

Who Will Play Your Music
Excerpt from Creating an Imaginative Life
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For many years my art and my work represented separate and distinct lines of development in my life.

My art was music. From the moment when I was two or three and my aunt picked me up and gently guided my fingers over the piano keys, I had spent at least an hour of every day at the piano.

My work was educating managers and consulting with organizations. While psychology and organizational behaviour fascinated me almost as much as music, my business practice also offered a cover, a means through which I could engage directly with the world and still preserve a protected space for this inner work. Being at the piano had taught me how easy it was to feel profoundly vulnerable and self-conscious, even embarrassed, when I began penetrating into the deeper layers of who I was and which our art often asks us to do even when I know that the qualities being released would prove to be my greatest strengths.

Sometimes however, during management retreats, the topic of music might come up in conversation over a meal. Then I would lead a small and curious group down some narrow darkened hallway behind the kitchen where I knew a spinet piano was stored, and play it for a while. Because of my vulnerability, I was often uncomfortable performing my own music for others, with the exception of close friends. Instead, I did covers of other people's music and relied upon these arrangements when I played for these managers, or in a public place.

It was one of these arrangements that I was exploring while sitting at a piano in a hotel lobby one quiet evening. I had been leading a seminar for the last few days and we had given ourselves the night off. I had come back to the hotel early from the restaurant where we had eaten to prepare some materials for the next day. Upon seeing the piano, I decided to sit down for a few minutes and play.

The hotel wasn't that empty, however. Soon an old man walked unsteadily out of the nearby lounge and plopped himself into a big easy chair beside the piano. There, he slowly sipped his wine and watched me play. I felt distracted and uneasy, trapped on the bench where at any moment he might request one of his favourite tunes, one I most likely did not know how to play.

"What's that?" he asked when I was done.

"Oh, a bit of Moon River," I replied.

"Yeah, I recognized that," he said. "But there was something else before it, what was that?"

"That was some of my own music," I replied. "I don't have a name for it yet."

"You should," he said. "It deserves one." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then he said, "Your music is beautiful, but you're wasting your time with that other stuff."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's your music that brought me out here."

"But," I said in my defence, cutting him off, "it's the other music that people want to hear."

"Not when they hear this," he replied. "Please play some more." Then he closed his eyes and sat back in the chair. When I finished playing, he and I sat together for a long time. Slowly he opened his eyes and sipped from his glass.

"What were you doing with the music?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said. "It's just something I do for myself."

"Is that all?" He sounded surprised.

Then I explained what had brought me to the hotel.

"But how many others can do this consulting work?" he asked.

"Oh, perhaps twenty or thirty," I said, adding quickly, "But I don't want to give it up. My mission through the work is to change the world."

"I'm sure it is," he said. He seemed unmoved by the forced conviction in my words. Then he set his wine glass down on the table and looked directly at me.

"But who will play your music if you don't do it yourself?"

"It's nothing special," I protested.

I was about to offer more excuses when, with fire in his eyes and voice sober and clear, he said, "This is your gift. Don't waste it."

I sat frozen on the bench. Who will play my music? I asked myself over and over again.

To do what was being asked of me here was no easy thing. I could neither push forward nor hold back. When we reach this moment of turning in our lives, we are often asked to go beyond our skills, to do the opposite of what we have done before. If we have been unfocused, this is the time for focus; if we have been driven to succeed, this is the time for shifting into a new mode of action and creating space for the new direction to emerge.

And our "art" may not necessarily be special talent like writing or music; instead, it may be a quality of caring that we offer, or a capacity to listen deeply to the concerns of others, or it may simply be the wonder and beauty we awaken in the world through the attention we bring to a piece of music, a flower, or a tree.

The old man reminded me that I could be of little help to others in fulfilling the visions for their own lives unless I had done something about fulfilling my own. In the years that followed, I let go of my consulting practice in order to continue composing and recording the music I had played that night. One recording led to ten more, and now the music that I once shared only with close friends has spread around the world.

Marrying Intellect and Soul

Yet I felt a longing for the work I left behind, and I have now returned to consulting. But something is very different now. I no longer need to fulfil the expectations of others, nor to leave any part of myself outside the door. When I set aside my consulting practice to return to music, I could not foresee where it would lead. Over time, the painful doubts and uncertainties have evolved into a wonderful dance that has elegantly woven together and integrated all of the seemingly separate strands of my life. While the task of finding the marriage between intellect and soul may seem too complex and perhaps too terrifying for the strategic mind to grasp, creating our lives so that they are a reflection of what we love is child's play for the heart. "Don't grieve," says the Sufi poet Jalaludin Rumi. "Anything you lose comes around in another form. The child weaned from the mother's milk now drinks wine and honey mixed."

These days, when I work with groups, I bring not only charts, projectors, and theories as I did before. In addition, I bring myself, some stories, and a nine-foot-six-inch concert grand. And I am careful to save a place beside the piano for the old man from the lobby of the hotel.