

Reading: "Blessing for Kin," from Breaking and Blessing, by Sean Parker Dennison'

Happy Pride. I got to give sooo many glitter blessings yesterday at the Pride Parade. I had my little container of iridescent glitter and a little spray bottle filled with rosewater. I started with the UUs. There were thirty or forty of us, UUs of all ages, gathered on and around our float, a truck covered in unicorns and clouds. It looked great. I blessed twin toddlers in their stroller, UUs in their sixties and beyond, youth on roller skates, and everyone in between.

Then I worked my way over to other groups and their floats. I blessed Lutherans and body piercers from Evolution piercing. As the parade started to move, I blessed spectators who were sitting along the sides.

"Who wants a glitter blessing?"

"I do," they said. Some shyly. Some boldly.

I blessed a row of three- and four-year-olds who were sitting on the curb. They wanted the glitter on their knees. Spritz, spritz, spritz. Sprinkle, sprinkle, sprinkle. "May you live with passion. May you know your power. May you go in pride."

I repeated the words to each person. Spritzed them with rosewater. Sprinkled with glitter. I blessed an elderly woman, and lots of people covered in tattoos. I blessed foreheads, shoulders, hands, and hearts. Wherever they chose. Everybody looks great with glitter. Sometimes a person wasn't so sure about it—it's not every day you're approached by a tattooed, pierced, purple haired woman in a rainbow clergy collar with a spray bottle and glitter. But after they heard and saw the person next to them receive a blessing, several of them decided they wanted one too.

"May you live with passion. May you know your power. May you go in pride."

I wish those things for all of us, for all of you. Especially passion because I think passion supports the other two. If you're living with passion, I think you're more likely to explore your power to influence the world, and I think you're more likely to feel proud, of yourself and of your life.

I started thinking about this after reading something Lady Gaga said. In 2015, when she had been an international pop star for about six years, she attended a dinner for the non-profit Americans for the Arts. She watched several young people perform her songs with a look of sheer joy. Then she went up on stage to receive an award. Tears were streaming down her face. She called the award "the best thing that ever happened" to her. Then, remembering her childhood dreams, Lady Gaga said, "I suppose that I didn't know what I would become, but I always wanted to be extremely brave and I wanted to be a constant reminder to the universe of what passion looks like. What it sounds like. What it feels like."

Passion. What is it like? What is it?

We're going to come back to that. First, I'm going to talk some more about Lady Gaga. I think, although she is inimitable, although there is no one like her, in her story there is something for all of us.

First of all, her parents did not name her Lady Gaga. When she was born in 1986, her mother, Cynthia, and her father, Joe, named their child Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta. They are an Italian, in case you didn't guess. An Italian family living in New York City. She had a natural talent for music, and her parents nurtured it. When she was four, she started writing out the notes to musical songs on Mickey Mouse staff paper. She says, "The musical notation was of high quality in comparison to the lyrics on the page—none of which were actually spelled correctly. I've always had some difficulty saying what I really mean with just words."

When she was eleven, she was accepted at Julliard, but she decided it was not for her and switched to an all-girls Catholic School, Convent of the Sacred Heart.

There she was involved in band, piano, and acting. She had a great voice for singing, and she got voice lessons. She was also a serious student. She was self-disciplined, studious, dedicated. But she also had a hard time fitting in at school, she says. She was bullied.ⁱⁱ Other kids seemed to feel she was... a bit much. Too provocative. Too eccentric.

She *tried* to tone it down.

It was hard on her. The bullying. The trying to make herself fit in. She began suffering from depression in middle school. Her parents didn't know about depression in adolescents. They didn't know how to recognize it or that she might need some help. So Stefani had to find a way to get through it. Art helped. Music especially.

In her early teens, she started performing at open mic nights. At age seventeen, she won early admission to New York University's Tisch School for Performing Arts. She was successful there, but the next year she dropped out. At nineteen, she was starting to get the attention of professionals in the music industry. And then something horrible happened. She was sexually assaulted. Multiple times.

It was devastating. But still, she did not have the help she needed to heal. Instead, like so many of us who experience trauma, she again found a way to just get through, to survive. Stefani Germanotta developed a persona that she could escape into. The persona was Lady Gaga. A flamboyant, eccentric, edgy persona who wore impossibly tall shoes. Stefani Germanotta was five feet one inch tall, had been bullied, struggled with depression, and now had a mean case of PTSD. But Lady Gaga was whatever size and whatever mood and whatever *whatever* she wants to be, and Lady Gaga had a mission of kindness that Stefani wanted to spread around the world.

She created Lady Gaga as a superhero for herself. A vision of who she wanted to be. And ...she became extremely famous.

She became a star. She got busy, traveling and performing and doing interviews. But then she began to experience intense pain. Some days she couldn't get off the couch, even though the source of the pain wasn't clear.

Finally, one day, while she was involved in a court deposition, she experienced a PTSD trigger, and had what she describes as a psychotic break. Her body started tingling. She dissociated. She disconnected from reality and could not move. She ended up in the hospital, screaming.

She couldn't push through her PTSD and other mental health struggles anymore. She finally began to access the help she had needed all along. And when she got to a place where she felt able to talk about it, she decided to do so. She decided to use her fame to help destigmatize mental illness and to educate people about mental health.

Talking about trauma is one of the hardest things any human can face. Trauma also changes our brains in ways that are associated with neuropathic pain. Neuropathic pain is sometimes referred to as fibromyalgia. Chronic pain is part of Lady Gaga's life. It's something she manages every day.

She has used her experiences to shape her mission. She says, "I have mental health issues. I take a lot of medication to stay on board. And I am a survivor, and I'm living and I'm thriving and I'm strong and I'm going to take all my life experiences and share them with the world and make it a better place."

It takes a lot of support to keep her going. People around her know what steps to take to prevent her from going into a dissociative state. Yet she says she is now healthier than she has ever been in her whole life. She meditates. Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, and prescription medicine have all helped her. She doesn't spiral as much as she did before she had medicine and therapy. One thing she has learned is radical acceptance. To accept herself and what is and to go from there.

Out of all that, she and her mother created the Born This Way Foundation. It's a nonprofit whose mission is to "empower and inspire young people to build a kinder, braver world that supports their mental wellness. Through youth-driven research, programs, and strategic partnerships," the Foundation aims to "make kindness cool, validate the emotions of young people, and eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health."ⁱⁱⁱ

And, she says that although Lady Gaga was originally born out of trauma and the need to escape, today Lady Gaga and Stefanie are one.

She is also queer, by the way. Lady Gaga's song "Poker Face" is about bisexuality. She's a bisexual woman who is married to a man. They are a large but invisible group, bisexual people in hetero relationships. Worth lifting up on Pride.

Lady Gaga encourages all of us to "take little bites of bravery, of kindness, of courage each day."^{iv}

"There's a discipline for passion," she says. "And it's not about how many times you get rejected or you fall down or you've been beaten up. It's how many times you stand up and are brave and keep going."^v

So, back to that word, passion. It has two seemingly contradictory sets of meanings. One has to do with suffering. From a painful disorder of affliction, or the suffering of a martyr. That meaning is pretty much obsolete, although in Christianity, there is still reference to

“the passion of Christ.” And the obsolete meaning is hidden in some contemporary words, like “compassion” which etymologically means to suffer with.

In the fourteenth century, passion became more of a medical word. A philologist explains:

Physically, it could signify anything from a broken bone to a terminal disease, and this sense of the meaning is completely obsolete today. However, it could also signify mental illnesses or seizures, and consequently, *passion* also came to describe psychotic fits or episodes of madness: anything that provoked a “state marked by... strong excitement, agitation, or other intense emotion”^{vi}

By the fifteenth century, it had come to refer to any strong feeling or impulse, eventually including love or desire, and nowadays that’s what we usually mean by it.

Strong affection or love. An intense desire or enthusiasm for something.

In Lady Gaga’s story, we see a lot of passion- the painful kind and the joyful kind. The queer community is also known as a passionate bunch. That’s why so many queer people love Lady Gaga.

We live passionately when we live for something that is deeply meaningful. When you have a sense of some mission in the world that is rooted in your values, that’s where passion develops. With Lady Gaga, it’s her mission of kindness. She had it from the start, I suspect from back when she was a bullied kid who just wanted to be flamboyant and who almost couldn’t help herself she was so *edgy* on the inside. And then, with her own struggles, her mission grew into kindness that encompasses mental illness and wellness.

What are your core values in life?

Kindness. Love. Peace. Interdependence. Caring for the earth. The sacredness of children. Equality. Justice. Education. Healing. Family. Honoring your ancestors. Being a good ancestor...

And what personal mission flows from your core values? It can be overarching: “I’m going to help create peace where there is conflict.” And it can have more specific forms: “I’m going to volunteer with the organization Seeds of Peace.” Or Mosaic Action. Or... there are many good peacemaking organizations. That’s some of the good news in the world.

Overarching: “My core value is Love. I’m going to spread love in the world.” Specific: “I’m going to start a soup kitchen and get involved in advocacy.” Or, I’m going to center myself in meditation each morning, setting an intention to let love guide me in my interactions with others.

A passion of this kind connects us with something larger. In doing so, it builds our resilience for life. We are about something. Something bigger than our bad days, bigger even than trauma or illness or loss.

The other kind of passion I see in Lady Gaga and so often in the queer community, is a passion for life itself. A strong desire to enjoy life, to live deeply and authentically, to experience joy and pleasure and connect with others. This can show up as a delicious flamboyance. Al and Jack, your head-to-toe multi-rainbow couples ensemble at Pride

yesterday is what I am talking about. Puck, your rainbow eyebrows. Viv, your glorious purple hair. There were tutus and unicorn headbands and roller skates and glitter. So much glitter. Everybody who showed up at pride as your exuberant self. Yes. Delicious flamboyance.

A passion for life can be subtler, too. A person with a passion for life might be the kind of person who smiles at babies, every time. Who puts out a bird feeder because it's absolutely the best thing to look at with their morning coffee, which, by the way, they savor. A passion for life can cause a person to have a belly laugh, and to use it often. And to feel gratitude many times per day. And to really try to be present. To pay attention to life.

A passion for life doesn't mean we don't have bad times, hard problems, or terrible moods. Everybody has those. But a person who has a passion for life, or who is cultivating one, knows those are fleeting, and importantly, that they are useful. We learn from them. We grow from them. Sometimes they help shape our mission.

The last thing I want to say, and I think this is really important, is that a passion for life inevitably leads us to want to be real. To be our whole, authentic selves. To not tone ourselves down or censor ourselves so much that we aren't ourselves or that we stifle our passion. If we love life, if we are passionate about it, we will want to experience it with our whole selves. We don't want to use up our precious energy denying or hiding our spirits, who we are, what and who we love.

That's not always easy. And in some cases, it isn't safe. This year alone, the ACLU tracked 516 anti-LGBTQ bills in state legislatures, some of which have passed.

It takes courage to show our true selves. Other people aren't always nice. But that's not about you. That's about them, and the fear inside them, and the parts of their own selves that they have refused to heal or have stuffed down and denied.

And so, however much we can, let us "take little bites of bravery, of kindness, of courage each day." And let us support each other.

May you live with passion. May you know your power. And may you go in pride.

Happy Pride.

ⁱ Here's an audio-visual version of the poem: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKrjIGgAUJo>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/lady-gaga-mom-describes-singer-childhood-depression-8549518/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://bornthisway.foundation/our-mission/>

^{iv} <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/lady-gaga-heal-through-kindness/id1264843400?i=1000456061742>

^v <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8iNYY7YV04>

^{vi} This blog post breaks it down and has references at the end:

<https://onceuponawrittenword.wordpress.com/2018/02/19/the-metamorphosis-of-passion/>