I love solving problems. I love to chip away at a challenge, considering it from different angles until a refinement, a solution, or an ease of passage presents itself. In teaching, my aim is to partner with my students to uncover solutions that help them strengthen their artistic voices, their confidence, and command of the instrument.

Ultimately, I want all my students to feel empowered to keep developing independently, even long after our time together has come to a close. That’s why I ask so many questions in lessons, to help students think through their intentions and their process. The college years are the time to develop the foundation for self-analysis that will support a lifetime of instrumental and artistic growth; these are precious years.

In terms of specific approaches, efficiency and organization are crucial in the left hand. My teacher Michael Tree passed on to me his “obsession” (his word) with exploring every possible fingering in a given passage and trying to find the right balance between systematic organization and expressive musical intention.

Knowing what position you are in at all times and what pattern the four fingers make together is the essential technical foundation to letting yourself make music with abandon.

As for the bow, I consider it our breath and voice. That’s why I encourage students to focus on the way the right-hand fingers engage the beginning of the sound in each bow stroke with the same attention actors give to the enunciation of each consonant and syllable. After all, what we are trying to do in performance is envision the most vivid musical character we can create, and then deliver that character’s lines to the audience so that they are audible from any seat in the house.

I am fascinated by the vast etude literature for viola. Beyond the twenty or so studies I remember working through in my student days (mostly transcribed from violin: Kreutzer, Mazas) there is a treasure trove of largely neglected works - many originally for viola by obscure composers like Bruni, Palaschko and Vieux - that can help us explore every aspect of playing. This fascination led me to create the **Viola Etude Finder** [link] with violist and Microsoft engineer Cody Russell, a buddy of mine from music camp many moons ago. Take a look, and see what you discover!

Mastering the craft of playing is its own process, and brings great personal rewards, but in approaching a piece of music we have to find a more selfless purpose. I want my students to always keep this pearl, passed down to me by chamber music coach (and heart-melting violist) Steve Tenenbom, in the back of their mind:

"As a performer, the highest compliment I can receive after a concert is not 'Oh what a beautiful sound you have' or 'My what a great violist you are,' but 'Wow, *what an amazing piece of music that is*.' If I hear that, I have done my job well."