

Almost Heaven: For John Denver

There is a mysterious force inside us that directs the flow of our attention. Perhaps it's our soul, perhaps it's the Holy Spirit—the teaching and revealing function of the divine. It causes me to notice a particular sequence of events and have a specific sequence of insights in a day, while you notice an entirely different sequence; thus our realities can be incredibly varied and multitudinous. I'm always in awe when this force causes me to respond to ordinary circumstances in nonordinary ways, and I've learned to trust how it can suddenly turn certain mundane experiences into spiritual teachings. Or how it can keep a theme in the forefront of my attention for a long time, as if to say, "You haven't quite gotten it all yet; look some more."

So it was that I was visiting family in Denver at Christmastime, somewhat dulled from a difficult year, when an ordinary event turned high-gloss. My brother-in-law got tickets for us to see *Almost Heaven*, the relatively new musical about John Denver's life. Ahhh, yes—John Denver. I'd seen him in concert twice, listened to his music in my early years, and always been moved by his voice. And yet, a musical about him? It seemed slightly silly, almost anachronistic, and a weird thing to do at the holidays. Interesting, but weird.

We took our seats, me sitting next to my teenage, heavy metal-loving niece, and the lights went down. Six talented singers, one taking the role as Denver, and six musicians, began weaving Denver's songs together with a narrative of his life, while slides filled a giant screen behind them. There were no pictures of the man, just stunning images of what had been happening in the world during the years he wrote his songs. The sound and images brought a flood of memory about the very real, and very emotional, issues I too had been concerned about in those days, and how much I had cared about so many things that have fallen by the wayside in ensuing years. Before I knew it, I was crying quietly, hoping my niece wouldn't notice her wimpy aunt losing it over a musician nobody in her generation had ever heard of. As song after song was sung, new reserves of tears were tapped, and water literally poured from my eyes. I could not stop it. At intermission, my family appeared quite concerned. I regained my composure, only to fall back into the same release process in the second act.

In the music I heard for the first time how John Denver had truly captured the sound of the goodness, the noble yet earthy qualities in the American soul, much as *Oklahoma!* and *Appalachian Spring* do. And I realized that the sound in so many of his songs marks the path of the recumbent soul who has waited patiently in the dark body for lifetimes as it finally rises up and seeks to take over the whole of life; seeks that stretch into full activation. As I listened and let myself be affected, my own soul seemed to be saying to me, "When did you forget about your passion? How did you become partially hypnotized by the world's semiconsciousness? How long has it been since you pushed the envelope?"

Denver's life had been one of perpetual exploration and seeking, in spite of what pained him. He certainly stumbled morally and showed us his inner chaos, yet his drive was consistently

for heart and more heart. His mind soared yet he grounded his ideas in real action. He did more for the world's hunger problem than almost anyone else and yet, ironically, he was left out of the great gathering of musicians for the "We Are the World" recording session. In just thirty short years he made an indelibly positive mark worldwide, yet he is oddly undervalued and not much remembered in today's shallow celebrity scene. It hadn't occurred to me that as Woodstock exploded on the scene and rock stars like Hendrix and Joplin became idols, John Denver did not allow himself to be coopted; he maintained his integrity, his authenticity, and "kept walking," eventually to reemerge and become a phenomenon himself.

There are lessons for all of us in the way one human being lives a life. I have not been able to stop thinking about what Denver's life and death mean to me since that day my inner Teacher sat me down in that theatre seat and opened my ears. If Denver could maintain his idealism and work practically for what he believed in, involving so many others, so can I in my own way. If he could maintain his connection to his deep artistic reservoir, so can I. If he could pick himself up from loss and sadness, from embarrassment and self-recrimination, so can I. The way John Denver lived his life is a gift to us all—as wonderful a legacy as the music he left us. It's so reassuring to have it modeled in the clay of reality: that you can follow your own dream and see it to fruition when no one else believes in you, that you can have the human foibles that make us all real and at the same time embody a noble message, and that you can accomplish seemingly superhuman feats in a relatively short lifespan.

But there is something in the form of John Denver's death that also pierces me. From the concert program I learned that, besides being a pilot, Denver had qualified to be an astronaut and was slated to go into space on the Challenger, when at the last minute, Christa McAuliffe replaced him on the team. He would have exploded into space over the Atlantic, but for some reason he stayed on a few more years and went out in a less dramatic aerial accident over Monterey Bay. Was part of his life's purpose and impact to die in a way that symbolized his "Rocky Mountain High-Looking for Space-Leaving on a Jet Plane" message?

In his song, Flying For Me, written after the Challenger disaster, he writes:

"As you probably know by now, I was one who wanted to fly. I wanted to ride on that arrow of fire right up into heaven. . . I wanted to carry the dreams of all people right up to the stars. . . I prayed I'd find an answer there, or maybe I'd find the song, giving a voice to all the hearts that cannot be heard. And for all the ones who live in fear, and all those who stand apart—my being there would bring us a little step closer together. They were flying for me. They were flying for everyone. They were trying to see a brighter day for each and every one. They gave us their lives, they gave us their spirit, and all they could be. They were flying for me. And I wanted to wish on the Milky Way and dance upon a falling star. I wanted to give myself, and free myself, and join myself with it all. Given a chance to dream—it can be done. The promise of tomorrow is real. Children of Spaceship Earth, the future belongs to us all. She was flying for me, she was flying for everyone. She was trying to see a brighter day for each and every one. She gave us her life, She gave us her spirit and all she could be. She was flying for me, they were flying for me. They were flying for everyone."

As I listen to this song, I can feel the excruciating emotions Denver must have had then, and I can remember seeing that rocket explode live on television, feeling the lives that had just vaporized. I can feel, too, the moment I heard of Denver's early death at 53 in his

experimental plane. My heart contracted, much as it had when John Lennon died. A force for good had left the world and I could feel the void of what wouldn't be created in those years he might have lived. And yet, maybe some souls design their lives so their deaths drive home the meaning and energetic reality they embodied.

It intrigues me how often people know somewhere deep within that they won't have many years on earth. It probably motivates them to do as much as they can and be as real as they can. In an early song, Denver wrote: "I've been lately thinking about my life's time, all the things I've done and how it's been. And I can't help believing in my own mind, I know I'm going to hate to see it end."

Later, in *On the Wings of a Dream*, he wrote:

"Yesterday I had a dream about dying, about laying to rest and then flying, how the moment at hand is the only thing we really own. And I lay in my bed and I wonder, after all has been said and is done for, 'Why is it thus we are here and so soon we are gone?' . . . There are those who will lead us, protect us each step of the way from beginning to end. For each moment, forever each day, such a gift has been given; it can never be taken away. Though the body in passing must leave us, there is one who remains to receive us. There are those in this life who are friends from our heavenly home. So I listen to the voices inside me, for I know they are there just to guide me, and my faith will proclaim it is so. We are never alone. From the life to the light, from the dark of the night to the dawn, He is so in my heart. He is here, He could never be gone. Though the singer is silent, there still is the truth of the song in the song."

If I were going to die young, I wonder, what would I be more motivated to do? And if I am going to live to be 100, what am I truly motivated to do? There is something in this contemplation that makes me realize it's not how many years we have on earth, but how fully we embody each moment with soul force. As Denver said, "it's the only thing we really own." There is something here too about there being perhaps as much power in our deaths—as learning experiences for both ourselves and others—as in our lives.

So, my friends think I'm crazy-obsessed, running on about John Denver for a month and a half! But by allowing myself the plunge, and by feeling what he felt, empathically imagining what it is to live a life like his, I have reminded myself of my own life purpose and destiny, of what might be possible for me to accomplish. I have contemplated new paths of action, and somehow amidst the music I've been listening to, I have reclaimed my passion and awakened from my hypnosis. Perhaps this is a long-forgotten practice, to periodically slide inside the skin of a noble life lived by a highly intentional soul, to remember what one person can do when love replaces fear. Then to ask oneself the real questions: How am I doing on these things I hold as admirable?

Just as the Native American plains tribes stay fully present and in their power by saying, "Today is a good day to die," so I remind myself that here is one other flesh and blood person who really went for it, encompassed a large part of what the heart can do, and was successful. And what better motive for stepping into our destinies, to do what we are "built for," than to imagine that someday, after we're gone, someone we never knew may see the

way we lived our life and be moved to slide into our reality for a moment, or a month, to remember their own dream?

FOR JOHN DENVER

I miss him, my kindred soul
that space man mountain man tree man snow man ocean man
the man I never knew, but knew
I sat with him only twice, in the dark
and he couldn't see me there
I heard him in my heart
his voice made the sound of my soul
and I cried and rode along the notes with him
kept him company
lifted off with him gladly
his voice a rocket
his path to self, like mine,
was pioneering and led through audiences
to lonely moments that suddenly fill with God
his questions were like mine
his solace too
and I know so well the pressure
he kept on the walls of the known world
it's the pressure of those who remember
the diamond light
and won't pretend opacity is real

in so few years he made a magical mark
on the world, the whole world
wove simplicity with daring
a generous heart with real action
brought the dream back
and when eclipsed by others, he stayed true
and followed the muse
and followed the muse
and followed the muse
to the final surrender in the west
into the sky again on a fine day
and on that last day
over the sparkling bay
she showed him the joke
that heaven isn't high
in fact it's not far at all
when you just fall in
but I miss him
a diamond man in the earth
is so rare