

Guthrie's legacy: How to face the hard path

By Tom Palaima

Posted Feb 20, 2014 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 25, 2018 at 10:54 AM

Austin American-Statesman

<https://www.statesman.com/article/20140220/NEWS/302209706>

*Show me how, how to fight my battle in life / Show me how to fight /
And I'll run away with you.*

*Teach me how, how to fight my hard times in life / Teach me how to
fight and / I'll run away with you.*

*And I will never dread the day I will die / 'Cause my sunset is
somebody's morning sky.*

—Woody Guthrie, “My Battle”

These profound words were written by American folk music genius Woody Guthrie. We never heard them until Jonatha Brooke recently set them to music. I heard Brooke's version sung with extraordinary meaning by Eliza Gilkyson in the “Walking Woody's Road” show she performed with her fellow Austinites Jimmy LaFave, Slaid Cleaves, Sam Baker, Bobby Kallus, Glenn Schuetz, Phil Hurley and Chip Dolan.

Guthrie spent his too short lifetime looking at and feeling with ordinary people. He did his utmost to make all Americans see the neediest among us. One could say that Woody was a one-man national version of the Austin American-Statesman's Season for Caring program.

He began his adult life during the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl. He lived and fought alongside farm families forced off their land, seeking desperately anywhere for basic living wages.

Woody fought against fascism in World War II. He wrote his poignant song “Deportees” in 1948 when he read in a newspaper that a planeload of migrant workers died in a plane crash and were treated as a nameless and worthless mass who, to quote from his “Pastures of Plenty,” silently “come with the dust and go with the wind.” To Woody, every human being had dignity.

The ancient Greeks believed that we learn who we are and how to treat others through our own suffering. Modern American culture promotes the illusion that a life of perpetual enjoyment is our birthright. But we all learn eventually that the Greeks were right. We all confront what another American musical giant sang out, “I’ll never get out of this world alive.”

Woody wrote “My Battle” when he faced something worse than Hank Williams’ realization of our mortality. In 1952, he was diagnosed with Huntington’s chorea, a degenerative disorder that would rob him of his mind and leave him alive, but somehow dead. He was permanently involuntarily institutionalized in 1956.

Eliza’s evocation of what she calls Woody’s “dark night of the soul” in singing “My Battle” was so moving that I asked her where her inspiration came from. I asked other soulful people what they thought of the song.

Eliza said she could feel starkly Woody confronting “one of those archetypical pivotal moments in the life of someone who serves and suffers on the world stage.” She could empathize with Woody “looking left and right for a way out and ultimately accepting his fate,” much like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. And she knew the power of seeking someone with whom to share life’s inevitable tragic moments with strength and dignity. She found her life partner, University of

Texas journalism professor Robert Jensen, a committed activist for social justice, at an antiwar rally.

Recently retired Statesman feature writer Brad Buchholz, a longtime friend, feels Woody's words partly through his own battle with cancer. He says, "Eliza inhabits the song. She makes Woody's words and experience real to us. She is sensitive and understands." He hears Eliza saying, "I've been there. I know what that means. I know that trial. I know that longing."

Brad's partner, Margaret Slovak, a beautiful and humanly caring jazz guitarist, was robbed of her full creative powers by a sudden motor vehicle accident. She performs for patients battling with cancer and other life-changing injuries and losses. When she heard Eliza sing Woody's and Jonatha's song, she thought, "Each one of us faces life-changing physical and emotional challenges through accidents, diseases, loss of loved ones. We come out the other side stronger with an increased awareness of what really matters in life. Most importantly, we learn how to give and receive love in the purest sense."

Lucinda Alwa, a Methodist minister in an economically challenged community in Wisconsin, knows the despair of losing a loved one suddenly. She writes, "Woody's song gives a striking sense of peace. Whatever Woody meant by the line, 'I'll run away with you,' I find myself running away with the song. It melts the dread, soothes the soul, lights the sky."

Thank you, Woody, Jonatha and Eliza, for reminding us that we are all hard travelers through life together.