Recently my first-born has decided to take after his old man and pick up the violin. It is a classic case of determinism. I started playing violin because my older siblings played violin in elementary school. These were the instruments we had around and, wanting to be like them, I started playing at age five and played on through college. My oldest is entering middle school and taking orchestra as an elective. And with those same junior instruments and my well-worn Suzuki Method books, he is beginning to learn the violin. Hearing him practice the various rudiments is like a trip down memory lane and the road less travelled all in one. The scales and songs are so familiar but teaching them in light of (and in spite of) my own experience has had me shook on more than one occasion. I don’t know if nepotism is making this process easier or harder. For now, we take it one note at a time. As long as he still smiles at his accomplishments and values the hard work, we’ll both keep at it.

When I was a kid, it never dawned on me that I could have learned violin any other way than the method in which I was trained by my particular teacher. The Suzuki Method takes its name from Shinichi Suzuki, a 20th century Japanese violinist. Suzuki was a pivotal figure in music education, especially in the training of Japanese violinists who went on to play in Western professional settings. Suzuki’s pedagogy derived from his understanding of language acquisition. He noticed that while learning an instrument is difficult, so too is learning a language—which children manage to do. Thus, were people to learn an instrument as they did language, then the former would be more possible. Additionally, Suzuki figured that since language acquisition appears much easier at childhood than adulthood, musical talent is far easier to cultivate at an early age. If this reminds you of previous Bulletin guest Noam Chomsky’s work on universal grammar, you’re not alone. I wrote a paper on the similarities back in college. The contemporaries were indeed drinking from a common, deep linguistic well.

The Suzuki Method starts with teaching basic rhythms on one string that accentuate sound (sixteenth notes) and less sound (eighth notes and rests). A la John Cage, learning that silence and noise are both part of music gives students space to experiment with difference. Students then learn to play two strings, experimenting with the same rhythms, followed by learning to place three fingers on one string. An adventurous student could replicate this on another string to play a total of an eight-note scale. But even a conservative student sticking with the two open strings and the three fingered notes could play Mozart’s tune, popularly associated with “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” albeit with the rhythm patterns previously learned. The budding violinist then rehearses the same melody with new rhythm variations. The student then learns to play a song applying the previously learned fingerings on the second string, then learns to add the fourth finger to both strings and then slowly but surely learns to use all four strings and play more and more complicated pieces. The method has been emulated for other instruments and pedagogical systems, but Suzuki’s systematization is remembered as the origin.

One element that makes it stand out from others is its insistence that students listen to expert recordings of the pieces. In addition to learning how a piece is supposed to sound, astute listeners will hear that even the simplest pieces can be difficult. Playing juvenile melodies with expert fluency is as challenging as the listener’s ear is discriminating. A professional teacher can find out the rough edges of the most basic scale. As I listen to my son rehearse with joy, I question whether I was ever that happy playing. Is his playing perfect? Absolutely not. He saws away like he’s preparing firewood. But he lacks the stress of getting it right even as he works to get better one note at a time.

That’s the energy that I see this issue’s contributors bringing to the academic study of religion. In the Interview, biblical scholar Chris Jones opens up about how his journey brought him to the broader—even
broadest—religious studies classroom. Known for his student-centered pedagogy and praxis, Jones fills us in on what he’s learned along the way. Meanwhile in The Conversation, the Global Critical Philosophy of Religion working group shares how they’ve flipped the script on their subfield.

Speaking of flipping the script, we’re back with The Conference, bringing you dispatches from the American Academy of Religion’s Academic Relations Committee. At the 2022 annual meeting, they hosted a panel on decolonizing religious studies, and we’re pleased to bring you an abbreviated transcript of that discussion. And in The Essay, Jessical Albrecht, a doctoral student at the University of Heidelberg, presents her critical reflections on the study of religion in light of meta-reflection, social theory, and corporeality. Out from The Archive, we bring you a 1982 argument from the late Joseph Fitzer, advocating for not separating religion from general historical inquiry. And finally in The Question, Sage D’Vice assures new graduate students that they do not need to sacrifice friends and family for their education.

We’re taking it one note at a time, and we are glad that you’re joining us.