

Gold Medal Moments  
by Dr. Jim Henry  
Harmony University Keynote Address  
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First I want to express how honored I feel to be standing here this evening. I was twelve when I attended my first Harmony College back when Bob Johnson stood in this same spot. Like most students in those days, I was completely evangelized by him and scared to death that he would carry through with his threat to send home anyone that he caught singing a modern tag (which, I now admit, I did do on occasion). As a matter of fact, singing modern tags at Harmony College in 70's involved five people: four to sing the tag and one to look all around for Bob Johnson like a terrified meerkat. But we became very adept at shifting instantly from any major-7<sup>th</sup> chord to "My Wild Irish Rose" whenever we saw Dr. Johnson coming our way.

I also learned from some of the Barbershop Society's most revered icons like Dave Stevens, Lou Perry, Mac Huff, Val Hicks, Greg Lyne, Eric Jackson and others through the years at Harmony College, and from fellow (albeit adult) students who took me under their wings—men like Chuck Lower, Bill Heyer, David Krause, Bob Landry, Gordon Lankenau, Ron Black, Rick Taylor, Dwain Brobst, and countless others. I can honestly say that this is the setting that really put me on the path that has led to my being invited to speak to you tonight. I am overwhelmed and deeply humbled.

In the introduction to his 1925 *Book of American Negro Spirituals*, James Weldon Johnson, a towering figure of the Harlem Renaissance—author, lyricist, composer, lawyer, civil rights leader, and founder of the NAACP—recalled a scene from his boyhood memories of Jacksonville, Florida in the 1880's. See if it doesn't sound familiar to you:

In the days when such a thing as a white barber was unknown in the South, every barber shop had its quartet, and the men spent their leisure time playing on the guitar...and 'harmonizing.' I have witnessed some of these explorations in the field of harmony and the scenes of hilarity and backslapping when a new and rich chord was discovered. There would be demands for repetitions and cries of, 'Hold it! Hold it!' until it was firmly mastered. And well it was, for some of these chords were so new and strange for voices that, like Sullivan's Lost Chord, they would have never been found again except for the celerity [i.e., swiftness] in which they were recaptured. In this way was born the famous but much abused 'barber-shop chord.'

In these days when controversies about what does and what does not constitute barbershop fester incessantly (Is "Surfer Girl" barbershop?), it is reassuring to read an account from 125 years ago that describes exactly the same scene that takes place in nearly every corner of every barbershop harmony gathering around the world today. Never mind that these poor ignorant souls from the last millennium didn't know that they weren't supposed to use a guitar, or be unashamed about finding new chords with strange

voicings—after all they didn't have the contest rules or the sages of the Harmonet to set them straight—and, truth be told they certainly would not have possessed the clean, polished sound of a Max Q, OC Times, Vocal Spectrum, or Realtime. They weren't singing for anybody but themselves, and they were loving every minute of it. A lot of things have changed, but that spirit that gripped those singers from two turns of the century ago is just as fresh and palpable today. It is that timeless spirit of barbershop, and music in general, that I want to talk about this evening.

I bet that every singer in the room is here because at least one time in our life a musical experience changed us in a significant way. I am blessed to remember several. I was in junior high when the high school choir sang for my school at an assembly. I wasn't singing in the choir at that time because I wanted nothing to do with the teacher who I considered to be ineffective and uninspiring (or as I described her in junior high school-ese, a tone deaf witch). But I was in the audience when the high school choir came to sing for us. I don't remember anything they sang except for one song: "Search Me O God." The lyrics came from Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." The music was not at all fancy or complicated, and the singers were your average high school students. But for me it was as if I had heard the Beethoven 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony for the very first time, played by the world's finest orchestra. Their music, especially the heart they poured into it, overwhelmed my spirit. To follow the line proposed by the great choral musician Weston Noble, my spirit then inspired my soul—my emotions and my mind—and my soul effected my body, creating chills and a rush of adrenaline. For a moment every part of my being—body, soul, and spirit—was filled to overflowing. I was only about thirteen, but for a few minutes I was complete. Music did that, and I determined then and there that I would devote my life to trying to experience that completion again, and maybe even inspire it in others.

Thankfully, the good Lord has put me in the path of many more life-changing musical experiences over the years, and most of them have been related to barbershop. Most of us in this room know the gut reaction that accompanies latching on to a really ringing chord. It hits you like a drug, and it is addictive. You have to re-experience it over and over again. It is timeless—the quartet in James Weldon Johnson's memory felt the rush as strongly as we do today—and it does not discriminate based on race, religion, wealth, or age. Some of you found it later in your life, others like our friends in Vocal Spectrum or the wonderful Westminster Chorus find it early. I found it early as a second-generation barbershopper with two extremely active barbershop parents. While still in single digits, I accompanied my dad every week as he went to rehearse with a small bunch called the Daniel Boone Chorus. In 1975 at the age of eleven, I was allowed to join as a full-fledged member singing tenor (a feat that I will not try to recreate here tonight or at any time this week). Neither I nor anyone else in the chorus at that time could have imagined that 29 years later I would be directing the chorus, now known as the Ambassadors of Harmony, to our first—and thanks to the Westminster Chorus so far our ONLY—International Championship. Though formed before I was born, the chorus I joined was small—maybe 25 men on a good day—and struggled to keep a respectable performance level through several director changes (I know none of you can relate to THAT dilemma). We hit our lowest

point in about 1979 when we came in last place in the small chorus contest. In other words, of all the choruses in our district that chose to compete that year—and the small ones to boot—we were deemed to be the worst.

Then something incredible happened that changed everything. It stirred us like a tornado. Its name was David Wright. David came to us with a vision that the Daniel Boone Chorus could actually become a great singing ensemble, and immediately began to raise the level of expectations. He made the chorus stand up to rehearse. A few guys quit in protest. He instituted auditions in order to become a member. A few more guys quit in protest. For every change David made, people quit. And yet within a few years we had more than tripled our size and found ourselves competing in our very first International Competition.

Now you don't really care to hear about the history of my chorus, but I tell you about these events because I associate them with a phrase that I heard repeatedly from men who disagreed with David's initiatives. It is a phrase that I think all barbershoppers, male and female, have heard and possibly uttered on more than one occasion. The phrase: It's only a... (*hobby!*). Several of us chuckle because we know that the word hobby doesn't begin to describe our obsession. But here's what I find troubling: for many of us, there is mingled with our laughter a measure of guilt—guilt for letting our “hobby” subsume our lives to such a degree. I have an American Heritage Dictionary at home that defines *hobby* as “an activity or interest pursued at one's leisure for enjoyment.” Certainly barbershop can be categorized as such an activity. But in my 32 years as a barbershopper, I've come to discover that barbershop is infinitely more, and it is time for us to stand up and state proudly that barbershop is not just a hobby. It doesn't just fill your leisure time. It feeds your spirit. It changes your life and the lives of everyone for whom you sing. This was made very clear to me not long ago. Many of you are aware that my brother and the man I stood next to for sixteen years in the Gas House Gang died of esophageal cancer in 2003. Not long after that I found myself in the office of a dear Christian counselor as I was dealing with my depression over losing my only brother, concern over how our family dynamic had changed, and a desire to discover how God wanted me to proceed with my newly redefined life. There are several Californians in the audience tonight, so I thought I'd make them more at home here in Missouri by talking about my counseling sessions. During one meeting, I mentioned to him that I had for years been carrying around a gnawing feeling that I had let God down. You see, when I was in high school I was sitting in church as the preacher started talking about how God calls us to His purpose. All of a sudden, I was overtaken with the feeling that God was calling me to be a music minister. I even mentioned it a few days later to the preacher, who informed me that, yes, he had happened to catch my face from the pulpit and could tell from my expression that God was working on me. But I didn't follow through with any training for the music ministry. I went to college to get my public school teaching certificate. Then I went to graduate school. Then I started singing with the Gas House Gang. Then I started directing the Ambassadors of Harmony. Then I became a college music professor. Before I knew it my call from God was 20 years in my past, never pursued. I mentioned this to my counselor. He listened to my lament and then asked me, “How long has your quartet been singing together?”

“Eighteen years,” I replied.

“Where did you sing?”

“All over the world.”

“Did you change people’s lives through your music?”

“I hope so. I kind of think maybe we did.”

“Did you sing for the Lord?”

“I didn’t always sing about Him, but I always sang to Him.”

“Were you a witness for God during your travels.”

“I really tried to be.”

Then he looked me in the eyes and said, “Jim, you’ve been a music minister for 18 years. And you’ve reached more people through your ministry than most church musicians ever see.”

His words engulfed me—“your ministry”—and I started to cry. I have not called barbershop my hobby since that day. It isn’t a hobby, it’s a calling, a ministry. A full eight months after the Gas House Gang’s final concert, we got two emails within about a week that drove this point home for me. The first one reads, in part:

I was born and raised in Berlin Germany, my mother is German and my father American, they are divorced, I live with my mother while my Father resides in Australia, trying to escape the debts he has here in Germany to the Government and my mother. I'm nineteen now and just finished my German School Degree. I learned to sing Barbershop [at my school] here in Berlin from our vice-principal[,] who has his own quartet and whom you might know from when he sang with you once a while back. It is one of his fondest memories and he speaks very highly of you. He is like a second father to me, and it means a lot that you made him so happy and gave him such a fond memory. His eyes shine when he speaks of that occasion. I have had five quartets, which were all not very successful, but I plan to try again in Newcastle. Your music has been an inspiration and something to look up to for me in the last couple of years and one of the main reasons I want to continue singing Barbershop in College and forever after that. Especially “Hold On” has carried me through the last couple of years and is partially the reason I pulled together the wreck that I was due to alcohol, crazy nights and smoking up, and got my High School Diploma and my Abitur and have the opportunity to start over and make something of my life. Recently a friend of mine called and her boyfriend had left her for another. She was a wreck. I played “Hold On” for her, she felt so much

better afterwards, and I knew you guys had made magic. Thank you Gas House Gang, thank you all so much.

And here is a bit of the second email:

You're music helped me with some personal healing just now and I wanted to let you know.

I have been working late tonight and had live365.com (Barbershop channel) playing as background music as I reviewed some documents. A few moments ago your song "Lullaby" came on. The combination of words and music came together in such a way that I had to stop what I was doing and listen. As the music tuned me in to the bond between the father and son in the song it was as if an arrow shot straight into my heart, and I began to weep. It was a "good" kind of hurt... one that helped me to grieve. You see, although I know my own dad has loved me, I haven't experienced the kind of emotional connection expressed in the song. My dad was never very expressive with his emotions, and even though we often enjoyed each other's company, we never really had that kind of bond, even though I have tried to make that kind of connection happen between us. Now, for the last few years, the man my dad was has been slowly drifting away due to Alzheimer's, and I doubt I will ever enjoy that connection in this life - though I have the sweet assurance that I WILL enjoy it in the presence of my heavenly Father. Your song helped me get in touch with the wound I carry and gently coaxed me to grieve and heal a little.

All this to say, you guys had (still have via your recordings) a healing message in your music. Many of the songs have a musical formula that just plain fits the story of the words so well, that, when sung with the heart you guys have, is movingly powerful. Thank you for your gift. It made a difference to me - again - tonight. Thank you.

And here are some other short comments I've read recently:

"My wife and I come to your shows and leave better than when we came."

"You brought tears to the eyes of the man I love on Valentines Day. He was so moved that he called me up and told me how much he loved me. Thank you so much."

"WOW! I had the chance to see you last night in Melbourne FL. and I enjoyed every single note that you guys sang. Now, I know I'm only 16 but I have a passion for barbershop (quartets especially) and I know when I see the best. (the best being you). Thank you for singing Mam'selle to me. I know I was as red as red can be and I had a grin from ear to ear, but it was by far the best birthday gift ever."

“I truly enjoy hearing your voices ring. I have become a huge fan. Thanks for bringing a smile to my face! Your group has been instrumental in bringing my voice out of the basement and into a quartet! Thanks for the push!”

“Thank you for reminding me, and all of us, why we take part in this art form, where it's headed, and just what's possible when everyone can be committed to excellence and artistry. Unfortunately, words cannot possibly begin to convey what it is I want to express. You touch lives, inspire, and thrill with all that you do. I suppose only two are really needed: THANK YOU!”

These last testimonials weren't sent to my quartet. I found them on the website guestbooks of various quartets and choruses across the country. Because of these ensembles' magnificent performances, hearts are tweaked, precious memories are created, people muster up the courage to sing in a quartet, and husbands are compelled with tears in their eyes to call their wives and say they love them. And who knows how many thousands, or even thousands upon thousands, of other lives have been changed for the better because you guys are so obsessed with your “hobby.”

How many gold medals are those testimonials worth? You'll see several men this week wearing gold medals. But when we go home we will take our medals off and put them away in a drawer or up on a shelf. They're just things. Inanimate objects. Of less monetary value than our cell phone, and less useful to our needs or, even more significantly, the needs of our fellow man than a simple glass of water. They come to us because out of the six-and-a-half billion people in the world, a whopping fifteen men decide that our seven-minute performance on a single day was better than every other chorus's seven-minute performance at a barbershop convention that most of the world doesn't even care about. (Just ask “America's Got Talent.”) Is that really our sole reason for being? Are we so wrapped up in the competition that winning a gold medal is all we care about? It's a serious question, because for some people it is. I mean, for some people, just one point from some judge, ANY judge, would be all it would take to break a tie and make their life complete again. (sniffle)

I went through a low period as a director when that was all that mattered to me. And little by little I started losing my joy. And the chorus suffered for it. Then one day the apple fell off the tree and conked me in the head. I had a revelation: It's the JOURNEY, stupid, not the destination! To paraphrase one of the Ambassadors baritones, Michael Kunz, it isn't THE gold medal that you need in your life, it's the gold medal moments, the little gold medals you win every time you stand with your friends and master a new skill, or finally ring that bear of a chord, or first receive that brilliant David Wright or Aaron Dale arrangement that you know is going to knock people on their butts, or rejoice at the birth of one of our fellow chorus members' children, or weep at the death of their spouse or child. How many gold medals do we win even before the warm-up is over on an average chapter meeting night? THE gold medal is awarded for a seven-minute performance. How many gold medals do we win the other 31,535,580 seconds of the year? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? Millions?

But the great thing is that we not only *recieve* these gold medals, we have the power and privilege of giving them away. To the people we sing with and the people we sing for? How many lives have we changed? How many souls have we fed? How many men have we made vulnerable enough to call their wives and whisper to them “I love you?” How many troubled teenagers have been stirred to make a better future for themselves because of a song they heard us sing. And to what extent do the actions that we inspired in one of those people impact all the other people that are a part of that person’s life? Really, have you ever tried to fathom how great is your impact? I’m not talking to the Barbershop Harmony Society, or your chorus, or your quartet; I’m talking to you—*your* impact. I’m sorry; this isn’t just a hobby. We’re not collecting stamps here. We are creating art in an age when art is being systematically shoved out of every school in the country. And we are making a positive difference, one life at a time, to a world that is in desperate need of it. Music does that. Now, you see, we have a viable reason to sing well. For the better we perform, the more gold medals we give to our audience members and, in turn, the more we receive ourselves. And, yes, along the way, if we keep getting better and perform well enough at a barbershop contest, we win a shiny gold medal to pin on our coat or wear around our neck. Only now it has a real value because it is a tangible representation of the innumerable gold medals that have poured into us and out of us all year long. It represents the lives of every person that has been changed, including your life, because you worked so hard and devoted so much of your self to be great at your craft.

And what is particularly magical about singing in a good chorus or quartet is that there isn’t a single one of you that could by yourself impact people as profoundly as all of you can together. You are so blessed. You’ve been given the ability to sing at a high level. Better than that, you’ve been given a spirit that drives you to improve your ability. Better yet, you have found in this life other good, quality gentlemen who share your talent and passion, and who want to sing with you. Still better, you have been given musical and administrative leaders who not only know how to make you and your soul mates better, but dedicate themselves to it. You are so blessed.

Some of you in this room were at my brother Rob’s funeral—for which, by the way, I am still deeply grateful—and you may have seen the collection of emails that poured in from around the world during the three months that he was sick. It took two three-inch, three-ring binders completely full of paper with multiple emails per page, front and back, to contain all of them. Rob won only one physical gold medal in his life—he didn’t live long enough to receive the chorus medal that the rest of us got and that he helped prepare us for—but those emails represented a small percentage of the thousands of gold medals that that one baritone stuck at the end of one barbershop quartet gave to people around the world, and the gold medals that he got in return. Rob gave me many gold medals in the last weeks of his life. One of the most significant was the day we celebrated the tenth anniversary of our championship. We had bottles of champagne that were given to us the night we won, and the plan was to open them at the International contest a decade later. As it turned out, Rob, was too ill to go to that contest. So we popped the corks and celebrated at his house. At some point in the day someone asked us to sing a song. Rob didn’t know if he was up to it, and he was too weak to stand up. So Rich, Kipp, our original tenor Joe, and I sat around him

and sang one of the first songs we ever learned, “Old St. Louie.” His voice was weak, but it was clear and beautiful, and he slotted every note perfectly, just like he always did. I got to sing with Rob when he sang his last notes on this earth. A few short weeks later, I held his hand as he took his last breath.

And that’s the way it is for all of us. We’re only given so many notes to sing in this life. So many people go to their grave with their music still in them. But not you. That is why you must embrace the gift of music you’ve been given, and this great organization that has provided you an outlet for it. Don’t squander your notes. Sing every one of them with care and beauty and craftsmanship, as if it were your last. Don’t take your chorus for granted. Go to every rehearsal, prepared, in the moment, and ready to find greater heights of artistry. Directors, spend as much time learning how to conduct as you spend on your golf swing, and use every resource to make your chorus a great singing ensemble. Singers, build on your craft. Work that craft every time you sing, be it in a shower, your car, or a stairwell with a bunch of tag singers. Don’t take a half-hearted effort to audiences and proclaim “this is barbershop.” Don’t just sing as if it were a hobby, sing as if it were your life. Sing with the fullest measure of your intelligence and spirit. For, you see, it isn’t just a hobby; it is a ministry. You might not consider it a Christian ministry, but it is a ministry nonetheless. You are making a positive difference in people’s lives. And your own. You’re bringing beauty and art to the world. Don’t value barbershop over God or your family as many have done, but don’t minimize it either. And don’t you dare be ashamed of it. As a matter of fact, anyone I find not singing as skillfully and from the heart as he possibly can this week will be SENT HOME! (I just wanted to see what that felt like.)

In 1513, Machiavelli wrote to a friend, describing how he found consolation from the cares of the world:

I go to the library, and as I cross the threshold I cast off my everyday clothing, covered with filth and mud, and put on the costume of the royal court.... Thus honorably clad, I enter the classical court of the Ancients. They welcome me warmly, and I feast on the nourishment for which I was born. And there I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions, and they, in their humanity reply to me. And...I forget the world, remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death; I pass indeed into their world.

This is what our barbershop music making can be for us—not just a hobby or a sport to win, but an opportunity to cast off our troubles, if only for a while, put on our royal clothing, and come face to face with our predecessors: The Flat Foot Four, The Buffalo Bills, Val Hicks, Lou Perry, Mo Rector, Ed Waesche, Lloyd Steinkamp, and that quartet of nameless African American men from the 1880’s who we would never know about except for the impact they made on James Weldon Johnson—the gold medal they gave him, if you will—as they gathered in a non-descript Southern barbershop latching on to a chord that filled their spirits, souls, and bodies to the point that they had to cry out “Hold it! Hold it” and repeat it over and over again as they attempted to relive that glorious moment of absolute musical, spiritual, and fraternal synergy. And our modern day master composers, arrangers, and directors like David Wright, Jim Clancy, Freddie King, Tom Gentry, Aaron Dale, Clay Hine, Joe Liles and so many others. To listen to what they have to say to us

through their music; to respond to them by magnifying their music with the music of our own souls; and then to offer this glorious new creation to others, each of whom will receive it in their own unique way, wrapping it inside their own sensibilities, and finding a place in their hearts and minds to keep it for the rest of their lives. This is our calling. It is our ministry. And it is an awesome one.