

The first two musicals Broadway that I really "got" were *The Music Man* and *My Fair Lady*. I was about 10 years old and living in Odessa. My folks took me to a live version of *The Music Man* staged by a local group at the Permian Playhouse. And just a few weeks later, we watched *My Fair Lady* on TV at my grandparents' house. And I fell in love with both of the con-artists with the initials H.H.: Henry Higgins and Harold Hill. In fact I was a little disappointed to find out later that other musicals didn't always have some kind of con as a central part of the plot.

Now, Henry Higgins and Harold Hill have very different motivations as to why they're engaged in deceiving others—I'll say more about that in just a moment. But they also have much in common—both seem incapable of loving anyone but themselves—and I'll say more about that as well.

I want to begin with Henry Higgins and *My Fair Lady*. This 1956 musical was based on a 1912 play, *Pygmalion*, by the great Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw. The title comes from the Greek myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with one of his statues, which later comes to life.

Shaw was very critical of the class divisions in British society, and *Pygmalion* satirized these divisions. And just in case you forget the stratification in British society in 1912, remember another very popular film that is set in 1912: *Titanic*. A large part of the plot in *Titanic* centers on the class distinctions, between the upper, middle, and lower classes. In *Pygmalion*, and then *My Fair Lady*, a central part of the plotline is Henry Higgins, the professor of linguistics, trying to subvert those differences. He tries to remove class distinctions through changing people's speech patterns.

When Alan Lerner and Frederick Loewe said they were going to adapt *Pygmalion* to be a musical, people thought it was hopeless. No lesser lights than Rodgers and Hammerstein had tried to write a musical based on *Pygmalion*, but gave it up as impossible. But Lerner and Loewe pulled it off, and their songs integrate almost seamlessly with Shaw's play. And in their opening musical number, even though Lerner and Loewe wrote the song, the sentiments are pure Shaw.

In the opening number linguistic Professor Henry Higgins encounters Eliza Doolittle, a poor girl selling loose flowers, and berates her for her ghastly accent. And then he sings,  
*Why can't the English teach their children how to speak?*  
*This verbal class distinction by now should be antique.*

And then he says to the wealthy Col. Pickering,  
*If you spoke as she does, sir,*  
*Instead of the way you do,*  
*Why, you might be selling flowers, too.*  
*An Englishman's way of speaking absolutely classifies him*  
*The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him*

Higgins then makes a boast about Eliza. He says,

"You see this creature with her kerbstone English, the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days? Well sir, in six months I could pass her off as a duchess at an Embassy ball."

Well, Eliza desires to be upwardly mobile instead of being trapped in poverty. And Col. Pickering agrees to foot the bill for the expenses of this experiment in trying to change a poor girl into someone who could pass for a proper lady.

Like the mythic Pygmalion, Henry Higgins will sculpt Eliza with phonetics and linguistics. And in the end, they are all successful. Eliza is able to pass as a duchess. It is a paean to upward mobility. With education and training Eliza is able to escape being a "prisoner of the gutter."

But there is another theme that weaves through the play. Pygmalion sculpted a statue, an inanimate thing. And throughout the play, that's exactly the way Henry sees Eliza, as a thing, not a person.

His housekeeper berates him:

"Sir, you can't take a girl up... as if you were picking up a pebble on the beach."

To which Higgins replies, "Why not?"

Later, Henry's mother berates both Henry and Col. Pickering about the way they're objectifying Eliza. She says,

"You're a pretty pair of babies playing with your live doll."

And yet there is one chink in Higgins's armor that shows itself toward the end of Act 1.

Pickering says,

"What of the girl? You act as if she doesn't matter at all."

To which Higgins replies,

"Rubbish Pickering. Of course she matters... What could possibly matter more than to take a human being and change her into a different human being by creating a new speech for her? Why, it's filling up the deepest gulf that separates class from class, and soul from soul. She matters immensely."

And the Second Act will show how this growing realization plays out in Higgins's life. He doesn't think he needs love. He doesn't really think of anyone but himself. But he begins to open himself up to the possibility that he might need someone else. Not all at once. And not in a standard "Hollywood" romantic way. But he realizes that he wants Eliza as part of his life.

His final song is, "I've grown accustomed to her face." It's not an ultra-passionate proclamation. But for Henry Higgins, it indicates tremendous growth in feeling affection toward someone other than himself.

We have a similar theme play out in *The Music Man*. Interestingly, *The Music Man* is also set in 1912, just like *My Fair Lady*. But the class-conscious society of London is completely different from the town of River City, Iowa. And into this unsuspecting Midwestern town walks a fast talking con-man, another "Professor" named Harold Hill. We're not sure who he is, and even he's not sure who he is. He unexpectedly meets up with an old colleague who has gone legit and is now working in the livery stable. But the old colleague always calls Harold Hill by the name of Gregory, or Greg. So we're not sure what his true identity is.

We find out he is NOT a music professor. The conservatory he claims to have graduated from was not even around at that time he claimed to have attended. No, he's simply a con-artist. And the con is to sell boys' bands: to get people to buy instruments, and uniforms, and music lessons. The only catch is, Harold Hill doesn't know anything about music, and he has gotten the con down to a fine science, getting the money and then skipping town at the last minute.

Professor Henry Higgins was trying to fool people in order to eliminate class distinctions.

"Professor" Harold Hill is just in it for the money.

And as part of his con in every town he goes to, he tries to seduce the local music teacher to keep her off balance so that she won't be able to reveal his lack of musical training.

Except this time, it backfires. Harold Hill really falls in love with music teacher and librarian Marian Peroo. And he feels great affection for her young brother Winthrop as well. For the first time in his life, Harold Hill, or Greg, or whoever he is, finds love. In his words, the salesman has gotten his "foot stuck in the door."

And as the con is falling apart, he stays instead of running because of that love. For the first time in his life, "The Music Man" will stay and face the music.

But my favorite parts of *The Music Man* are the glimpses we get into Harold Hill's deepest desires. He daydreams about really conducting a band. He really would like to be the leader of a band. He longs to truly be the man he just pretends to be.

And there's a poignant exchange with Winthrop. Harold has come clean and admitted that he is a liar and that he can't lead a band. But he tells young Winthrop that he's a great kid, and that Winthrop needs to get past his anger over his father's death and his embarrassment over his lisp. He concludes,

"That's why I wanted you in the band, just so you'd quit mopin' around feeling sorry for yourself."

A very angry Winthrop sarcastically replies,  
"What band?"

To which Harold Hill replies,  
"I always think there's a band, kid."

The great spellbinding con artist is an expert at fooling everyone else. But he also fools himself. Deep down he wants to love and be loved. And he wants to lead a band.

At the end of the play, he actually gets to. The band is not very good. But his patented "think system" allows the boys in his band to play something that approximates the "Minuet in G." And for proud parents, that approximation is enough.

Harold Hill has hidden behind the mask of "Music Man." Harold Hill and Henry Higgins have both hidden behind the masks of being self-sufficient, of not needing others. Both have started out self-absorbed, and moved to being concerned about others.

And that's part of our life's journey as well.

We all start out as infants. There is nothing in this world as self-centered and self-absorbed as an infant. It's a good thing they're so adorable, otherwise we might lose patience with them.

Because infants only know about their own needs: "I'm hungry. I'm wet. And I'll cry out until the situation changes." But as they grow, they begin to recognize others. They hopefully receive the love of others. They hopefully learn to empathize with others. And they begin to form bonds with others. Mom. Dad. Playmate. Friend. Self-centered infants hopefully grow into loving individuals in relationship with others, and in community with others.

And that's part of our spiritual journey as well.

God loves us before we love him. God loves us before we love others. God pours out his gifts and his abundance upon us. And hopefully, we will respond to God's love by loving God, and loving others.

God knows who we truly are, who we are truly created to be. We might be in denial. We might wear our masks. We might be trying to con ourselves or others.

Yet God will love us and keep loving us until we become who we are supposed to be. God will form us and transform us, if we'll let him.

Open yourself to the loving hands of your Divine Sculptor.

Let him shape your life.  
Let him change your life.