



# The Greener Grass Is Right Under Our Feet

By Tim Lautzenheiser

With the close of an academic year often comes some serious self-talk, focusing on our professional future. The rearview mirror reveals weeks and months of invested time-on-task. Even before welcoming your students to their first day of class, you've already spent countless hours in summer camps, leadership retreats, room preparation, and staff development. Then you're off to the races with the calendar's early launch of scheduled performances.

Throughout the year, music educators remain immersed in ongoing administrative responsibilities, recruitment and retention programs, fundraising, parent meetings, bus schedules, budget requests, endless communication responses, organizational/association attendance, and much more. The expectations are infinite. Is it any wonder that at this time of year, exhaustion sets in and thoughts of redefining one's professional pathway emerge? There's just no more fuel in the tank; you're running on fumes.

I have often been amused (and haunted) by the classic wisdom

shared by the famous cartoon philosopher Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

It is easy to get caught in the undertow of our chosen mindset. When we are tired, anxious, disillusioned, or stressed, we become susceptible to our own misgivings. We begin to look for a way out, relief from the pressure, a different theme for our daily commitments, or even a complete reset of our life's mission. It simply is our survival mechanism guiding us to "hope for" greener pastures. However, perhaps it is not just about *what* we are dealing with, but rather *the way* in which we are processing it, or more simply put, *our viewpoint*. Is their grass really greener, or is it our thought filter that embellishes the color? If so, wouldn't the same logic apply to everything we perceive in life?

We don't see the world as it is; we see the world as we are. Our focus and our attitude determine our reality. Is it partly sunny or partly cloudy? Is the glass half full or half empty? *Aren't they the same?* Isn't it just a different viewpoint or labeling?

# We must give up giving up.

When our mind defines something, we treat it accordingly. And, as we all know, the mind's job is to make judgments on everything from intonation problems to classroom behavior. The good news is we have control over our thoughts if we choose to do so. In a world that often emphasizes the negative, it becomes quite easy to get caught in the downward spiral of a pessimistic perspective. We're now back to our friend, Pogo, who recognized the sad futility of our own internal thinking often branded as *self-doubt*.

This powerful quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi may offer some insight to a desired alternative:

*Your thoughts become your words,  
Your words become your actions,  
Your actions become your habits,  
Your habits become your values,  
Your values become your destiny.*

What a powerful blueprint it brings to one's unlimited potential. *It all starts with our thoughts.* With that in mind, what if we highlighted the professional and personal positives that are one-of-a-kind benefits generated by being a music educator?

The obvious one is being connected to *music*, a universal language of *art, expression, creativity, beauty*. While there is a big leap from "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" to Handel's *Messiah*, it is still a journey of learning–growing–becoming. Witnessing a child get it is a personal victory worth celebrating. Then there are those glorious moments when all the puzzle pieces come together and a musical phrase is created that stirs the soul. The student or the ensemble *feels something*, and we struggle to fight back the tears of joy. How often does that happen with other areas of study?

In a recent workshop with administra-

tors, the participants were sharing their aligned thoughts concerning the uniqueness of their music programs and their music staff. These are a few of their insightful reflections:

- The music teacher is not a one- or two-semester instructor, but rather an every-semester mentor. Living in a small farm community, my choir director (who clearly is a revered influential difference-maker in my life) was in front of me from first grade through high school graduation.
- The principals were quick to say, "Music is not a class, it is a culture." It is a microcosm of society. We know it is a *family* for many of our students, a place of belonging, a community where students can contribute and feel valued in a myriad of ways *that matter*.
- Being a music educator means going far beyond the cognitive aspects of the discipline, also integrating the affective elements of the educational highway. We teach music; *we teach life*.

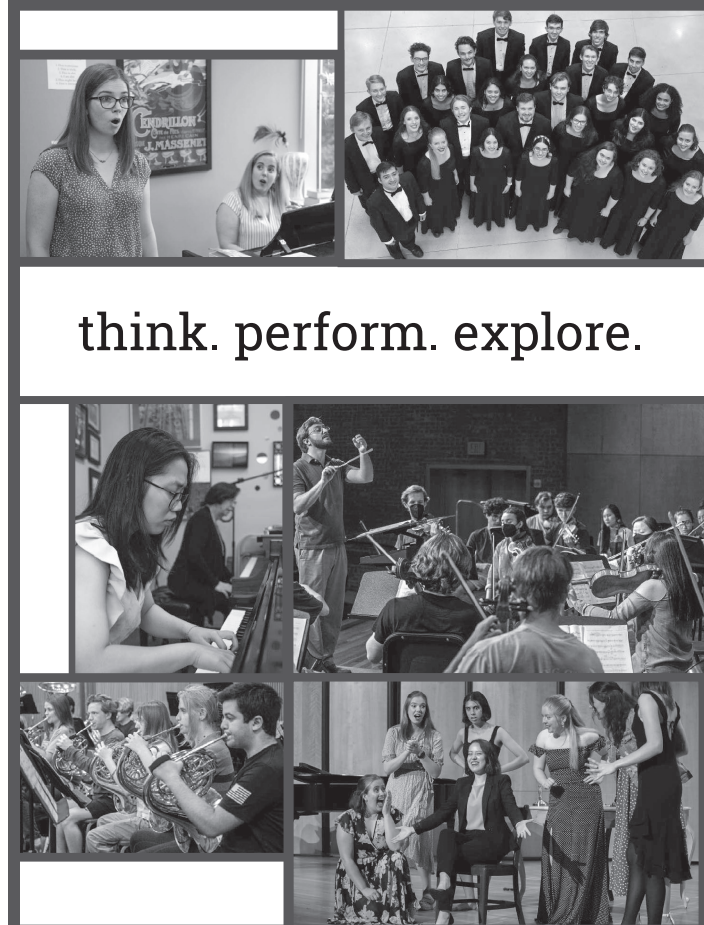
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think. perform. explore.

- Music-learning and music-making (particularly in an educational climate) require a sense of cooperation, sensitivity, self-discipline, compassion, compliance, communication, collective support, and relinquishing of one's personal agenda for the welfare of the group's advancement. It is an ongoing development of the character attributes that serves as the cornerstone of success in all aspects of our society—*positive habits* transferred to all facets of our being.

As a music educator you are often seen as the adult role model. “Ms. Music Teacher, can I talk to you about a personal problem?” That’s not an unusual request, is it? It comes with the territory. This same student is the one who returns in eight years to let you know the shared conversation was a turning point in their life. Had it not been for your caring advice, medical school would never have been an option; now this music student is a heart surgeon serving as a key member of a medical team and it’s because of you, *the music teacher*.

There is so much more to our profession than the teaching of notes, rhythms, dynamics, articulation, and a never-ending list of performance standards. The master teacher realizes it is a balance and blend of *content* and *context*.

For nearly five decades I have had the opportunity (privilege, pleasure, good fortune) to spend time with the finest music educators on the planet. Many of them reside in your great state of Texas! It is ever-apparent (perhaps more than any other organization) that music programs are a reflection of the music educators. Unlike the transfer of knowledge in other academic disciplines, such as math where 2+2 will always equal 4, working on the same piece of music never yields the same result. It can be interpreted in so many ways based on the relationship–status–connection with the teacher/conductor/maestro. This in no way diminishes the importance of every teacher/educator, but it certainly shines a light on what is brought to our students with *the art of music* and the *music of art*.

More than any other educators in the curriculum, the music teacher is the gatekeeper when it comes to the delivery and understanding of the knowledge needed to comprehend the language of music.

Do we teach techniques? *Yes*. Do we develop talents? *Yes*. But, we also open

hearts and minds, bypassing the definitive data while connecting to the depths of emotions with the musical vocabulary to express them.

We all want to make a difference. We all want our lives to matter, to have our commitment and dedication contribute to society’s forward motion. I expect anyone reading this article can point to a music educator who was pivotal in guiding you on the pathway to music education. Might I suggest *you* are postured as one who will lead others as you have been led—*the teacher who makes the difference*.

What is the common denominator of the successful music educator? What do master educators do when faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges, when the odds are stacked against them, when they are so behind it seems impossible to catch up? We all know there is no quick-fix, but there is prescription that can help us reboot our thinking, our motivation, our thoughts, and our mission—we must dust ourselves off and simply get back in the race. *We must give up giving up*.

From the 30th president of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, comes this brilliant quote:

*Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost*

*a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.*

The slogan “Press On” has solved and will continue to solve the problems we face every day. The sun *will* come up, the tides *will* rise, the stars *will* shine, the grass *will* grow, and the music *will* play on forever.

As a coda, I would be remiss not to recognize the unparalleled contribution of my loyal colleague and dearest friend, Mr. Robert Floyd. Every word in this article is a bold testimony to his unwavering commitment and dedication to music education, not only as the Executive Director of the Texas Music Educators Association, but also as an incomparable leader who has not just met the standards but also influenced the creation of the highest standards for music education everywhere. As this is the final publication of *SOUTHWESTERN MUSICIAN* during his remarkable tenure, please join me in a heartfelt acknowledgment of Mr. Floyd’s gift to all of us as we tip our hats to our grand mentor and our much-loved hero.

*Let the music begin.*



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