



The Sound Of One Hand Clapping

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David Brooks describes his spiritual journey in his bestselling book by the same name, “the second mountain.” To paraphrase Brooks, climbing the second mountain is an expedition some of us make to fulfill our “soul’s mission.” It is a mission I hypothesize we develop amnesia for the moment we are born. Many of us live our entire lives unable to recover our spiritual mandates. Scaling the “second mountain” may be likened to climbing Abraham Maslow’s pyramid-like hierarchy of needs in a quest for “self-actualization.” Some of us awaken to, rediscover and fulfill our souls’ mandates and others live out our lives scaling our “first mountains.” Reaching the summit of “the first mountain” may be defined as successful accommodations to cultural and familial norms. These norms captivate many of us for our entire lives

Recently it dawned on me that if I took seriously my vision of “self” as an agent of positive change in this world I had to scrutinize my ongoing involvement in a singing group I joined less than a year ago. The group in short order was a drain on my spiritual battery the way the absence of light in the dead of winter affects folks with seasonal affective disorder. My initial hope was that this singing group would be a vehicle for me to actualize my second mountain goal to inspire, empower, and heal souls through my singing and songwriting.

My dawning realization was that this singing group’s benign neglect, and indifference towards me which I describe in the title of this article as “the sound of one hand clapping,” was proving to be soul crushing. I was only six months into blending my voice with theirs and already leaning towards giving up on the group to help launch my ambitions. My truth was that an unbridgeable cultural divide existed between my group of one, and the remaining group of 10. If I was to take seriously my second mountain goal, I could not risk the demoralizing impact of being cast as the group’s outsider.

At this juncture I brought my psychotherapist Donna into the loop. I posed the following question for us to explore: Was my motive for leaving my singing group suspect, shaped by a displaced thirst to take revenge on those who activated painful associations to my past and my role as outcast in my own natal family? Donna wondered if the group’s dismissiveness of my needs and feelings was “personal on their part” She wondered if I helped shape their responses

by my own empathic failures relating to them. I told Donna that absent them losing a measure of respect for me for trying too hard to fit in I doubted it.

I behaved towards the group in a manner consistent with my most cherished values. I took an interest in the members' lives by asking questions, registered concern when they were in distress, applauded their talents, and demonstrated appreciation for whatever kindnesses they extended me which in this case were solely of an artistic nature. Their interest in me beyond my artistic contributions was nil.

In addition, accountability and integrity were in short supply in the group. I tried but could not change the fact that I was the lone wolf who showed up every week on time for rehearsals. What added insult to injury was that I did so despite nagging hip and back pain exacerbated by my long commute relative to theirs. I was also the lone wolf working daily to rehearse our numbers.

Finally, their moral relativism irked me to no end. If their actions were good for them then their consciences were clear. My second mountain existence was all about learning lessons about how to heal others and not hurt others based on learning from the hurtful mistakes of myself and others. It was time to go once the group took a brief hiatus from performing.

The overarching import of my story is how it sensitized me to the plight of "outsiders" around the world. Their despair borne of not being kept in mind as "mattering" in their communities shape unbearable feelings of despair that breed tragic reactions of vengeful retribution.

My story of the outsider is a cautionary tale for all of us to take to heart. If we do not integrate the abandoned, alienated and forgotten members of our communities, these objectified and degraded souls may be squandered resources we need to save this planet. Furthermore, they may in their rageful despair leave as their legacies, living nightmares that ensure their traumas are inscribed in the souls of the survivors of their carnage for generations to come.