

In the valley of echoes

People often respond not to the person in front of them but to reverberations from the past.

by [Julian DeShazier](#) in the [May 2026](#) issue

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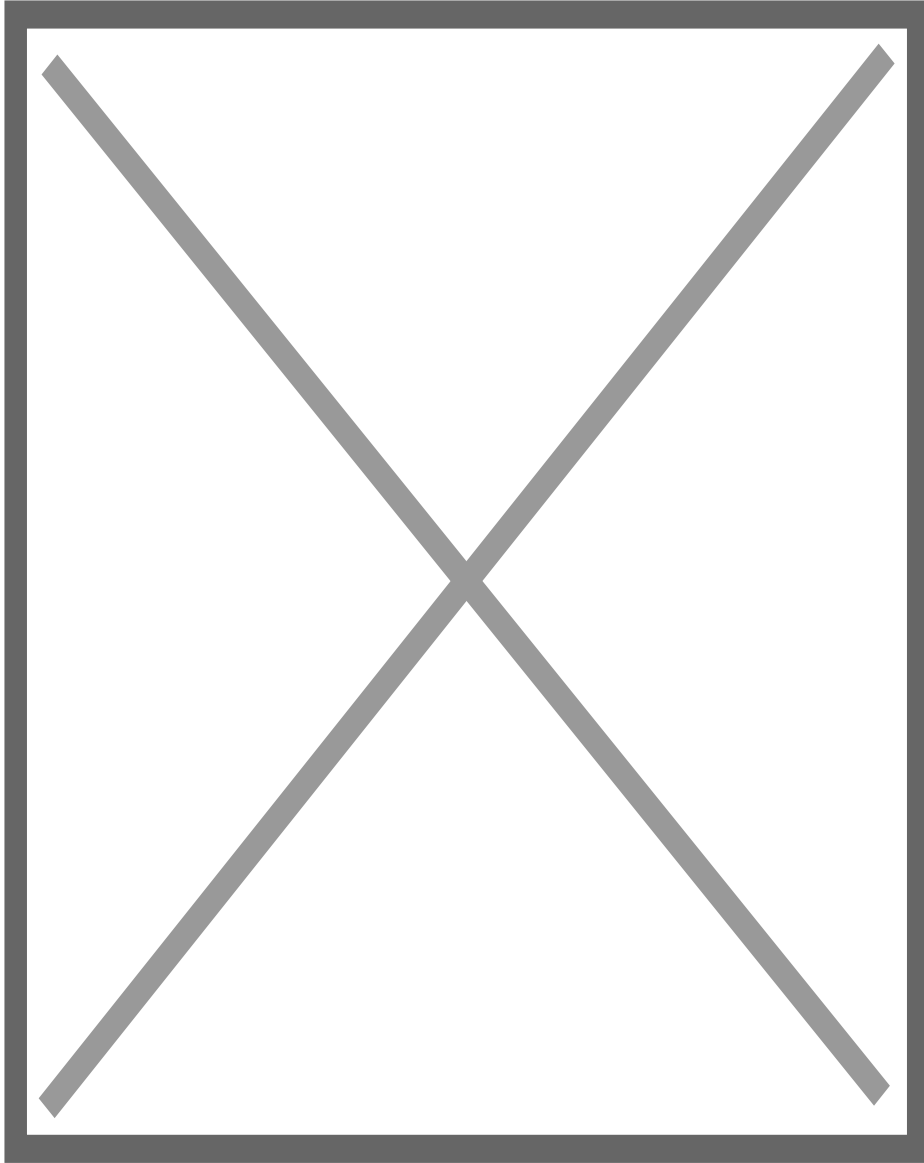


Illustration by Susie Ang

I have in recent months undergone several changes, some simple and others more profound. These shifts reverberate through the rest of my life. They impact people around me as well: In interactions with others I often get the sense that they are lingering with and responding to my old self. It is quite the inconvenience for all involved.

I guess this is what happens when you shed a skin. Though that's not quite the right metaphor; no one keeps interacting with the skin. Nor is being under the shadow of some past the right image, because shadows are temporary things: Once you move whatever is blocking the light, the shadow is gone. No, what I am describing is an echo, in which what has been done continues to vibrate in other people's experience of us.

I got this image while working at McCormick Theological Seminary, where the school's Trauma Healing Initiative is teaching students, faculty, and staff about how trauma works in the body. Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, a must-read in trauma scholarship, describes traumatic experiences as echoes that continue to live in the body, so that our responses to things are often wired by unprocessed experiences from years ago. It was in this work we were doing as faculty that I met the echoes inside my own body—the past crying out for healing—which correlated with a particularly stressful relationship I was trying to better understand. I kept thinking, *If I've changed, why isn't this getting better?* Then the realization struck me like an anvil: This person is dealing with an echo of me.

This felt true in a way all true things feel. Then I extended it further. If someone could be dealing with an older version of me, could they also be dealing with other antiquated notions of my identity that I had nothing to do with in the first place? I'm a Black man, and it seems like everything I do resonates with existing vibrations in the people I encounter. Sometimes this is positive. Someone who wants to heal some racial tension from the past will be nicer to me—it won't heal you, but please always be nice to me—and I certainly have benefited from echoes of moments that had nothing to do with me.

But others I encounter have been socialized into notions of how I should think, speak, and act. One of the sinister by-products of racism in the classroom is that many Black or international students feel the need to make up for an experience they did not participate in. This is true outside the classroom as well, of course, and it applies beyond racial and ethnic markers of identity. Gender, sexuality, disability—these are all ways of being that confront people's preconceived notions. Inside of us are echoes. And when we claim these identities for ourselves, it often comes with the pressure to represent an entire people, who have now tagged us in to represent. Without us doing anything, decisions have been made about us. Again, echoes.

At one level I am simply describing an unsurprising (though fascinating) aspect of memory. But one area in which this notion of echoes seems particularly useful is the life of faith.

The God we talk about is ostensibly one others have experience with, and not all of those experiences have been positive. The church I want to help build is likely different from whatever someone else thinks of when they hear that word. Indeed, the word *church* illustrates how real and fraught these personal and cultural echoes can be. This holy work Christians commit ourselves to sits in a valley of echoes that crescendo from gongs none of us was there to make. Yet this work belongs to us.

This helps me understand the biblical Jesus a bit better—as someone who was moving and healing in a world where would-be messiahs came and went. It adds texture to his quoting and reframing of familiar scriptures; he knows what people think of him, and, more importantly, he knows what experiences and expectations they are holding onto that keep them from embracing him fully. He understands the echoes. And instead of the tirade that echoes through my body at times—*Why don't you see me? Give me a chance!*—he uses his last breaths to forgive them (Luke 23:34).

I feel convicted by that, and it raises interesting questions about the future of faith leadership. How do we declare justice and jubilee in a world of violence, hatred, and exclusion—all done in the name of a Christian god? How do we proclaim good news amid this calamitous ruckus? Can we make a joyful noise that can be heard amid the din of what Paul calls a “resounding gong” (1 Cor. 13:1, NIV)? It's the same question today as it was in ancient Corinth: How do we navigate these echoes?

In this political and spiritual moment—“our struggle is not against flesh and blood,” says another epistle (Eph. 6:12)—it feels like we are spending more of our time fighting against something (or someone) than fighting for anything. This tension between the apophatic “not that” and the constructive “like this” is always present, and it urges our caution as many of us lean further into politics. Others have resigned themselves to being gongs inside silos, playing the game of who can be loudest; we should not follow suit.

Here with you, in the valley of echoes, I want our proclamations to resonate, recognizing that the science of sound also applies to leadership: clear is better than loud. We need to listen, like Jesus, to what is said about us so we can reframe it—understand the echoes. We need to proclaim our vision for love and beloved community in a consistent and collective voice, so that when the noise stops we can still be heard.

And a new echo begins.