



umeri

DRAKE UNIVERSITY ALUMNI CHOIR

Aimee Beckmann-Collier, *conductor*

Saturday, June 3
7:30 pm

Sheslow Auditorium
Drake University

The Sacred Veil | by Eric Whitacre

with texts by

Charles Anthony and Julie Silvestri

A Note from ABC

Once I chose *The Sacred Veil* as the repertoire to conclude Umeri's fourth concert season, I immediately began to think about how we could create a "go deeper" experience for both singers and listeners. Dedication to such a process, in which performers and audience members experience the piece through contextualization of its genesis, the music itself, the text and its themes, as well as the cultural context of its creation, was a hallmark of the Drake choral program during my time at the University. I knew that this piece almost cried out for such a process, given its dark beauty and deeply human topics of love, loss, compassion, resilience, and finding meaning in the midst of suffering. As I began to plan the trajectory of this process, I was guided by three quotations:

- "Pain teaches you the limits of will." Rachel Maddow – NPR's "Fresh Air," December 15, 2022
- "Keep death daily before you." Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480-587)
- "Dying is about becoming more human." James Martin – *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (2010)

And who could guide us in our reflection on fear, suffering, courage, community, hope, joy, beauty, gratitude, compassion, spirituality, and renewal? It seemed to me that Dr. Richard Deming, founder of Above + Beyond Cancer, the medical director of MercyOne's Richard Deming Cancer Center, and a nationally-recognized proponent of integrative medicine, was the perfect person to lead us. Dr. Deming responded immediately to my inquiry about the possibility of collaborating with him and his organizations and, in December 2022, we began to create a plan for deepening the experience for all who would be touched by rehearsing, performing, and listening to this very special work.

For the singers, our "go deeper" experience has included the following components

- the opportunity to hear Dr. Deming at our first rehearsal on April 10, in which he began by focusing on his philosophy about practicing medicine, quoting Dr. William Osler, often called the "father of modern medicine." Dr. Osler said, "The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease." Dr. Deming noted that every patient has a story. That story includes "the hard science – symptoms, CAT scans, PET scans, surgical procedures, etc. But fundamentally, the story is about the whole person, not just their illness. Hearing a patient's story requires an understanding of our human connection." Dr. Deming practices what he calls "narrative medicine," in which compassionate listening to the story of a patient's illness and life can allow the reciprocity required of authentic human encounter.

- presentations by cancer patients and their families throughout the rehearsal process. Umeri has been privileged to hear from and to engage in dialogue with Evelyn McKnight of Fremont, NE, and the author of *A Never Event*, who has journeyed with cancer for over thirty years; Clark Smith, whose wife, Lauren, died of breast cancer; Diane and Chuck Cutler, whose son, Charlie, died of lymphoma at the age of 26; Jeff Nichols, whose wife, Madonna, also died of breast cancer.
- conversation with Charles Anthony (Tony) Silvestri, the librettist of *The Sacred Veil*, whose wife, Julie, died of ovarian cancer at age 35
- reading "When I Was Diagnosed with Cancer" by Chelsea Rink, one of Umeri's members, who was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in her mid-twenties.
- accessing a book list we created for this project, as well as poetry germane to topics we've explored
- participating in Dr. Deming's weekly Cancer Education series podcast, sponsored by Above + Beyond Cancer and the Richard Deming Cancer Center at MercyOne (can be accessed at [Youtube.com/Watch?v=d6l7BZV3uPE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6l7BZV3uPE))

But our desire to provide in-depth opportunities to reflect on the themes of *The Sacred Veil* is not limited to the performers or based simply on providing the audience with the chance to hear the Iowa premiere of this work, which was published in 2020. We offer the following pre-concert experiences to enhance the depth with which listeners can hear the work and reflect on it following the performance:

6:00-7:00 pm, June 3 – pre-concert talk by Dr. Richard Deming and Dr. Charles Anthony Silvestri

7:10-7:30 pm, June 3 – photos and quotations from *Above and Beyond Cancer*, published by the Drake Community Press. As Dr. Deming notes, "This book is not about the organization or about any of the climbs." (Cancer survivors, led by Dr. Deming, have journeyed to Mount Kilimanjaro, Machu Picchu and the Andes Mountains of Peru, Mount Imja Tse in Nepal, Mount Kailash in Tibet, and the Rocky Mountains of Colorado under the auspices of Above + Beyond Cancer.) "It is about the philosophical journeys that cancer survivors, caregivers, and family members experience on the path through a diagnosis...This book will take you to every dimension of what it means to be human and what it means to live in a world both fraught with suffering and lit with joy. No cancer diagnosis required."

We are grateful for your presence tonight and invite you to read the program notes and texts that follow in order to further enhance your experience with *The Sacred Veil*.

The Sacred Veil

by Eric Whitacre

with texts by
Charles Anthony Silvestri, Julia Lawrence Silvestri,
and Eric Whitacre

umeri

Drake University Alumni Choir

Aimee Beckmann-Collier, *conductor*

Susan Ihnen, *piano*

Ashley Sidon, *cello*



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Umeri dedicates the performance of Child of Wonder to Evelyn McKnight, the memory of Charlie Cutler, Madonna Nichols, Julie Silvestri, and Lauren Smith, their families, and to Dr. Richard Deming.

Presented in collaboration with Dr. Richard Deming, the Richard Deming Cancer Center at MercyOne, and Above + Beyond Cancer

An introduction to *The Sacred Veil* Charles Anthony Silvestri

What if our departed loved ones are not truly gone, but are closer than we think? How can we mourn those we have lost while still moving forward? We have all experienced the loss, in one way or another, of someone or something we have loved deeply. How do we know when it's time to move forward? *The Sacred Veil* represents a journey toward the answers to these questions. Many journeys, really. Working with Eric to create *The Sacred Veil* has become a significant part of my journey toward healing and wholeness after great loss.

My wife, Julie, died in May 2005 after a long battle with ovarian cancer, just a few days shy of her thirty-six birthday, leaving me and our two small children to navigate the world without her, our guiding star. Julie was a gentle soul, but with a tenacious and stubborn spirit, and she approached her diagnosis with grit and determination to survive. She had always wanted to be a mother, and now with the fulfillment of that dream all around her, she faced the anguish of leaving her babies, and resolved to beat this disease.

But in spite of all her efforts and prayers, cancer touched our family like it does so many, and took her away. Understandably, I was angry for a long time—at myself, for not doing more to save her; at Julie for leaving me to raise our kids without her; at God, for His cruel silence in the face of all our prayers. I grieved, and mourned her loss, to be sure. But I had children to raise, and a demanding job. I couldn't touch the deepest places of my grief. At least not yet. And I certainly could not write poetry about it.

After a long while, ten years or so, I was finally in a place where I could process what I had experienced, what Julie's death had meant to me, and what I had learned after all this time. My friends had encouraged me to write poetry about it, poetry that was authentic, that came from a deep, personal place. And so, with their support I began to experiment with writing about my grief, gingerly touching that place in my heart, still tender after all this time, and exploring the deeper caverns of my emotions.

One of the earliest poems I wrote was a reflection about birth, death, and eternity, which was the product of all the reflection, all the processing, all the spiritual struggle to find my way back to a solid place to stand in a universe with God in it. I began to understand things differently, contemplating what Julie might be experiencing now, having crossed the veil into eternity. It was comforting to realize that, from her perspective, where time and space have no meaning, she and I and our children are already together, and have always been. That veil

between here and there is always very close, and we are not as separated as I had felt. Our loved ones who have died stand so close to us.

I brought this poem with me to Los Angeles to share at a family funeral, and I stayed in the home of my friend Eric Whitacre. I don't know what possessed me to leave a copy of the poem on Eric's piano as I left for the cemetery, but I did so. Perhaps I just wanted to share with my friend the little bit of catharsis I had found in it; perhaps I secretly wanted him to consider setting it. Eric quickly found the music beneath the words, and the journey toward this work began.

Throughout the entire process, Eric was more than a creative collaborator. He was my friend, my brother, my confidant, my confessor, my advocate, my voice when I could not speak. I don't think I could have explored those deepest places in my soul without his guidance and gentle encouragement. The music he created cradles and embraces the text in the most loving and respectful way.

The process took several years and demanded that I read for the first time since her death Julie's journals, her email blog, her medical records, and other writing. I discovered (or rediscovered) what a deep and thoughtful writer she was, how much she cared for me and the kids, and how frightened her illness made her, in spite of her powerful faith. Reading these relics of her inner life was the most challenging part of the process for me, reopening all the old wounds and encouraging a new, deeper catharsis. I am very proud that her voice is included in this work.

Encountering her voice again also reminded me what a deep honor it is to have loved, to have become so intimate with someone that theirs is the hand you hold when you experience the most intense and sacred moments of your life: birth and death, those moments when the two sides of eternity mingle. Those moments are all here in this work: love, life, loss, anguish, and, eventually, acceptance, peace, and welcoming home.

The Sacred Veil represents the deepest, most personal of all the lyric poetry I have written, and the most intense of all the creative journeys I have attempted. We all have pain. We all have experienced loss. We all long for catharsis and closure, even as we grieve. What I have found is that, through hard work and time, the old wounds do close; but they leave scars behind. Those scars are powerful talismans, evidence that we loved—and still love—those we have lost. Oh, but they are not lost; their journey continues. The Veil is thin. They stand so close, just there, just on the other side Of Eternity.

About the music – written by Eric Whitacre



The Veil Opens

Whenever there is birth or death
The sacred veil between the worlds
Grows thin and opens slightly up,
Just long enough for Love to slip,
Silent, either in or out
Of this our fragile, fleeting world,
Whence or whither a new home waits.
And our beloved ones draw near,
In rapt anticipation or
In weary gratitude, they stand;
Our loved ones stand so close, right here,
Just on the other side
Of Eternity.

..... Charles Anthony Silvestri

These are the very first words Tony showed me. He had been staying with me in Los Angeles for a few days, visiting, and had left early in the morning for his aunt's funeral. He left this poem sitting on my piano, so first thing upon waking, I saw it. I sat down at the piano and immediately began composing. If I recall correctly, I had set about half of this by the time he returned that afternoon.

I remember reading the poem for the first time and repeating the first phrase over and over, savoring it. After a moment I was already seeing the grand structures built deep into Tony's poetry.

Try saying these three identical lines out loud, one after the other:

Whenever there is birth or death,
Whenever there is birth or death,
Whenever there is birth or death.

I think when you say the line the first time, there is a sense of anticipation created in the word-machine of the mind. What is the next line? How will this idea unfold?

If the line is repeated again, the mind instantly recognizes it as a pattern. So the sense of anticipation shifts and now there is a more alert, more curious part of the mind that looks for the pattern to be confirmed.

When spoken a third time, the pattern is confirmed, and I think we then feel a sense of completion of the idea—there is no reason to go on, because the pattern, and, thus the idea, is complete.

I knew then that this was my 'golden brick' – my essential idea that would hold the entire piece together. So I began to build. I knew that I would repeat texts and phrases three times every time I wanted to meditate on an idea, to 'formalize' the poetry, and to create a sense of stasis in the music.

I decided early on that the 'veil' would be represented by a middle C (the third letter of the alphabet) and that moments or even entire movements would 'cross' the veil, often up or down the interval of a third. And I knew that Julie's theme would be based on three notes starting on middle C, up a third to E flat, then back down again to C.

Thus, the very first sound we hear is the solo piano playing Julie's theme, middle C (the 'veil'), up a minor third, and a minor third down. We hear that little motive three times in a row; after that the cello gently enters on a middle C, marking the formal introduction of the 'veil.' The cello 'leaves' the 'veil' three times, each time a higher note (further from the 'veil'), but each time being pulled back into it.

Then the choir enters with "Whenever there is birth or death," repeated three times. The final repetition is voiced slightly differently at the end, designed both to complete and to create anticipation for the next line. This pattern continues throughout the movement, always pulling the musical material back to the 'veil' note of middle C.

2

In a Dark and Distant Year

In a dark and distant year,
A wand'rer ancient and austere,
He surrounds himself with books he's never read.
He was a child then, the world inside his head.

He would often wonder, "Who
Could love a dreamer such as you?"
And so he trusted no one's shadow but his own.
He was a fool then, and he was all alone.

Then quite to his surprise,
Passing there before his eyes,
A girl unlikely, gently laughing by the shore.
She had unlocked his heart and let his spirit soar!

And on that golden, hopeful day
The boy was bold enough to say,
"Come, hold my deepest secrets here among the foam;
You are the world to me, and you...you feel like home."

..... Charles Anthony Silvestri

In the year Julie died Tony celebrated his fortieth birthday. I wrote him a poem for the occasion and read it to him over dinner. Amazingly, neither of us can find the poem but I was able to remember the first stanza:

In a dark and distant year,
When I was young and full of fear,
I was called to fight a war that was not mine;
I was a child then,
And I was thirty-nine.

As we began to build *The Sacred Veil*, movement by movement, I realized that we needed to hear Tony's story as well. And I knew that Tony, one of the most modest and humble men I know, would have a hard time writing about himself. So I gave him the task of writing a new poem with the exact structure of my original stanza and asked him to write about himself in the third person, as if he were an ancient troubadour telling a love story to a king and his court. Tony came back to me with this beautiful poem, just perfect.

As I began to set the poem to music, his word 'wand'rer,' immediately resonated with me, so I constructed the music so that it 'wanders' from key to key to key. The tenors and basses begin in unison and then blossom open to four parts, painting the idea of the wand'rer adventuring and growing. It finally ends with the sopranos and altos (Julie) descending and the men ascending (Tony), merging on a middle C (back to our 'veil' note) on the word 'home.'

3

Home

You feel like home.

..... Charles Anthony Silvestri

This was the third movement we wrote. I asked Tony, very simply, to write about the moment he first knew he was in love. He sent me several pages of poetry, beautiful, delicate memories; but as with everything in this piece, I wanted it to be as simple and compact as possible, hoping to illuminate all that emotional information with minimal, elegant gestures, both music and words.

We had a long phone conversation, and as we spoke, I asked him to tell me about the day itself. Tony told me that it was their second date and they were having a daytime picnic, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He said he remembered looking at her while she was talking and that a single thought filled his mind as he watched her speaking: "You feel like home." When he told me that, I said, "That's it," knowing that was all the poetry we needed for this movement.

The movement also quotes a piece I had written just a few years earlier, a setting of e.e. cummings's *i carry your heart*. I liked the idea of taking a musical motive from my idea of aspirational love (*i carry your heart*) and placing it in the context of real love (Tony and Julie's).

4

Magnetic Poetry

The enormous need
Egg-ache whispers urging
Moon wind chanting like sweet languid honey
Sleep-swimming through sweaty summer
Dream mists

The delirious girl
Woman goddess
Not yet a mother
But the spring life force is so near
What a bare symphony here

I recall our gorgeous moments together
Beneath my heaving peach skin
Essential you
Like some diamond gift incubating
In love

..... Julia Lawrence Silvestri

As Tony and I got further into the creation of the piece we began to talk about how nice it would be to include Julie's voice in it. Julie was a terrific writer—smart, sharp—and she had left behind dozens of pages in the form of diary entries, journals, and blog posts.

As Tony was sorting through a box of her pages, he found this 'poem,' one that Julie had made from those poetry magnets you buy and then stick on the refrigerator. At the time they were really trying to have their first child, and it wasn't going as easily as they had hoped. Julie had written the poem on the refrigerator and then later wrote it down in one of her journals.

When Tony sent it to me, I was thunderstruck by the poem...The imagery is so specific, from the "egg-ache" that Julie must have been feeling, to her own worries that she wasn't conceiving--"what a bare symphony here," and her dream of finally getting pregnant "Like some diamond gift incubating." More than that, I felt like I could hear Julie in those few words, her true character leaping off the page. "The delirious girl, woman goddess" is so Julie, at least the Julie I knew well.

The musical construction is fairly simple—literally two chords slowly alternating back and forth. The first chord is a variation on the fate theme from the first movement. The second chord is the one we hear much later on in movement eleven on the words "you rise." The cello plays a version of the notes from movement three, 'Home,' symbolizing their future child, dreamed about and made in a union of pure love.

5

Whenever There is Birth

This movement was meant to convey the tender wonder of childbirth. The cello plays the theme to the musical setting of the first words "whenever there is birth or death." Now we hear the progression of those bending chords that will later be heard in "laughter" in movement eight, "Delicious Times," and, finally, the last breaths in movement eleven, "You Rise, I Fall."

In the middle section the cello quotes another piece I wrote, *When David Heard*, playing the theme "O my son, O Absalom, my son." It is quoted not as a sorrowful moment, as it is in *When David Heard*, but rather the sound of deepest love of parent to child.



I'm Afraid

I'm afraid we found something...
[Fifteen centimeter retroperitoneal cystic mass with complex internal septation...
The patient is a twenty-eight-year-old white female, primagravida, in the third trimester of pregnancy.]

I'm afraid we found something...
[Pathology confirms grades I, II, and III mucinous cystic adenocarcinoma with focal carcinosarcoma consistent with ovarian primary.
Recommend six cycles Taxol and Carboplatin...]

I'm afraid we've found something...
[...two left adnexal cysts and a septated right adnexal cyst...]

I'm afraid we've found something...
[exploratory laparotomy and excision of bilateral ovarian dermoids...]

I'm afraid we've found something...
[...uterus, tubes, sacral pain... ovaries... recurrent, recurrent, recurrent...]

[Exploratory laparotomy,
Total abdominal hysterectomy,
Bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy,
Paraaortic lymphadenectomy
Bone scans in sacrum, left ilium, right acetabulum
metastasis...metastasis...metastasis]

I'm afraid we found something...
I'm afraid.

..... **Charles Anthony Silvestri**

I remember talking to Tony about that moment when the doctor walks in and says, "I'm afraid we found something." Tony told me there is your entire life before that moment, and your entire life afterwards. The moment of learning you have cancer becomes a central dividing pillar in all of your memories.

Over the years I have heard people talk about their cancer journey and they often said that once they received the diagnosis of cancer, it was 'always with them.' Every moment of the day, whether happy, sad, banal, sleepy, just waking up—the awareness of your cancer is always there, buzzing just below the surface of every conscious thought.

I imagined that, from the moment you learned of the cancer, an internal clock would begin to tick, a race against time, a countdown of remaining minutes, an ever-present wheel of anxiety turning and turning and turning. To musically represent this, I simply took Julie's three note theme (the C up to the Eb and back down to the C) and repeated it over and over, a sort of humming motor of anxiety.

Each time we hear the words "I'm afraid we found something," the women's choir is divided into three notes, with the first three syllables ("I'm afraid") sung as a triplet.

The introduction of the cancer theme is portrayed by the mutation of the third: a minor third against a major third...

I have been told that every patient eventually becomes an expert in their own cancer treatment. But I imagine that when you are first told in stark medical terms what you have, and what the treatment will be, the words come at you like a wall of sound, unintelligible and dreadful. And I imagined that sitting in that small room, hearing the diagnosis, the only word that every single person would recognize would be "metastasis," and the force of that would shatter around you like shards of broken glass.

Imagining all of this, I constructed the entire movement so that, as the diagnosis unfolds, there is a slowly dawning realization, the sheer horror of the information becoming more and more clear. As the movement finally ends, I shortened the phrase "I'm afraid we found something" to reveal the simple truth of the moment: "I'm afraid."



I am Here

This movement was meant to be the sound of the moments after Julie was diagnosed. As the three-note chord of "I'm afraid" hangs over into this new movement, the piano enters on an E major chord (E major because of the mutated third of the cancer theme, a third above the veil.)

Then the cello plays the "Whenever there is birth or death" theme three times, the third time rising to a cry of anger and despair. Then we hear Julie's theme three times, slowly picking up the pieces of her life and finding her feet.



Delicious Times

My hair started to fall out at precisely 1:00 on my birthday.

By Thursday it was making a terrible mess, so the kids helped me shave off whatever was left. They'd pick up my hair from the ground and slap it on my head and say, "You need more hair!" and they would laugh and laugh. Then at bath time I wore my wig, and they would beg me to take it off and put it back on again – they howled with laughter.

At bedtime, when my little one plays with my hair, she just stroked my head and said, "It's so soft and clean!" She says, "Mommy, your hair went bye-bye but it'll be back soon!" I was most worried about her because she loves my hair so much, but she is just fine!

Today I visited my oldest at school and he shouted, "Hey, everybody! My mom has a wig!" He was the star of the class as all the kindergarten stared, open-mouthed, in wonderment. It's been a very funny week. The kids have been amazing, and we've had some really delicious times together.

..... **Julia Lawrence Silvestri**

In the last year of her life, Julie wrote updates to a growing number of followers. By the time she died she had several thousand people on her email list and reading her blog.

On the surface you can hear Julie being light as a feather, trying to dance through the madness of her condition and making it fun and memorable for her kids. Anyone who has children of their own can imagine what it would be like trying to navigate these moments with them—the feat, the uncertainty, for yourself, for them, for your family.

In the middle of the moment, the cello again quotes *When David Heard*, only this time I add Julie's three-note theme to the end of it. It is meant to musically symbolize the love a parent has for their child, the deepest possible love. As a parent myself, I believe there really ought to be another word than 'love' for the way we feel about children. 'Love' really isn't enough.



One Last Breath

In a dark and distant year
The wand'rer weary, full of fear,
Confronts a fated force more powerful than life –
A carriage made of sea
Has come to take his wife.

The waves too dark and deep to swim,
He hears his love cry out to him,
Her piercing anguish rising high above the foam.
"Please don't let go of me
For you, you are my home!"

From the shore he sees his bride
As she fights hard against the tide.
He swears a sacred vow that every loved one keeps.
He steels himself,
Takes one last breath, and leaps.

..... **Eric Whitacre**

I really struggled with whether or not to insert my own poetry—my ‘voice’—into the narrative of the piece. Ultimately, I decided to do it, because having known Tony for nearly thirty years I knew that he would never be able to write himself as a hero. And I very much see him as a hero.

In my poetry I quoted Tony’s poetry twice, both times from pieces he and I have written together. “Dark and deep” comes from *Sleep*, which we wrote in 2000; and “He steels himself, takes one last breath, and leaps” from *Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine*, which we wrote in 2001.

10 Dear Friends

Dear friends,

Tonight I feel that I must ask you to pray.

I just got out of the hospital tonight and I received some bad news. The scan showed that I had numerous liver and peritoneal metastases. My doctor said this meant I most likely had about two months to live.

I am now asking you to pray as you have never prayed before. Please don’t pray that I will have a peaceful death. Please don’t feel pity for me. Just pray hard. Pray that I will be healed in a miraculous, supernatural way. Pray that God will give me wisdom as to what to do next. Fight with me, don’t give up on me.

..... Julia Lawrence Silvestri

This was far and away the most difficult text for me to set. I knew Julie well, knew her spirit. She was always the last person to put someone out, the last to ask for help. Reading these words, hearing her pleading to her friends to do something, anything—I could hear in her words the moment she was staring into the abyss, resolute, desperate. Several times as I was working through the movement I would suddenly start sobbing.

The movement begins musically by bringing back the ‘ticking clock’ motive from movement six, “I’m afraid,” the minor thirds repeating over and over. Then, beginning with “I just got out of the hospital tonight” the three sentences (always threes) echo the ‘fate theme’ introduced by the cello at the very beginning of the piece. Each sentence is a tone higher, reaching, aspirational, only to get pulled back down into the reality of the veil.

Then, at the lyric “I am now asking you to pray as you have never prayed before,” the music turns major. The sopranos and altos rise above the veil, three times striving, splitting into threes at the end of each phrase. The cello, on the other hand, starts well below the veil on a major third (the mutated cancer note from movement six) and slowly rises up through the veil, finally catching the sopranos and altos and smearing them as they rise.

The movement is really the culmination of several themes: the fate theme; the rising cello theme from movement one’s “in rapt anticipation or in weary gratitude they stand,” signaling her standing on the very edge of the abyss; and finally, her last cry as the sopranos sing “don’t give up on me,” with the word “me” on Julie’s minor third motive.

11 You Rise, I Fall

Listening to your labored breath,
Your struggle ends as mine begins.
You rise; I fall.

Fading, yet already gone;
What calls you I cannot provide.
You rise; I fall.

Broken, with a heavy hand
I reach to you, and close your eyes.
You rise; I fall.

..... Charles Anthony Silvestri

This was actually the second movement Tony and I wrote together, just after I had set “Whenever There is Birth.” Before I had a note of music written, I jotted down the words “You rise, I fall,” thinking that it perfectly encapsulated the culmination of Tony and Julie’s journey together—just as Julie was finally released from all the suffering, Tony began his spiral downward.

Taking the melody from the first movement’s line “Silent, either in or out of this our fragile, fleeting world,” I recorded it and sent it to Tony, asking him to write three stanzas (always three) about the final moments of Julie’s life. What he sent back was so direct, so honest, I remember tearing up as I read his words.

Musically, we now hear the ‘full bloom’ of the breathing motive, first introduced in movement number five.

For the “you rise” section, I wanted to find music that felt healing, like a soft embrace. The first two iterations of that motive are just like that; but at the third iteration, the world turns dark as we move to Tony’s journey of grief and horror. For the falling motive, I imagined the chords slowly melting and collapsing.

12 Child of Wonder

Child of wonder
Child of sky
Time to end your voyage
Time to die.

Silent slumber calls you
Dark and deep
Child of soft surrender
Child of sleep.

Child of sorrow
Child of rain
There is no tomorrow
No more pain.

Turn your silvered sail
Toward the light
Child of mourning
Child of night.

Child of iridescence
Child of dream
Stars and moons will guide you
Down the stream.

Stretched on ocean waves
Of endless foam
Welcome home my child
Welcome home.

..... Eric Whitacre

I decided to write the poetry for “Child of Wonder” myself, with the hope that it would serve as a kind of benediction, not only for Julie, but for my best friend, Tony. Again, I quoted Tony’s poetry from *Sleep* twice: “Dark and deep,” and “surrender/sleep.” And I quoted another poet, Octavio Paz, who wrote the poetry to Tony’s favorite piece of mine, *A Boy and a Girl*: “Stretched...exchanging foam.”

The piece ends as it began, three wordless iterations of the musical material for “Whenever there is birth or death.” In the final moments, the men drop out, and the women join the cello in unison on a middle C, our veil note.

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DRAKE UNIVERSITY ALUMNI CHOIR

SOPRANO

Kelly Friesleben
Anna Gebhardt
Katie Highsmith
Katelyn Mardis
Emily Roeder
Elizabeth Watson

TENOR

Peyton Braun
Trevor Bridge
Tom Florian
Seth Hammond
Hunter Johnson
Justin Scheel
Tanner Smith

ALTO

Mary Craven Bartemes
Samantha Clement
Megan Houge
Kayleigh Koester
Emma Ksiazak
Maggie Parker
Chelsea Rink

BASS

Benjamin Brodkey
Patrick Carroll
Jacob Fross
Rob Graziano
Ian Ksiazak
Avery Luepker
Nate Mohrhauser
Thomas Riordan
Kyle Roeder

About the Choir

Founded in November 2019, Umeri is an ensemble of alumni of the Drake Choir, Drake University. Seventy-five alumni of the choir live in the Des Moines metro area and, since its inception, fifty-five of them have participated in Umeri. Alumni who have sung in the choir graduated from Drake in the years 1992 through 2022 and represent all Colleges of the University and a plethora of academic disciplines. As alumni, the singers are contributing to the Greater Des Moines community in many professional areas, including education, health care, public relations, finance, marketing, accounting, sports administration, and the arts.

Umeri, a project-based ensemble, takes its name from the Latin word for “shoulders” because Drake Choir members were frequently reminded that they stood on the shoulders of those who came before them. The choir rehearses 6-8 times preceding a concert, thus requiring a high level of musical independence and advance preparation on the part of each member. Umeri presents three concerts per year.

For further information, contact Dr. Aimee Beckmann-Collier (aimee.beckmann-collier@drake.edu)

Umeri's website is: umeri.wp.drake.edu

Choir Reflections

Umeri members were invited to reflect on the presentations offered by Dr. Deming, Evelyn McKnight (cancer survivor), Clark Smith, Diane Cutler, and Jeff Nichols (family members of loved ones who have died of cancer). Here's a sample of their thoughts.

Chelsea Rink, Umeri alto and cancer survivor

It often doesn't feel like there is time in this world for pain, suffering, or death. It's more pleasant to spend time anticipating and reflecting on the joys of life - accomplishment, marriage, career, etc. Context matters, of course, but when I think about my own culture, and the rooms I tend to find myself in, there are not many who've been forced to navigate the degree of pain that some of our speakers have had to endure. When there isn't time or space for pain or suffering or grief, it can make navigating those feelings a very lonely journey. This has been reinforced for me through our speaker series. One clear takeaway for me has been the importance of a supportive community. It is obvious that Dr. Deming has built a community where people feel safe navigating their challenges together, allowing cancer patients and their loved ones to move through their cancer journeys in more meaningful and purposeful ways.

When I had the initial conversation with the doctor who found my cancer, I was alone. I cried alone. I hadn't ever heard of thyroid cancer before, so I didn't know about its favorable prognosis; I didn't know I wouldn't need radiation; I didn't know I would probably be okay. What I did know was that cancer was bad, and that I could die. After feeling very sad about dying, I remember having a talk with myself: I would be the best cancer patient. I would be graceful; I would smile a lot; Everyone would say how brave and strong I was. Looking back, it makes me sad that I was so quick to dismiss myself and my feelings in order to consider how I would be perceived by others as I navigated my own cancer diagnosis. This makes me think about Julie's journey. Julie's approach was obviously quite different - she fought to the end, maybe even when that stance wasn't comfortable for others...There is obviously no “right” way to navigate cancer. I do wonder if part of the value of a community - like the one Dr. Deming put together - is a space to be able to talk with others about their journeys, to feel less alone, to try to heal together.

Katelyn Mardis, Umeri soprano

For a couple of reasons, I have found myself thinking back to the night Evelyn spoke with us. First, I had never heard of the idea of bringing an advocate to your doctor appointments, especially when you are hearing significant news such as a cancer diagnosis, until Evelyn spoke on that concept. I think it struck me because she used the word “advocate” rather than talking about the other person in the room as simply another person. I can't imagine how much energy is zapped from cancer patients in a variety of ways, and it seems like having an advocate would not only conserve someone's energy by not having to think about/remember everything the doctors tell you, but it would also conserve your energy to focus on fighting the disease rather than fighting for your rights and your life simultaneously.

The other thing that stuck out to me (also from Evelyn) was when she talked about how her sons, all of whom are physicians, don't like to talk about her cancer on an emotional level. It made me think about my own life and how hard it would be to watch someone I love get sick like that. I want to be intentional about how I treat those who are suffering and give them space to talk about how they feel, no matter how hard it is for me.

Another thing I've learned is to acknowledge the suffering around us. Sometimes when people around me are struggling, they want me to distract them from what is going on. But after hearing Evelyn talk about how hurtful it is when others don't acknowledge what's happening in her life (such as when friends wouldn't ask her how she was doing after her arm was amputated), I have started reframing how I approach caring for the suffering of others. Ignoring it won't make it go away, but in order to create a safe space for others, I need to be a space that allows them to feel rather than constantly having to ignore it.

Kayleigh Koester, Umeri *alto*

The texts of this piece and the comments from Dick, Evelyn, Clark, Diane, and Jeff have been a profound gift. They have spurred a great deal of reflection about my own path and how I can be in better relationship with others.

The writings of Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön have become quite dear to me. In particular, her book *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* is a book I turn to over and over again. I've been making a lot of connections with the quote below:

"We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy."

This theme of making space for many truths and experiences is something I have experienced and a theme I heard in the comments of our speakers. Amidst a journey with cancer there is horror and pain, but also time with grandchildren, weeks on the RAG-BRAI trail, and literal mountain top moments with new community.

I especially appreciated Dr. Nichols' vulnerability. I too struggle with the idea that "all things are unfolding as they were meant to." Really? Things like this are meant to happen? Some people are just meant to get tragically sick and die leaving behind all their loved ones? I find that idea offensive (and theologically reductive).

Instead, I find a lot of truth in Pema's words- we must make space for it all. I heard once somewhere that you can't draw a picture without shadows. Well, you also can't draw a picture without light. Holding space for the entirety of the human experience is what it means to live well when things are falling apart (and probably all of the time).

I think that *The Sacred Veil* does this well by allowing us to meet and get to know Julie and Tony before her diagnosis. There's also a reminder that a cancer diagnosis isn't the only time that "things fall apart." There's "egg-ache" when she's healthy and in the midst of treatment, there are "delicious times." Before and during cancer, there is the every day, every season reality that "things come together and fall apart" with room for all the experiences that are a part of that. In some ways, perhaps even the existence of the piece is an act of making room for Tony and Eric.



Support

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