

To Sing or Not to Sing

By Steve Hanamura



Expert Forum



Shortly after I moved to Portland in 1980 a colleague, knowing my background with high school and college choirs, invited me to join the Choral Arts Ensemble, a forty-voice group that primarily sang classical music. Oddly enough we were invited to sing back up on a number with singer/songwriter Barry Manilow during his concert here in town. When we showed up for rehearsal the producer took one look at me and walked over to our director and said, "He can't sing."

"What do you mean?" the director asked. "He's one of our basses."

"He can't sing because he's blind!"

"What does being blind have to do with his singing?"

"The choir needs to run on and off the stage at a fairly fast clip. There are lots of cords on the floor and he may trip and knock over the microphones and lights." Knowing that I am a rather outspoken person the director said to the producer, "I'm not going to tell Steve that! You tell him."

What followed was a rather heated twenty-minute discussion between the producer and me regarding my ability to get on and off the stage safely. I realized that I wasn't getting anywhere so I asked if he would be willing to let me try it during practice. If I messed up, then I wouldn't sing during the performance. He agreed. Practice went well so I was allowed to sing with the Ensemble during the performance.

To his credit, the producer came up to talk with me after the show. "Steve", he began, "I'm sorry about what happened. You see two days ago we had a blind woman in Los Angeles who didn't know how to teach her sighted guide how to help her get on and off the stage. She bumped into the lights, knocked over a microphone and we had to stop the performance."

As I listened to the producer's story, I realized that within a very short period of time he had had two very different experiences with someone who is blind. He had every right to be apprehensive, but to his credit chose not to discriminate based on the previous experience.

Today there is a lot of discussion about implicit and explicit bias. We make the assumption that if you meet one person with a disability or a person of color or someone identifying as LGBTQ or someone who speaks another language or

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someone in a different work group or ... then you have met them all and whatever experience you have informs how you behave with others in the same group. The problem is biases and stereotypes often pre-empt our ability to connect with one another. If the producer had enforced his bias, I would not have been able to sing, and he would have always assumed that blind people can't be on stage in a back-up group

The late Roosevelt Thomas said that diversity is a journey and not a destination. We think we can eradicate prejudice and discrimination but that's probably never going to happen. What we need to focus on is the journey and that each one of us on a day to day basis is in the process of learning how to recognize our own prejudices and biases and then reduce or change our behaviors accordingly. Each of us will experience fear, anger, and doubt on how to address these different dimensions of diversity. Find people you can talk with, learn from them and then commit to help make the appropriate changes in how you respond to those who are different from you.