

THE SINGER'S ADDICTION

PART FIVE: LEARN TO FORGIVE YOURSELF

by Adria Firestone

Building on the continuing discussion of recognition, mourning, grief, and letting go, Adria Firestone discusses the healing, forgiveness, and gratitude that can come after a singer decides to leave the stage.



*“Tara! Home. I’ll go home
... After all, tomorrow is
another day.”*

—Scarlett, Gone With the Wind

I'm in the dressing room of my mind, and I'm trying on phrases: "I stopped singing five years ago." "I used to be an opera singer." "Oh yes, I still sing, just not opera anymore."

Why all the waffling? I'm a retired opera singer. Ouch, that sounds so final. Well, it is. It's a fact, plain and simple. I am no longer an opera singer. Instead of pride, I used to feel shame. Why? I come back to this question again because there is a stigma attached to leaving a performance profession.

If you are a retiring CEO you get a huge severance package, several dinners honoring your accomplishments, and maybe an oil painting featuring your steely gaze, hanging on the wall of the company's hallowed halls. Instead, just yesterday I heard a physical therapist say, "Oh yeah, I have all her old videos, but have you seen Jane Fonda lately? She looks horrible!" No, she looks great, and she's 71.

One of our readers told CS how he felt when he met other singers still in the business. "It is often awkward to run into former colleagues who are visibly uncomfortable to hear that I am no longer singing, as though they fear coming in contact with a communicable disease," wrote Pedro Porro. "Yet according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 11 percent of persons who filed as singers or musicians in 2006 were employed by performing arts institutions."

Porro quotes from the 2008-09 edition of the Bureau of Labor Statistics' *Occupational Outlook Handbook*:

"Competition for jobs as musicians, singers, and related workers is expected to be keen, especially for full-time jobs. The vast number of people with the desire to perform will continue to greatly exceed the number of openings . . . talent alone is no guarantee of success: many people start out to become musicians or singers but leave the profession because they find the work difficult, the discipline demanding, and the long periods of intermittent unemployment a hardship."

"I have great respect for people who continue to persevere and even find joy in the face of such unfavorable odds," continued Porro, "but I was ultimately overwhelmed by the 'hardship' of life in the performing arts. My focus is now on physical and emotional healing."

No Virginia, there is no Santa Claus who will bestow eternal youth or guarantee contracts as a reward for genuine talent—and retirement isn't contagious.

So where is our pride in accomplishment? If we are unable to support ourselves solely as singers or we don't rise to the highest ring of the A houses does that make us a failure? No. It simply means we tried something, and tried it again, maybe for a long time, and it just didn't work out. Better to have taken the risk than to have never attempted to fulfill the dream. The key to our happiness at that point lies in our flexibility, in being able to change the vision and release one thing so we can embrace another.

Back to the Future

Sometimes you have to go back before you can go forward. I certainly did. As I told you, I stopped singing in 2002 and didn't utter a note until 2007. My silence began healing my burnout and allowed me to follow my process to the joy I had lost. I began studying for a new career even though I had no guarantees this alternate path was appropriate for me. I started new businesses and plumbed the depths of my soul to uncover what made me tick.

When I became quiet enough to hear the voice of my heart, what I heard was quite different than I expected. Guess what. I love being home. I'm learning to ask for what I need.

I discovered I have a huge need for solitude and silence. I also learned it's much more important for me to be authentic than to be liked. In short, I discovered the core values that fuel my life choices. I learned my priorities are quite different than I thought. Best of all, I found I like myself as a human.

Two life-changing qualities arose out of all these realizations: forgiveness and gratitude.

"The deepest craving of human nature is the need to be appreciated."

—William James

For those of us who feel show business has treated us unfairly, who feel we deserve more recognition and fame, the anger that comes from not being accepted and acknowledged on the level we desire can become a prison for our hearts, minds, and energy.

"Before retiring, I came to equate the sound of my singing voice with the sound of rejection, unemployment, and financial debt," Porro wrote. "I look forward to a day when I might unselfconsciously hum an aria in the shower with a sense of unfettered pleasure. This is how I sang before all the voice lessons, before all the coachings, before all the auditions and the rejections, before I became a 'professional.'"

"I hope to one day sing this way again—not as a retired also-ran, but as someone who is joyous and free. That would be enough."

In 1996 while in Santander, Spain, I wrote the following in a letter: "As for singing, I love it perhaps more than ever, but I have also become totally detached from any career expectations. I only know I will not continue the same nomadic existence without immense rewards. I think my past struggle goes much deeper than testing my mettle. . . . Singing may only be a shining key to something much larger."

When we feel unappreciated, our lives close down and we are filled with resentment. "Dis-ease" sets in, and the burnout begins.

Given all my dedication and sacrifice, I felt that I should have had at least financial ease. From the time I was a child, others used my talent to garner attention and favors, so I too came to believe my talent was the best part of me. Eventually I stopped perpetuating the pain and began the long journey to forgiveness. I had

to forgive an impersonal business that didn't care about me or my colleagues, a business that considered us disposable commodities. I had to forgive the people who used my neediness for their own ends. Crowning it all, I needed to forgive myself. For me, that was the greatest challenge.

In their book, *The HeartMath Solution*, Doc Lew Childre and Howard Martin define this situation wonderfully.

"The incoherence that results from holding on to resentments and unforgiving attitudes keeps you from being aligned with your true self. It can block you from your next level of quality life experience. Metaphorically, it's the curtain standing between the room you're living in now and a new room, much larger and full of beautiful objects. The act of forgiveness removes the curtain. Clearing up your old accounts can free up so much energy that you jump right into a whole new house. Forgiving releases you from the

punishment of a self-made prison where you are both the inmate and the jailer."

"If you want to turn your life around, try thankfulness. It will change your life mightily." —Gerald Good

When I realized I had forgiven myself and was grateful for *every* experience in my life, the positive and the negative, gratitude crept up on little cat feet. Remember I told you how moved I was seeing my students at the university discover their joy in performance? I was inspired to create a cabaret, "Return to Love." Its purpose was not to show off my singing prowess but rather to tell of my journey, with its ups and downs, a journey that led back to the love I had for performance and for song. I shared things that were funny, poignant,

and uncomfortable.

The purpose of it all was to use the stage that I loved so much to educate, inspire, and enrich. In the process I realized how far I had traveled and how much I had grown.

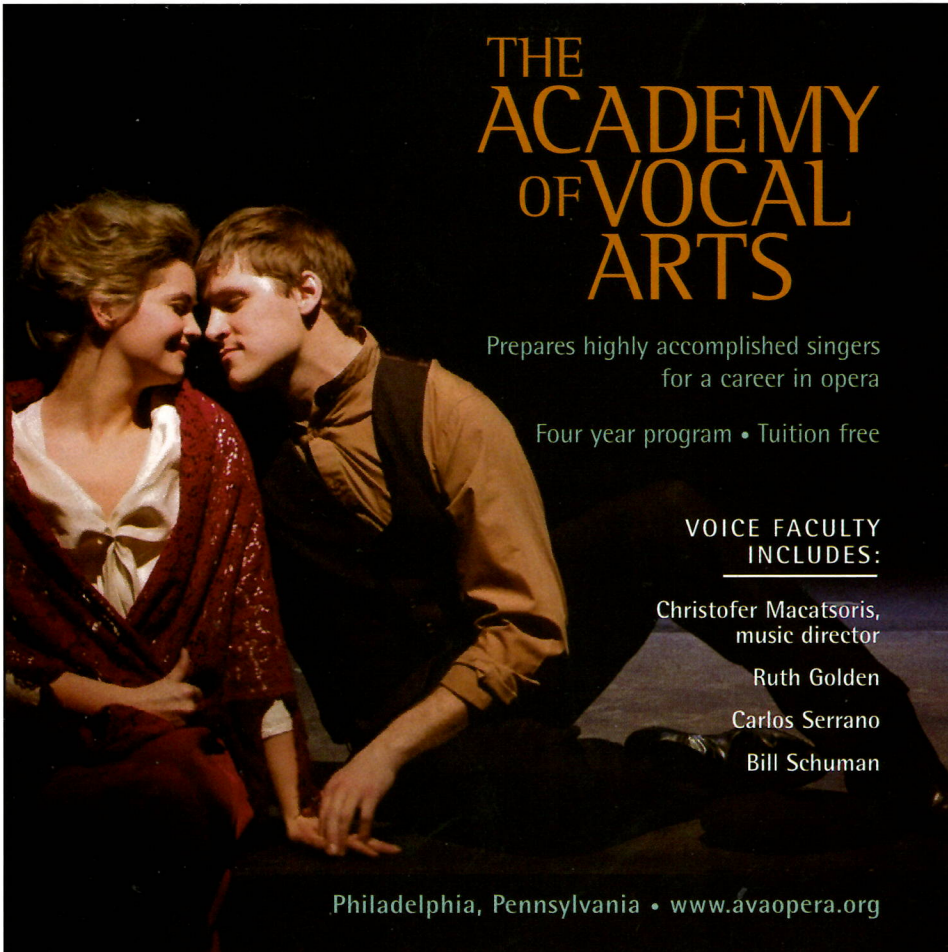
The results were not at all what I expected. I had a positive reaction from my audiences, but the need to sell myself or to garner admiration was absent. I was, simply and directly, sharing what I had learned.

The power of stillness that I felt on that stage was astounding. There was no anxiety, no proving of my gifts, but simply a desire to share. Strangest of all, after I performed the cabaret a couple of times, the need to perform again is simply not there anymore. It's gone. I don't know where it has gone, but it has vanished without a trace. I don't understand that yet. Maybe I never will.

Each of us has our own journey, and each journey has a myriad of destinations. I hope that sharing a portion of my struggle has opened the windows and let the sunlight into the dark night of our souls so healing may begin. We can weave the richness of music into our lives in so many ways, but whatever way we choose, let it be based on *giving* love.

Next month we wrap up this series with many more of your comments. We all have the same fears and pain. In sharing them they lessen, and the ten-headed monster in the closet turns out to be just smoke and mirrors.

Adria Firestone is an award-winning singer and actress whose credits range from Carmen to Family Guy. After an international singing career, she withdrew from the spotlight to explore a deeper calling. For the past 15 years, she has given masterclasses throughout the world and is currently on the faculty at New Jersey City University. Firestone is a speaker, writer, and life coach focusing on the international performing arts community. Visit her website at www.thefreedomcoach.com.



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