

11-25-16 A Spiritual Journey

Last Saturday night brought me to a much anticipated concert by Mavis Staples. My oldest son told me about her last year and advised me if I ever had the chance to see her that I must! So, when I saw that my Alma Mater, U Mass Boston, was bringing the marvelous Mavis so close to home, I was on board.

Going to a concert, getting away from a routine, having some fun, and doing something for myself was part of my recovery process. Recovering from something for which there is no recovery; that of the death of a child. My thirty five year old son, Keith, died on August 8, 2015 from fentanyl. The deadly fentanyl had been added to street-purchased "Percocet" pills. That is one downside of buying drugs off the street, you just don't know what is in them. At least with a prescription, it is what it is supposed to be. My son, unbeknownst to his family, had years earlier joined the early wave of the overprescribing of opioid pain relievers, with insufficient follow-up or guidance. Not everyone becomes addicted but some do. Once the disease has hold of them, they live for what the body craves. They die for it, too.

Keith was one of the more than fifteen hundred opioid deaths in Massachusetts alone in 2015. When you add up the numbers for other fatal overdoses, such as tranquilizers and heroin, just to name two, the numbers are staggering! Add alcohol and we are talking about hundreds of thousands across the nation. A generation of young people are being lost from this country. Their children are growing up with the tragic loss of a parent, or both parents. Grandparents are raising grandchildren at an ever increasing rate.

Last year, my mind and heart were consumed with grieving my loss and with worries about the alarming rate of still increasing numbers of people struggling with addiction. And they do struggle. They are tormented inside even when they appear to be happy and functioning. It is a developed "survival" skill to pass for normal.

Last August, after my family honored Keith, his struggles, and his gifts to us, I was left with the question of "What now?" After a while, I concluded that year two would be a spiritual journey. How can I heal? Where is Keith? Can I rediscover religious beliefs? Where could I find faith and hope?

I have no path laid out before me. I approach it with an open mind and heart. I took a Reiki class, both for me and in case I could offer relief to another. I talk to (some) people about their religious beliefs.

Little did I know that when I would hear Mavis Staples sing, that she would add so much to this spiritual journey. It was like going to church, in the best of ways; inspiring and uplifting.

I knew she was categorized as a rhythm and blues/gospel singer. I had a hunch she was a political activist. She has been through so much and she stands there on stage and brings hope and laughter and offers you her hand. She tells you to lift your chin high, put out your chest out and to smile. Don't let anyone take away what you own. Own your smile and your happiness.

She also delivers down to earth tough messages about responsibilities. In *Can You Get to That?* she recalls someone in her life who was irresponsible, checks coming back as "insufficient funds" and she wants to know, Can you get to that? Mavis knows how to be tough. In *Tomorrow*, she says, "Gotta' work for what you want, Nothin' comes automatic".

I was not prepared for songs reminding me of Keith, making me cry tears of loss and of gratitude. She sang songs about having family and friends. I recalled the support I had and have of so many friends and a loving family. She sang a song written by Bon Iver (Justin Vernon) called *Dedication*. For me, it was a personal song dedicated to Keith. "Down the road we walked. Down the road we talked. I remember when." (I will never forget!)

Her songs are layered with meaning and open to interpretation, like all great art. For one, it is political, for another purely religious and for others, uplifting messages of hope.

She knows hope after deep, dark, painful struggles. Those lyrics had personal meaning for me because of the struggles for those suffering from addiction and the turmoil the family suffers. How could I not think of addiction with lyrics such as the following?

“Come away from the darkness darling. Come back into the light again. If you call my name, I will come.” (from *If It's A Light*)

“In a moment, When you can't decide, A moment, All torn up inside, Quiet your mind, Quiet your mind. Let your love shine.” (from *One Love*)

“Everybody needs something. Everybody needs someone. Everybody has a friend of a friend who knew a friend of a friend who's got a friend of a friend.” (from *One Love*)

So, I went to a concert and it gave me another tool, another page to my journal, another window into my spiritual journey.

And I made a new friend! *Step into the Light* concludes with this, “It's a never ending journey. Step into the light, my friend.”

Thank you for being you and for being there, Mavis Staples!

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