

THE FUN AND FEAR OF FINDING OUR TALENTS

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Introduction

An important part of life is discovering our talents. They provide a focus for our lives, they bring us happiness, and it is through our talents that we serve others. It is important to watch for the right time and season and show gratitude for our gifts by magnifying them and using them with an eye single to the glory of God, who will bless our efforts. Part of discovering and using our God-given gifts is gaining enough confidence to overcome our fears and gain the appropriate amount of self confidence that is necessary to use our talents to bless others.

Diversity of Talents

Through our more-than-fifty years of marriage I have discovered that the talents of my husband, Doug, are totally different from my own. When we started dating at BYU, we went ice skating. Doug went right out on the ice and began performing figure eights; I could never even get my ankles to stay up straight. Later in our marriage he became an expert roller skater. He dressed in a tuxedo and performed in roller skating dance reviews. He bought me the best skates available and gave me lessons hoping that I could perform with him. It just wasn't me. I either lacked the talent or desire or both. Fortunately for us both, just before the review, a woman recently returned from her mission needed a partner and filled in nicely for me.

Doug is also tenacious about learning languages. He played several brass instruments and he was a racquetball champion and captain of the swimming team in college. In our later years he took up canoeing, bicycling and even roller-blading. I admire his many accomplishments, but I've had to discover my own natural gifts and talents.

A Mother's Influence

A couple of years ago about a week before Mother's Day, a news reporter from the *Deseret News* came to our Provo home to interview me for an article about how mothers influence their children's creative abilities. She had already interviewed my artist brother, Gary Kapp, and now posed the question to me. I said, "What did Gary say?" She answered, "Basically he described your mother as an enthusiastic cheerleader." "That covers it," I replied.

Our mother helped us believe that we had special talents. Gary said she made him feel as if his first painting were a Rembrandt. He was in junior high then. I was convinced that the first little song I wrote in high school was the most beautiful song my mother had ever heard. A few decades later she continued to love every song I wrote. If she heard that I had finished a new song she'd say, "Play it over the phone for me—I can't wait to hear it!" When I finished playing it she would say, "Oh, Jani, it's one of your best ever."

Sometimes I knew it wasn't but I thrived on my mother's encouragement and validation.

She put up half the money for our first album. She was willing to second-mortgage her home to finance our musical, *It's a Miracle*. I can't believe we let her do it. (We paid her back in one year.)

A Mother's Example

Perhaps my siblings and I were most influenced by the way Mother pursued her own talents. She was a widow for twenty-one years. When Dad died at 57, she had developed enough talents to fill her life happily during all her years as a widow. She had always loved music and had filled our home with it. She and Dad played piano and drums in a dance band for twenty years during my growing up years (and I played with her for a while after he died).

She was the heart and soul of a Senior Citizen Fun Band that performed regularly throughout Utah Valley. She accompanied many performers through the years, She made quilts for every grandchild and crocheted and knitted for everyone. After Dad died she went on a full-time mission to Jackson, Mississippi. Afterward she became an excellent genealogist, researching and entering more than forty thousand names for temple work. She missed our dad but filled those 21 years with wonderful experiences through the development and use of her many talents.

Discovering Our Own Unique Talents

Many people who think they have no talents discover them through life's little twists and turns. Trying one thing leads to another. That's pretty much how it was for me. I love playing ball for city and church teams until I was almost forty, when I broke my ankle playing basketball with my nephew. With my foot in a cast I wrote original music for our ward roadshow and my life turned in a whole different direction. When I began to write in earnest and fulfill my goal (to add to the simple music of the church) I told Doug I wished I had started writing twenty years earlier, and he said, "No, those years were your *research phase* when you were experiencing the things that you can now write about."

He was right: We'd reared our children, one of our children had died, my father had died, we'd reared foster children and experienced many of life's joys and sorrows. All of these experiences refined and taught me while my love for music was simmering. For years Doug and I had been focused on getting our children started singing, playing instruments, and even writing music—helping them discover their talents. That was the right time and season for us to support them in this. When our last child was in school I was actually home alone. *I have five or six hours a day free to choose something I want to do*, I thought. It was a great feeling. That was a defining moment for me in discovering my own talents.

Overcoming Fears, Forging Ahead

After the roadshow, I wasn't sure of my direction for a while but I knew I wanted to write music. I wrote a few popular songs and found it to be fun but not fulfilling. One day our son Steve (about 15) was asked to sing a solo in sacrament meeting, and I decided to try writing a song that my teenager would feel good about singing in church. He seemed to like the song so I started writing a few others. Then I found a way to publish a couple of pieces of sheet music. That was an exciting step for me. I sent a few children's songs to the church music office and they sent a kind letter suggesting that I "brighten my own little corner of the world by using my songs

in my family, in my ward, in my stake.”

That was good advice. When our stake needed a temple-themed song I wrote, *I Love to See the Temple*; when our stake needed a missionary-themed song for a children’s choir to sing at stake conference, I wrote *We’ll Bring the World His Truth*; and so forth. I just kept filling musical needs where I was and enjoyed making a contribution. Gradually, from this start, my songs found their way into a larger arena.

In time I had enough songs to record my first album, *Where is Heaven*. Then I started receiving requests to speak.

I was fearful about this—I didn’t know how to stand up and talk about my music. Doug assured me that any woman in the church can stand up and bear testimony of what she personally has learned. But for two years I let my fears hold me back from doing this. Eventually I decided to risk it, but I was very insecure in doing so. I had to decide whether to keep doing it and try to overcome the fear or to just never do it again. I kept trying and it took five years for the fear to completely leave. I had others do the singing as I was fearful of that aspect too. Then a wise old Hawaiian woman chastised me for declining to sing on my own programs. Holding back was a sign of pride that President Benson had warned us against, she said. “You have the fear of men and you need to repent. You wrote these songs and you should stand up and sing them, and look to the Lord for approval, not the world.” I took her advice and have been singing ever since and overcoming that fear. My voice is still average but my confidence has grown.

A New Kind of Bravery

This was a very happy time of my life. I was writing music constantly, publishing, recording and doing so many things that I loved. Then one day I read a brief article in a doctor’s office called, “Feeling the Fear But Doing it Anyway.” If your life is comfortable, the author said, you should stir things up a bit! Think of something you would love to be able to do, even if it seems somewhat beyond your ability, and start taking little steps toward achieving it. Any distance you cover will be a victory and you might even make it. “But decide on something today,” he urged, “or you may forget to do it.”

I brushed it off because my life was very comfortable without adding any stress. But I did mention the article to Doug at the dinner table that evening, and he suggested that I try out for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I protested—that truly was out of reach for me, something I had never even considered.

Something made me call the Choir office the next morning, and I found that all members of the Choir were not trained professional singers. The audition at that time consisted of three parts: a written music skills test, a home audition recorded on cassette tape; and an in-person audition when positions became available. I passed the first two and then heard nothing from the choir for a lengthy period. I finally wrote in my journal, “I tried out for the Tabernacle Choir and made it two-thirds of the way, and I consider that a victory.” And I closed that chapter of my life.

A few weeks later I received a letter saying that there were now openings in the alto section and inviting me to appear for my in-person audition. Every fear that I had conquered in the past returned one hundred fold and I could not imagine myself singing in front of the choir officials. But I was 55 and all choir members must retire at 60 so this would be my only chance.

The night of the audition, the singer auditioning before me had such a beautiful trained voice

and my courage failed me. I told Doug we needed to leave before it was my turn. “They have so many who are auditioning, they will never miss me—let’s go!” He held my arm firmly saying, “If you get this close and do not follow through, you will always wonder. . .”

The door opened, and Doug took my hand and pulled me through the door into one of the most frightening experiences of my life. The officials were kind, but put me through the paces of my audition to evaluate my sight-reading ability, my ability to blend, my understanding of rhythm, and my simple vocal solo sung a cappella

I Need Thee Every Hour. I did my best but the fear factor made it impossible for me to sing even as well as I could normally. I cried on the way home, feeling sure that I had not qualified for the Choir.

Two weeks later I received my letter of call to sing with the *Mormon Tabernacle Choir*. I went to my first rehearsal in a state of complete awe. At that time JoAnn Ottley worked individually with new choir members who needed to be brought up to speed. I saw my name on her list and went to work with her privately while the Choir rehearsed. Before we started I said, “Sister Ottley, when I auditioned I was too afraid to even do what I can do! For my peace of mind, please tell me how I got in the choir.”

She smiled and said, “We could tell you were frightened, but we knew your musical background from the written test, and we had heard your home audition tape where you were not afraid. You did well at sight reading and you have a voice that blends well. You know, sometimes we hear a voice that *won’t hurt* the choir, and we feel that we can bring you along with us.” Then she added, “The bottom line is, we pray about every person who auditions, and if the Lord says ‘yes’ you are called. Work hard and be at peace.”

My fears almost caused me to miss five years of the most glorious musical experience I can imagine on this earth. I sang on 290 broadcasts, sang at the funerals of two prophets, enjoyed sweet friendships with choir members, and enjoyed many wonderful tours and concerts in the United States and several other countries. From my perspective now at age 70, those years seem almost like a dream, and I almost missed it all by letting my fears hold me back. I hope that sharing this experience will inspire someone else to have courage to reach for their dreams.

Recognizing Personal Talents

To find your personal talents, ask yourself, *What brings me compliments? What comes more easily to me than to others? What seems almost familiar to me?* We did something before we came here and maybe we brought some of what we did in our pre mortal lives here with us, as part of our individual, immortal spirit. Occasionally when I write music I have a fleeting feeling that it could be something I have heard before.

Decide on a talent you want to pursue and develop. Good intentions are not enough, you must begin. Too often we are always getting ready to live, and before we know it time runs out. Tagore wrote, “I have spent my life stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I came to sing remains unsung.”⁽¹⁾ So don’t wait. Think of something you’ve never done before but secretly would like to do, and then start taking steps toward it. Any distance you cover will be a victory and you might make it.

About a year before Camilla Kimball died, she and I sat together at a luncheon in the church office building in Salt Lake City. She seemed frail and bent as she entered the hall, and her daughter was helping her manage an oxygen tank. During the meal, however, she became quite animated while telling us about the oil painting lessons she was taking. The instructor was coming to her apartment and she was learning to paint the four seasons looking out the back door of her home. I asked, “Is this a new talent or something you’ve done previously?” She answered “Oh, it’s brand new and it’s very

exciting!” Anything she accomplished, she assured me, would go with her when she left this life and would give her a little head start in the next. After Sister Kimball passed away, a friend went to the homes of the four Kimball children and each had a painting of one of the four seasons as a final gift from their mother.

A Father’s Final Gift

Years ago my good friend Beth Cottam, from St. George, came to my Provo home to videotape me giving a presentation on finding and developing talents. Her husband Sid, a shy man, came with her and listened quietly as I spoke. As they were driving home, Sid told his wife that he had thought of a talent he would like to develop—metal sculpture. She was pleased as she felt he remained in the background too much and she had wanted him to become more involved in life. He started collecting what some may view as junk and studied about metal sculpture. Several months later he brought us a sculpture that he titled, *The Tree of Life* with a typed explanation of what it meant to him. The next year he made sculptures for his children, his neighbors and his friends. Then he presented my husband and me with a second sculpture, *Cosmic Saw*, with a framed explanation of its significance. He seemed like a vibrant new person!

Ten days later, Beth called to tell us that Sid had been killed instantly in a car crash. It seemed so cruel—he had seemed so alive and so interested in pursuing his new talent. Later I phoned Beth and said, “Tell me about him. Tell me what his life was like.” Among other things she said, “Developing his talents made him come alive, gave him a purpose for his everyday life and his spare time. The work brought joy to him and to many people who received his sculptures. His creations will always be treasures to his children.”