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TALK FOR ROSH HA-SHANNAH, SECOND DAY

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In 1960, when I was eleven years old, I decided I was going to be a folk singer. I took guitar and voice lessons all through high school, practicing my style by listening to Joan Baez recordings. Her recorded concerts were my favorites because I could imagine the applause was for me.

When I left for college, my C.F. Martin acoustic guitar went with me. Unfortunately, the small mid-western school I started at was not a good fit for me and I left after a semester. After collecting credits at three other institutions of higher learning, I settled at Boston University. I continued to strum my guitar and joined the Folk Song Society of Greater Boston. In 1974, I auditioned for a role in the production of “Bound for Glory,” a musical tribute to Woody Guthrie. I can still picture it in my mind: the dark stage, the spotlight I walked into, the song I sang, accompanying myself on my guitar: “Gypsy Davey.” It was my first public performance. It was a magical moment for me.

In the audience that night at Brookline High school was my boyfriend, Jordan. He liked my singing; he liked other things about me too. After college, we started life together: moved to New York, got married and found jobs. I worked as a production assistant for a fashion trade magazine. That was not a good fit. A year later, I found a job more in line with my degree in broadcast journalism – working for Price Waterhouse, writing scripts for training videos. When I became pregnant, we moved out to Teaneck, New Jersey. I stopped playing the guitar early in my pregnancy because my fingers began to swell and it was painful to play. I did not resume playing after our son was born, unable to balance motherhood with much else. Fortunately, Price Waterhouse held my job for me and when our son was three months old, I returned to work part time, and then to full time work when our son was a year old. My guitar continued to sit in my closet unloved.

In 1982, while still at Price Waterhouse, I began volunteering for the human rights organization, Amnesty International. A cousin of Jordan’s who volunteered for AI in Boston, suggested I join a local group. I had mentioned to him that I was losing interest in my job. He thought I would find Amnesty’s work rewarding. What I found was a world of injustice, and cruelty that defied the imagination. Group 111, which met in Teaneck, was focusing its work on Argentina where a junta in power and thousands of people were being tortured and murdered. At my first Amnesty meeting, I learned about the case of a man from Buenos Aires, Juan Rodriguez, a teacher, who spent his spare time as a community organizer, helping poor people in his neighborhood. In the middle of the night, soldiers invaded his home, dragged him from his bed in front of his horrified wife, and took him to a prison on the outskirts of the city, a prison notorious for using torture. I joined the other AI members who were writing letters asking for his release. My life had a new sense of purpose.

Within months of joining the Amnesty group, I took out my guitar. I was rusty. And without calluses on the tips of my fingers, it hurt to play, but I kept at it. Along with playing my favorite

folk songs, something new and wonderful was happening. I was experimenting with composing melodies. I don't read or write music; it was an intuitive process. And then, I gave birth to a song. I felt a rush of feeling similar to that which I experienced giving birth to our son. I called my musical baby, "Prisoners of Conscience," the term Amnesty International used to describe people like Juan Rodriguez.

In 1984, I stopped work at Price Waterhouse after my boss discovered song lyrics on my computer. That was not a good day. I quit a week later. I wanted to write songs full time. It was not an easy decision to stop work, since it meant that Jordan would become the sole breadwinner. We had not discussed that. But it was clear that my happiness and emotional stability were increasingly tied to my music. From that moment on, Jordan became the very generous and indispensable patron of my art and my activism and would remain so.

In addition to writing letters on behalf of prisoners of conscience, I became a public speaker for the organization. I spoke at high school assemblies. You'd be amazed how attentive students can be when you describe in graphic detail, torture devices used on kids their age living in other countries. I spoke at church services, at Rotary and Elks clubs; I took every opportunity to talk about human rights abuse, to tell stories.

I continued to write protest songs and sing them at Amnesty events, in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York and at the kick off cocktail party in San Francisco for Amnesty's "Conspiracy of Hope" rock concert tour in 1986. Joan Baez sang at that party too.

In the mid-nineties, my music took a different turn after I met the cabaret singer, Andrea Marcovicci. I had sent her some of my songs. She reacted by telling me I should write for cabaret, songs in the style of the great American songbook. I took her advice, and although I spent years writing traditional love songs for cabaret, I did not stop writing protest songs; you see, it was my song "Lover's Lullaby" about that couple from Buenos Aires that had attracted Andrea Marcovicci's attention. Juan Rodriguez survived his tortures and returned home to his wife. He was a broken man. I wrote my song in the voice of his wife. The chorus goes like this: "Let me sing to you, a lover's lullaby, quiet down your fears, dream of better years, wipe away the tears, loving you."

I continued to write and occasionally perform in New York at songwriter showcase evenings and in two cabaret shows of my own songs. But a problem that had surfaced at the outset of my musical career was getting much worse. Stage fright. Every performance was a nightmare for me. I was a psychological and physical mess weeks before any performance, suffering sleeplessness and vertigo. It did not matter if there were 20 people in the audience or 900. I tried pills. I tried therapy. Nothing really worked. And so, I had to forgo that precious desire to be a singer songwriter. It was a terrible loss for me, a terrible feeling of failure. I changed my business card, replacing singer songwriter with composer lyricist. This meant that I had to find singers who wanted to add my songs to their repertoires. I had some luck, but it was very slow going.

Twice, I ran away from the music career. I spent a semester and a half in grad school, at Teacher's College at Columbia University, studying special education. But after spending a day

in a classroom with little children, I felt the walls moving in on me, trapped in that room. I dropped out of school after sharing a tape of some of my songs with my professor. She called me into her office and said, “You don’t want to be here. You want to be writing songs.” I tried one more conventional job, writing tax brochures for the AICPA – American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. I had a near nervous breakdown. I returned to writing songs.

In 2008, I began working with a playwright on what we hoped would be a Broadway bound production. I was introduced to this playwright by a theater publicist who knew us both. The playwright was looking for a musical project. I was looking for recognition. The show, entitled, “Suburban Revolutionaries,” was about a group of suburban housewives in the 60’s who became political activists, protesting nuclear testing in the atmosphere, later the Viet Nam war and toward the end of their lives, the war in Iraq. It was also a mother daughter story – my story. I fed the playwright remembrances of my mother and her wonderfully loud women friends, who, in the same breadth, would complain about the U.S. government and their husbands. The show had a few out of town readings, and a reading at the JCC in New York. But it went no further and after working with this playwright for three years in a difficult collaboration, I called it quits. I broke up with my career. Sometimes you just know when you’ve had enough. Somewhere in the middle of my life, I stopped loving my guitar.

Alexander Graham Bell said: “When one door closes, another opens; but we so often look so long and so regrettably upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us.”

In 2009, Jordan and I moved back to New York City where we had started our married life. As we settled into the Upper East Side, we began looking for a synagogue to join. There was no question in Jordan’s mind that we would affiliate again. There was some question in mine. In Teaneck, we had been members of two Reform synagogues. I had also spent eight years (while we were Jewishly affiliated) as a member of the Ethical Culture Society. For the last 10 years in Teaneck, we were members of a conservative congregation.

A friend of mine said we should try the SAJ. I knew two things about Reconstructionist Judaism: first that it was liberal and second, that Jordan’s mother’s best friend’s uncle was Mordecai Kaplan. We began to attend services here, but continued to explore traditional conservative synagogues on the East Side.

I was growing more interested in Reconstructionist Judaism. Many of the rituals at SAJ were familiar to me, and although I had stopped playing guitar, I thought a guitar playing cantor was a wonderful addition to the service. There was something else I noticed: the God talk was different here. Lots of ways to interpret God but one thing was clear: It isn’t the will of God that drives ethical and moral behavior, but the conscious choices we make. It is our human responsibility to create a just, kind, and compassionate world.

I attended several meetings of SAJ’s Social Concerns Committee. I knew if I didn’t click with this committee, I would not be interested in joining the synagogue. I was hooked by the end of the first meeting. Judy Bass and Myra Zuckerbraun moved us through a long and impressive list of social justice projects. I was learning just how intelligent and caring this community was.

We joined SAJ at the start of 2011, and my volunteering took off. I am currently working at WSCAH, the West Side Campaign against Hunger, and with Manhattan Together, a power organization that brings together different faith groups to affect social change. I've even had the chance to do some public speaking. Last April, I co-chaired a Manhattan Together Assembly held here at SAJ, where we shared stories about our work, including making neighborhoods on the Upper West Side senior friendly, and working to improve conditions in public housing – all of these efforts meant to “transform the world from what it is to what it should be,” as Manhattan Together describes it.

In 2000, I read about a film that was opening at the Quad Cinema. The title was “The Children of Chabannes.” The advance review was written by Alan Riding, the European Cultural Editor for the New York Times. I went to see the film, and left the theater knowing I would write a song telling this story of 400 Jewish children hidden during World War II, in a chateau in a tiny village called Chabannes in central France.

My song was eventually adapted to French by Jean Dréjac, a highly regarded French writer who had written songs for Edith Piaf and Yves Montand. Jordan and I had dinner with Monsieur Dréjac in Paris. It was one of the most magical evenings of my life. He tried to do something with my song, but nothing ever happened.

I sent the song to Alan Riding too, telling him that it was his review that had sent me to the film, that had led me to write the song. I thanked him for that. He wrote to me telling me he loved the song and encouraged my writing. I wrote back to him and, in a moment of weakness, voiced my great sadness that my dream of becoming a household name as a songwriter was very likely not going to come true. Alan wrote back and told me something that has taken me a life time to appreciate: “Remember, Kathy, it’s the journey that matters.”

Shanah Tovah