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Lessons from the “Little Red Book”

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We include this one because it is so well-written and powerful. Also because your editor, at the time of this edition of UNISON was obsessed with the game of golf.



My mentor taught me well the lesson that many valuable lessons for a choral director could be found in places other than the library or the traditional music textbook. He stressed being active in the world, reading everything you could find, and being available to whatever opportunities and adventures life presented. In the years since my graduate school days I have come to appreciate the wisdom of those words and I have, in the words of the noted author, Robert Fulgham, sought “to live a balanced life - to work and play a little every day.”

It has become a standing joke among my students that when I am not to be found in my office I’m probably on the golf course. While this is not always true, it is the case that I share freely my zeal for the game of golf. For me the golf course is a place of emotional repose, and it has always intrigued me that many of the words and qualities that define a good golf swing - poise, balance, tempo, rhythm - are also the words that characterize a good choral performance.

The world of golf recently mourned the loss of one of its great teachers, Harvey Penick. For over eight decades, Mr. Penick studied the game and kept a diary in which he noted the fundamental truths of golf - and life- as they became known to him. Convinced late in life to share his thoughts with the world, Mr. Penick published his famous, *Little Red Book*. In reading this book, and its sequel, *And If You Play Golf, You’re My Friend*, it became clear to me that Mr. Penick’s ideas and philosophies could improve not only my golf game but also my music making.

In the paragraphs that follow, I have quoted the words of Harvey Penick and subsequently attempted to draw parallels that I have discovered in my music

teaching career. The words in bold type are those of the legendary Harvey Penick. The words in regular type are my responses to his ideas. What you read may not convince you to take up the game of golf. However, it may serve to remind you that musical lessons may be found in curious places, and that music, by its very definition, serves to help us connect seemingly unrelated ideas and aspects of daily living.

You don't have to play golf. You get to play. There's world of difference. Playing golf is a privilege, not a sentence.

As a faculty member in a Department of Music I am frequently out several nights each week attending concerts. I consider this part of my job. And when Wednesday night rolls around I often find myself saying, "I have to go and conduct church choir." I remember well my late twenties, where I sought out opportunities to conduct choral music.

Fifteen years later, living the daily routine of being a music teacher, I sometimes forget to remind myself that conducting an ensemble of singers is a privilege. The singers who show up every week honor me and my talents with their presence. Their lives are certainly as busy as mine, and yet they take time out of their schedule to make music. Conducting is not something we have to do - it's something we get to do!

I think it's fine to get mad if you hit a poor shot or miss a putt you should have made - it shows you have the competitive spirit. But while you are being mad, be mad only at yourself.

Golf swings are like choral rehearsals - the magical few are usually concomitant with moments of frustration. When things are not going well, I've seen golfers abuse equipment, and I've watched conductors abuse singers. This never makes the situation any better, because the golf clubs that produced the poor shot are the same ones that produced the miracle on the last hole, and the singers that are with you today are the same ones who sang a terrific concert two weeks ago. When frustration sets in, which it inevitably will, be careful how many clubs you throw and how many you break. It's usually not their fault, and once you've broken them, there is nothing left to play with.

I don't try to teach golf to children. Let them play, then help them when they want you to, or when you see something that demands a teacher's attention.

When I look out into my church choir or our community Masterworks chorus I am awed by the aggregate brain power that sits in the room. If the enemy wanted to seize the brightest and the best, he need only show up for a choir rehearsal.

In this musical context, these professional people act differently than they would in their place of business. They relax, they laugh, they experiment. I wonder, what is so magical about a choir rehearsal that these adults are willing to give themselves to experience the freedom of playful banter - to step outside their carefully groomed professional demeanor?

The secret I've discovered is this - that no matter what choir you conduct, you are always conducting a children's choir - it's just that some of the children are older than others.

I think it is necessary in all forms of golf instruction to repeat over and over descriptions of the same movements. Often the student will grasp the teacher's meaning when stated one way when he has failed to understand it in many other forms.

Teaching through metaphor is common in choral music. It is a tremendous challenge for us to describe in words an aural phenomenon that cannot be seen or touched. As music teachers we must be willing to look anywhere and everywhere for examples and metaphors that might serve well in the choral rehearsal. A word of caution is required, however. Too often choral directors become so enamored of their own command of words that they seem to be trying to draw attention to themselves. Remember, it's not what the teacher says, but what the student hears that matters.

A teacher's real reward is not money; it is the joy of helping others.

On the campus where I teach, the music building is located directly across from the building which houses the College of Business. Given that the

salaries of professors at state universities are public information, the topic of salary inequity between disciplines arises from time to time. Last year, a parent of one of the members of my boychoir called and said they had no idea how to decipher the Christmas list their son had given them. Seems all he had requested was a video tape entitled, *The Three Tenors*. At that very moment I heard an angel fly by. Maybe there are more important things in life than money.

Taking dead aim means blanking out the sounds of the world. It can be an advantage to be a little deaf.

Physicians have many machines that enable them to become medical engineers, and choral directors have learned well the tools of the trade for aligning vowels and rhythm. What we tend to forget is that both the physician and the musician practice what might best be referred to as the healing arts.

Singers come to our rehearsals to be fed, both spiritually and musically. They freely bring to us their good will, their desire to perform to the best of their ability, and their love of singing. Not all singers possess the same talent for producing a pretty tone. However, each singer has the same basic need to feel affirmed, appreciated, and valued.

So, the next time you conduct a choir where their heart is bigger than their tone, remember - sometimes we have to stop listening in order to hear the music.

Golf is a game of honor. If you are playing any other way, you are not getting the fullest satisfaction from it.

We live in a society that teaches us that bigger and more is better. The situation has progressed to such an extent that Rabbi Harold Kushner was inspired to write a book entitled, *When All You Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. One of the problems that seems to nag at choral musicians is the idea that, "If I only had a better job or a better choir, I'd be fulfilled."

There is a certain amount of this attitude that is healthy - we all need a bit of competitive spirit to help us grow. However, too often people tend to get caught up in the idea that the job they are doing now is only a stepping stone to the

one they really want. It's hard to hide that attitude from the perception of singers. Let's define success not by tomorrow but by today. Success is doing a job you honestly respect at a level of quality you honestly respect.

Teaching choral music is an honorable, and respected profession. If the singers you conduct are not what you respect, remember first to look inward.

References: Penick, Harvey, and Shrake, Bud, *Little Red Book*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992

Penick, Harvey, and Shrake, Bud, *And If You Play Golf, You're My Friend*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993

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