

The Sound of One Hand Clapping: Why I Could Not Tolerate It, Faith and All

By Mitchell Milch

This story is a lesson in humility for me. My affiliation with a Manhattan-based barbershop vocal group was a faith and trust-eroding story with a happy, faith-affirming conclusion. Ultimately, the Holy Whisperer persuaded me that the group's general disinterest in my skill set, my talents, and how these attributes might enhance its fortunes, was much less of an injustice than I had made it out to be. This article chronicles my journey to understanding there were manifold gifts to be had in my surrender to unmovable and immutable pillars of experience, past and present. I could neither change the culture to better suit me nor cope very well with its defining personality characteristics. The chorus's largely indifferent reception to me that I'm wryly calling, "the sound of one hand clapping," had the effect on my protective spiritual skin or armor, that a very sluggish flesh-eating bacteria might have had on my real skin. You could re-title this article "a word to the faithful wise," or "a cautionary tale for followers of Jesus." Ultimately, I let go and let God steer me towards the dawn of new choral possibilities.

I've been told ad nauseum I'm not much of a swimmer. This is true. Scuba diving is one of those "out of the question" hobby choices. Yet as a seeker of God's truth about myself and His plans for me, I am, when even-keeled, eager to plumb the depths of my unconscious mind, gracefully scissor kicking my way to the historic roots of my vulnerabilities to distrust myself and lose faith in God. When my conscious mind is asleep at the wheel, these sea-floor-hugging, unconscious narratives are forever ready to stir up trouble with the push of few buttons. My unwitting choral group pushed those buttons, which in turn left me at frequent intervals at odds with myself and with them for the duration of my tenure in the group.

Oh, how these young barbershop singers muddied the waters of my perception! The net result being I felt all alone at our weekly rehearsals, not another devout believer within 15 miles of these rehearsal spaces. God being one inaccessible thought away, I retrieved from the dusty attic of my mind, the hat of "victim." In all the glory of my self-righteousness, I laid blanket blame on my youthful fellow singers for my helplessness but to depreciate my self-worth in the wake of feeling invisible and unrecognized by a majority of them. Absent their validation, I shamefully felt like a puppet on a string, helpless to remember that I was a redeemed and loved child of God. Stripped of this forgotten truth, I was at a loss to remember or remind myself that God directs and/or uses all my actions including my externalized, sinful inner dramas, to advance His ineffable, righteous, and loving objectives.

What largely made the sound of one hand clapping my kryptonite, that left me so mired in confusion and self-doubt so as to rely on old, sinful, immature, simplistic, and warped blueprints for reasoning and judgment, was the foolish expectation that my Holy Spirit-infused church community experiences would inure me against feeling so bereft in environs such as this. Juxtaposing my church community and my choral community made for a discombobulating clash of cultural mores. My church community's enjoyment of and expressions of gratitude for the fruits of this graybeard's labors to integrate and align my heart, mind and soul with God's wishes, was far afield from perceptions of my singing community ignoring and devaluing me, like a fruit picker might ignore an overripe piece of fruit on the vine. This contradiction was nothing short of "crazymaking," during moments I distrusted my abilities to reliably reconcile discrepancies between anachronistic and mindful interpretations of present experiences.

Trouble brewed for me because I wished, and demanded, that matters be different with my chorus. Foolishly, I banked on God performing a miracle once I suspended my typically reliable reasoning and judgment in favor of silently holding my chorus hostage with a water gun. Instead of relishing with gusto the opportunity to be a shining model of righteous discipleship to openly and humbly explore with the chorus's leadership potential matches between my resources and their needs, I entered into a Faustian bargain, an all or nothing pursuit of a headstrong, temporarily regressed man-child.

I silently harbored expectations that in exchange for me ministering to my younger peers like a fatherly uncle, self-appointed mentor, etc., that they in their munificent gratitude would affirm me as a wise elder and help me fill a void of meaningful service left by my retirement from gainful employment as a psychotherapist. Little did they know anything of my sinister agenda or the fact that "spiteful and vindictive little me," in the absence of my satisfaction, was capable of "fixing them" by plotting an abrupt and terse departure. While in the midst of enacting some very destructive and immature aspects of black and white thinking, God was indeed simultaneously awakening me to the idea that nothing of a loving and nurturing God-fearing kind would come out of me usurping His authority or relinquishing it to young people who did not acknowledge His paternity.

The catalyst for me re-living a dust ridden and musty smelling artifact of my wounded past was embedded in the demographic of my chorus. My fellow singers were self-identified cisgender and transgender men who I estimate ranged in age between 22 and 42. A stunning, touching and envy-producing dynamic for me was their genuine mutual affection for each other that transcended significant variations on the themes of gender and sexuality. In a Christ-centered moment, I openly remarked to them on our community Slack channel how much I admired their spirit of camaraderie. I could not imagine my generation of Baby Boomers at their ages embracing such variations in gender and sexuality.

There were five graybeards including myself in this chorus, three of whom I consulted before leaving the chorus. To my comforting relief all of them felt, albeit with less intensity than myself, the kernels of truth I had in my saner moments teased out from perceptions distorted by the shadow of history. One of these men was planning his exit in a slow and deliberate fashion, and the other two felt put off but not overly put out, so they did not seriously entertain leaving the group.

The young vocalists whose scalps knew little about the color gray theoretically could have been my biological children. This conceptual possibility bore heavily on the trajectory of my story. It was not gratuitous on my part and yet not an oversimplification of matters for me to equate the sound of one hand clapping with a benign form of ageism. Once again, I deem it indispensable to my story to juxtapose the character of my church community to that of my choral community. My church habitually grooms and installs as church shepherds and church elders, qualified older congregants in equal if not greater numbers than qualified and interested younger male and female congregants. To the last they are held in high esteem, discipling members of our congregation on their faith journeys.

Our church culture is in some respects not unlike tribal cultures of indigenous North American peoples. The orientation of my artistic peers to the resident graybeards stood my church's high regard of its older members on its head. Wishful thinking blinded me to what a more empathic stance would have made abundantly clear to me. I was so caught up contrasting my superiority to the deficient parental figures of

my formative years that I forgot how the objects I intended to influence were not objects but living and breathing subjects. With embarrassment I confess that despite decades of training in the art and science of walking in the shoes of others, I failed to consider their subjective experiences of complicated relationships with their own fathers and father surrogates. Once I did, I had a lot more compassion, tolerance and forgiveness of their alleged snubs of our "graybeard club."

God corrected my vision like a good optometrist does so I could see clearly how irrationally ludicrous it was for me in my arrogant self-righteousness to decide I had earned and thus deserved for these young non-believers to lift me up as a wise elder. It took me some time to reach the point in my diary communications with God to awaken to and relinquish another equally important aspect of my nefarious agenda. An immature, hurt, and vindictive and recalcitrant voice in my inner family system demanded that if justice was not served in the present tense, then a second chance at peer group acceptance denied to me as a youth was rightfully his.

The puzzle pieces of my Faustian bargain began to fit together, despite my dastardly desire to hang these youthful barber shoppers in effigy. I was slipping and sliding down a regressive hill, ruing the days of yore when I repetitively made shameful and guilt-ridden mistakes relating to my male peers that left me as an outsider looking in on all the fun they were having. Here I was again with that same envious disposition to others. Periodically during these rehearsals, a faint voice of reason chimed into the competing inner conversations to say in exasperation: "When are you going to step up and be a bulwark against a relapse into your addictive obsessions and compulsions and stop stewing in your grievances and grudges against male peer groups who never bargained for you refusing to play by the rules of their cultural norms?"

I had a good-natured laugh at myself on the heels of a period in which my sense of humor went down the drain like soap suds riding a shower head's torrent of water. Then, I was no longer at a loss to observe and reflect on how ridiculously little responsibility yours truly, forever an emotionally androgynous guy, had foolishly sought acceptance among a cohort of jocks. When you scratched just below the surface of my "pretend exterior," you discovered that God had made me to be an artistic, highly sensitive, and in my better moments, fragile empath, created to serve God as a creative channeler of His wisdom.

My story ended with the Holy Spirit triumphing over depraved aspects of myself. You might say the ongoing spiritual warfare waging inside of me is a like a day-by-day, block-by-block battle between the forces of good and evil. Ultimately, I did not act out my timeless self-mortifying scripts. I left with my dignity intact. I credit God, my church community, and the Holy Spirit for not allowing me to scuttle my earnest desire to be an empowering kingdom builder. In the end I concluded that God used this experience to drive home a most important point about righteous love of one's neighbors. Restrictive, unconditional lovefests such as the ones I witnessed were, shame on me, not to be envied. They minimized, denied, and controverted God's righteous standards for conduct that blasphemes Him. They work in opposition to the efforts of my Christian brothers and sisters to spread the Gospel and save this planet from the evil forces bent on destroying it. Clearly my fellow singers had not seen God's memo and the collective sound of one hand clapping was in part a testament to this truth. These young folks were truly indifferent to God's Word. In the end God made it abundantly clear to me for now, to let it be.