

## Mr. Mergler's Gift

### Teacher's Guide

#### Recommended educational audiences:

- Senior secondary classes
- Post secondary classes
- Pre and in service teachers
- Pre and in service social workers

#### Curriculum content areas:

- Music
- Ethics
- Spirituality and religious awakening
- Sociology - family studies, intergenerational studies, integration of immigrants, relationship development, parenting, cultural expectations
- Palliative care and related issues such as dealing with, preparing for and perceptions of death and dying,
- Psychology – nature of creativity and talent, nature versus nurture, parenting, relationships
- Education studies - teaching and learning processes
- Media literacy
- Career education

#### Content themes:

- Teaching versus instructing
- Legacy
- Death and dying
- Talent and creativity
- Music and it's role in the human experience
- Fate
- Ethics

#### Learning Activities:

**1. *What was Mr. Mergler's gift? What gift did he give and what gift did he receive?***

- A.** The title of the production – Mr. Mergler's Gift – uses deceptively simple language to describe an item that was both, given by, and received by, Mr. Mergler. While the title uses the singular term – gift, in fact Mr. Mergler gave many gifts to many different people, and received many gifts from many different people.

There are many interpretations of “gift” in this film, using the table below (which should be extended as needed), list the tangible and the intangible gifts, as well as the direct and collateral receiver(s) and giver(s) of the gift(s). Some examples have already been listed in the table. Consider the following people as both givers and receivers of gifts in this story: Mr. Mergler, Xin Ben Yu, Alexandre Solopov, the film’s audience(s), Xin Ben Yu’s mother, Xin Ben Yu’s father, the film’s director.

Gift giver	Gift	Gift receiver
Mr. Mergler		
		Mr. Mergler
	talent	

**B.** Mr. Mergler’s gifts are symbols of the legacy that he leaves to the recipients. Some of these items are tangible, such as the bust of Beethoven. Some of the items are intangible, such as his love and appreciation of music, and his contribution to the development of Xin Ben Yu’s musical talent. What other tangible and intangible items constitute Mr. Mergler’s legacy to Xin Ben Yu, to her parents, to Montrealers, to the film’s audiences, to the world. Who will remember Mr. Mergler, how, when and why?

**2. Teachers and teaching**

**A.** During a lifetime people meet, experience, and interact with teachers both in the formal and informal education system. We all have memories of that really great teacher as well as that really awful teacher. What characteristics, practices, strategies, events made that really great teacher stand out in your memory? Both teachers and instructors pass on knowledge, skills, subject area contents and processes. But an instructor is not always a teacher. What are the differences between an instructor and a teacher and why was Mr. Mergler a teacher and not an instructor? (Clues: passion, commitment, appreciation)

**B.** You want to hire a piano / music teacher for yourself or your child. Write an advertisement for the local newspaper or bulletin board as a search tool for a piano / music teacher. During the interview, what are you looking or listening for as clues that this person will be a good teacher for yourself or your child? What questions would you ask in deciding whether or not to engage an applicant for the position? What questions would you expect the applicant to ask you? Once the lessons begin, how would you evaluate the teacher’s job performance?

**C.** In classrooms around the world teachers are addressed with a specific title, for example: Mr. xxx, Miss xxx, Mrs. xxx; Professor xxx, teacher xxx, Sir, Ma’am, Madam xxx, or by the teacher’s first name. During your primary, secondary and

post secondary education, how were you expected to address your teachers? If you used a non English or non French word / title, what does this word mean in either French or English? How did this term of address define or establish the boundaries or nature of the relationship between the students and the teacher? Throughout the production, Xin Ben Yu and her parents always refer to their piano teacher by using the formal terms Mr. Mergler or Mr. Daniel Mergler. He is never addressed or referred to by only his first or last name. What is the significance of this or why is this done?

**D.** During the piano lessons we see Xin Ben Yu not just practicing the mechanics of playing the piano but we see her actively trying to appropriate the material through questioning, discussion and cognitive links to the stories and emotions behind the music. This type of interactive and multimodal learning works not only for Xin Ben Yu but also for many students in today's classrooms. As a teacher, how would you support and utilize this learning style in the classroom and in informal learning situations?

### **3. Music and it's role in the human experience**

**A.** The English language has many phrases about experiencing music, for example:

- Feel the music
- Hear the music
- Make music
- Play music
- Enjoy music
- Touched by the music
- Reached by the music
- Sway to the music
- Move with the music
- Dance to the music
- Relaxed by the music
- Soothed by the music
- Be one with the music
- Sense the music
- Empowered by the music
- Moved by the music

Describe a situation that is an example of each of the above phrases. What type / genre / style of music, or who was the musical performer, in these situations? How did the music contribute to the physical, emotional, or spiritual environment of the situation? What part did the music play in the story behind the situation? If you heard that music today, what memories would it trigger?

**B.** Music is a universal language that transcends the translation issues inherent in the spoken and written word. It is a language that can unite across culture and nationality – e.g. the world wide success of The Beatles. Music unites people across time and space, e.g. the enduring place of Mozart and Beethoven in performance and recorded repertoires. Why is it that some music endures long after the composers or performers have died, e.g. Beethoven, Elvis Presley, Irving Berlin, while other compositions become one hit wonders, e.g. Sukiyaki by Kyu Sakamoto, They're Coming to Take Me Away Ha Ha by Napoleon XIV or Classical Gas by Mason Williams?

### **3. Ethics and health**

**A.** When Mr. Mergler meets eight year old Xin Ben Yu , and her parents, he knows that he is dying of colon cancer and that he has months and not years left to live. Yet, he accepts Xin Ben Yu as a student and does not tell her, or her parents, about his illness or impending death. Instead he uses what is left of his inner strength, dignity, passion and dedication to teach Xin Ben Yu all that he can, while he can. *Debate question:* Should the parents of this eight year old girl have been told of Mr. Mergler's illness and impending death so they could decide whether or not she should develop a relationship with him or so they could have time to prepare her for his death?

**B.** When and how does one explain topics such as cancer, palliative care, or death, to a child? How does one help a child let go and say a final good-bye to a dying loved one? How does the dying adult let go and say a final good-bye to a beloved child? What roles do religion, medicine and culture play in this process?

### **4. Fate, Bashert, Meant To Be , Ming Yun ? ? , Coincident, or Serendipitous**

Mr. Mergler's first meeting with Xin Ben Yu and her father in the park can be described as either a coincident, serendipitous or fated. "Bashert" is a Jewish word that means fated or meant to be, while "ming yun" conveys the same idea in Chinese. Was the meeting just luck, a coincident – serendipitous, or was it "bashert" / "ming yun" – meant to be? Mr. Mergler felt that the meeting was "bashert" / "ming yun" so as to give his last days a purpose. So that he could make sure that this musical talent was nurtured and entrusted to a worthy teacher who in turn would nurture the talent, guide the family and Xin Ben Yu on how to share the talent appropriately, and teach more than the mechanics of music and the piano. He fought to live to make sure that was accomplished. Fated or serendipitous, what do you think and why?

### **5. Media Literacy**

The slow pan of the inside of Mr. Mergler's living room shows the contents of the room as well as his style of living in the room. The camera takes the audience into the room through an invisible peephole much like a child peeking into a new environment. How does the camera movement and lighting , along with a voice over by Mr. Mergler, rather than images of him speaking from within the room , contribute to an understanding of Mr. Mergler, the man, his passions and his legacy?

### **6. A Man of the Arts**

Mr. Mergler not only taught children how to play the piano, he also taught them how to appreciate all forms and expressions of music.

“Mr. Mergler was my music teacher in Grade 1 at the former Wentworth School. All of the kids looked forward to his class because he’d always have one of the new top 40 hits to play for us on his record player. He’d have us all sing together and by the end of each week we knew the words by heart.”

M.J. Cohen, Montreal, in 2006, aged over 40.

Mr. Mergler wrote poetry – see <http://www.poetry.com/poets/DanielMergler.html> to read some of his work. Please read these poems out loud to appreciate their cadence, emotion and message. As you read and hear the words of the poems, can you hear their music?

He also read extensively and in later life became very interested in Philosophy, reading, absorbing and engaging in discourses about Martin Buber and Reb Nachman.

In today’s world where science, engineering, technology and the trades are preferred post secondary career paths, how do career counselors, parents and teachers interest young people in a career in the arts or a career related to philosophy? Where are the future artists and philosophers going to come from? Do we need, and if so, then, why do we need artists and philosophers? How does one lobby the different levels of government to increase funding for, and financial support of, those students who wish to study, and who have talent for, the arts and philosophy? How can we insure that there will be more Mr. Merglers – men, and women, of the arts and philosophy?

## **7. Talent**

**A.** Xin Ben Yu has a talent for music and playing the piano. How does one objectively measure, evaluate, quantify, describe, judge, assess, or value talent? Is talent something that exists as an innate skill within the person regardless of opportunity, teaching, or practice? Or, is talent a latent gift that must be nurtured through teaching, practice and opportunities to display and hone it?

**B.** Compare the discovery and development of Xin Ben Yu’s talent with that of a well known professional teen athlete or a child actor in terms of how the talent was managed and exploited and the impacts of this on the psychological and social development of the talented “star”. What role do the teachers, coaches, managers and family members play in assuring that the talented star experiences as normal an existence as possible so that they have a positive and productive life after the talent fades, or once the star succeeds?