

Rolheiser: Losing the song in the singer

Often when listening to someone singing live or on television, I close my eyes to try to hear the song so as not to let the singer's performance get in the way of the song. A song can be lost in its performance; indeed, the performance can take over so that the song is replaced by the singer.

When anyone is performing live, be it on a stage, in a classroom, at a podium, or in a pulpit, there will always be some combination of three things. The speaker will be trying to impress others with his talent; he will be trying to get a message across; and (consciously or unconsciously) he will be trying to channel something true, good, and beautiful for its own sake. Metaphorically, he will be making love to himself, making love to the audience, and making love to the song.

It is the third component, making love to the song, which makes for great art, great rhetoric, great teaching, and great preaching. Greatness sets itself apart here because what comes through is "the song" rather than the singer, the message rather than the messenger, and the performer's empathy rather than his ego. The audience then is drawn to the song rather than to the singer. Good singers draw people to the music rather than to themselves; good teachers draw students to truth and learning rather than to themselves; good artists draw people to beauty rather than to adulation, and good preachers draw their congregations to God rather than to praise of themselves.

Admittedly, this isn't easy to do. We are all human, so is our audience. No audience respects you unless you do show some talent, creativity, and intelligence. There's always an unspoken pressure on the singer, the speaker, the teacher, and the preacher, both from within and from without. From within: *I don't want to disappoint! I don't want to look bad! I need to stand out! I need to show them something special!* From without, from the audience: *What have you got! Show us something! Are you worth my attention? Are you bright? Are you boring?* Only the most mature person can be free of these pressures. Thus, the song easily gets lost in the singer, the message in the messenger, the teaching in the teacher, and the message of God in the personality of the preacher.

As a teacher, preacher, and writer, I admit my own long struggle with this. When you first start teaching, you had better impress your students or you won't have their attention or respect for long. The same with preaching. The congregation is always sizing you up, and you had better measure up or no one will be listening to you. Moreover, unless you have an exceptionally strong self-image, you will be a perennial prisoner of your own insecurities. Nobody wants to look bad, stupid, uninformed, or come across as talentless. Everyone

wants to look good.

Moreover, not least, there is still your ego (and its power can never be underestimated). It wants to draw the attention and the admiration to itself rather than to what is true, good, and beautiful. There is always the temptation for the messenger to be more concerned about impressing others than about having the message come through in purity and truth. The subtle, but powerful, temptation inside every singer, teacher, speaker, preacher, or writer is to draw people to themselves rather than to the truth and beauty they are trying to channel.

I struggle with this in every class I teach, every article or book I write, and every time I preside at liturgy. Nevertheless, I make no apologies for this. It is the innate struggle in all creative effort. *Are we trying to draw people to ourselves, or are we trying to draw them to truth, to beauty, to God?*

When I teach a class, how much of my preparation and energy is motivated by a genuine concern for the students and how much is motivated by my need to look good, to impress, to have a reputation as a good teacher? When I write an article or a book, am I really trying to bring insight and understanding to others or am I thinking of my status as a writer? When I preside at mass and preach is my real motivation to channel a sacred ritual in a manner that my own personality doesn't get in the way? Is it to lead people into community with each other and to decrease myself so Christ can increase?

There is no simple answer to those questions because there can't be. Our motivation is always less than fully pure. Moreover, we are not meant to be univocal robots without personalities. Our unique personalities and talents were given by God precisely as gifts to be used for others. Still, there's a clear warning sign. When the focus of the audience is more on our personalities than on the song, we are probably making love more to ourselves and our admirers than to the song.