instrument to play. We purchased an upright bass for her in the past year, and now people tap their feet when we start playing. But she

also has a new way of engaging with our sons as they learn music. Our family has a shared endeavor. The reverse is true for me. I grew up playing folk instruments, but have no formal musical training, or any vocal training at all. I'm beginning to learn how to sing harmony, and it isn't easy for me, nor does it come naturally. But it also isn't as hard as I imagined it would be.

What is true of families is true of churches. Chances are a handful of people in your parish know a few cowboy chords on the guitar, and you may find out if you ask (as I did recently) that there are four mandolinists concealed in your church's pews. Get them together and play music. Most folk songs have three or four chords. Have everyone choose one song they want to play together. It's great fun, and no one will demand you sound professional. In his varied writings on culture, Josef Pieper claims that there can be no feast without the presence of the Divine, and every feast must have the muses as guests at the festival. A parish that endeavors to sing together like this will celebrate feasts together. And when people come visit your church's gatherings, they'll realize your life together is vibrant.

One word of warning. Resist the temptation to drift into playing "what people know." You may get more participation — at first, anyway — if you strum out the chords to pop music tunes that everyone knows by heart, whether from the 1970s or the present. Unlike classical music, which is transcendent, and folk music, which is rooted, popular music tends to be both ephemeral and placeless, as are all me-

dia meant for mass-consumption. Yes, the form is simple, but no, it is not made for participation. Pop music is the music of highly-produced virtuosos. Listen to most teenagers try to replicate their favorite contemporary songs, and you'll see what I mean. The attempts are cringe-worthy, because most people can't sing like the people on major record labels, nor do they have a high-powered enough band to pull off the music.

But any group of friends familiar with a similar repertoire can lift up their hearts in chorus together. The melodies and harmonies of folk music are accessible because, in most cases, it wasn't virtuosos that wrote the songs. It was the folk, the people, who wanted music, and so they made it. And they often made their music about surprisingly normal things. Listen through Del McCoury's "Fathers and Sons," and you'll find some perennial truth about the generations, and the interior urge of sons to strike out on their own. "Last Train from Poor Valley" encapsulates what it is like to feel your livelihood crumbling, and your life with it, and feel helpless to reverse the trends so much bigger than yourself. Listen to "St. Anne's Reel," or "Jerusalem Ridge," or "Beaumont Rag," and you'll wish your community could learn how to dance together.

A few summers ago, I traveled to Kansas to visit St. Martin's Academy in Fort Scott. After an excellent dinner and a lot of good conversation, the Kerr family moved out onto the porch to play music. We carried on for hours. The guitar was passed around, our hostess brought out a fiddle and played while a visiting priest sang most of the songs with a cigarette in his mouth. I sang a Doc Watson song with the eldest daughter of the family who at the age of 13 was turning into a capable guitarist. The baby fell asleep on the porch. I had never met the Kerr family before, but we played music until after midnight, and I felt a sense of belonging and shared love only a few hours after getting off the plane. There is something about this kind of music that binds people together, and gives them respect for their roots, for their community, and for their past.

Frankie, the 10 year old, waited and waited for his turn to call a song, and after several hours of listening, picked up a bouzouki and led the family in a song about a poem by James Whitcomb Riley. It had been written by his late grandfather. &