

What I Learned from Harry Chapin

by Kevin P. White

There are relatively few people whose death has made me cry. I didn't cry when my mother died, for reasons I won't go into here. I cried several days after my father died, when I was alone in the garage of his house and saw his old golf clubs, jarring the memory of having caddied for him sometimes when I was a kid. He and I had been very close, but showing emotion had never been his thing; and I guess I had learned that from him. I also cried a few times when patients of mine died - a few times from me having become exhausted trying to save them, and a few times when their death was just so damned sudden and unexpected. This especially happened when I was a medical intern and resident, and death and dying were relatively new to me. But I sat down and absolutely bawled, on July 16th 1981, when I heard on the radio that Harry Chapin had died.

Who was Harry Chapin? Many of you won't know, because he died before your time... or because his music was never so main-stream as to be omnipresent on the radio. One song of his DID become a #1 hit, and that song plays regularly on the radio even today. That song – Cats in the Cradle – is perhaps one of the most thought-provoking popular songs ever written, one that calls every parent to be better. I can't hear it without thinking about what type of father I have been to each of my four children, now all fully grown (my youngest just turned 17).

But that song and that life-influencing message isn't why I cried for Harry Chapin. Harry Chapin was a songwriter who didn't write for the rich and famous, or the cool and hip. He wrote for those among us who are sad or lonely or old or sick... or all of the above. He wrote about justice and injustice. He wrote about the poor and down-trod. He was the ultimate champion of the little guy. Once he released Cats in the Cradle and became financially secure for life, he dedicated himself almost full time to helping others, in particular the poor and hungry. Among all the performers of his day, it was he who spear-headed World Hunger Year, and was central to the creation of the Presidential Commission on World Hunger. When I saw him in concert, at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles in about 1980, he was donating all proceeds from the sale of his book, and his share of proceeds from one out of every three concerts he performed to World Hunger. In all, he apparently supported 82 charities, and died driving a Volkswagen. In 1987, six years after his death, he was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal for his social activism.

But that's not why I cried for Harry Chapin. I cried for Harry Chapin because I actually got to meet him, after that concert at the Greek Theatre, standing in line with hundreds of others to have him sign the book of his I'd just bought. I stood there for over an hour, waiting, and wondering if he'd eventually just announce that he'd have to leave to catch a flight. But he didn't leave until he'd signed every single book, including mine. And when I told him I was a songwriter too (though only 22 and completely unknown, and headed to medical school and likely never going to become a renowned musician), he seemed genuinely interested. He encouraged me to follow that dream, even if other things made me put it on hold for awhile.

Even though I was a total stranger, one of hundreds he'd met one-on-one that night, he cared enough to spend time with me.

I didn't even think to ask him for his phone number or address so I could contact him and get advice about one day making my music heard, because I was too awed just by meeting and talking with him. But I am confident he would have given them to me. He was THAT kind of person. And until the day he died, I guess I dreamed that one day I WOULD contact him, when I was ready. Obviously, it is far too late for that now.

Just the other day, I happened to hear my favorite Harry Chapin song on a university radio station. The song, called *Mr. Tanner*, never would become a hit – like *Cats*, or *Taxi*, or *W.O.L.D.* – and it certainly would never appear on a major radio station today. But it was and remains a hit among those who love Chapin. In the song, Mr. Tanner is a small-town cleaner with a breathtakingly beautiful voice who sings quietly to himself while he works, just because he loves to sing. That image, of doing something just for the love of it, remains with me to this day. It is the reason I started writing seriously about 7 years ago; and, sixteen books and more than 400 songs later, why I continue to write today.

I don't know if my books or my songs will ever hit a best-seller's or top 50 list. Or have the impact that Harry Chapin's did. But if they don't, I still hope that some people get to read or listen to them – and laugh a little bit, and cry a little bit - and then feel a little richer for it.

Harry Chapin wrote: *Oh if a man tried to take his time on Earth and prove before he died what one man's life could be worth, I wonder what would happen to this world*

My life goal is to live up to these words. And that is why I, like Harry Chapin, have tried my best to champion the little guy: those who have fibromyalgia whom the medical establishment have forgotten; those who are bullied in silence; those who suffer addiction; those who have mental conditions like autism and Down's syndrome; and those who just feel all alone. And that is why proceeds from all my CDs and all my books, like Harry Chapin's, are being donated to charity. You can thank Harry Chapin for that!

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