Judy Collins On Suicide, Mental Illness And The Story Her Voice Is Telling

By Carey Goldberg, CommonHealth

I thought I loved Judy Collins because her voice was ineffably crystalline, because her songs were the soundtrack of my youth, because her "Who Knows Where The Time Goes?" becomes ever more relevant as I get older.

But now that I've heard her converse with Here & Now host Robin Young, I understand something more: that infusing her inimitable voice were the pain and the power that come from a life that has included glory but also rock-bottom despair: alcoholism, depression and the 1992 suicide of her son, Clark.

Not that she has kept any of her travails secret. Now 77, she has written and spoken about them so publicly that this week she received the McLean Award from McLean Hospital for "her work to increase awareness about mental health through her many interviews, compelling memoirs and advocacy efforts."

"She has courageously and very publicly shared her experience with depression, alcoholism and the struggles she faced following her son's suicide, thus helping dispel the stigma of psychiatric disorders," says the award's text. "She has reached countless people with her message and is a true champion of mental wellness for all."

Here's some of her conversation on Here & Now, lightly edited:

RY: What was it like? You became sober, I'm sure still, in some part of your heart, mourning your father, the alcoholic, and then having to watch your son...

JC: The worst, the worst. He committed suicide in relapse. I don't know how I got over it, really. You don't get over it. I shouldn't put it that way. You get through it, however. And people reached out to me — people were so kind. There was a kind of cluster of women — Mariette Hartley and Iris Bolton, Joan Rivers.

"This is not a big terrible dark secret."

Joan called me one night from Las Vegas, while she was in the dressing room, getting dressed, and she said, "I know" — it was about four days after his death — she said, "I know you want to stop working." I said, "You bet, I've already canceled everything for the next year." I said, "Bury it. I don't even want to look at it." She said, "You can't do that because you won't recover unless you keep working." And she knew that because she'd lost her husband to suicide.

You said at the time, "His suicide has both ruined my life and probably saved my life, because I have to live through it, I have to get through it."
You have to. I was determined. Then I had to learn, how do I not kill myself today? And it happens for a lot of issues in terms of our lives. "I just won’t do that for today." And I think that’s part of our search for mental health, the ability to stabilize your own, sometimes-erratic emotions. If you know where you can finally wind up — I’m in AA, I’ve been in AA for 38 years. I will never not be there, because that’s where the recovery is. And we have had, over the past 10 or 15 years, a kind of revolution in our attitude about this. This is not a secret. This is not a big, terrible, dark secret.

There is a change now, viewing it as a disease.

We now have a man who’s the head of the drug and alcohol commission — Botticelli is his name. I saw him on television the other day when he said that the moment he walked into a meeting and he got it — his eyes teared up. I said, "That’s right." Mine did too, when I heard him say that because when you understand that there is a solution — you said it was like wrestling with a jellyfish.

We were talking earlier, and I said mental illness is like wrestling with a jellyfish.

I will quote you from now on, because it is. However, there are many solutions. And frankly, human contact with other people who are awake is a big start. I’m very happy that my life is one of sobriety and of living a day at a time, and of working — and I’m so grateful that I’ve been able to work. I have this brand new album, which is to me like a lifeline, and a new world. It’s about the continuity of creativity, and you know you cannot do that when your head is buried in a bottle. I do not believe that what happens when we’re completely out of it doesn’t kill the things in us that are alive and happy and joyful and able to spread the word.

Does it help at all, or maybe even propel you, that while you couldn't do it for yourself for a long time, you were doing so much for everybody else [with your music]?

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Well, I was also keeping myself alive and thriving, because the music, and the artistic aspects of everything in my life, were there. I’m the first person that gets the benefit of all that, so I was staying on the planet and there was a lot of beauty and wonder and extraordinary experience in those years. And until I really went down at the end of ’77 — and I really thought it was all over, because I couldn’t sing, either — in many ways I was thrilled, of course, with the life I had and I was ecstatic much of the time — when I wasn’t passed out. But you cannot keep that up. You cannot.

I’m wondering if we hear any of those early struggles — your son, when he was taken in the custody agreement — do we hear any of that in the music you wrote?

I don’t think that there’s so much a biography, but I think art takes over and makes out of what you are living something that is of you, but it doesn’t have to be autobiographical. It tells the story. I think the voice may tell it. I think you may hear it in the quality of the voice, more than anyplace else. I believe that.