

“From My Heart to Your Heart” – A Song Without End: Com-passion With the Dying Via Song

by *Pashta MaryMoon*

‘Compassion’ – ‘com’ + ‘passion’: ‘com’ – together, and ‘passion’ — surprisingly, the root of this word is ‘to suffer, endure’. I prefer to interpret the word ‘compassion’, with ‘passion’ implying what it does in the modern day world – to share in another’s enthusiasm, energy, zeal, excitement, drive, or whatever touches one deeply and draws them beyond themselves — although certainly, in terms of my Songs of Passage work, ‘to share another’s suffering and endurance’ is equally relevant.

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How does one share a passion with the dying – especially someone who you are not likely to know, and who will die before you have a chance to share the ‘journey of their lives’? Mere pity — even empathy — is not enough. I can draw upon my own love of music — especially the way it slides through my throat, hungering for ‘more space’ to resound within; or upon my almost 50-year drive to find a more humyne* way to die. But these would be just MY passions — not those of the patient, not a ‘sharing of passions’.

Although it has become ‘common jargon’ within Pastoral/Spiritual Care organizations, the phrase ‘walking the journey with’ does not lose any of its com-passionate power. As a regular Songs of Passage Bedside Singing (1) mentor on the Victoria Hospice unit, I have come to learn that it is in walking that journey with the patient — even if only for a few moments, and even if only with the ‘legs’ of our voices — that a ‘sharing of passions’ *may* occur.

My Bedside Singing partner and I *may* touch into the patient’s tension or restlessness — and wrap a soft blanket around them with our voices, soothing the sharp edges. We *may* modulate

our timbre to a tender tendril, infusing into their skin — like a musical IV, answering to the incessant plea of their pain. We *may* cradle them in a bubble of sweet, safe sound — held apart, for a moment, from the crass and embarrassing practical necessities of dying. We *may* wind a pathway into their deepest or brightest memories; or pave a road stretched out beyond them — that final road still to be walked in this life. We *may* reach out “from my heart to your heart” (2) — in a moment of dissolving the translucent, bruised skin and bone-carved flesh and drooping, toothless mouth, rattling with ragged breaths, and know them as their souls, as that which could not be “anything less than beautiful” (3); and pray that someday someone will do the same for us. We *may* sustain this quintessential image as ‘a song without end’ within their own knowing of self, and in this one moment — within an otherwise empty, hollowing (but also hallowing) room— hold their memory, in honour of all those who have loved them and already passed away.

It is not that I walk into my own death in this ‘journeying with the dying’ (although everyone who works with them faces glimpses of those ‘demons’), much less theirs. Rather, to the best of my ability, I attempt to share a moment of their ‘passion’ this day — their need, pain or fear; their hope, faith and joy; the elusive hovering presence of all that came before. From this can I sing “from my heart to your heart”, directly.

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1. Songs of Passage co-founded by Pashta in 2006, Victoria, B.C., with the mandate to use vocal music to ‘ease the dying process’ (referred to as Bedside Singing)
2. “*From My Heart to Yours*” by Maria Culberson
3. “*How Could Anyone’ say you are anything less than beautiful*” by Libby Roderick

(info: <http://victoria.tc.ca/Health/SoP/>)

*Editor’s note - author’s feminist spelling choice