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The Flute Challenge. A True Story by Rev. Karen Fitz La Barge All Rights Reserved.

When I was in 5th grade, our small school decided to start an orchestra and they gave us the opportunity to learn an instrument. I had decided that I wanted to play the flute, and with my parents making installment payments on the instrument, I still remember the day that I got it. We were all sitting in folding chairs in the portable classroom. Our director, Mr. Marceau opened up the long black flute case, and there it was, still wrapped in plastic from the factory, sitting in its pockets of beautiful blue velvet. Mr. Marceau showed me how to put it together, and how to take it apart and clean it. He showed me how to blow into the mouthpiece; and he gave me a chart which showed me how to hold my fingers, and which buttons to press for which notes.

But after that brief introduction, I was pretty much on my own. Mr. Marceau was a violinist. He didn't know how to play the flute, and neither did I. I just was supposed to figure it out on my own. Our little school orchestra began with some simple music, and we were told to practice it every day. And so I began. I practiced; I tried out all of the buttons on my flute. I even tried the buttons in combinations that were not on my little fingering chart. And I learned how to play the flute. – Not so well, but just adequately. But then there came Athena Crawford.

Athena was a musical genius. She was younger than I was, and she sang soprano in the choir with this incredible voice with a super range. Her parents gave her voice lessons, piano lessons, harp lessons and wouldn't you know it... flute lessons. She was really good at anything having to do with music. And she was, by far, much better than I was on the flute. So she always got to play the prettier and more complicated first flute part. And when Mr. Marceau was passing out the music, I always got to play the extremely boring and easier second flute part.

But of course, this was America. And I had a dream. I had a dream that one day, I was going to challenge Athena to play first flute on a song. And that dream was that I would do better than she would and that for at least one song, for that full **five minutes**, I would be better than Athena Crawford on the flute. And so that is what I decided I was going to do. --And because I have this tendency to always go after the biggest goals, I picked the hardest song that our little orchestra was doing. --I was determined that I was going to beat Athena Crawford in playing the flute part in our simple orchestra rendition of Handel's Hallelujah chorus. I didn't pray about it. I didn't ask for anyone's help or a suggestion on how to do it. I didn't even tell our director Mr. Marceau that I was going to attempt it. I was going to do it, all on my own. And so I started practicing, every day, after school at home in my bedroom. With stubborn unrelenting determination, I played the Hallelujah chorus over and over and over and over again –for hours. My parents soon were completely sick of hearing it, and they looked forward to the Tuesday when I would have orchestra and would get the challenge over with.

--Finally the day and the time came, at the end of our orchestra rehearsal, I challenged Athena for the first flute part on Handels' Messiah. Mr. Marceau had me play the piece of music first. I gave it all that I had. I played that piece with all of my heart, and I didn't miss a single note, and I only squeaked once. Mr. Marceau was very impressed. I could tell, because his eyebrows went up. Then it was Athena's turn. She looked at me, smiled, took a deep breath and then played the first flute part of the Hallelujah Chorus beautifully. She didn't squeak at all. Her tone was beautiful. She even played the notes with vibrato, which I didn't know how to do. When she was

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done, I didn't need Mr. Marceau to tell me that she was better, because even I could hear that she was. --But I still hoped that he would reward all of my hard effort, my doing the very best that I could. I hoped that my flute playing was good enough for him to switch our parts, just this once. Even just for one performance, or even one practice. But he didn't do that. He was kind though, and he said. "Karen, you did very well. That was the best that I have ever heard you play. But Athena did even better, and so she will play first flute part on the Hallelujah chorus." I packed up my flute quickly and left the portable classroom holding back tears. When I was alone, I cried. I was devastated. And I was rather shocked that giving it all on my own didn't work.

I had truly believed that if I gave something my best, that if I gave it my all, that if I really practiced and really tried my hardest that there would be no way that I could fail. --It was all about me, that my best would somehow be a magic guarantee against failure. But that wasn't true. It was a lie that I had been told, and it was a lie that I told myself. Because just like the American dream, sometimes it is impossible to attain your goal. You can do everything right, you can honestly give it your best, and you can practice and be absolutely wonderful and amazing; but someone else can still be better.

--Perhaps the reason for this is because of the scarcity of things on earth, the fact that there can only be one first prize, one winner of the championship, whether that is the superbowl or the first lego robotics challenge. Perhaps it is because of the diversity and the scope of natural raw talent, and the fact that some people are just more athletic or more creative or that they have better engineering intuitions. Or even that they were taught how to practice better or more productively. On earth, the playing field is never even and level. There will always be the disappointment of someone not attaining their dream. There will always be a loser in the superbowl. But the good news for us here today, is that the things that we strive for so hard on earth are not the only game in town, and in fact, it isn't even the most important game. Attaining our particular American dream is only something that matters for our brief time that we are here on earth; but the bigger and more important game is the one that is eternal.

Unlike the American dream in which people can do their best and fail, the dream that cannot die is the reality of your relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is the dream where there really is a level playing field. Where giving something your all really does matter. The dream where the amount of dedication that we give to a task, counts for everything, and all of the innate skills and talents that we were born with become almost incidental. Because in your relationship with God, what really counts, what really gets weighed is the condition of our hearts rather than our job performance.

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