

The day I heard “I was born the running kind,” I became a Merle Haggard admirer. Knowing this, my son included me when he bought tickets to the Cheyenne Frontier Days event that featured the elderly country singer. Naturally, the fans in the bleachers loved this performance. To me, it presented a stroll down memory lane.

Forty years ago in California I knew that “I was born the running kind” came from the heart. When the speaker describes his isolation as restrictive as “any dungeon with its walls of stone,” and “home” as “never home to me at any time,” I understood the song revealed the man’s deeply-felt personal despair. Such self-disclosing takes courage.

Courage aside, speaking confessionally was a sign of the times. Born of “Okie” parents who fled their hardscrabble existence for the promise of the golden state, Haggard came of age as the encounter movement gained traction in California. Back east, the confessional poetry of writers like Galway Kinnell paved the way.

When our pastor offered an encounter group for married couples, my husband and I signed up. At outset, each participant of the participating four couples completed a personal inventory, the results of which came to us in increments. Every two weeks each participant received a computerized note that was commented on by the group, telling us something about our emotional behavior. To me, for example, it was revealed that I tended to suppress my emotions with the exception of angry feelings. When anger bubbled up in disruptive exchanges, I seemed to have little control. The note advised me to ask God’s guidance in accepting the range of my feelings. Learning to express love, it said, required hard work.

As the offspring of unexpressive parents, I was untutored in emotional disclosures. The only “teachings” were my mother’s fits of rage, during which she grabbed me by my braids, flung me around, then sent me crashing into bedroom wardrobe or kitchen sink. At fourteen I ran off to another city to have my braids cut off. I’ve worn my hair short ever since.

Our California pastor added a book discussion of “The Transparent Self,” which advocated emotional honesty and offered ways to pursue self-disclosure in intimate settings. Author Sidney Jourard had taken the dictum “Know thyself” to mean “Disclose yourself and you will know yourself.” Darold disdained reading, but we spent many hours reading together: I’d read aloud until my voice gave out, when he’d pitch in for a page or two.

Merle Haggard, meanwhile, ‘fessed up in song, informing the world that earlier he’d embarked on a life of petty crime. When he was nine, as the family eked out a living in the town of Bakersfield, the death of his father was a defining blow. Legend has it, he met Johnny Cash in California’s notorious San Quentin to the tune of “Folsom Prison Blues.” The two became lifelong friends.

Today I know that neither easy-flowing ditties nor inspiring poems will by themselves lay the foundation to satisfying personal relationships. Years ago, when I encountered the admired Galway Kinnell in person, I found him tongue-tied, judgmental, and stymied. Given that his prolific output had earned him the Pulitzer Prize, not to mention a professorship at a prestigious eastern university, the discovery left me dumbfounded.

Similarly, Merle Haggard burned through four marriages before investing years of effort into his fifth. At CFD he shared an anecdote of watching his prized Martin on TV “float by” in a flashflood that inundated Nashville. A few weeks earlier, he had donated the guitar to the Country Hall of Music. I imagined my reaction, were something similar to happen to my cherished di Giorgio. A Brazilian-made Spanish guitar, I acquired the “gently used” instrument well over forty years ago.

Since then, “Make Love not War” has given way to “Greed is Good.” My husband passed nine years ago, but we had parted before then. Was the idea of loving via self-disclosure but a short-lived chimera? Darold never got far in this effort; his old-guard views dictated that a man can’t afford to show weakness, acknowledge error, admit misconception let alone wrongdoing. As a lawyer, he “naturally” gravitated toward the perceived failures of others. A mind focused on someone else’s wrongdoing has little room for introspection. Darold relaxed only as he listened to me play classical guitar, when no demands were made on him.

Still I believe in loving, self-disclosing interaction, having experienced it firsthand with my all-time hero Viktor Frankl, a man of exceptional compassion and grace. His ideas gave rise to the humanist psychology of Sidney Jourard, Gordon Allport, and others. Even today certain hardy souls guide the confused along Frankl’s precepts. One such is Jeffrey Berman, who teaches English at University of Albany. He assigns writing exercises that encourage self-disclosing personal essays, and he himself shares painful experiences with students. The author of fourteen books—I recommend you peruse at least some of these—Berman is recognized nationally as making a profound difference in people’s lives. In April 2012, the Princeton Review named him one of America’s best professors.

Merle Haggard in his Frontier-Days stint included the autobiographical “I Turned 21 in Prison.” Later, in a tribute to Johnny Cash by way of “Folsom Prison Blues,” his band superbly imitated the sound of a train “coming ‘round the bend.” Halfway through his concert the singer removed his sunglasses, a symbolic gesture of shedding a façade that, I imagine, includes the pretense of prestige. The Haggard website states that it was The Johnny who encouraged his acolyte to write—and sing—in a confessional vein.

If CFD were to extend the opportunities accorded mature male performers to their female counterparts, I’d vote for Roberta Flack. In stature, skill, and audience recognition, this African-American vocalist is every bit as proficient as Haggard. How about it, Equality State?