

I'm Black. Is that a problem?

The regular pianist would not be available to play for my father-in-law's Memorial Service so there was a scramble to secure a musician. Several phone calls by a few family friends had more immediate results than a prayer chain. Somebody knew someone who knew someone who knew a pianist who just might be available. Next thing you know, I'm overhearing a phone conversation between Mary Helen and Valerie. On Sundays, Valerie is involved in the music program at a Methodist church, and yes, she was available at 11:00 am Monday for Dr. Henry Richbourg's send off at St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Ray City, Georgia. Mary Helen asked Valerie to play Amazing Grace which was one of her Dad's favorites.

Henry was a long-time member of Jackson Moore's Sunday School class at Nashville First Baptist Church. His wife Ann was a life-long Catholic. When the young couple moved to Nashville, Georgia in 1967, Catholics were few and far between. Ann Richborough was undaunted. She arranged for a priest to say Mass regularly the lobby of Henry's family practice office. Those few Catholics in Nashville met there on Sunday mornings. Mary Helen was raised Catholic and to this day is faithful to the Church. The number of Roman Catholics increased in Berrien County such that in 2016 over 500 people attended the dedication Mass for the new church building in Ray City. The parish community of St. Anthony of Padua finally had a permanent home. Ann and Henry Richbourg had provided generous support, financial and otherwise for decades.

Ann died three years ago. Deacon Steven had officiated her Funeral Mass at St Anthony's. Those two knew each other well. Deacon Steven had made that Mass quite special. Henry had requested that Deacon Steven preside over his Memorial Service, which would not be a "full Mass" so that the many non-Catholics in attendance would be spared the awkwardness of those uniquely Catholic prayers, gestures, and responses.

Beyond that special request for Amazing Grace, a hymn shared by Catholics, Baptists, and Methodists, Mary Helen told Valerie she could play whatever she felt

was appropriate. I overheard Valerie proudly state that she had been a singer for the Oral Roberts University Choir. During her time there she traveled to NBC studio in Hollywood California on a monthly basis where the group made recordings for the weekly TV ministry shows. She had extensive voice training. The prior week she had a solo vocal performance that lasted for three hours straight, but now at age 72, her voice was not what it once was. Normally for a Memorial Service, she would play *and* sing, but her voice was still recovering so for this occasion she'd just play the piano.

I wasn't listening carefully when they talked about whether Valerie preferred a check or cash or Venmo, but they worked that out.

The part I did hear was when Valerie said, "I'm black. Is that a problem?"

Neither Mary Helen nor I anticipated that question. Mary Helen recovered more quickly than I did. She assured Valerie that being black was absolutely *not* a problem. In fact, St Anthony's is mixed race parish where Latinos probably outnumber Whites. According to the Parish Website, "...we are a multicultural faith community that includes African American, a large and growing population of Latino, as well as white and several Asian American families; this multicultural community of faith makes us so special and rich, because it gives us unity and diversity and with it, we can say to south Georgia and the world, that understanding, tolerance, sacrifice, love, hope and faith bring people together."

After the call ended, Mary Helen and I looked at each other in astonishment. It is 2025. Was it necessary to bring up the issue of race? What had prompted Valerie to ask? I was eager to find out.

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Valerie arrived an hour early on Monday. I met her in the church parking lot. She emerged from her Toyota Corolla wearing a stylish black and green pleated dress. Her straight gray hair was combed emphatically back. Her glasses were fashionably oversized. Her lipstick was carefully applied.

"Valerie?" I called out as I approached her on the sidewalk.

“Yes,” she replied with a big smile.

I forget the little chit chat that followed but I couldn’t hold back my question any longer.

“Why did you ask if being Black would be a problem?”

“I don’t like to surprise people. I want them to know what they’re getting in advance. Better to face it up front.”

“But this is 2025. You shouldn’t have to ask. That bothers me. I thought we were past the time when it could be a problem.”

“Well, I’m here and I’m ready to play,” she asserted with enthusiasm. I sensed that she didn’t want to delve into that sensitive topic just then.

“I’m ready to hear you play! Let’s go take a look at the piano and get you settled,” I suggested.

In the lobby, I introduced Valerie to Mary Helen who was surrounded by a crowd. I then passed Valerie off to Deacon Steven who showed her into the sanctuary and led her to the grand piano. She removed a stack of sheet music from her bag and got organized.

I had other chores to attend in my role as the Richbourg Family Sherpa so I left Valerie for the time being.

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From my seat in the first pew, I had a good view of Valerie at the keyboard. Her head tilted back as she played, probably because she had to use the bifocal part of her glasses to read the music. She moved her head and shoulders slightly side to side, swaying in time. For some chords, she lifted her hands dramatically in balletic arches. The music she had selected was challenging. There were times when the next complex chord arrived a little later than I anticipated, but that was because Valerie wanted to get it right rather than play it faster.

There came a time in the service after Deacon Steven had finished his homily (Protestants would call it a sermon) and had taken his seat beside the altar. He

invited the congregation to reflect privately about the life of Dr. Henry Richbourg and the memories they had of him. There would be a time soon for people to come to the lectern and share their stories. Valerie launched into a soft melody that embellished this interval. I was really savoring this interlude and her playing when one of Henry's dearest friends went to the lectern and started her remembrance of Henry before Valerie had finished playing that lovely piece. It seemed to me that talking over Valerie's music was disrespectful. Valerie continued to play until the sheet music ended. I wondered what Valerie thought. Was she offended? She was the only Black person in attendance.

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Lunch was provided in the Parish Gathering Space after the Memorial Service. Valerie was the only Black person there. I called her over to a vacant seat at my table. The six of us generated a lively conversation. Valerie joined right in. We learned that Valerie grew up on a hundred-acre farm in a tiny Georgia crossroads near Valdosta a few miles from Ray City. Her first love was always music, but she feared that she would not be happy on the income of an artist, so in the 1970s she majored in psychology at Oral Roberts University and returned for an MBA. She had a career in corporate America as a computer engineer, first at IBM and later at Oracle. Her work has taken her across the country. During COVID she moved from Philadelphia back to Georgia to be close to her Dad. He passed away in May. She's building a large house on the property. Her 90-year-old Mom lives three minutes away in her own place.

We were having a good time when I was summoned to pack up some food to take home, so I never had a proper chance to bid Valerie farewell. Nor had there been a chance to ask her several questions that were on my mind.

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Two days after the Memorial Service, I texted Valerie with a request for her to call me. I indicated that I wanted a list of the songs she had played, but that wasn't really the information I was after. I wanted to know how she felt when the first

speaker interrupted her meditative music. And I wanted more clarification on why she felt it necessary to ask if being Black was a problem.

Valerie did call and we had a long conversation. I asked how she had gone from being a farm girl in southern Georgia to a career as an assistant engineer for IBM where she was part of a team that installed and serviced huge mainframe computers.

“Well,” she began, “I knew early on I wanted to get away from the farm and see the world. But what was available to me after high school was a local Southern Baptist institution where I was welcomed as a member of the choir. We were a very good choir. So good that we were invited to do a concert tour in the Holy Land. The Holy Land!” she emphasized. “I was so excited. But we had to do some fundraising. Ask family and friends for support, you know, that kind of thing. I was eager! But I was called to a meeting with the Choir Director. I was told I would not be going to The Holy Land because I’m Black. The Choir Director explained, ‘Our school cannot take an interracial group to The Holy Land.’ There would be no need for me to raise funds.”

At last, I had my answer. Being Black had been a very big problem for Valerie.

Back in the dorm after that meeting with the Choir Director, her friends were outraged at this news. “I was very upset, but my friends were so supportive. This just happened to be my birthday, so my friends insisted we go out. It turns out they had a surprise birthday party for me at the home of the person who just hours earlier told me I could not go with the choir to The Holy Land. Can you believe that?” She paused but kept telling the story. “A week or so later, I got a call from another Southern Baptist school in *northern* Georgia. They told me to quietly pack my bags and come to their campus after the Christmas break. I would have a full scholarship there. So that’s exactly what I did. In the 1970s there was a big difference in racial attitudes in northern Georgia compared to southern Georgia.”

Still eager to get out of Georgia, she applied to and was accepted to Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota where the climate and the welcome were too

chilly for her. By this time her reputation as a vocalist drew the attention of the folks at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma who recruited her to join their choir.

It was after this story that I felt comfortable asking my second question. “Valerie,” I ventured, “how did you feel when the person started talking over your instrumental piece before you had finished? Were you offended?”

“No,” she said dismissively. “I was only five bars from the end, so I just kept playing. That wasn’t a big deal. I haven’t given it any more thought.”

Earlier in the conversation, she had spoken at length of her 35-year-old son who finished a 4-year bachelors degree in nursing school and could “whip up an Italian Crème Cake better than me! Everything was fine until midway through his college years. He had surgery at Johns Hopkins to correct a Chiari malformation Type 1, a structural anomaly where the hindbrain protrudes into the spinal cord and the cerebellum is compressed. During the two-month hospital stay, he tolerated two surgeries (Chiari and shunt placement). He did not tolerate the two months of oxycodone which seemingly changed the chemical balance of his brain, but he continued to fight for his slice of the pie, engaging in life. We had good medical, psych and counseling support before moving to Georgia.”

Since moving to Georgia Valerie and her son have sought but not found the level of care he required so they traveled to Florida for electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) treatments. “That was decent and a good outcome until during one of the treatments he was given heavy doses of ketamine. After the ECT procedure he was unresponsive for over two hours. My son died! They resuscitated him but his brain had been anoxic for an extended period. He’s never been the same after that. He has a traumatic brain injury. He does things and seemingly has no memory of them. It is difficult to trust this new person. He’s spent months and months in hospitals and inpatient psychiatric facilities in several states. He’s easily agitated, uninhibited, and impulsive. He’s been arrested three times for stealing cars. The last one was when I left him alone so I could fill my car with gas. When I came back, he had driven off in a Sports Car that a woman had left the keys in. There were guns in that car. That really complicates things.”

“My son is not a criminal, she insists. “He is mentally ill because of a traumatic brain injury. Being in prison doesn’t help. But I can’t take care of him. He needs to be institutionalized but there aren’t sufficient resources for that in Georgia.” These are the far more important issues that deserve her attention. So what if she hadn’t finished that piece of music before an eager speaker launched into a tribute to a man she never knew.

Her son is compromised through no fault of his own. Apparently he is no longer capable of discerning right from wrong. He is presently in jail. There is a problem, and it is serious. And he is Black, and that makes a difference, especially in southern Georgia, where Amazing Grace may unite us but race still divides us.

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Sing this hopeful verse from that dear old hymn for Valerie and her son and Henry and for yourself and for me:

*Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

Amen.

GR Davis Jr
25 October 2025