

Scott Ainslie-Bounded By Silence Keynote Address
Positive Music Festival
Tampa, FL
March 29, 2019

Song List:

- **Blowin' In The Wind/Change Is Gonna Come**
- **Rocks and Gravel Blues**
- **Guide My Feet**
- **I Will Trust In The Lord**
- **The Land That I Love** (©2008, Scott Ainslie)
- **Rice Grows Again In Vietnam** (©1995, Scott Ainslie)
- **I Love A Darkened Room** (©2018, Scott Ainslie)

Ainslie Keynote 1st Half **43:42** <https://youtu.be/qrZcBG1CFmo>

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 1 **10:40** <https://youtu.be/Bhd8nJDI2KQ>

I'm not used to doing this sort of work, so I wore my wedding and funeral shoes...and I'm not used to talking without a guitar around my neck so for protection, I'm going to put it on.

I must tell you that normally when I wander around the world, I'm not playing for a bunch of musicians. I'm not playing for people who know that they have to expend a tremendous amount of energy, fiscal resources, time, spiritual, and emotional energy in order to make music.

I play for civilians.

So it's a great honor be among you, to be here in this community with people who think that music is important enough to sacrifice for. And I take the responsibility of this time to heart and I hope that it's useful for you.

When we play music, essentially we're taking something that's a solo thing – you've gotta spend a lot of time alone...

You know somebody asked John Mayer (y'all know who Mayer is, he's a fancy, five dollar guitar player), "Where'd you learn to play guitar like that?" And he replied, "In my bedroom..."

So, what we're essentially doing is taking something that's intensely private and personal, and making it public. We're sort of turning it inside out.

I find that a really beautiful thing. But what it means is that there is a lot of alone time that underlies our time together.

Now, the title of this talk is "Bounded By Silence: Songs of Change." And the thing about music as an artform, and there are some other performance artforms that are like this, is that until the last note dies, the song isn't complete.

So, when it's complete; it's gone.

On either end, it's bounded by silence. When painters go to work they want a blank canvas or a blank sheet of paper. What we want is silence.

And then, we paint on someone's brain with sound.

You can imagine in the tactile arts, if this was true—if the moment you pause something disappears. Think of Michaelangelo working on a block of Carrara marble, working on his magnificent, larger-than-lifesize statue of David. And he takes a break for lunch and it falls to dust.

That is essentially what's going on with music. And what we do is that we hold in our memories those performances. All that time in your bedroom, all that time working by yourself is to create that memory. And if you do use written music or lyrics, that's just simply a reminder of that memory. We're measuring ourselves against that as we go.

A song is a nearly perfect vehicle for living in someone else's shoes for a few minutes.

For three or four minutes you can live in someone else's experience and have a sense of what their life must be like, in an emotional and a rational way, and then, at the end of those four minutes, you get your shoes back.

Sometimes that's a relief!

I want you to think back with me to 1963, cause that's where we're going to start.

In February of 1963, Blowin' In The Wind made the charts: Peter, Paul and Mary, Bob Dylan's song, of course.

Sam Cooke heard that and decided that if a white Jewish kid from Minnesota could write a song like that about his people, that he should be able to write one, too. And he wrote, "Change Is Gonna Come." We'll come back to that.

In April, the Children's Crusade was going on in Birmingham, Dr. King was arrested and wrote "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" to pastors who said that black people should be patient for their rights...(laughs)..think about that for a second.

In June, Byron De La Beckwith killed Medgar Evers in Jackson MS, the NAACP's field officer there.

In August, The March On Washington For Jobs & Freedom took place...and Dr. King gave his "I Have A Dream" speech, for which he is so famous.

In September, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed, killing four little girls. Their names were Addie Mae Collins (14), Denise McNair (11), Carol Robinson (14) and Cynthia Wesley (14). They were getting dressed up for the service in the basement when the bomb went off.

On December 11th, Bertha Franklin, the manager of the Hacienda Motel in Los Angeles shot and killed Sam Cooke in what everybody thinks was a scam.

On December 22nd, eleven days later, his record company released "Change Is Gonna Come."

The verse that drove Sam Cooke to write "Change Is Gonna Come" was this one:

*"How many years must a mountain exist
before it is washed to the sea?
How many years must some people exist,
before they're allowed to be free?
And how many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see?"*

*The answer my friend is Blowin' In The Wind.
The answer is Blowin' In The Wind.*

-2nd Verse and chorus of "Blowin' In The Wind"

And, Sam heard that and thought, 'If a white guy can do that, I should be able to do that, too...'

But he was making his living singing things like:

You—send me, whoa-oh-oh-oh-oh...

To young white girls, possibly some of you...

And, he was afraid of alienating that audience. But he finally committed to the tune and produced it. (He had his own production company, owned his own publishing, he was very canny...he'd been in the music business since he was 14, singing gospel with the Soul Stirrers.)

Sam dumped a lot of money into the track—french horns, a chart, the whole thing. And then got killed before the rest of us heard it.

So, think back to 1963, if Sam could sing this then, we can sing it now. I mean, we live in strange times. But, we've seen worse.

Sings: Change Is Gonna Come

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 2

4:24 <https://youtu.be/OJbXt3sVcxc>

Bio

At the age of three, my mother pulled me off a piano stool where I was picking out the melodies from the records she listened to during the day. I played everything I could get my hands on.

I played piano until I was about seven and met the old lady who smelled of rose water and had a ruler in one hand that she would hit you with: This woman has taught piano all over the world!

And so, I quit playing the piano. I wasn't going to go sit with her, any longer. But, I played everything I could get my hands on, eventually I took up the banjo ukelele (showing an early affinity for obnoxious metal instruments). It was like a tomahawk with strings, you could fight your way out of bar with it and play it the next day.

But, in 1967, having played the flute in the elementary, middle and high school bands where I'd run into a band director that was like a grade B, World War II movie, Nazi deathcamp guard...about that time, I went to a Mike Seeger concert, Pete's half-brother. And he was playing Appalachian traditional music. He had seventeen musical instruments on stage and was busy playing them all in turn. When, halfway through the concert Mike looks up and a black man's come in the back door with a guitar case.

And Mike stops his concert and says, "John come up here. Y'all need to hear this man play. John play these people a couple songs."

His concert. And he gave up his chair and sat this black gravedigger down to play us some music.

John played a kind of music I didn't know existed in America. It wasn't on the radio. I didn't know anybody who played it. It was the most complicated and wonderful guitar music I had ever heard, and I started playing guitar a month later.

This was 52 years ago.

Now, if you've been thinking about playing guitar and putting it off: your fingers have to hurt, it takes a lot of time...you might want to leave now.

This is the tune that put me over the edge:

Plays & Sings: Rocks & Gravel

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 3

10:52 <https://youtu.be/-Xn6UDQ4nFk>

Now, I continued my formal and informal musical studies, I went on to college and took an independent degree at a school that didn't offer a music degree (luckily), Washington & Lee University. In 1970, I got there (having skipped a year of high school, I couldn't stand it any longer!) and I ran into an old-time banjo player, a Geology professor who was struggling mightily to learn how to play the old-time banjo with absolutely zero string instrument experience of any kind. And, by dint of will, and without what anybody would call 'raw talent,' Odell McGuire turned himself into a perfectly fine old-time banjo player.

And Odell carried me around to meet all the old-time people that he was learning from. His strategy, and it has become mine, when I want to learn something new, is to go find the oldest person who still does it, who's been doing it for a long time—a tradition bearer—and go and sit with them. And not once, make tape and go home. Go and sit. Have a relationship. Build that thing.

And Odell gave me this, by ushering me into all these places where I would never have thought I would be welcome. Odell just thought, "If he says 'yes,' we're goin' in. It can't hurt to ask..."

So, I had this really wide musical life. During the week I was writing atonal chamber music and listening to Webern, Babbitt, and Schoenberg...and on the weekends, I was learning to learn to play old-time banjo and fiddle from illiterate 70, 80 and 90 year olds in West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina.

So, it's been a very wide and interesting life.

But, all we do is begin to learn. Thankfully, there's no end. Pablo Casals, at age 95, he had an old friend come into town. Pablo had quit playing out, when he was in his eighties...but he was arguably the finest cellist of the 20th century.

In 1971, when he was 95, this guy's coming into town. He calls, "Pablo, I'd like to come by and see you."

"Yeah, but don't come until 12:30, when I take a break for lunch."

"Take a break? What're you doing?"

"I play three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon."

So, the guy gets there for lunch and they say hello, and sit down and have a cup of tea, and the reporter says, "Pablo, are you gonna gig out?"

"No, no."

"Six hours a day?"

Pablo says, "Yeah. Five days a week, not seven. I take the weekends off."

The reporter says, "Why are you still playing so much?"

And Pablo says, "I'm starting to see some improvement."

FRAMING

I want to frame what it is we do, because the modern world has a very warped idea of what we do, how we do it and why.

And I want to take these in order. I'm going to talk a little bit longer now, rather than play, but I'm going to keep my guitar on for protection and security...

First, What are we doing?

In 2000, I was selected as a Public Fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And I got paired up with a professor to work on a proposal, which was to develop course work, and a paper on Teaching As A Performance Art. I was going to do the brain science and the performer part of it, and Dr. Wally Hannum, at the School of Ed, was going to do the pedagogy of why we have an educational system in this country that's still based around the (Correction: 19th) century model of preparing people to stand on a production line for 8 or 10 hours without complaint, and subject them to as much boredom and repetitive things as they possibly could, deaden the brain and then control them.

And we were about four months into that when Wally got a call from the World Health Organization. They were training lay nurses in Africa to go out and try to stop the AIDS epidemic. And they'd go out in the bush and fail.

And they said, "Wally, we're not teaching them right. We need your help here."

Wally called me and he said, "Scott, I'm gonna have to stop our work together for awhile," and he told me what the problem was. And he said, "You know, if I teach badly here, some grad student will get a C. If I teach badly there, people will die."

I said, "Wally, go. Let me know what happens."

So four months later, Wally's back in the country for a little while and he called me: "Coffee?"

"Yeah, great coffee."

And he said, "Scott, I'm using all the ideas that we developed and it's working like gangbusters: across cultural lines..." This beautiful thing!

There are different kinds of authority, right? And leadership?

We can't flunk the audience. Or send them to the vice principal's office. So, we have to engage them and then get them to go where we want them to go.

And this has been going on since we were gathered around Neanderthal campfires: the Griot, or the Shaman is there and he is telling us our history, he's reminding us of who we are, where we've been and what we've been through.

And there are implicit or explicit questions about, "Are we still this people? Is this us? This is who we were. Are we still who we thought we were? Who we want to be?"

We're basically leaders without authority. One leadership model is that you control other people. The other leadership model is that we control ourselves.

And the stage becomes the place where we are melted down and reconfigured. It is a fearful place. It is a place where we refine ourselves.

Pema Chodron, a Tibetan Buddhist nun said that, "it is only by being sandblasted every day, that that which is irreducible will be revealed."

And this is the place where, I get sandblasted a lot. And you do, too.

So, the artists' role in society I see...I don't buy the ego thing, I don't buy the lust for applause, and I don't buy the running after the money...I don't think there's anybody in this room who picked up an instrument or started singing thinking, "I'm gonna make a lot of money."

I'll be surprised if you did, and you'll be surprised...!

But, I think what we do is that we hold a mirror up to our culture, we reflect back to them some portion of who we are, and then—by doing that—we raise the question, "Are we happy with this?"

It makes music not so much an entertainment (it has to be entertaining), as a tool to shape our community. And I think that's the work we do.

I think we're taking a bunch of strangers and turning them into a group. And we do it with something as simple as sound in the air.

So, I'm going to argue that what we're doing is less self-expression—or if it is self-expression, it's self-expression for community-expression. And that we are servants of the community when we take this place.

And in the same way the Shaman was loved and feared, we can be loved and feared.

But the arts aren't a luxury. They're a survival mechanism. They cement the bonds between people which makes the survival of a hunter-gatherer group more likely.

Individualism, is the luxury.

If we look back at paleolithic art, the cave art in Lascaux, France, in Altamira, Spain— 11-12,000 years old.

They discovered a cave in 1992 in the wine country of France, Chauvet Cave, that pushed the dawn of art back 40,000 years to more than 50,000 years ago. There are 40,000 year old fragments of bone flutes that have been found in caves in Iceland and Slovenia.

Music and art are not negotiable. You don't take them out of us and still wind up with human beings at the end. It's one of the building blocks that allows our species to survive.

And to try to dismiss it as a bauble on the wrist of some rich person is crazy. We need these things. They help us survive. Which is why everyone of you picked up an instrument: you picked it up to cement your survival.

For me, music is my religion. I worship at the altar of the sounds that we make. Those sounds unite us in joy or grief, they shape us and guide us forward, and remind us of our history. And all those things are critical to me knowing who I am now. And aiming me toward who I'd like to be.

What I say about religion is, "As a repository for the great questions that attend human life in this plane, religions can be a force—a great force—for good. But, they're a force for evil, the moment they think that they've answered any of them. A religion lives in its questions and it dies in its answers. [And it will also allow someone to kill their neighbor...]

Surety is a lethal force in human communities. Being sure you're right.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the son of Senator, went into the Civil War three times from Massachusetts. He was wounded twice, sent home and recovered and went back into that bloody conflict.

And he came out of the war with this idea: That it is surety, being sure that you're right, that is the root of all violence. [See: The Dante Club, Matthew Pearl]

And, as a Supreme Court Justice later, he entertained the questions deeply, but even when he had to make a judgment, he did not claim that his judgment was necessarily 'right,' but that it appeared to be this, and then he made his ruling. He held them very tenderly and couched them carefully, because he'd had enough of violence.

So, I like songs that raise questions better than songs that purport to provide answers.

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 4 **10:13** <https://youtu.be/Foy8sq5iECo>

The second things is 'How Do We Do It?'

And, talent, the notion of talent is bandied about in ways that I find offensive.

It seems to me that I've crawled over glass to get to where I am with this instrument and this voice. I've sacrificed. I've spent hours doing this work...

You know that Mozart, maybe had ten percent more aptitude than the baby in the house next door, but he was the son of the best and most revered music teacher in Europe. By the time he was six, he had his 10,000 hours.

So, I think that 'talent' is the excuse civilians use to excuse themselves from having to do the work that we do.

"I'd love to play music, but I just don't have your talent.."

You know, I have to really bite my tongue when I hear that. And when someone tells me how talented I am, instead of going through the litany of things...

- Do you know how many hours, days, months, years I've spent doing this?
- Do you know how many marriages, how much time with my children I have lost?
- Do you have any idea of the financial cost of the roads not taken?

...instead, I just say thank you, and repeat that litany in my head.

The notion of talent is a very dangerous thing. I consider it an opiate, a dangerous mirage, it's like you're lying on a bunk underneath a shop in China town somewhere, on dirty sheets in the opium smoke haze thinking, "tomorrow, I'll play better..."

That's not who it works. If anyone can meaningfully say that talent exists, what they're talking about is the work done, the time taken, and the attention paid.

Talent is 90% discipline. But, we call it playing music for a reason. If it brings you joy, it won't feel like work. But, there's work involved. And in order to play, we have to work.

So, honor that in your day. Everyday, spend sometime working and sometime playing. And it's good to sandwich that worktime on either side of the play time.

If all you do is work on an instrument, you are always going to be at the edge of what you know, and it'll get frustrating and you'll stop playing. (It's possible.)

If all you do is play, you'll make the same mistakes 30 years from now that you're making today.

So, a little work on something you can't do. Play. And then return to that work before you put the instrument down. With whatever music time you have in a day or a week: a little work, a little play.

Eventually that work time will infect you, it will inoculate your play time, and you'll be able to do things on your instrument or with your voice that you couldn't do before. A little work; a little play—man, that's it!

It's good to know how your brain works in order to do this work. Brains make a pattern of the world and then they operate on that pattern until something violates it.

This is why you can drive a hundred exits down the interstate and, until some idiot drifts into your lane on their cell phone, you don't know where you are on the highway because nothing has interrupted the pattern in your brain. There's no new information coming in, and your brain goes, "I'm gonna think about paying my phone bill," or "I should call so-and-so..." and all of a sudden your life's at risk, and your whole brain comes awake and then you wonder, "Have I missed my exit?"

Your brain encodes, not what we hope to do, but what we do. And so, if we play it wrong, we encode it wrong. So, if you're stumbling over something in a piece of music, stop. Slow

down. Figure out what the problem is. Sort it out. Then work your way back up to speed. Then drop it into the context of the tune and try it again.

You can't actually break a bad habit. This is the news from brain research. We don't break habits. We make new ones.

So, what you have to do is consciously send your neurons down a new pathway. Not the one they want to go down—and they really want to go down that one: it's all lined up, you know the lines are painted on the highway, it's ready to go...

You have to bushwack to new territory. And carefully send them all down that new path. "Nope, over here. Over here. Over here...Road Closed!"

And eventually, weeds will grow up in the old pathway and no neuron with any sense will go down there because it's dark and scary and they might get mugged. They're gonna go over here where all the other neurons've been going.

And then the brain will take that old pathway and recycle it. There'll be no input going down there and it'll be like, "We can use this again, reuse it."

So, instead of trying to break a habit, make a new one. This works for instruments, it works for alcoholism..this is how brains work. And it's good to know how brains work. Most of us have one.

Making music is a very physical activity. And how you use your body will completely influence the sound make. So, you can watch all the YouTube videos you want of somebody playing guitar, or doing something that you'd like to learn, but you have to know that YouTube is not watching you (at least not in that way).

A good teacher will look at you and say, "Your hands don't look right, try it this way." "Your shoulders are too high..do that again, let me see what's going on." We're scanning for the physical part of doing this work. "Why is your guitar neck down there, it makes this chord really hard, put it up here..."

That a key thing. So I warn you off YouTube (and Tablature, if you're a guitarist). Very dangerous.

But this is where apprenticeship comes in. And I'm a great believer in apprenticeship: putting yourself in the presence of living tradition bearer, if you can do it, is really important. You should go out of your way to do it. And you should do it more than once.

My time with the old people, on both sides of the color line made me who I am. I did this with white musicians, mountain musicians in old-time music in the 1970s and early 80s and I did it with black blues and gospel musicians in the 90s and early 2000s in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia.

Hanging out with people who are old and have still got their sense is a good thing. I'm rapidly becoming one of those.

But, what I say about apprenticeship is this, "I believe in apprenticeship. And what we love changes us. You should let the music, the tradition change you, before you change it.

The Africans have a proverb: "*The hand that gives is always above the hand that receives.*"

So, make sure you put your hand under when you're going to receive.

The Catholic nun, and artist/educator Corita Kent once said, "*To understand is to stand under, which is to look up to, which is a very good way to understand.*"

So, you submit, in some way, to allow yourself to be changed.

Now for a tradition to survive, it has to fit in your mouth, it has to fit in your experience, it has to be suited to our times, which means to stay the same, it has to change.

But, before you rush in there and make a bunch of adjustments, take the time to really know what it is.

Zora Neale Hurston, who is buried here in Florida, in Fort Pierce, did a lot of collecting of stories and songs. And she would go and hang out at these camps—turpentine camps and lumber camps—and she would stay with the people she was learning from until she could sing the song the way they sang it (“Oh yeah, that’s it. That’s it!). She would tell the stories until they said, “Yeah. That’s good.”

She was building a relationship, but also allowing herself to be changed by the material so that she could deliver it the way they delivered it. Once that is done, and you have assent from the community, then you can present to someone else.

Until that moment, you’re still an apprentice.

Now, I’m still an apprentice! But I have enough. I have compliments that I can’t repeat in polite company from old black singers, and I wouldn’t sing this music or presume to talk about it, were it not for my time with those old people. They made me who I am.

I am not the man I was raised to be. I’m not the Eagle Scout that I was (well, in some ways I am. I do still help old ladies across the street...).

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 5 **7:33** <https://youtu.be/O94QXQ3MNGw>

So, we have what we do, we have how we do it. The last thing is why we do it.

And the culture says, it’s for our egos. The culture says, it’s for money (laughs...There has to be an easier way...).

I read a book somewhere of a man whose African grandfather told him “Give your labor away. Don’t sell it. If you sell it, you will belong to someone else.”

When we pay for something, we feel entitled to it. It’s ours! We can do what we want with it.

The transactional economy is: I bought it; it’s mine.
The gift economy is: I’ll give you this, and, well, pass it on, or whatever...and the gifts never actually equal out. Someone will give you gift, and one is more valuable, or a little less valuable. It’s never an equal trade. There’s never stasis: it’s always a dance. It’s always in motion. Those relationships.

And that little bit of debt between us helps us keep track of each other. “He still owes me 5 bucks...”

So, rather than music being a gift to us; it’s our gift to others. We’ve worked hard for that, and we tithe with our music. And sometimes we receive tithes in return.

In order for me to have more than a half-century of guitar playing, some money has had to change hands. Otherwise, I’d have to have a whole bunch of other jobs and I wouldn’t have as much time to play.

But, the commodification of music—like the commodification of love, or of anything else that is sacred—makes it profane.

The market has a hard time assigning value, a hard value to what it is we do. While the quality of it may not change, or it may improve, the compensation for it varies wildly.

So, it’s not suited to the transactional business world where, “It cost me this much, we’ll mark it up this much, and you’ll buy it.” Cause I’m up to a nickel an hour...

But, I think transactional economies tend to weaken communities and gift economies create relationships. They tend to strengthen them.

We are in a room filled with remarkable giving: everybody has sacrificed to be here, and it's not going to balance out. But that's part of the dance—to have it be dynamic. A living community is going to be like this. And we have to allow that to be the way it happens.

So, Why do we do this? (“Ah..I have no idea...”)

I do know that I leave home to make a difference in the world, that I picked up the guitar to make a difference. And regardless of whether I make a lot of money or a little money, I can take up this guitar and make a difference. And I'm gonna do it.

And I think you are, too. This is what music does for us. This is our tool. It is how we influence the world. But, we're the floating class:

We play the all night dives and we play the exclusive country clubs; we play the jail house and the White House (well, not this one...).

But, I think we're operating under a different currency. And it's good to keep your eye on that. Keep your eye on investment, emotional investment.

If you're moved somewhere from where you are to a slightly different place, that has a little more empathy and a little more understanding of your life and the lives of the people around you, that's worth real money in a community. That's a lasting change. That's something that won't go away.

And I think that's what we're aiming at. You should aim your arrows at the right target.

Lastly, years ago, a DJ at WPSU in Bethlehem PA sent me a photo of a quote that he had taped over his desk at the station. And it said, “*We can do good. We can make the world a better place. And we can do it with something as ephemeral as music in the air.*”

And I wrote him back and said, “Man, that's great. Who's the author?”

And he wrote back, “You.”

I'd said it in a live interview at the station. Luckily, he wrote it down, cause I didn't remember it!

Tell you what, stand up. Because reading and writing was forbidden in the black community, songs were built simply so you could sing them..”

Sings: Guide My Feet

Ainslie-Keynote 2nd Half **41:10** <https://youtu.be/4fgJyqu4Bo>

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 6 **10:41** <https://youtu.be/hvoiQcIHegQ>

Yip Harburg, the author of all the songs for “The Wizard of Oz,” lyric writer of “Brother Can You Spare a Dime” during the Great Depression (which FDR really did not want on the airwaves)...Yip said one time:

*Words make you think a thought.
Music makes you feel a feeling.
And a song, makes you feel a thought.*

I'm gonna tell you a story and sing you a song that I learned from Willie Malloy.

Willie was born in 1900. I met him in 1988. He was still playing guitar for the quartet at his church. They'd come and collect him. Playing electric guitar in dropped-D tuning and hitting it as hard as any 15-year-old, I mean, just banging on the thing. It was inspiring!

But, when I met Willie, it was clear that he'd been really severely harmed by a fire or something. And I said--when I got to know him a little bit--"Willie, what happened to you?"

And Willie said, "Well, I ran away from home when I was fifteen with a blues band."

Nineteen-fifteen, children!

Two years on the road, up in the coal country, working in Charleston WV--on the black side of town, downtown. And he played all Friday night and slept under one of the tables in the juke joint, as he often did, until morning or late morning. He walked out, blinking in the sun, which had finally gotten to the streets of Charleston WV, and he had a guitar on a rope around his neck and was looking for a little coffee and maybe a little breakfast when a church lady accosted him:

"You the one makin' that racket last night?" (That's how Willie said it.)

He said, "Yes, ma'am. Gonna do it again tonight, too."

She said, "If you can play for the devil, you can play for the Lord. Come to my church tomorrow morning."

Willie said, "I'm gonna be up most of the night..."

And she said, "Stay up! And bring that box with you. We don't want to hear no blues..."

He said, "Well, maybe I will," hoping to get out of this. "Which church is yours?"

And she walked him out into the street, and Willie--more than 70 years later--could tell you the street corner he was at in downtown Charleston. I've forgotten it, but he hadn't.

Two steps out in the street, third steeple down. Ten o'clock.

Well, Willie did decide to stay up. He started thinking about that collection plate. Make a little side money, which would be good.

So, he walked in and he played his mother's favorite tune, which I'm about to play for you in just a moment, the way Willie taught it to me.

And it made him so homesick: to be in the heart of the church after two years on the road, and for his mom, that he quit the band and started hitch-hiking home. We knew traveling musicians in those days as 'walking musicians.' Nobody had a car. And so, Willie started to walk home.

He got as far as Norfolk VA and ran out of what money he had. And he took a job in a reconditioned furniture store, stripping paint and taking old furniture, regluing the joints and fresh coat of paint, and selling it as 'reconditioned' not just used. "We fixed it up!" you know...

There were six guys in the back stripping paint and scraping it, the fumes...turpentine...and Willie's job was to put it in the window and take the money. Willie was 17 in 1917.

And Willie said, "You know, I heard the explosion. And the six people in back, those people, those men died in that moment. And I jerked my head around and I could see that fireball comin' through the door. And I started to run. But it caught up to me and it burned off my eyelids, and my nose, and the tops of my ears, and blew me through the door and out into the street.

“And I wouldn’t be here talkin’ to you, but some man—and I don’t know who that man was—but somebody grabbed me by my clothes and pulled me out away from that brick storefront just before it fell down where I was lying. And I don’t know whether he was black or white. I don’t know who that man was, but I wouldn’t be here talking to you today if it wasn’t for him. And I’ve never been able to thank him!

“Well, I lay in the hospital for about two months and the social workers came by and they said, “Willie, where are your people?”

“I said, “Fayetteville, North Carolina,” which is where I found Willie.

And they said, “Well, you need to get back to them because you don’t want to go blind in a town where people don’t know you and don’t care about you.”

Willie couldn’t close his eyes. His corneas were drying out and they were going to cloud up pretty fast—couple days, a week more maybe—so, they gave him busfare and put him on a bus to Fayetteville.

But, in those days, if you couldn’t pay the rent, you moved. And you didn’t tell anybody where you were going, cause you didn’t want the landlord to come find you.

So, Willie’s family, in two years had moved three or four times. And he couldn’t find them.

He was wandering all around the black community, losing his sight each and every day, seeing less. The world’s getting a littler darker around him; drinking water out of the ditches and sleeping with jars of moonshine hidden in the ditches behind houses in the black community.

And, finally one day, he knocks on a door, and his mother opens it.

And he is so glad to see her, but she beholds the wreck of a child before her and it says, “Mama?” The beautiful boy who ran away from home two years before is back.

They fall on each other’s necks and they weep. And she gives him something to eat and something to drink and she puts him in bed. And he wakes up the next morning, stone blind. Made it home!

And Willie was one of the happiest, most astonishing people I know.

I have a jewelry box he made for me.

Willie went to the School For The Blind in North Carolina to learn a craft. He did woodworking. And he made dresser drawers—he called them ‘chifferobes’. He could make a three-drawer little cabinet out of 1 x 10s, and the joints worked, everthing slid, you know...the paint job’s were really terrible...

And he made what he called ‘jewelry boxes,’ and I have one in our bedroom next to our bed. And the boys know, at least my boys—I need to tell Barb’s boys, too, in case something happens—that, if anything happens to me, this doesn’t go to the landfill. Because Willie gave this to me.

And it’s a jewelry box, made out of 1 x 10s, his favorite wood. It’s about this big (gestures 14” x 10” roughly). And it’s got a chain for the top that keeps it from tipping back too far, or falling over—the chain is the right length. The hinges all line up, the little latch on the front—the hook and eye latch— works. It’s all pretty good. The joints—he could feel them—the joints are pretty tight. Again, the paint job sucked.

But there’s a mirror in the top. You open it up and there’s a mirror there. Now, Willie couldn’t see himself, but you might want to see yourself. And he nailed the molding in to hold the mirror with carpet tacks, these little furring strips of wood. And Willie was inordinately proud of it:

“I never broke a one,” he said. “I never broke a mirror.”
And he gave me one of these treasures. And he gave me this (indicates the song).

Sings: I Will Trust In The Lord

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 7 **9:35** <https://youtu.be/BkHW5zmvMRk>

The old people made me who I am.

Writing from Someone Else’s Perspective

Raising your voice for the voice of someone who has been ignored, silenced, or misunderstood, is a very powerful thing.

And this next song is one of those sort of ‘newspaper songs.’ On NPR in 2007, I heard a story about a woman named Grecia Cruz, who crossed the Sonoran Desert on our southern border with a bunch of human smugglers.

And was lost in the Sonoran Desert. It was June 23rd, 2007. It was 110 degrees in the desert that day with a ground temperature that could be 120, radiating that heat back up into your body while you’re sleeping.

It takes two gallons of water a day to stay alive in that desert in the summertime—per person! And the smugglers will tell you it’s a five mile walk to Tucson, when it’s seventy. So, instead of one bad and dangerous night’s walk through a desert that’s covered with things with thorns on them, just waiting to injure you and incapacitate you, it’s a seven day walk.

Nobody’s carrying 14 gallons of water. The moment you cross the border, your life’s at risk. They have found 3,200 or 3,300 bodies in that desert over the last fifteen years, and they think that they’ve only found 10%.

That gets us to 30,000.

But, the price for crossing the border without papers shouldn’t be the death penalty. But, by militarizing the border, we have weaponized the desert.

And it is taking people’s lives.

There are people who go out and put water in the desert to try to save the lives—or extend the lives—of migrants who are lost and have run out of water. This winter, some of them were charged with littering, for leaving bottles of water in the desert.

But, I knew that the NAFTA Treaty had made American corn—corporate corn, the most heavily subsidized crop in the nation—cheaper to sell in Mexico than it was to grow. So, American corn flooded Mexican markets and put hundreds of thousands of subsistence farmers—who had held their land with land protections written into the Mexican Constitution for several hundred years—and suddenly, they can’t stay on their own farms anymore.

So, I carried Grecia’s loss. Her sister-in-law was looking for her with a member of the Tohono O’odham tribe on the reservation that straddles the Mexican-American border. I carried this around in my head for awhile and finally thought, “Someone, somebody needs to write this. People need to know what this felt like, what it feels like.”

I wrote this song in memoriam for her. Her remains have not been found. The scavengers disperse bodies more quickly than we can find them. This tune is for her.

And after I wrote it—which took about a year and a half of sitting with it—I went to two Latino musicians I know, José Cuellar and Tomas Montoya. And I said, “Look, I’ve written this song sort of from your perspective and I need to know if I’ve got this wrong. If it’s wrong, we’ll throw it away or we’ll fix it. You have veto power.”

When you write a song for someone else, you have to check in with them. Because it's entirely likely that you've seized on a cliché or a stereotype that is in you that you don't know is there. And you have to ask them, "Have I got this wrong?"

Well, I'm happy to say that José and Tomas are both on the track. It's available on YouTube.com. It hasn't been released on a record yet, except a benefit CD compilation for No Mas Muerts/No More Deaths. You can hear this on YouTube.com and see the desert. It's called The Land That I Love.

Sings: The Land That I Love

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 8 **9:07** <https://youtu.be/aVpINoDgkvY>

This is Rice Grows Again In Vietnam, a song that I wrote in 1995, but put on a record in 2005, when I finally had a non-blues record that I could put it on.

After I wrote the song, I had the lyrics translated into Vietnamese by a State Department translator in Washington DC. I figured if they're doing it for the State Department, they've got it. I didn't want some hack to do it. So I paid the \$200 to get the song translated.

And then, I went looking for traditional Vietnamese musicians to work with me on the track. I didn't want it to be a song just for American vets. I wanted it to be open to both communities that suffered in the war.

And I'd written it from a child's point of view, because I'm still so filled with rage about that war, if I wrote from my point of view, it would be entirely too toxic.

So, I looked back on it, from a child's point of view, and then I went looking for a Vietnamese musician, and I found Nguyen Dinh Nghia.

Nghia was an instructor at the conservatory in Saigon: a traditional music instructor, instrument builder and composer, a flute player.

When Saigon fell, he fled to the mountains and lived with the Hmong for about ten years, waiting for a way to get out of Southeast Asia and come to the United States. He finally found one, but he spent ten years learning their music, as well, and then brought his family to the DC area, which is where I found him through a friend.

I went to Nghia's house and he was a little nervous about it: "How am I going to fit into a white American songwriter's song?"

But, I gave him a copy of the lyrics in Vietnamese (his English was pretty good, but I gave him the lyrics) and then I sat down in his living room and played it for him.

And he went from being skeptical to being excited. And we started talking about where the flute could fit and so, I left him saying, "Okay, we're going to do this. I'll let you know when the sessions are, I'll get you there..."

I was recording in Woodstock NY with Scott Petito and Leslie Ritter.

But before those sessions came around, Nghia had a stroke and was rendered essentially motionless and he couldn't speak. So, his ears worked. His brain worked. He understood what was going on around him. He knew what he had lost, and he could barely move his hands and feet on one side of his body, and couldn't talk at all.

When I got the call, I thought, "Gee, this is such a terrible thing" but, I still wanted some Vietnamese presence on the record.

And Gerry Marotta was playing drums. He played drums for Peter Gabriel for ten years; he played on Sledgehammer! When Gerry hits the drums, tears burst out of my eyes.

And Gerry had a Vietnamese family living next to him. And the parents didn't speak English, but they had a straight-A high school senior, Duyen Tran. Duyen spoke English. So, I sent a translation through Gerry, who walked it over to Duyen.

If you called the house and spoke English, the parents would hang up on you, cause they were afraid of Duyen having truck with somebody and them not knowing what was going on...

So, I couldn't call the house. Gerry couldn't call the house. Gerry had to call her sister and have her call the house and tell the parents what's going on. So, we worked this out, kind of a house of cards.

The last day of tracking for the record, we were sort of under the gun, trying to get things done. And it became clear that somebody had to go pick up Duyen and it would be an hour and a half—45 minutes there 45 minutes back—maybe two hours. And walking away from these sessions for me for two hours looked like it was impossible.

And Gerry Marotta happened to be there that day. He wasn't on my dime. He wasn't playing. He'd adopted us. He was hanging out in the studio, this incredibly famous musician. And he looks at me and looks at Scott Petito, and he says, "I'll go get her."

So, off the payroll, Gerry gets in his car and goes off and gets Duyen. And I work with Scott for two hours.

Duyen walks into the studio—willowy, long straight hair, straight-A student. Sits down on the arm of a chair. We all say 'hello.' I make sure she's got a copy of the lyrics, she has them in Vietnamese.

And she looks at them—she'd read them through before, she knew what was coming—and she said, "Why did you write a song about my country?"

And I sat down in a chair and I said, "Well, when I was your age, my friends were killing your countrymen. And your countrymen were killing my friends. And there just has to be a better way to resolve our differences."

And she went (gasp), "Right." And walked straight into the studio and read them off, bam, in one take. And we cut her voice into the track so that—not only the servicemen who served in Vietnam would hear that language again, and a young girl, happily—but that Vietnamese people would hear it too.

And I've heard from both sides, but the Veterans and the Vietnamese, that this is a very powerful song for them.

But I wanted you to know the length to which I went to make sure that everybody was in the room with me: not just "Check it out," but join me in the track. Play. So, here's the tune.

Sings: Rice Grows Again In Vietnam

Ainslie Keynote Pt. 9

10:25 <https://youtu.be/vbUd6STLH-E>

Question & Answer

If you have a thought or a question you'd like to ask, please raise your hands and we'll talk a bit here.

Q: You talked about performance being about to engage and then direct a group of people, and have strangers become friends. Could you talk a little more about that?

A: Yes. We're all used to people sitting in coffee shops, even people who are dating one and other, looking at the screens. Or having a fight! We live in a world where we are more and

more isolated by our technology. And the moments where we might have interaction with somebody, if the technology can solve it, we let it.

So, I don't know if you've noticed, but children don't know how to call anybody anymore. They don't even answer email. You've got to text them, right?

So, what we offer a group of people is a common experience uninterrupted by screens (except for maybe three times today)...(applause)..

What we do is give people a shared experience, a common experience. They take a sip of their own sorrows or joys with us. They don't have to confess anything, but they can have a look at what's inside their closets, when we open ours on stage. And we become a community by sampling that stuff, in each other's experience, without having to reveal anything in particular. It's a safe way to become a member of a group.

And when we sing together—as we did—you risk social embarrassment. And that shared suffering makes you a community.

So, that's how I look at it. We're just simply united. You take a bunch of strangers and they come in and go, "I wonder if it's going to be good?" And then, "It was good! It was GOOD!" Or not.

But, it's a shared experience. We have things in common.

When you're on stage, you go first. Someone has to lead this parade. You open the door, and people can either go through or not. But that's the community.

Q: I want to hear a bit more of what you thought of as Teaching As A Performance Art.

A: Yeah. Well, I think, as I said, we can't flunk people or send them to the office. So, we have to engage them.

And the brain learns, this is again brain science, the brain remembers things in sequence.

"Where are my car keys? When was the last time I drove the car? I came in the house, where'd I put them down?"

But, we don't learn things in sequence, well.

If I go: "A, B, C, D..." you know it's the alphabet. You know the alphabet, and you start thinking, "I wonder what happens next. I wonder if I should go get a cup of coffee now. Oh, I didn't pay the phone bill..."

So, we recall things in sequence, but we learn best like this—and every Neanderthal storyteller and Griot didn't start with A and go to B. They started:

"Isn't it funny, Q! Look at Q, out there by itself. And then R and X. And actually, L, M, N...but to really understand it, you have to go back to A..."

Every good story starts in the middle. And lessons should, too. They should start with an unexpected fact. And every fact that's presented, should generate a question.

The person who controls the questions, controls your education. So, the way to take control of your education is to make questions and ask them.

So, when I did educational residencies, I would open with that!

I'd say, "I'm going to read you some facts. And I want you to write down three questions that come to mind for every fact I present. I'll be presenting facts all week long, and I want you to write a question down. So, a fact: then, "Wait minute, what about this?"

So, my favorite facts often came out of Harper's Index, you know, the magazine, where they have this little section of unexpected facts. And one of my favorite ones was this:

"There's a motorcycle gang in Moscow, USSR (this was back before Glasnost) and it has 5 members, and one motorcycle. Go!"

This raises a lot of questions in my mind:

"Can you call a motorcycle gang a motorcycle gang when they've only got one?"

"Are five guys a gang?"

"Are motorcycles hard to get in Russia?"

"Are they highly taxed? Do they make them there? Do they have to be imported?"

"How did they get it, if they had to import it?"

"Did they pool their money?"

"Who gets to ride it on Wednesday?"

"If you've got a date, does that trump the guy who's gonna ride by himself?"

There's a lot of questions that this raises that lead us into new territory.

So, by learning to generate questions, you can take control of your own education, you can learn what you want to know, rather than just what they want you to know.

Empowering students to build questions and become questioners is, I think, part of the job of education. Especially, now!

Q: You mentioned that they were teaching people to go out into the community for health education and that they were failing. How did they change their teaching of those people?

A: They did what I just did. What did Wally do? He didn't teach them sequentially. He said, "Look, you're going to put the needle in here! It's really important. This is why we put it in there. And we clean it before we put it in there..."

Not: clean the needle...blah, blah, blah...No, you start at a critical moment, something that's important. And then you work your way to that, building in the things that you have to build in.

And the emotional thing of putting a needle into someone else's body awakens the emotional mind. And the emotional mind will remember, in a way the rational mind will not. If you're not invested in what's going on, you won't remember it.

We remember things that are marked with emotion: positive or negative. They are easier to set in the memory and their easier to recall. So, if you can mark what you're doing with emotion, you can get investment, and then students will remember.

I want to pay homage to what we do, that we're here together.

Sings: I Love A Darkened Room