



**An interview by Linda Douty on [www.explorefaith.org](http://www.explorefaith.org)**

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*Spiritual guidance for anyone seeking a path to God.*

**Faith and Life**

**Film and Television Composer Gary Malkin finds a way forward through grief, injury and divorce**



*"We all go through life thinking that we're going to live forever, that we're invincible, thinking that everything will go the way we hope and plan. But, if you live long enough, you realize that just isn't so. You know [the saying], 'How do you make God laugh? You tell him your plans.' After enough losses and twists and turns in the road, you realize that, hey, I better learn to build the muscle that deals with things not going the way I want, because if I don't I'm in for a big surprise."*

**E**mma award-winning musician, composer and producer Gary Malkin does not speak lightly of life's surprises. Now passionately involved in the creation and promotion of the CD *Graceful Passages: A Companion for Living and Dying*, Malkin describes himself as once being defined by the external world... where your bank account and your glory wall are the measures of who you are. Listening to just one track on *Graceful Passages* assures you that at some point in Malkin's history, he did some earnest reassessment and came up with a different definition.

*Graceful Passages* is a compilation of music paired with spoken messages about loss and dying from 12 of the world's most profound wisdom keepers-- Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Thich Nhat Hanh, The Rev. Alan Jones, Elisabeth Kubler- Ross, and Ram Dass, among others. The CD is meant "to help people realize that emotional and spiritual intelligence is needed profoundly during the transitions of life," Malkin explains, "when you don't exactly know what's coming around the bend. When people experience loss of any kind, they're in new territory. This is the time when you need support from the people who have walked those walks and traversed those waters. That's the time when you're most receptive to really listening. So that's our goal, to kind of raise the bar on the world's awareness of the need for support during transitional times."

Malkin's own encounter with tragedy opened his ears and helped him hear deeper voices than those he had followed before. Out of his despair grew a realization that

life's meaning did not lay in material success, and a mission to help others access the spiritual, especially during times of grief and sorrow.

Explorefaith spoke with Gary Malkin about his work with *Graceful Passages* and the journey that brought him to its creation. What follows are some of his thoughts on his music, his spirituality and the results when these two are grafted together.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** Can you describe some of the events in your life that triggered the faith journey you are engaged in today?

**GARY MALKIN:** In 1974, when I was twenty-one years old, I was an integral part of an accident of a little girl, Lisa, who was like a godchild to me. I was helping her father jumpstart his car, and we didn't realize she was under the car when we pushed the car to get it started. It was a horrific experience on every level. I saw the child, frozen, under the wheel, wondering what was going on. For ten years after that, I would wake up in the middle of the night in cold sweats with an image of her under that wheel.

At the memorial service, I viewed the body of this child whom I adored, and I *knew* that *she* was no longer there. [Yet] her spirit was so bright, I knew *that* couldn't be extinguished. **I had this indefatigable, unshakable faith, almost like nothing I had ever experienced before, that she was somewhere else. It was an experience of believing in a way that I'd never believed before.** It was really an epiphany for me. And that planted the seed of what eventually became *Graceful Passages*. Hindsight is 20/20. You don't really know the seeds until you look back.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** How would you describe your faith before this experience?

**GARY MALKIN:** I was very turned on to the Jewish religion up until my *bar mitzvah*, and after that I got turned off to the superficiality of the way the Jewish religion was being handled in temples in America. My faith was integrally connected to joy, to music, to dancing. In 1971 I was introduced to Eastern religion, but up until Lisa's death, I think my *religion*, if you will, was creating intimacy with song. I was really in love with the act of accompanying a singer and diving into the heart of the music. Music was my spiritual path. It always has been, really. But after Lisa died, I went through a real dark night of the soul period, because it shattered my world. The fact that something like that could happen to an amazing, beautiful child was really deeply troubling to me.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** After Lisa's death, you faced more tragedy— thirteen years later, your sister was diagnosed with breast cancer and then 4 years after that, your father died. Then your daughter was born six months later, in a very hard delivery. All of these are life-changing events.

**GARY MALKIN:** You can't emerge from an experience like losing your father, especially when you're close to him, without having a major reevaluation of your spiritual beliefs and your sense of what's important in life.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** And your daughter's birth, that also involved some uncertainty and fear.

**GARY MALKIN:** It's really interesting, because we did everything right and there was no indication that anything was going to go wrong. It was a textbook pregnancy. Then when the birth came, it was like being hit by a truck. Six months after my father died, both my wife and baby almost died. It was one of those very complicated births with many things going wrong. I guess looking back it was another huge chink in the belief that everything's gonna go as you planned. It was another death, if you will.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** What were you doing during those critical hours after your daughter was born?

**GARY MALKIN:** I was praying as hard as I've ever prayed in my whole life... I couldn't pray the way people have recommended me to pray - for the "highest and best outcome." I was praying that they would both survive. I mean, of course! I'm only human.

I stayed there for hours with my daughter and my wife. Within about six hours, I heard the doctor say, "My God, there's life coming into her [his daughter]." It was again this profound moment of God coming in and breathing life into a situation. My daughter and my wife ultimately turned out fine.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** Tell us about *Graceful Passages*. How did it come about?

**GARY MALKIN:** It was about five years after the birth of my daughter that Michael [Stillwater, co-creator of *Graceful Passages*], my old and dear friend whom I've known and worked with for many years, contacted me. He had recently been touched by the death of his father. As a result of the life-changing experience that he had had at the deathbed of his father, he decided to offer his gift to others going through similar circumstances. **He came to me with this idea to produce a CD of songs that he had written for people and their families to play at their bedside, at the portal of the end of life.**

Michael was devoted to using music for spiritual healing and being a spiritual musical minstrel in the world even when we first met back in 1976, and for me he was almost a bit *too* much that way. At the time, I was afraid of being identified as some sort of new-age spiritual musician. When he approached me after the birth of my daughter, there were cracks and chips in my control freak's view of the world, but I was still extremely attached to the image of being a successful film and TV composer. I was actually quite identified with that world, even though I had a deep relationship, privately, to spirituality. I had a very stubborn ego that was attached to the image of having my success defined by the external world. I had to have the big house and the big car and Emmy awards. ... My energy went into defining my value by the way that the world and America works, which is "you are how much money you have and how many awards you've gotten."

Even so, when Michael came to me with this concept, I said, "Okay, let's explore it." We recorded it with him speaking as if he were talking intimately to someone who had just received a terminal diagnosis, and I was on the keyboard scoring it like a film.... When it was done we just got chills.... That's when it occurred to us that it would be wonderful to record the voices of the spiritual treasures of the world, and then score it the way people score films. We didn't think anyone had ever done that before. Since Michael has been offering healing music for 25 years, he already knew a lot of people: Ram Dass, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Rabbi Zalman, among others.

We initially recorded Michael, Arun Gandhi and a Cherokee Indian woman named Jyoti. We asked them **if they were going to die tomorrow, or if a loved one was going to die, what would they want to tell their loved one? We asked them to speak directly to one person who was in need of the kind of comfort you might want to offer a child before they go to bed** after a good cry, or after you've made love and you want to be intimate with someone. That kind of intimacy is what we were asking each person to speak from.

We then edited these hour interviews into about five to eight minutes and scored them.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** How did this experience affect you?

**GARY MALKIN:** When I scored those three, a shudder went through me and I thought, Oh, God, I wonder what I'm going to have to go through so that I can be the vessel through which an authentic expression can be created. I really [understood] that what we were doing was creating a context for people to truly contemplate the issues of their fear of dying and the very *thought* of the mystery. The gravity of the project humbled me; I told Michael that this was a way bigger deal than I had [imagined]. However, at the time, I think my ego was still attached to the world of form and being a successful composer and all that. It's a hard one to break.

A couple of months later, I went to Hawaii for a vacation, and I decided that every night at sunset I'd meditate and pray to God. I sensed something coming...and knew that something wasn't quite right with my life. **I literally pleaded to God for all that wasn't authentic and real to strip away. I prayed that I would be the expression of what I came here to do in this life.** I said, "I don't know what it is anymore, but I think that there's more that I came here to do. Please, please strip away anything that isn't true, authentic and in alignment with my highest expression."

**EXPLOREFAITH:** So what happened?

**GARY MALKIN:** A month later, on July 17, 1998, I had this horrific bicycle accident. I was hurt very badly, and my daughter was pretty scratched up too. I shattered my left wrist in 18 places. It was a question mark whether I'd ever play piano with my left hand again.

Fortunately I ended up finding a famous hand reconstruction surgeon who was able to reconstruct my wrist. But then, as I was healing from that surgery, my wife went through a spiritual crisis of her own, and chose to leave the marriage, when our daughter was six years old.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** What kind of impact did that have on your faith?

**GARY MALKIN:** Oh, that was the heart of it for me. That was the beginning of my true faith journey. Looking back, God was in that. My wife knew that there was something that needed to shift in the marriage, but it took me a long time to see this. I hated that it happened, and I still have hard times with it sometimes, but I know that it was what was necessary to strip me bare. I would say the most profound dark night of the soul for me was this period. It was absolutely the thing that broke my ego's picture of how things were going to go.

I'm really stubborn, because I had a lot of different opportunities to surrender before this point ( *laughs* ). **But it took a real two-by-four for me to break this particular attachment to being famous and successful financially. It really took this shattering to get down to the nub.** I don't recommend it, not to anybody, I wish to God it could have been smoother and simpler and certainly less painful, but this is the path that my life took. For a year I walked around, to borrow a phrase from the famous grief expert Ken Druck, "with no skin on." And that was the state I was in when I wrote the rest of the music for the messages on *Graceful Passages*.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** Was there any faith community you were in touch with, or was it basically you and God?

**GARY MALKIN:** I had very good friends who basically let me sob and sob and sob as much as I needed to, who were there for me, who took me to doctors and physical therapy. A huge part of my healing was allowing my family and close male and female friends to support me and be there with me. And I meditated and prayed a lot. Another thing that really helped me was reading Pema Chodrun's book *When Things Fall Apart*. She's an esteemed Buddhist teacher from Nova Scotia.

My biggest spiritual practice in healing the wounds of this time was writing the music for *Graceful Passages*. I was listening to these world-class wisdom-keepers speaking about how to deal with loss, while I was panting on the floor trying to recover from my own loss. **The synchronicity of Grace that I had been felled, but right around me were these amazing people speaking incredible things about loss, that basically was my church, it was my temple.** It was audio medicine for my soul.

**EXPLOREFAITH:** What has been the response to *Graceful Passages*?

**GARY MALKIN:** It is truly a miracle, the kinds of letters that we get from people, the lives that have been changed, the ways in which people have responded to *Graceful* is unbelievable.

I cannot tell you how many letters, phone calls and emails we've received from people whose lives were different and changed because this product opened up the discussion, brought out the elephant under the rug, and shifted things from being in debilitating fear to a state of acceptance and compassion.

One classic example is the story of a woman who was hanging in the balance on life support, and no one could make the decision to pull the plug. Things don't always work this neatly, but a friend came to the hospital room and played a track from *Graceful Passages*. When it was completed, everyone intuitively knew to go over and give a kiss to the woman who was on life support and say their goodbyes. And literally, by the final note of the music, she had died, without any interventions.

It doesn't always work that way, but it's a very dramatic example of how it helps people have closure even when they're facing cancer and they're fighting for their life. **People say, "I don't want to face this issue of dying. I don't want to give up hope." And we say, "It's not about giving up hope. It's about giving up fear."**

**EXPLOREFAITH:** What advice would you have for someone currently going through a dark night of the soul?

**GARY MALKIN:** When you're having a hard time I think it's really important to be honest about it. One of my mentors is Thomas Moore. He says, Don't look for the happy ending or the silver cloud when you're in the midst of the dark night. You need to go through it, you need to experience it. What does it taste like, what does it feel like? Be as present as you can in your despair and allow it to infuse you and fill you, rather than try to avoid it.

My way of approaching it is trying to be as conscious and present and deep-breathed as possible as I encounter another corner of my consciousness that doesn't trust that in God everything is going to be fine. No matter what.

*Interview by Linda Douty.*

*To listen to a selection from Graceful Passages, visit the Oasis Spirit Songs Section of [explorefaith.org](http://explorefaith.org).*

*Gary Malkin is currently creating other CDs designed around the Graceful Passages model, dealing with subjects including courage, love, forgiveness, grief and birthing. He is also involved in the nonprofit Companion Arts, whose mission is to use music and the arts to deepen the humane and compassionate dimensions of life, specifically in health care and in inter-faith communities. The newest release, *Care for the Journey: Sustaining the Heart of Healthcare*, was created to support the health care professional to reconnect to their original sense of purpose when they became a healer. To learn more, visit their website at: <http://www.thewisdomproject.net/>*

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