

Staying positive.

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Friday, August 22, 2008

Chapter I



I keep starting and re-starting this post. My mind is crowded with so many thoughts that want to get out, and I haven't been able to figure out where to start. So I'm just going to wing it. :)

I registered for the four day Hospice & Palliative Care Music Therapy Institute at Berklee College of Music. I flew there directly from my trip to Seattle. I felt a little funny, because I was really excited about what I would be learning and excited about stepping back into the world of music therapy. Are you supposed to get excited about Hospice & Palliative Care? I wasn't sure.

Lurking beneath all of that excitement that caused me to randomly jump up and down and "yeeep!" (don't worry, I don't know where the yeeeping comes from either) was a bit of fear. Two years earlier, my husband was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Nine months earlier he died. In the real world that keeps on going, that's a long time. In the grieving world, that's not a long time at all. Would I end up crying for four straight days? Would I even be able to hear what was being taught? Would I have to run out of the room? Was I completely insane?

The experience ended up being incredible. I was wary at first. It wasn't long before the hospice jokes started. I am able to joke about non-funny stuff with some of my fellow widdas and widders. It's what we do to keep sane (although not for everyone.) But generally, if someone outside of the club (that nobody wants to join) cracks a death joke, they are given the title of DGI. A DGI is a person who "doesn't get it." It's true, I can have a dark sense of humor. The jokes were funny. And by golly, it felt good to be able to laugh at something that isn't supposed to be funny. It felt fine to laugh too, because I was in a room full of people who chose to work with dying people every day.

There were some extremely intense moments during those four days. During one exercise, we worked with a partner. Each person had to choose three people or things that they could not ever imagine losing. Each was written on a notecard. Then a card would be chosen at random, and we would share how it would feel if what was on the card was taken away from us. I could barely bring myself to write anything on my cards. After all, the person I cherished most in the world had

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- ▼ 2008 (54)
 - ▼ October (1)
 - Desert Song - Part II
 - September (5)
 - August (4)
 - July (7)
 - June (3)
 - May (4)
 - April (7)
 - March (14)
 - February (3)
 - January (6)
- 2007 (134)
- 2006 (111)

Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. -Song of Songs 7:7a



already been taken away from me. I couldn't bear the thought of losing anyone else dear to me. So I turned off half of my brain.

We also did role plays. We did individual and group role plays with the opportunity to pose as the patient, a family member, or therapist. Scenarios were chosen from a basket. Individual sessions were practiced first. My partner volunteered to be the therapist first. He read the slip of paper he had chosen. I was a patient about to be extubated. "Have you ever been part of an extubation?" he asks me. "Well. Yes. But not as a music therapist. It was my husband..." Awkward. But we got through it. It was much more comfortable being on the therapist side.

During the group role plays, we had gone through several scenarios. One last one was chosen. I volunteered to be a family member. The scenario was a lesbian couple in their 70s. They had only been together for a couple years when one was diagnosed with a terminal illness. The healthy partner was worried about being alone. That's who I played. I didn't even think twice about volunteering. Then suddenly, I'm in the midst of this role play telling the therapist how scared I am about losing my partner, and how scared I am about being alone. That's when I realized that this was all striking *really* close to home. Once again, I turned off half my brain.

But something beautiful happened during these role plays and through each of the lectures. I sat there and thought, "Wow. I wish Joe and I would have had this gift of music therapy while he was sick." Sure we sang together. Sure I toted my darling ukulele to the hospital. But it's different when you're in the middle of the situation as well. My other thought was, "Wow. I really want to be able to bless other families with this gift of music therapy." In hospice and palliative care music therapy, you aren't watching people die. You're helping people to live. Recently, I mentioned that, "I've been learning and discovering that there can be as much beauty and power in death as there is in birth." This concept was continually reinforced during my time at Berklee.

The other part of the program that I found extremely valuable and encouraging was when the speakers would talk about their own losses and grief journeys. It was good to hear how they worked through it. It was also helpful to hear the boundaries and limits they set for themselves in order to remain in the field of hospice and palliative care and not go crazy.

It's funny. I didn't shed a tear during my four days at Berklee. I welled up a little when I found myself singing, "Who Am I" during an unexpected song swap one night. I welled up a little when telling the the main speaker about Joe. But I didn't cry. What I was learning was so absolutely captivating. I have so much respect for people who choose to work in Hospice and Palliative Care. They are really amazing people.

Music therapy is so much more than a lady with a guitar entertaining old folks in a nursing home. It was so wonderful to be reminded of that.

Posted by Joe.Karen at 4:27 PM 

2 comments:

[LisaBe](#) said...

i am SO PROUD of you! you are amazing--when i'm dying, i hope someone just like you is there with me (i almost said you, but you don't need that load!). my aunt-in-law has been a hospice nurse for decades and still volunteers now that she's retired. it sounds like amazing but *really* difficult work. your patients will be lucky to have you.

when you're settled, let me know where to send your nine-month-old gift. miss you lots,
xox

lisabee

[8/22/2008 7:48 PM](#)

Anonymous said...

it sounds as though you experienced so much, and you have so much to give of your life with joe. i can't think of anyone who DGI (does get it!) more than you.

go ahead and laugh ..."laughter is a medicine" and one of my most favorite. you have "earned" the right.

I think i talk too much with quotation marks!!!! gigi

[8/30/2008 12:07 AM](#)

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