

## **Robert Ashford: A Tale of Two Passions: Binary Economics and Music**

By Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

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Robert Ashford, Professor of Law at Syracuse University, is convinced that binary economics can help rid the world of the economic fears and inequities that contribute to violence and sufferings of all kinds. Binary economics, however, is not just another Robin Hood type economic redistribution theory where the rich are somehow forced to share their wealth with the less fortunate. Rather, it involves establishing “win-win” economic arrangements that enable everyone to prosper – the middle class and the poor, as well as the rich.

Ashford not only is passionate about binary economics but also demonstrates a passion for music. He is an accomplished musician who classical compositions are aired on classical radio stations throughout the country.

Ashford graduated summa cum laude with dual majors in physics and English literature from the University of South Florida and cum laude from Harvard Law School. He was also a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Stanford University. Before beginning his teaching career, he practiced law in San Francisco where he was associated with prestigious firm of Morrison and Foerster and was later a member in the firm of Kelso, Ashford and Ludwig. He also served as chief operating officer and general counsel for the investment-banking firm of Kelso & Co. At Syracuse University his subjects include corporate law, professional responsibility and binary economics.

The articles and book chapters, which he has authored or co-authored (on topics ranging from implied liability, professional responsibility, utility regulation, securities regulation, and socio-economics to tax and workers compensation), have been cited by numerous state and federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court. His book, “Binary Economics: The New Paradigm,” coauthored by Rodney Shakespeare of London, is available from University Press of America and amazon.com. His articles on binary economics can be downloaded for free from the website [ssrn.com](http://ssrn.com).

When asked about the impact of his Greek background on his life, Robert Ashford stated, “My Greek background gave me a historical and cultural appreciation of the contributions of my Greek ancestors to the establishment of western civilization. Their contribution to democracy, science, mathematics, art, law, and politics is still felt today. This appreciation gave me a sense of both gratitude to the past and responsibility to the future.

“Learning Greek with English as a child gave me bi-lingual capacity that has enhanced my understanding of language and my vocabulary. My musical compositions are influenced by the rich melodic quality of Greek music; and the Greek commitment to education, excellence, family and ‘philotimo’ has enriched my life in innumerable ways.”

At an early age, Robert Ashford's heart and mind were influenced by his parents. His father's commitment to intellectual honesty, continual striving for excellence, high ideals and lasting value to society, and his mother's great love music and compassion for the downtrodden have inspired him throughout his life. He carries their passion, vision and dedication daily in the work he does.

Both were involved in helping victims of the wars and turmoil in Greece and Cyprus in the last century. Robert Ashford's mother, Venette Tomaras Askounes Ashford was a distinguished social worker who helped thousands immigrate to the U.S. beginning with Hitler's invasion of Greece through her retirement in 1963. "My mother was a woman of great and deep feeling and compassion. She had an immense heart and was always concerned about 'the least of these' in society." (Venette Askounes Ashford is one of five Greek-American women featured in 'Greek-American Pioneer Women of Illinois,' edited by Elaine Thomopoulos, Arcadia Publications, Chicago, IL 2000.)

From his father, Robert learned a deep commitment to Greek ideals of rigorous thinking, intellectual honesty, excellence, virtue and social responsibility. Born Theodore Askounes, Robert's father came to America in the early 1920s at the age of 14, waited on tables, supported a family of seven in Greece, learned English from reading newspapers and worked his way through school. Within 10 years he was teaching chemistry as a substitute teacher in Chicago's public high schools (although he himself was never able to attend high school).

During the Great Depression, after obtaining his Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Chicago, he found he had to change his name in order to find a job. He looked in the telephone directory under the "As" and chose the name "Ashford" and became known as "Dr. Theodore Askounes Ashford." Theodore Ashford became professor of chemistry at the University of Chicago and then at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. He later became the founding Dean of Natural Science at the University of South Florida. He was a pioneer and internationally recognized expert in chemistry testing.

"How do you know?" Robert's father would frequently ask when Robert offered his opinion on a particular subject. With this kind of questioning, his father taught him the importance of rigorous, scientific thinking, of identifying the contradictions and unproven assumptions underlying theories, and of thinking beyond the mainstream. He also credits his father for teaching him the importance of devoting himself to lasting worthy activities that would bring honor to the family and to the Greek heritage. The youngest of three sons, Robert also learned precociously from his older brothers, Nicholas and Theodore, who excelled in school and music and strove for excellence in whatever they did.

His mother taught him to be a humanitarian. He says, "My mother was a woman of great and deep feeling and compassion. She had an immense heart and was always concerned about 'the least of these' in society. Her commitment to help the disadvantaged made it difficult for me to accept the notion that mainstream economic theory was good enough as long as I was well off or to accept the notion that there was no moral problem in just looking out for myself and my immediate family and not devoting myself to work to discover something better for people less fortunate."

Robert Ashford's passion for more equal economic opportunity has led him to become a leading academic authority on "binary economics" – a unique market-based approach to alleviating poverty, helping working people, and promoting widespread, environmentally friendly economic prosperity. First advanced by Louis Kelso and Mortimer Adler in 1958 in "The Capitalist Manifesto," the binary approach focuses on broadening capital ownership by broadening "the right to acquire capital with the earnings of capital." The "binary" in binary economics refers to the two ways of earning income: by laboring and by owning capital (defined by Kelso as anything non-human contributing to the production of marketable goods and services, including tools, machines, land, structures, systems, and patents).

Binary economics does not involve redistribution of wealth. It achieves its benefits by expanding, deepening, and fortifying the institution of private property and by opening the capital markets to make them more inclusive and competitive. It reveals ways that will enable middle-class and poor people to acquire capital with the earnings of capital. It predicts that the process of broadening ownership will promote growing prosperity for all. According to binary economics, extending this right to all people will help unlock the full potential of an industrial economy to profitably satisfy unmet needs and desires.

Ashford believes that binary economics is in harmony with many Christian principles fundamental to the Orthodox faith. It finds support in the parable of Jesus sharing the bread and fish; there was more not less at the end of the meal. Ashford says, "Inclusion produces God's abundance; whereas hoarding leads to scarcity and deprivation."

He believes that the economic deprivation that prevails in the world is the unnatural result of human institutions that can be reformed to produce more of the abundance that naturally comes from loving inclusion. Compared to the present system in which capital acquisition with the earnings of capital remains largely concentrated in a few, the inclusive binary approach is structured to work more in harmony with Christian principles, and by those principles may produce greater abundance. See "Using Christian Principles to Reform Economic Theory" available on his web page at Syracuse University ([syr.edu](http://syr.edu)).

With seemingly boundless energy, Robert Ashford is not only writing, lecturing and teaching principles of binary economics to other teachers, government officials, business representatives, foundations, and churches, but organizing conferences on binary economics and trying to raise funds to establish centers for binary economics in universities and colleges.

Ashford's mother, who taught him to feel and act compassionately for those in need, also instilled his love for music. Venette Askounes played the piano with passionate, yet tender feeling. Parties at the Askounes Ashford home always included plenty of Greek dancing, music and food. Some of the flavor of Greek music can be heard in Robert's musical compositions. Robert began composing at the piano at the age of four; and by his high school graduation he had learned to play and compose by ear using a number of instruments including piano, flute, French horn and string bass.

In speaking to him, one can hear music in his voice. He says, "I try to compose music that makes people feel loved." He has even organized an informal organization called "Friends of Melody" which endeavors to promote beautiful melody in music.

(Robert Ashford has released two CDs of his compositions, “Heroes and Heroines” and the “Lord’s Prayer” both available at [cdfreedom.com](http://cdfreedom.com) and [baby.com](http://baby.com).)

His first CD, “Heroes and Heroines,” contains 18 instrumental compositions featuring solo piano, and small string and wind ensembles. Selections from this CD are frequently aired on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” as musical interludes. Noted musicologist Dan Campbell, champion of "the Mozart Effect" describes Ashford’s music as both "awakening and calming at the same time ... clean, beautifully structured and inspiring." Pulitzer Prize Winner, Jazz legend Ornette Coleman states, "Robert Ashford’s music has natural and spiritual quality everyone should hear."

The Lord's Prayer, his second CD, features a sweet, new hymn-like melodic setting for the Lord’s Prayer that is easy to learn and sing. According to Dr. Craig Jessup, Music Director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Ashford’s setting of “The Lord’s Prayer” has “an appealing melody and would indeed be quickly learned by a choir of virtually any age and ability.”

My parents were close friends with Robert Ashford’s parents, the late Dr. Theodore and Mrs. Venette Ashford. As a child I couldn’t quite understand the meaning of the many discussions about Cyprus, politics, and social and economic justice held over the many dinners our family enjoyed at the Ashford home. But I did hear the concern for others that motivated these conversations, as well as the jazz and Greek music that Robert’s two brothers, Nicholas and the late Theodore Ashford, were playing in another room. The Ashford home was alive with ideas, with caring and with song, and so is Robert Ashford.