

Life is short. Do it now.

Deb Tobin

Most of us have heard of the British phenomenon Susan Boyle, who, quite unassumingly, walked onto the stage of "Britains Got Talent" and gave the performance of her life by singing "I Dream the Dream". Susan Boyle is a single, 48 year old woman who lives in England with her cat. She had taken care of her mother her entire life until she died a couple of years ago. Before her mother died, she promised her mother she would pursue her dream of a singing career by going on "Britain's Got Talent" a show her mother loved to watch. When she walked on stage that night, she was giddy with anticipation. But the audience practically wrote her off. Why? Susan was just a "plain Jane" – an ordinary, not very attractive woman and self admittedly, probably the oldest candidate on the show. The audience was actually laughing at her and the judges were being somewhat snide in their questioning, since they were of the same opinion as the audience. "What could this dowdy woman possibly have to offer on this show?" they must have been asking themselves. That is,

until she began to sing. The moment Susan Boyle's voice was heard a look of shock and amazement was on everyone's face. She was fabulous. And then the audience and judges alike were on their feet, cheering and laughing and crying from the sheer joy of watching Susan perform.

I received the You-Tube link from a friend who said "please watch this – I cried while I watched". I watched and I cried too. Her performance was nothing less than extraordinary. Like most people, I never expected the plain looking woman who walked onto that stage to sing so beautifully, with such conviction, such passion, such incredible talent. Susan Boyle knew she had a gift and wanted to share that gift with all of us. And as she did, our collective reaction helped to reaffirm her own belief in herself, reinforcing the belief her mother had in her for so many years. By reaching inward, she reached out and we are all the beneficiaries of her gift of herself. Together, we watched Susan Boyle's soul grow.

In his April 23rd article on CNN.com Peter Bregman wrote about the quiet woman who rocked the world with one performance. He said "...there's something else Susan Boyle awakens in us as we watch her come out of her shell: our own selves. Who among us does not move through life with the hidden sense, maybe even quiet desperation, that we are destined for more? That underneath our ordinary exterior lies an extraordinary soul? That given the right opportunity, the right stage, the right audience, we would shine as the stars we truly are? It's easy to admire Susan. But it's far more interesting to be transformed by her. "There is grace," a friend recently wrote to me, "in being molded by your own gifts." Susan Boyle took a chance – her last shot, she had said earlier that day. And in doing so, she was transformed. And so were we.

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In 2001, my father, Jim, was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer of the esophagus and during that year and the following year I

made several trips to Atlanta, where he lived, to spend time with him. Eventually he needed a feeding tube in order to "eat". What surprised me the most during each visit was his positive attitude and his intense love and caring for others, despite what was happening to his body. Three times a day, he would hook up to his "meal", smiling, licking his lips and telling our family that it was "delicious!" He lost all his hair from the chemo and radiation, so he got a wig that we jokingly told him made him look like Elvis Presley. He lost a lot of weight so he bought new clothes and modeled the smaller size for all of us to admire. His zest for life seemed to actually increase!

In fact, in many ways it was the knowledge that "life is short" which seemed to motivate Jim to act. His faith in a power greater than himself gave him strength and hope and he wanted to share that with as many people as possible before he died. Many years before he had helped my mother to get through surgery and treatment for colon cancer. He was convinced then that a Higher Power had taken care of her. It was due to that experience that

he decided to spend the months prior to his death not pining away in a sea of self pity for the life he wouldn't have or the grandchildren he'd never get to see, but working with other cancer patients from his church, giving them a message of hope about the love his God had for all of his children.

On September 18th, 2002 my dad died peacefully at the age of 60. At the services held for my father, I marveled at the number of people who spoke of Jim's courage, his positive attitude in the face of a fatal prognosis and his willingness to give everything he had to others. His pastor talked about the love he had for his God and for his fellow human beings such that he so selflessly gave of himself because it was all he felt he had to give. We are always, *all of us*, all we have to give.

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Debbie Ford, renowned author of many spiritual self-help books, tells us in her book *The Right Questions*: "Every day, each of us

makes a multitude of choices that will impact our lives. Some of these choices are minor and will only impact a few minutes, hours or days, while others will completely change the direction of our lives. Some choices are easy to make; some are more difficult. Some will lead us straight to success, while others will bring us face-to-face with failure. Some will seem earthshakingly important, while others will seem completely insignificant. But what's imperative for each of us to know is that, no matter how large or small, easy or difficult, each choice that we make, individually or collectively, alters the direction of our lives. The quality of our choices will dictate whether we will struggle in frustration or live an extraordinary life...".

I would add to that the thought that some of our choices, in fact many of them, will impact the direction of others' lives as well. But as good as all that sounds I have a simpler way of putting it:

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My friend, Jean, has lived in Provincetown for over 20 years. Her family has been scattered across the United States for many years and while she may see some of them on holidays once a year, her true family she says, are her friends. When she first moved to Provincetown she made friends with Beverly, who lived in the apartment next to her. Beverly is an older woman who moved to Provincetown from Hollywood, California years before. She's a little bit of a thing and quite a spitfire. They would have grand times together laughing, playing cards, sharing stories and genuinely enjoying each other's company.

A couple of years ago, Beverly was diagnosed with lung cancer. The prognosis is not good. She hasn't been able to go out much and now spends most of her time in the elderly apartment complex where she lives, watching her shows or sleeping. But when Jean comes to visit, she perks right up, makes her a cheese sandwich, pulls out the cards, and it's like old times again. This summer, Jean had an opportunity to go abroad for a couple of months but was very concerned about leaving her friend Beverly.

She was afraid that Beverly might not be alive when she came back and struggled with those feelings. And Beverly was also struggling with her feelings about Jean leaving her and going far away. Neither woman knew how to talk about those hard feelings.

The week before she left, Jean went to visit Beverly, as usual. This time, though, instead of letting Beverly make her a sandwich or set up the cards, she just sat with her on the couch. She reached out and held Beverly's hand. And then they sat and watched Beverly's shows - together. It was a simple gesture but in its simplicity it spoke volumes for both women, who didn't know how to verbalize the feelings about how much they would miss one another. They did that several more times before Jean left. Each time, Beverly would sit quietly, smiling and patting Jean's hand. They were both happy and content.

That was over a month ago. Jean sends Beverly post cards every week from her travels. And Beverly shows them to the other

residents in the apartment complex and tells her daughter, who told Jean on Facebook that her mother was so excited to receive them and how happy she was that her friend remembered her that way. Very little money was spent. Not much effort was expended. A simple gesture – a very powerful message of love.

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I was speaking with another friend, Kathy, the other day. She told me the story of a woman I'll call Mary who was always talking to others, inquiring about their lives and their problems, but never talking about herself or her own personal demons. Kathy knew from their private conversations that Mary suffered from depression but because she never talked about it openly, Kathy thought that she was feeling better.

Mary recently committed suicide and everyone, including my friend Kathy, was shocked. While she knew Mary suffered from depression she always thought she would have another

opportunity to check in with her, to reach out a friendly hand, to express her concern. Kathy expressed regret at not having taken the extra time to talk to Mary, and said she would never know whether she might have had some influence over Mary's decision to end her own life but she wished she'd at least reached out just one more time. She never got that chance.

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In Cheryl Richardson's book *The Unmistakable Touch of Grace* she writes "There is a moment in life when we make a choice that changes us forever. This moment marks a turning point, a threshold of sorts, when we realize that the life we're living is not a true reflection of who we really are".

We are a society of "multi-taskers", each of us moving at a fast pace to do all the things we feel we must do in the course of a day to keep things running in our lives. Most of us work or may be looking for work. Many of us have families or loved ones we

are responsible for. If we have children, we are shuffling them from school or one activity after another: play dates, team sports, friends houses, daycare – all the while trying to fit in things like food shopping, laundry, cooking, cleaning – the list is endless. And the electronic “connected-ness” of the modern age – complete with cell phones, Twitter, or Facebook – means we’ll never be out of touch, even if we want to be!

But how much of this so-called “connected-ness” really connects us with another human being? Are we truly embodying the UU principles that are printed in our literature or are we just paying lip service to them? In this little card it says: “We believe in the motivating force of love. The governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.”

How many of us, in the course of our busy day, remember that the governing principle in human relationships is love and seeks the welfare of others? When we give of ourselves, we enrich the

lives of others but we also grow our own soul. We are enriched far beyond what we could possibly imagine by the sheer joy of reaching out and helping another human being. But do we do it, or are we so bogged down by scheduling and multitasking and electronic connectedness that we forget the gift of one soul connecting with another in pure selflessness?

To quote Debbie Ford again, this time from her website: "The evolution of one's own soul is a process. It's not a quick fix. It's not a five day workshop. It's a lifetime process where we let go, discover and then allow for futures to come into existence.

Through connecting to our soul, to our collective heart, we can become congruent with our deepest values and our life mission. We can then allow for the realities which are always available to us to unfold."

Here at Arlington Street Church, we have an abundance of opportunities to give the gift of ourselves to others in our community and the world at large, such as the Friday Night

Supper program, the work we do with our sister church in New Orleans or on the Social Action Committee - even something as simple as being a greeter or usher at one Sunday service a month.

Each one of us makes a difference.

My friends, imagine for a moment: a world where each of us connects to our soul, to our collective heart, where we reach out by reaching inward, where we selflessly share our gifts and talents with the world around us, or in the absence of anything we may think we have to offer, like Susan Boyle, Jim and Jean, we share the one gift that transcends all – *simply ourselves*.

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Amen.