

Experts

In a suburb of Boston, there's a three-manual Hook & Hastings organ that I rebuilt in the 1990s. It's an electro-pneumatic organ built in the 1920s that had received a full-blown tonal revision in the 1960s, when American organbuilding decreed that eight-foot tone was no longer desirable. You know the drill. Strings were cut down to become mutations, an eight-foot Diapason was converted to the fattest Chimney Flute you've ever seen, and the resulting specification looked something like a cross between a Schnitger and a Schlicker. The organ was installed across the rear gallery at a time when the church had no choir, and access from the stairs to the console was a narrow, short, awkward passage through the organ, past an electro-pneumatic relay, over a few windlines, and a serious duck under the façade's impost. The organist had hung a sign there that read, "Smack Head Here."

We did a big job there that involved a new structure and new windchests intended to allow easier access to the gallery for musicians—there's a choir now—and to allow easier access for maintenance. The church's organist was a good friend and an excellent, imaginative musician who had been there for many years, and with whom I had lots of fun until his untimely death.

After a couple false starts with new musicians who didn't last very long, the church was happy to announce they had engaged a young woman with strong credentials, especially as a choral conductor. When I met her, I was disappointed to realize that her keyboard experience was limited to the piano. She had no experience playing the organ at all. She asked me some questions about the stop knobs, such as, "What are these for?" I gave her a quick introduction to the art of registration, and offered to introduce her to colleagues who were good organ teachers. She responded that she didn't think it was a big deal, and she'd pick it up naturally.

The American Idol syndrome

In the last several years, "reality TV" has taken a strong place in our entertainment life. There are a number of shows that focus on creating stars. I don't watch them, so I don't really know the difference from one to the other (maybe you think that means I'm not qualified to write about them!), but I do see contestants, ostensibly selected through earlier auditions and winnowing, performing in front of studio audiences and panels of judges. I'm sure that many of the finalists, who automatically become huge stars, are legitimately talented and well trained, but from what little I've seen, I know that plenty of them have learned their acts by imitating others. Through decades as a church musician, having been married to a singer, and friends with many others, I know enough about singing to tell when someone is well trained—or not.

Like that newly hired musician who didn't think organ registration was such a big deal, I have the sense that our culture is accepting of the idea that great performers "just happen," implying that there's no real need to actually learn how to do something. Why should we study if we can answer any question by Googling with our phones? Why should we attend a conservatory of music if we can "just pick it up?"

I've been reflecting on expertise, on the concepts of excellence and the sense of assurance that comes with the intense education and practice that fosters them. Of course, I think of my



Harry Holl serving bowl, lobster butter cup, and mug

many colleagues, who as organists sit at a console as though it were an extension of their bodies, whose manual and pedal techniques are strong enough that once a piece is learned, there's no need to raise concern about notes. You know it when you see it. Playing from memory is accepted as the normal way to play. Several times now, I've seen an organist come to town to play a recital, spending days registering complicated pieces on an unfamiliar organ, but never opening a score—in fact, not even bringing a score into the building.

A great thing about the human condition is that we don't have to limit ourselves to appreciating great skill in any one field. Whenever I encounter excellence, whenever I witness someone performing a complicated task with apparent ease, I'm moved and excited.

Everyday and ordinary

There are lots of everyday things we witness that require special skills. In our work at the Organ Clearing House, we frequently ask professional drivers to thread a semi-trailer through the eye of a needle, driving backwards and around corners. It's not a big deal if you know how to do it. And when I'm in the city, I'm aware of delivery drivers and the difficult work they have to do. Think of that guy who delivers Coke to convenience stores, driving a semi-trailer in and out of little parking lots all day, and all the opportunities he has to get into trouble.

I once saw a video of a heavy equipment operator cutting an apple into four equal pieces with a paring knife that was duct-taped to the teeth of a backhoe bucket. Take that, William Tell! If you want to get a sense of the skill involved in operating a crane, go to YouTube, search for "crane fail," and watch some clips that show skill lacking. You'll have a new appreciation for the operator who makes a heavy lift without tipping his machine over and dropping his load.

Where we live in Maine, there are lots of lobstermen. Their boats are heavy workhorses, usually thirty or forty feet long, with powerful diesel engines, and plenty of heavy gear on board. It's not a big deal because it's an everyday and ordinary part of their lives, but I marvel at how easily they approach a crowded dock. Recently I saw one fisherman run his boat sideways into a slot on a dock—imagine the equivalent in a car as an alternative to parallel parking.

Any homeowner will know the difference between a plumber with skill and one without. If he goes home wet, he needs to go back to school. And you want to hire a painter whose clothes are not covered with paint. If he's covered with paint, so are your carpets.

I appreciate all of those people who do work for us, and love watching anyone doing something that they're really good at.

Going to pot

One of my earliest memories witnessing excellence came from a potter named Harry Holl on Cape Cod, near



Wendy with Donald Hall

where our summer home was when I was a kid. His studio was set up as a public display in a rustic setting surrounded by pine trees and lots of exotic potted plants. He always had apprentices, interns, and associates around, so there was lots of action. There was a row of pottery wheels arranged under a translucent fiberglass ceiling, so there was lots of sunlight in which to work. Clay was stored in great cubes. They were roughly the size of sacks of cement, so I suppose they weighed seventy-five or a hundred pounds. There was shelf after shelf of large plastic jars full of glazes in the form of powder. It was a favorite family outing to drop in there to see what was going on, maybe buy a coffee mug, then stop for ice cream on the way home.

Harry's work is easily recognizable. For example, the signature shape of his coffee mugs is both beautiful and practical. It seems almost silly to say that his mugs are easy to drink from, but it's true—the shape fits your lips, so there's seldom a drip. That's simply not true of every mug.

Harry Holl's art is most recognizable through his glazes. He studied with a Japanese ceramicist whose experimentation with glazes inspired Harry. A material common in much of his work is black sand that's found at a particular beach on the Cape. Harry would go there with shovel and buckets to harvest the stuff, and go home to blend it into the colored glazes. Firing the glaze in a kiln results in beautiful black speckles that enhance the rich colors.

The best part of witnessing the work of this unique artist was seeing him at the wheel. He wore leather sandals and a long gray beard. His hands and forearms were deeply muscled. And the relationship between his eyes and his hands was miraculous. He'd drop a lump of clay on wheel, wet his hands, and caress the lump into the center of the spinning wheel. With one hand cupped and the other thumb down, a coffee mug would sprout from the lump—and another, and another. Or you'd watch a five-pound lump of clay turn into twelve dinner plates or cereal bowls, measured quickly with a well-worn caliper as they sprouted.

Other signature pieces were beautiful pitchers, bird feeders, birdbaths, and lamps. The Harry Holl lamp that my parents gave me as a wedding present thirty-five years ago is sitting on my desk as I write. And on the dinner table most evenings we use the dinner plates they gave Wendy and me as a house-warming present when we moved into our home in Maine.

Dodging the draft

My wife Wendy is a literary agent who works with writers, helping them sell manuscripts to publishers. One who stands out is Donald Hall, who has written hundreds of poems, essays, and books. He has written extensively about countless subjects—I think he's particularly good with baseball (the most poetic of team sports), and he has

written insightfully and eloquently about Work—comparing his work as a writer to that of his former grandfather, to sculptors, and other strong craftsmen. I recommend his book, *Life Work*, published by the Beacon Press.

His most recent publication is the essay, *Three Beards*, published in the online version of *The New Yorker* magazine. Read it at www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/06/three-beards.html. It starts:

In my life I have grown three beards, covering many of my adult faces. My present hairiness is monumental, and I intend to carry it into the grave. (I must avoid chemotherapy.) A woman has instigated each beard, the original bush requested by my first wife, Kirby. Why did she want it? Maybe she was tired of the same old face. Or maybe she thought a beard would be raffish; I did.

Donald Hall's writing is mesmerizing. It lilts along like a piece of music, casually using words we all know but never use, using them as parts of common speech just like they should be. When's the last time you used the word *raffish*? You might imagine the brilliant old man—did I mention that he's eighty-four years old?—whacking away on a computer keyboard, words flying across the screen like a stock ticker. But you'd be wrong. He writes in longhand on a tablet. And he wrote fifty-five drafts of this essay. Fifty-five!

I do a lot of writing, but I seldom write new drafts. Rather, I take the easy route and reread what I've written, editing on the screen as I go. A good final trick before hitting "Send" is to read a piece aloud to myself. That's when I find I've used the same word twice in a paragraph, and that's how I tell if something reads awkwardly. But fifty-five drafts?

Hall's fifty-five drafts are what makes it sound as though he writes in a flash, and when I read something of his aloud, it sounds like a friend talking to me.

For the birds

Another of Wendy's clients whose work I admire is Kenn Kaufman, an ornithologist and chronicler of nature. He has little formal education—he dropped out of school as a teenager to hitchhike around the country building a "Big Year" list of bird species. His book *Kingbird Highway* (published by Houghton Mifflin) is the memoir of that experience. He traveled 20,000 miles, crisscrossing to take advantage of the particular times when rare species are most easily seen. Part of that experience was meeting a girl who lived in Baltimore and shared his passion for birds. While Kenn's parents had allowed his crazy sojourn, Elaine's father was more protective, and when Kenn was leaving her area to go to Maine for a round-trip on the ferry Bluenose, known to promise the best sightings of pelagic (open ocean) birds, Elaine's father seemed unlikely to allow it.

Kenn writes that he slept in the woods the night before his boat trip, and when he arrived at the terminal, there she was, having found a way to get from Baltimore to down-east Maine on her own. He wrote: "If I could have looked down the years then, and seen everything from beginning to end—the good times, the best times, the bad times, the bad decisions, the indecision, and then finally the divorce—I still would not have traded anything for that moment."

I don't know if I've ever read a more eloquent or concise story of a love affair and marriage than that.

I've stood next to Kenn on the shore of the ocean, looking across an empty black sky, and Kenn rattles off the birds he



sees. Have you ever heard of Confusing Fall Warblers, thirty or so different species that all look alike, and whose plumage is completely different at different times of the year? They don't confuse Kenn. And I'm fond of the accurate scientific birding term, LBJs. Translation? Little Brown Jobs. Ask Kenn.

During his "Big Year," Kenn realized that identifying birds is interesting and fun, but not very meaningful if you don't know anything about them. He has observed, researched, and written about the lifestyles and habits of all the species. His book, *Lives of North American Birds* (Houghton Mifflin), looks like a reference tome, but it's a wonderful read. And his field guides are handy, interesting, informative, and in a single paragraph description of a bird, Kenn inserts humor, sarcasm, and simple pleasure along with the facts.

Sitting with Kenn at a dinner table, or better yet, in the woods and fields or at the beach, I'm amazed and impressed by the depth of his knowledge, experience, and appreciation of his subjects.

Doctor, Doctor, it hurts when I do this.

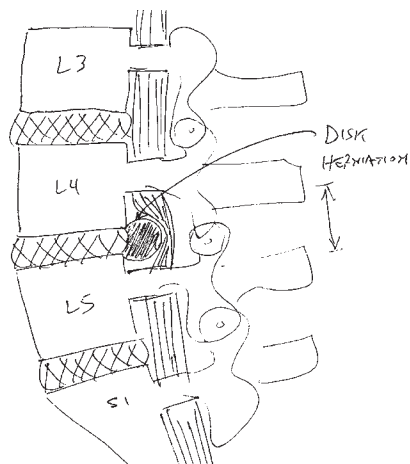
I know, I know, don't do that. In the June issue of THE DIAPASON, I wrote about safety in the interior of pipe organs, and finished by describing the collapse of a 130-year-old ladder that dropped me six feet to land on my back—the experience that taught me once and for all that the older we get, the less we like falling. Oof!

I described my encounter with EMTs, two of whom had grown up in that particular church, and all of whom agreed that my weight, when coupled with the lack of an elevator, was an issue for them. (I had a similar experience after a vehicle accident in 1979, when an overweight female EMT grunted from her end of the stretcher, "J____ C____, is he heavy!") I wrote about an ambulance ride across the river from Cambridge to Boston, and a long afternoon in the emergency room (thanks to Wendy for that long and supportive sit), ending with the news that I had a cracked vertebra.

That seemed to be healing well until a month later, when pain shot down my right leg and my right foot went numb. A herniated disc had pinched my sciatic nerve, and the shrill pain could have been described as stabbing, except for the fact that it was constant. It lasted four weeks.

My current favorite encounter with deep skill and knowledge was my brief relationship with an orthopedic surgeon at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, just blocks from our apartment. After an unpleasant visit with a specialist at another hospital, this was my quest for a second opinion. The guy walked into the room looking like a million bucks, dressed in a well-tailored suit and nicely matched, stylish, and colorful shirt and tie. He greeted me as though he cared how I felt, shared and explained my X-ray and MRI images, and then drew a terrific cartoon of "my" spine, naming the vertebra, showing exactly the issue that was causing the pain. Later when I was being prepped for surgery, one of the medical students (my doctor is a professor at the Harvard Medical School) said that he is famous for those drawings.

The doctor assured me that the surgery was simple and predictable, and that I could expect the pain to diminish quickly afterwards. In fact, when I awoke from anesthesia, the pain was gone. Simply gone. And two hours later I walked out of the hospital.



Dr. Andrew White's cartoon (reproduced with permission)

I could feel his confidence the moment I met him. His professional manner was both comforting and reassuring. He certainly has studied his subject. I'm so glad he didn't think he'd be just be able to "pick it up." He's given me my leg back. His name is Andrew White, and if you've got trouble with your spine, you should go see him. Tell him I sent you.

A writer's best friend

I've written here about a couple writers I admire, both of whom I met through my wife Wendy who is their literary agent, and who edits their work. She has edited many of our renowned and beloved writers, and she works hard to keep me honest. Late one afternoon, I was walking to her office in Boston to meet her after work, and ran into one of her clients, an admired juvenile judge—we had met recently at a party. He was carrying his latest manuscript in a shoe box, and said to me, "She's given me so much work to do!"

I've learned from Wendy the value of a good editor. And it has been a privilege and pleasure to work with Jerome Butera, editor of THE DIAPASON. My file shows that I wrote *In the wind...* for the first time in April of 2005. That makes this the one-hundredth issue of my column that has passed through Jerome's hands. At 2,500 words a pop, that's 2,500,000 words, which is a lot of shoveling. Through all that, Jerome has worked with me with grace, humor, friendship, and an occasional gentle jab. I value and honor his judgment, guidance, and support. Many of you readers may not

be aware of his presence over so many years. Take it from me that Jerome's contribution to the life and world of the modern American pipe organ is second to none, and the equal of any. Best of luck and happiness to you, Jerome, and thanks for all your help.

And welcome to Joyce Robinson, who has been there for years, learning the ropes while sitting next to the master. We're looking forward to lots more fun. Best to you, Joyce, and many thanks. Here's hoping you have a fun ride. ■

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