

Artspeak: Anatomy of the Whitney Houston Tragedy

Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD, Culture and Education Editor
Monday, 13 February 2012 00:00

At 2AM EST, my girlfriend Kesho from Iowa called and informed me that Whitney Houston, R&B music icon had died. Alone and without any apparent foul play, Whitney Houston, whose voice gave us airwaves magic with song like “I’ll Always Love You,” “I’m Your Baby Tonight,” “I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me),” “I’m Every Woman,” “How Will I Know,” and “The Greatest Love of All,” is no more.

When angels fall from grace, we always want to know why? What happened to WH? When did her downward spiral begin? Most of us will remember scratching our heads at her marriage to Bad Boy Bobby Brown. Loved his music as a member of the The New Edition group and his solo venture in My Prerogative, but couldn’t figure out what Whitney saw in him. Love is blind like that. Theirs was a tragic love affair played out very publicly (on reality TV) with Whitney wearing black eyes and seemingly in a constant drug-induced stupor.

In her 2002 book, *Saving Our Last Nerve: The Black Woman’s Path to Mental Health*, Dr. Marilyn Martin, M.D., M.P.H writes that “mentally healthy Black American women are comfortable experiencing the rewards of life. They know how to enjoy the moments when things work out.” We also have to hone “...the ability to tell the difference between what is and what is not under our control.” Whitney didn’t have this book by her bedside. Clearly she was a woman in pain, not comfortable, not experiencing the rewards of her life, desperate to change and not knowing how. And, now she’s gone at the extremely young age of 48.

I have often been asked by friends how I have survived adversities in life. At 50+, friends and mentees consider me the “bounce back queen” or something like the pink ever ready bunny—I seem to keep going and going and going.... One strategy I have adopted is to acknowledge my fears and pains. Facing what is uncomfortable is not easy, but it is a way to be clear about the course of direction one must take. I remain in strong communications with a small group of trusted friends/advisors/consultants.

They comprise my Cassandra circle—Cassandra was the “truthsayer” in Greek mythology “doomed to tell the truth, but never to be believed.” Understanding this paradox, my Cassandra Circle consists of people (men and women) whose judgment and knowledge I value, and who will tell me directly what I may not want to hear, but what I need to know. “Am I overreacting?” My Cassandra Circle will tell me yes or no, or give me a different way to look at the problem or issue at hand. And I believe them and listen. It is important when facing adversity to have those who will provide you with honest assessments, even when it hurts your feelings or points to you as the cause of the problem.

We are taught in today’s counseling culture that we grow emotionally through confronting pain and experiences, while a nearby church sign reminds me as I walk past—“Every failure is a success when you learn from it.”

And perhaps my greatest defense against adversity or the unanticipated changes I’ve encountered in my life has been twofold—(1) I try not to keep looking back. When people look back, they get stuck. Imagine a tape recorder in which you keep pressing the rewind button. Over time what you hear gets distorted because you’ve replayed the same thing repeatedly, and the quality of the tape deteriorates with each play. And, most significantly, you never reach

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the end of the tape. By avoiding the end, you may miss subtle points along the way. We get stuck in the pain, and miss the lessons along the way. Now don't get me wrong, I don't ignore history. There is much to be learned from the past; but it should be viewed as constructive flow of information—guide posts along the way, but not as the formula for what happens next.

By pressing forward, keeping focused on what lies ahead (both challenges and opportunities), I try to live life in the moment and remain ever hopeful about the future. My mantra is often "...And this too shall pass." My second defense is (2) "letting go" of anger, revenge and especially pain and hurt. I believe that there is symmetry in the universe, and that eventually balance must be maintained. Every act of ill will and revenge must be matched by an act of kindness and generosity of spirit. I refuse to become anyone's door mat, but I also don't have to participate in their negative behavior. I don't have to respond to ill will with my own negativity. What is the value in that, and just like being exposed to a deadly disease, I am convinced that joining in negative behavior is harmful to your mental health. I've learned to accept responsibility for my own "stuff" and discern when it's someone else's stuff. And, let it go.

What this translates into is my profound belief in divine justice and in "karma." In the ancient East Indian language of Sanskrit, karma "...is understood as the consequence of thought and behavior, thus providing causal continuity from moment to moment and lifetime to lifetime."

For me the translation is simple: actions have consequences, as do reactions. If you do evil, it will eventually catch up with you. But, if you show compassion and can be of service, goodness will find you no matter the circumstances. Mind you, the positive does not always appear when you want it—we do not control the timing, but goodness and kindness will come into your life if you have cleared the path. In borrowing from Eli's Theory of Exclusion in physics that two objects cannot occupy the same space simultaneously, I am suggesting my own theory of exclusion—that if you have pain and anger in your heart, there is no room for peace and forgiveness.

I wish Whitney Houston had let go of her demons a lot sooner, and not sunk into the drugs and negative coping behavior. I can only hope that in her brief life she had some opportunities to experience joy and pleasure and that she gave and received kindness; I hope/pray that the memories of these reside with her even in death. I wish for her (and for those surviving members of her family) a divine peace, for the gift of song she gave us with her voice. She left us a clear message to live by (even if she didn't follow it) when she sang: "I found the greatest love of all/Inside of me/The greatest love of all/Is easy to achieve/Learning to love yourself/It is the greatest love of all."

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For More Information:

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<http://www.lyrics007.com/Whitney%20Houston%20Lyrics/Greatest%20Love%20Of%20All%20Lyrics.html>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/13/arts/music/whitney-houstons-voice-of-triumph-and-pain.html?hp>