

Hank Williams Died for Our Sins

Brendan Halpin, January 28, 2007

Okay, okay, Hank Williams didn't really die for our sins. The most likely cause of death was not our sins, but the barbituate/alcohol combo that would become such a popular cause of death for the musicians who followed him.

So my title is flippant and irreverent. And one of the things I love about this church is that I can stand up here in the pulpit and be flippant and irreverent.

But my flippant, irreverent title is also my backhanded way of saying that I found God in music.

In order to explain this, I have to go back to 2000, when my late wife Kirsten was diagnosed with Breast Cancer. Maybe this is what happens when you grow up outside of any faith tradition, but I could not find anything in my admittedly pretty feeble faith that helped me make sense of this experience.

People from church came and cleaned our bathroom for us when Kirsten's immune system was nearly destroyed by the chemo—(and let me just pause here and say that I will never forget the amazing kindness that people in this church showed us during this time. I literally cannot thank you enough.)—So this was comforting and helpful, but prayer was kind of a washout.

And, ultimately, it didn't work. Lots of people prayed for Kirsten, and she suffered and died anyway. So either God can help and just chose not to help Kirsten, or else God doesn't work that way. And I know many people would look at the life we lived during the three years between Kirsten's diagnosis and her death and say, well, she lived a year longer than the average, and you had a full life together during those years, and that's what the prayer brought you.

I guess maybe, but see, what I was praying for was for her not to die.

I understand what a petulant baby I am. I remember sitting out there and listening to Patty Lieber's grandmother tell her story of surviving the holocaust. I remember sitting there in the pew and crying after she told us never to lose faith, that God never forgets us.

And here I am, having undergone something traumatic but certainly nowhere near the horror that she went through, and my faith went sprawling at the first hurdle.

Except that it kind of didn't. If I no longer found any comfort in prayer, if I was no longer sure that there was a God who cared about us, I did find comfort in music.

But that doesn't really cover what I'm trying to say. I found more than comfort in music. I guess I have to backtrack and say here that Jesus' divinity has always seemed kind of beside the point to me. (I'm going somewhere with this; stay with me). But my mother, a lapsed Catholic who lapsed back in midlife, says that for her, it's absolutely central that Jesus was God, because this shows that God was human, that God understands suffering, and that we're fundamentally not alone.

And so my mom finds this in Jesus—I find it in music. I found it when I was most miserable, listening to Hank Williams sing "I'm so Lonesome I could cry." I felt sad, and scared and alone, but I felt somewhat less alone realizing that Hank had been there too. After Kirsten died, I listened to the Buzzcocks' "What do I get" and knew I wasn't the only one who was angry about life not going the way he wanted it. And when I was lucky enough to meet and fall in love with Suzanne, I listened incessantly to Belle and Sebastian, because their music was the only thing that perfectly captured the weird joyful melancholy, the sorrowful elation I felt as I found a new love while still mourning the old one.

I suppose ultimately words fail when trying to describe a spiritual experience, which I suppose calls the whole enterprise of this sermon into question, but here's what I'm trying to get at: what I felt when listening to these songs was not just an affection for the

songs, but a profound sense of connection with other people and with the universe as a whole.

What's weird about great music, or great art of any kind, is that finding yourself in the art allows you to lose yourself in it. The connection you feel when a lyric says exactly what you were thinking, only better, the way a horn blast or a guitar solo or a bass line expresses joy more perfectly than words ever could, or the catharsis you feel when somebody lets loose with one of those fantastic rock and roll screams; even though all of these things connect with something inside of you, they also draw you out of yourself. Though this has happened to me on numerous occasions, I remember quite clearly seeing Husker Du in 1987 and just completely forgetting myself. Though the music spoke to my own mix of anger and confusion and sadness, it also allowed me to forget all that stuff too.

Because the anger, the confusion, and the sadness were no longer just mine alone. Misery loves company, but so does every other emotion. Even feeling bad isn't so bad when you're feeling bad with someone else. It's this sense of connection that is so important and so profound for me.

Not long after Kirsten's death, I was in the YMCA listening to Loretta Lynn's album Van Lear Rose on the headphones. When her song about widowhood, "Miss being Mrs." came on, I was nearly knocked off the exercise equipment when she got to the line "I took off my wedding band and put it on my right hand." I retreated to that weird room in the locker room where half-naked old men watch television just to listen to the song over and over again and feel miserable, but not alone. If I had any songwriting talent, I would write a song about that day and call it "Tears on the Treadmill." (It was really an elliptical machine, but that just doesn't sound as good.)

When Suzanne and I first met, she gave me a CD with the song "Brooklyn Phone Call" by the All Girl Summer Fun Band on it. The song is about two minutes of perfect melodic guitar pop, and it appears to be about a long-distance relationship. Though our

relationship was anything but long distance—she moved into the same building after we'd been dating for two months—the song really felt to me like the theme song of our relationship—because in two minutes, it summed up my excitement, my fear, and my longing.

When we got married, our friends played “Walk Don't Run” when Suzanne and the kids walked down the aisle, and the Troggs' “Love is All Around” during the ceremony and the Troggs' “Wild Thing” as we recessed. When I walked into the church and saw and heard my friends rehearsing the songs, I had the experience again of being nearly knocked off my feet. (It's a good thing I wasn't, because I was wearing a kilt at the time.) The music allowed us to share our feelings with our friends and family in a way nothing else would have.

I remember reading somewhere that sin is separation. That what's evil is seeing yourself as separate from other people. I saw this in my work as a high school teacher—brand someone as a loser, a burnout, a band geek, and you can convince yourself that they are somehow different from you, and that it is therefore okay to mistreat them. We are at our cruelest when we convince ourselves that other people are somehow not like us.

If evil is separating yourself from others, it follows, then, that what's good is reminding yourself of the connection with other people, and the art I find most moving always does this. So when Walt Whitman says, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” I don't think he's talking about having a lot of sides to his personality; I think he's talking about literally being everyone in the world. By the same token, Sly Stone says, “I am everyday people,” Johnny Cash says, “I still miss someone,” the Ramones say, “I just wanna have something to do tonight,” and they're making a connection with everyone. I guess this means that music, even something like The Dead Boys' “Young Loud and Snotty”, is holy.

And so, I guess, is any kind of art that allows you to lose yourself in it. Books, movies, music, sculpture, even television—if you can forget yourself in the art, you can dispense

with the illusion that you are separate from the other people you share this planet with. So this, I guess, is the cornerstone of my new and improved faith.

And, like a lot of faiths, mine has implications for the afterlife. I've had a lot of occasion to think about death and what happens to us afterwards. And I have to say that a lot of the most popular ideas about the afterlife don't really make sense to me. First of all, will I be reunited with Kirsten after I die, having hopefully spent decades married to Suzanne, who will probably be along shortly? Awkward! Will I have a self at all? I don't see how I possibly could. Illness or injury could destroy my personality long before my body dies. If my self might not survive life, how could I expect it to survive death?

This is a kind of terrifying idea, until I think about that Husker Du concert, or any time when I've been moved out of myself by music. I have already had the experience of not having a self, and not only was it not scary, it was incredibly cool. I might even say it rocked.

So I don't just like music. It is, after all, where I find the answers to all of the most profound questions in life. If you ask some people why there is horrible suffering in the world, they'll tell you they don't know, but God is with you. This feels like awfully thin gruel to me. But put your suffering to music and turn your amps up to eleven and all the sudden the question of why becomes irrelevant. I don't need to know why as long as I know I'm not alone.

I mean, why do we have music in church? Why do we play music at weddings and funerals and parties? Because music, as Madonna said, makes the people come together. Because music allows us to touch each other, and thereby touch God.