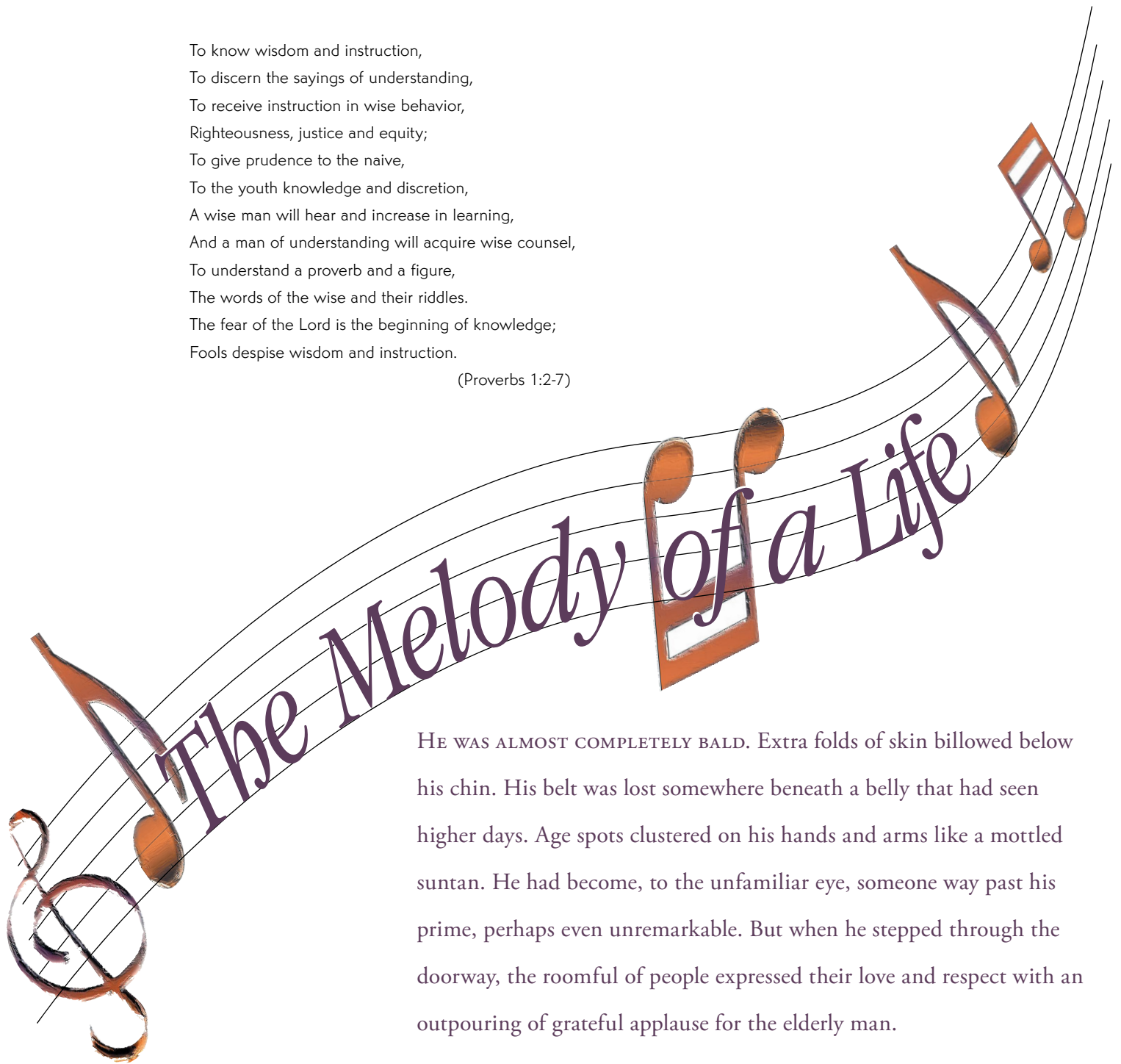


To know wisdom and instruction,
To discern the sayings of understanding,
To receive instruction in wise behavior,
Righteousness, justice and equity;
To give prudence to the naive,
To the youth knowledge and discretion,
A wise man will hear and increase in learning,
And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,
To understand a proverb and a figure,
The words of the wise and their riddles.
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

(Proverbs 1:2-7)



HE WAS ALMOST COMPLETELY BALD. Extra folds of skin billowed below his chin. His belt was lost somewhere beneath a belly that had seen higher days. Age spots clustered on his hands and arms like a mottled suntan. He had become, to the unfamiliar eye, someone way past his prime, perhaps even unremarkable. But when he stepped through the doorway, the roomful of people expressed their love and respect with an outpouring of grateful applause for the elderly man.

In 1965, during my final year of junior high, our band director, Mr. Franklin, had an idea. He would form a stage band with the better players from his larger concert/marching band. This was something relatively new—certainly unheard of in Marshalltown, Iowa. Seventh, eighth and ninth-graders playing jazz? Getting up early, twice a week, to rehearse before school even started for the day? Come on.

But it worked. And so for the next twenty school years, until he retired in 1986, Mr. Franklin led a succession of stage bands, rehearsing in that basement band room of Miller Junior High.

It is possible that at times during those years—but especially during that formative first year—Mr. Franklin rose every morning, put on his suit and tie, wondering, *What am I accomplishing here? What's the point of it?* It is possible—say, when he had to box the ears of the unruly trombones (of which I was one)—that he wondered if he was getting through at all to these undisciplined, unappreciative brats. When he introduced a tough chart, and endured the miserable squeaks and squawks and sour notes from his pseudo-musicians, he may have wondered if he had bitten off more than his young charges could chew.

Forty years later he would have his answer.

Last weekend, alumni from those twenty years of junior high stage bands gathered in the basement band room of the old Miller Junior High to pay tribute to this man who had played such an unintrusive yet important role in our lives. From the 33-year-old “youngsters” who had been in his last stage band, all the way back to us old folks who had played in his first, we came to honor someone who quietly but firmly did what he could to instill in us discipline, character, and a sense of responsibility. For, along with teaching us to be good musicians, Mr. Franklin taught us to be good human beings.

Respect

As far back as the dark ages of 1965, youth thought it had all the answers. Indeed, even Cain no doubt was convinced he knew more than his dad, Adam. Happily, in both of those faded epochs, adults paid no mind to such adolescent stupidity. They answered it with a dismissive sniff, punctuated their opinion by a swift kick in the seat of the pants, and ordered the miscreant to mend his or her ways so as not to jeopardize their freedom, their pitiable allowance, or both.

Some of his students (especially the girls) quaked in the presence of Mr. Franklin. He was not a tyrant, but his band represented at least a benign dictatorship. The seventh-grade trumpet player did not argue with the man with the baton. The eighth-grader cutting up back in the trombone section either mended his ways, or paid a heavy price for his disruption of the rehearsal. The ninth-grader? Well, she usually helped train up the underclassmen “in the way they should go.”

And in almost every case, the parents of the youngsters backed up the rules set by the director, and the behavior he expected.

A Firm Foundation

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

(1 Corinthians 3:10-11)

Whether he realized it at the time or not, Mr. Franklin was modeling the apostle Paul, in that he was setting in place for each of us a solid foundation on which we could build the rest of our lives. The building blocks with which we added to that foundation would be of our choosing; he was not responsible for our choices down the road. But like a good parent, Mr. Franklin had the responsibility to set the foundation substantial and strong for what would come later.

For the believer, that foundation is Jesus Christ. And on a level a bit more Spiritual than playing jazz, the “apostle Paul” is every Sunday School teacher who ever used a flannel graph to tell a story, every youth choir director who suffered the vagaries of the adolescent voice, every pastor who explained God’s word, and every parent who instilled in us the foundational truth for living in the light.

Building Blocks

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

(1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

After that Spiritual foundation has been set in place, however, the rest is up to us. Every Christian has Christ beneath and within; His presence is not optional. But it is up to each of us to decide what we will do with Him.

In that band room last weekend were individuals from all walks of life. There were doctors and scientists, computer programmers and writers, cooks, homemakers, mothers, and teachers. There were some who had pursued and excelled in music; there were others who had dropped it like a rock once they were out of school. There were men and women who, by any standard, had had prosperous, successful lives after junior high and high school; there were others who had had lives of disappointment, anger, and pain. Every one of them had received the same direction from Mr. Franklin, but every one of them had used it differently.

Just so, in every believer Christ creates the same foundation: the indwelling Spirit, a connection to and eternal life with God, and an advocate in the person of Christ Himself. At the same time He grants each of us special qualities, abilities, and gifts with which to serve Him. Some take these up, cherish them, develop and use them for the kingdom. Others, however, let them wither and atrophy, never quite developing the potential of God’s gift to them.

As I am coming to realize, my junior high band director was both the gift-planter and the gift. He set in place a foundation of good character on which I could build a life in kind. But Mr. Franklin was also the gift itself. He was God’s gift to me, put there as a mentor and goad, as someone whose own good character could stand as a template for my future. I pray that the melody of my life since then has honored his good efforts.

Long before that, however, God gave me the ultimate gift of His Son: the one, true foundation. He, too, has been a mentor and goad, an example against which I could always check my own efforts.

I pray that my life since then has brought honor to His name. 