



Wisdom of the World™

INTERVIEW WITH GARY MALKIN

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In November 2003, Gary Malkin was interviewed by fellow Forge member Elizabeth Ursic about his new book and CD, *Graceful Passages*, the first from his *Wisdom of the World* Series.

How did this project come about?

My friend Michael Stillwater had begun to create musical healing environments for families and friends at the bedside of the dying as a result of the experiences he had with the death of his father. He had started to go around to hospices and various homes and recognized the amazing role that music could have in opening up people's hearts. (Michael sent me a proposal that he wrote about the end of life.) Michael sent me a proposal for a music project for the end of life. Up until that point I had been pretty consumed with my career as a film and television composer and producer, but I had also been affected by experiencing my own father's recent death. So when Michael sent me this proposal I realized I was ready to do something that was more overtly spiritual.

You engaged some significant people to lend their wisdom to the project.

Yes. We realized we wanted the words of (amazing) remarkable people enhanced with music to bring people to a conversation about their mortality. That's how it began. Michael had been a musical conference weaver and many people knew him as an adjunct to their conferences. The first person that he went to was Gandhi's grandson, Arun and asked Arun and his wife Sunanada to speak. Then he met and recorded Jyoti, a Cherokee wisdom keeper. He also knew Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Ram Das, Dean Alan Jones and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shelomi, all of who shared their wisdom with the project.

Everyone was so generous in responding to the question – "If you were going to die tomorrow, what would you want to say to the people that you loved most in your life?" We insisted that they not prepare anything. Ram Das and Thich Nath Hanh spoke right away from the place that was the transpersonal, but many people spoke first about their thoughts, their beliefs and their philosophies. Often we would have to (do radical things) be quite persistent to get them to "drop in" to the essence of their heart. We asked them to go a lot deeper than they normally go during interviews in order to get this quality of intimacy that is the hallmark of the project.

Little by little Michael brought these FIRST recordings back. I started editing these hour-long interviews down to five or six minutes. I would use my heart as a dowsing rod for the phrases and (the) words that had presence and potency in them.

How did you create the music?

This project WAS such a healing for me. I'm a first generation Russian immigrant's son. I've inherited all the DNA of striving and pushing and having great ambition to fulfill the American dream. This was the first experience I had of the magic of stepping into a current that was so much bigger than me. The musical concept was totally inspired by the presence, authenticity and spirit that the speakers embodied in their intimacy and in their words. When I sat down on the keyboard to create the music, much to my surprise, everything was basically a first take. I would stop when it was done and I would be astonished, because my life had been so characterized by struggling for perfection up to that point. There wasn't any piece I overtly labored over, though I certainly labored. I spent 1200 hours in the

studio working, orchestrating, arranging and editing over a three-year period. I'm more proud of it than anything I've ever been associated with. If I died tomorrow, I would feel that this was my life's achievement. I realize this was a graceful passage for me to learn what it feels like to step into the flow of spirit, to allow myself to be used like a flute rather than to use my will to force things through. I like to think that when you listen to the music there is a homeopathic watermark of the speaker's essence in it because the music was totally guided by the power of the messages and the speaker's personal qualities. I really think that I could not have done anything but serve the qualities in the person's voice; it was such a great revelation for me.

Can you say more about encountering the sacred in music?

I think we've only begun to scratch to the surface of what music is. I like to call it the last unregulated drug. It is so powerful and we haven't even begun to understand the power. For years I've been interested in the art and craft of film composing because there's been a lot of time and money spent in understanding how to make people feel certain things in order to create a desired emotion. So instead of manipulating people's emotions for entertainment, the idea of using a musical language to reflect and underscore inspirational human qualities has become an engrossing spiritual path for me. So much so that we are going around the country sharing with health care nurses and chaplains how powerful it can be to use music and spoken wisdom to transform the healing environment and support their work in a significant way.

The original project was a CD with a small book and you distributed 30,000 copies. This new version is a longer book with an accompanying CD. Why the new format?

We went to this new format because we had gotten feedback that this was not just for people who were dying, but also for everyone. Everyone needs to live with an emotional and spiritual literacy, especially around the acceptance of mortality as a portal to appreciating the preciousness of life. We added text that talks about the many transitions of life, not just death and dying, but many twist or turns, such as divorce, a career change or loss of any kind. Our theory is that if you allow yourself to fully experience the little deaths of life you are more prepared when you face the big ones. We really want Graceful Passages and the Wisdom of the World Series to help provide experiences that we can share with our loved ones that might be deeper than we've had in the past.

With this book and CD, we want to start making people aware that transitions are the time to reach out and receive support. We live in such a culture of denial that says when you go into a hard time you need to hide out and not share your difficulties. We're hoping that our project will help people realize that a transition is a time to reach out, to get some support, and to find what would give life more meaning and connection. We are hoping that the Wisdom of the World Series can be one of the things people reach out to.

Do you have any concluding thoughts?

One of our subliminal intentions of this whole project has been to spread the message of the universality of all the wisdom traditions. With every project we put out we are trying to give people an experience of the world's different traditions and have it be something they don't recoil from. It's really exciting to find ways to do THIS without whitewashing the essential thrust behind these spiritual traditions.

Thank-you Gary for a great conversation.

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