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SINGING TOGETHER: A Counter-Cultural Witness

“People sing when they have something to sing about.” This is the dictum of a contemporary liturgical superstar, and I found myself thinking about those words this past week when I met Peter Yarrow.

I’ve just returned, within a handful of days, from the Telluride (Colorado) MountainFilm Festival, where my wonderful New York City son-in-law is Festival Director. Telluride, I should point out at once, has been called “America’s Most Beautiful Town.” It’s an old Victorian mining village, nestled in a box canyon deep in the San Juan Range of the Colorado Rockies, with snow-capped peaks on every side.

These days it’s a marvellous destination for winter skiing and summer hiking and biking: an impressive high-tech enclosed gondola runs, free, day and night to its “suburb,” Mountain Village, at over 10,000 feet elevation. Telluride itself is 8750 feet above sea level: You find yourself huffing and puffing with every step, until your body acclimatizes.

The town itself has been lovingly gentrified: No fast food franchises – not even a *Starbucks* – no neon signs, no overhead wires. Glorious multi-coloured Victorian homes and hotels and B and B’s line its streets, completely paved only as recently as 30 years ago. And there’s a festival, it seems, on every other weekend in the Spring and Summer.

MountainFilm is the gem of the lot, according to locals. It’s scheduled every year on the last weekend in May, over what Americans call their Memorial Day weekend: Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Two thousand attendees descend on Telluride, to view, as you might expect, filmed documentaries on three subjects: adventure films, nature films, and social issue films. Besides the films, there’s the chance to meet the film-makers themselves and even some celebrities: Tom Cruise has a place nearby; so do Darryl Hannah and Susan St. James and Maya Lin. The schedule for the four day event is packed: Film showings, daily breakfast coffee-and-conversation venues, and a three hour Friday morning Symposium featuring top flight speakers on subjects that stir the heart, and the blood.

It was here I met Peter Yarrow, as part of a panel at a “Booze and Banter” session one late afternoon in a local artisanal brew-pub.

Old timers will recognize his name as the “Peter” of *Peter, Paul, and Mary*, the wonderful folk trio from the ‘Sixties. He’s a white-haired old man now, and he began the session – there were perhaps twenty of us gathered, mostly handsome, healthy-looking young people with glorious tans and perfect teeth – by taking his guitar on his hip and leading us all in singing “...just like a tree planted by the wa-aw-ter, We Shall Not Be Moved...”

I’ll bet most of those present had never heard it! It’s a classic protest song from those heady days in the ‘Sixties and ‘Seventies when we sang – most of us on the campuses, anyhow – from that wonderful informal “song book” that seemed to be developing day by day; *Blowin’ in the wind*, *We shall not be moved*, *This land is your land*, *We shall overcome* – even *Irene, Goodnight*. Sang, not just in protest marches, but around the campfire, in buses and bars and pubs and parks, and even in church.

Those were the days, remember, when we had not only Peter, Paul, and Mary, but the Weavers, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie and Woodie Guthrie – it was an incredible, unprecedented outpouring of corporate song that caught almost everybody up in its enthusiasms.

I’ve confessed to you before: I’m a child of the ‘Sixties. I began my Campus Ministry then, and shared its burgeoning excitements: The Civil Rights movement, the Peace movement, the Environmental movement, Women’s liberation, Gay liberation. (And in religion: the Second Vatican Council, which promised to turn Roman Catholicism inside out.) Those were exciting days, I can tell you.

Much of the promise of those days has yet to come to harvest. But it will. Mark my words.

In the Q and A that followed, I asked the question: “Do people sing like that any more? Not in my experience. Is there corporate singing, for example, in the Occupy movement?” Singing together, in a group, is a counter-cultural experience, today. The only time you’re likely to hear voices raised in corporate song these days is “Happy Birthday to You.” I was quoting here another mentor of mine, another contemporary liturgical superstar.

Still: “People sing when they have something to sing about.” And you don’t have to be a diva: You can sing in a group, even if you can’t carry a tune in a bucket.

I attend a parish church these days where we regularly sing eight – *eight!* – hymns every Sunday. It’s wonderful. Granted, we sing three hymns during the reception of the Communion. And a hymn is often a psalm paraphrase in lieu of a full psalm. We’ve at least become acquainted with almost every hymn in our hymnal. What a treasure! Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Fred Pratt Green, Silvia Dunstan, folk melodies from Scotland, Ireland, and Scandinavia, Victorian weepers, contemporary “praise choruses,” African

call-and-response songs (with drums, of course!), German chorales, even plainsong: Your parish is impoverished without at least an acquaintance with these treasures!

Compare that with your typical parish repertoire. Two or three hymns at most. And those probably the same dozen hymns, Sunday after Sunday, no matter the Day or Season. Or worse yet, compare our parish practice with your typical “mega-church,” in my experience, where a choral group with band does all the singing for the congregation, the people joining in almost incidentally, if at all.

We live today in a radically private, individualistic culture. Young and old walk down the street plugged in to their ear-buds or cell phones, oblivious to the urban sounds – the music! – surrounding them. Christians should be in the forefront of resisting this terrible diminishment of our *humanum*.

So for groups of people actually to sing together, in church or as we used to in our protest marches – that’s a distinctly counter-cultural witness. We dare not lose this treasure. It will take hard work and discipline to make it happen in every parish. But the work will be well worth it. We’ll find our souls enriched and enlarged.

Some trivia: I would never describe myself as having perfect pitch. But after more than 55 years now of Christian ministry, singing those marvellous plainsong phrases of the Preface – “The Lord be with you...” – at the beginning of the Communion, week after week, I can usually hit that “G” out of thin air.

Stop me on the street sometime and test me.

