

Vermont Public Radio Commentary

By Tom Slayton, *Vermont Life* editor

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Can one person make a difference to a suffering world?

Several years ago, teacher and photographer Marjorie Ryerson realized that she loved two beautiful things: music and water. She wanted to bring the two of them together somehow.

The result was her book, *Water Music*, which was published in 2003. It is a collection of Ryerson's striking color photographs of water, combined with short essays and poems written by musicians she admired, ranging from Vladimir Ashkenazy to Taj Mahal. In all, 66 renowned musicians contributed to the book.

Ryerson's aim was to have people respond to water viscerally, rather than getting hung up in the tangle of problems and statistics, proofs and arguments that surround almost any environmental issue.

She remembered a line from the poet Rumi, who wrote: "Let the beauty that you love be what you do."

In following that simple, profound dictum, in the last two years Ryerson has seen the world open up to her.

She has just returned from Europe, where she toured with Vermont pianist Michael Arnowitt, doing concerts that combined readings, her photographs, and music: selections from Chopin and Debussy, along with jazz pieces like "Here's that Rainy day," all expressing something about water.

Ryerson has also begun working with the Vermont Department of Education on a project to teach children about water through music and art. Recently, she participated in a global water symposium at St. Michaels College with Lester Brown, founder of the Earth Policy Institute.

And she has been named this year's recipient of the prestigious Harry Schlenz Medal, an award made by the Water Environment Federation for outstanding work in public education about the importance of water. She accepted the award in Washington earlier this month.

There's almost no money in it for Marjorie Ryerson – sometimes she gets her travel expenses to concerts, more often she does free-lance editing to fund what she calls her “Water Music habit .” All the net profits from the book, she donates to a fund she helped set up at the United Nations Foundation to provide clean drinking water for people in developing countries that don't have it – that's about two billion people world-wide.

But though it's not making her wealthy, the project feeds her in a different way.

“It gives me great joy,” she said recently. “I'm doing it because I can't not do it.”

Her hope now is to find organizations that will buy quantities of the book, *Water Music*, so that she and others can donate more money to the Water Music Fund. A CD and DVD of the Water Music Concerts is another goal.

And based on her track record to date, chances are all that will happen You can hear Ryerson's passion for the project as she talks about it.

“Water needs us and we need water,” she says. “It's the one essential element.”

It's that simple, and that profound. And it is making a difference.