

How to capture it all? - Conveying the physical and spiritual aspects of our story

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OUR STORY

I remember being in song practice, up on the hill at Booneville, singing in a big circle with forty or fifty brothers and sisters, Jennifer Morrison playing guitar, and being utterly transported. The hearts of all, the harmonies, the spiritual atmosphere were incredibly moving. I could hear a high, clear trumpet playing along in the spiritual world.

Many times in workshops or services I thought "Somebody needs to record this amazing singing" and somehow capture what it was like. All the voices joining together.

Before meeting the church I sang a little, in theater school, but I never thought I had much of a voice. Though I have always loved music and been deeply moved by it, my parents didn't invest in any music lessons for me, because they thought I was tone deaf. I had no sense of what my voice sounded like and when I sang, I guess it was one note or many notes, just not the right ones.

Both my parents sang, my mother was in the church choir and played piano at home, both of them were in the local Gilbert and Sullivan group and sang in shows. They thought I was tone deaf, but didn't tell me, out of compassion I guess. One day in my teens I was utterly bored (remember being bored?) and wandered into the room where the piano was and started plunking keys.

In a minute or so I was one-fingering the Hare Krishna tune. My mom burst in from the kitchen and exclaimed "Sam!!! You're not tone-deaf!!" I looked at her, puzzled. 'I don't have leprosy, either, Mom' was what I thought of saying much later. In the moment, I just stood there open-mouthed. I had no idea they thought I had no sense of music. No wonder they never let me join the high school band class.

Anyway, I discovered my singing voice in Booneville. In a large group, no one can really hear you anyway, so I just gave it my all and in the process, discovered I actually could sing. And what a joy it was, joining voices with many other people and creating something so beautiful, and when the spiritual world connected we were all enraptured. The air between us vibrating in harmony and resonance. Swept up, taken into another dimension.

It was and still is one of my favorite things about church. When all our voices can join together, creating an atmosphere that moves us all to a new place. It's one reason I feel lonely sometimes when I'm in a church service where the band is so amplified I can't hear my neighbor sing, and sometimes I can't hear myself sing either. I miss that connection with the whole congregation.

At any rate, I remember feeling many times "Dang! I've got to record this so I can capture this amazing feeling!" so I got a cassette recorder (state of the art in the 80s) and pressed record. Afterwards, trembling with anticipation, I rewound the tape and pressed play. To my dismay, what came out sounded like an

incoherent horde shouting through towels while beating up a cardboard box in a back alley. While I'm sure that professional sound engineers could have recorded it better, it was clear to me that the physical recording didn't capture the spiritual elements very well. So I guess I'll have to rely on spirit world's recording to recreate the experience. And I'm looking forward to seeing who was playing that trumpet. (historical note: there was no one physically playing a trumpet at Booneville at the time)

Another time I experienced this was when I participated in the evening entertainment at a Holy Day in New York. I was at the seminary at the time, and I think it was our sister who was inspired to present a version of the "Small House of Uncle Thomas" dance from the King and I. It's the story of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' done in traditional Thai dance. I think it's on tape somewhere in the archives.

Anyway, I was "King Simon of Legree", an evil man who was pursuing Uncle Thomas. Decker out in a gold mask and black tights, with super long fingernails (plastic straws taped to my fingers) I encouraged the 'highly scientific dogs' to pursue and capture them. I thought my little dance was ok, fluid and expressive. Several days later, we received a videotape and the cast sat down to watch it together.

When "Simon of Legree" came on stage, I nearly died. What I saw on the screen was not the fluid and expressive dance I remembered, it was more the shuffling of an arthritic orangutan. I was devastated. On reflection, however, I decided that the camera only captured what my body was doing, it couldn't capture the image my mind and spirit were projecting, and for those who were present in the audience, they would have felt the mind and spirit as well as the purely visual image. Or at least, that's what I tell myself, so's not to remember myself as a clumsy dancing ape.

It's frustrating, this gap in trying to express and explain what spiritual life was like, especially when many people can't wrap their brain around what we were doing in the first place. I remember trying to relate a spiritual experience I had when I was fundraising to a writing group in a religious science church. "I was running through this icy parking lot in Indiana..." "What?! What were you doing in a parking lot?" "I was fundraising for my church and" "Fundraising? You had a table? What were you doing running?" "Well, we went up to people" "You just walked up to them? Did you have signs or collection boxes?" "Well, no we just had ourselves...." I never got to tell them the story, they needed a lot of background first, and it was hard for them to absorb the idea of running around a dark parking lot wearing polyester, with nothing but yourself, an id card and a box of peanut brittle to present.

And many people, no doubt, just heard the externals and instantly assumed, based on the physical evidence, that this was a terrible, evil, oppressive thing.

My question was and is: how to convey both the physical and spiritual aspects of our stories? Some testimonies are purely spiritual "I was so inspired, but then I struggled to unite and I was Cained out. But then I made strong conditions and I could feel Heavenly Father's heart and I broke through." Without the physical details, these testimonies can all sound the same, and we still don't know quite what happened, we have no picture so we don't know how to follow the example.

And some testimonies (though not many) are purely physical. One brother, when asked to give his testimony of joining the church, talked about where he was, and how broke he was, how much he spent on lunch, and he remembered exactly how much change he had in his pocket when he met his spiritual mother on the streets of Washington, DC, and what he had for lunch.

My hope is we can find the way to capture both the physical and the spiritual details together. We need both to help us find our way. We need the physical details so we can relate the story to our lives, and have a picture of exactly what happened, and the spiritual details so we can find our way through that world as well. But both together, mind and body together, please. They're lost without each other.