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Online Exclusive: Musician Peter Mayer

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Reaching for the Ageless, Evergreen Light »

By [Kent Rautenstrauss](#)

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“Getting a cancer diagnosis stopped me in my tracks,” shared singer-songwriter-guitarist Peter Mayer recently in a revealing conversation. “I began looking at all the aspects of my life — mind, body and spirit — to open up paths of peace and healing.”

He was on tour with Jimmy Buffett in Australia in 2014 when Mayer discovered a lump on his inner leg, later diagnosed as lymphoma. “The phone call to relay the hard news to my wife and children was the toughest thing I’ve ever done,” he said. “My prayer was to return to the miracle of this moment and this one precious joyful life. I wanted to know what the message was from my cancer so I told the injured part of me, ‘Let’s walk in the light.’”

Now four years later and in full remission from chemo immune therapy, Mayer proclaims that cancer is “the greatest gift I have received,” saying it forged a deeper connection with his family, a profound compassion and empathy for others, and a renewal of his spiritual beliefs and practices.

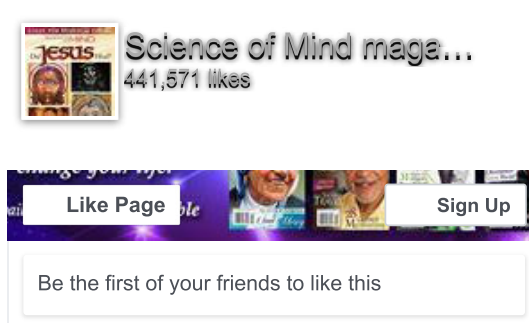
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MUSIC LIFTS UP A SHY KID

Mayer was born in Tamilnadu, India, the third youngest of eight children of Lutheran missionaries. “Growing up in India,” he says, “I experienced the beautiful world of the Indian people’s religions and culture, as well as the poverty and hardship. Seeing the suffering around me taught me that those who are different from me belong as an essential part of the family of this world.”

Living in India also imprinted music on Mayer’s young soul. “My musical life was changed forever by being exposed to the beautiful Indian singing and its marvelous rhythms,” he says. “I can remember



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villagers coming into our living room at Christmas to sing Tamil carols with wildly playing drums and flutes, shakers and bells. They would go on for hours with such joy.”

Upon returning to the United States at age 8, Mayer discovered the music of The Beatles. Their music “moved through my body,” he recalls. “It was a phenomenal sensation.

“I was a shy kid, often scared of the huge world around me. I mention my fragile qualities because I believe each of us has our own fragile place, but there is no meaningless creation in the light of God.”

Despite having a learning disability, Mayer began to sing and play guitar proficiently and discovered a place of belonging within music. His virtuosic talent brought him to the attention of singer Jimmy Buffett, who hired Mayer and his musical brother, Jim, for an album project. Impressed with their collaboration, Buffett invited the brothers to become Coral Reefer Band members.

“That was in 1989,” Mayer says. “Talk about a miraculous ride ever since! Jimmy Buffett teaches me to stay curious to life and to look for the fun in each new day.”

BEING IN THE PRESENCE

“I love being a musician,” Mayer says, “but in the music business, a lot of energy can be spent on celebrity and self-promotion,” which he admits can be tiring. The soft-spoken musician finds more soul-satisfying answers for self-esteem through spiritual study.

A Lutheran by upbringing, Mayer also opens to the spiritual messages through music. “In this Christmas season, many sing songs about ‘Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God with us.’ That is a source of peace for me, believing that we are ‘God occupied’ to the very last cell of our bodies.”

Contemplating his Christian upbringing, he says, “I find new doors opening in my understanding of the beautiful traditions I was raised with and new ones I learn about. The practice of Buddhist principles such as meditation, mindfulness, compassion and reverence for all of life lead me to new ways of exploring Oneness with all the children that God has created. I see new connections to my family and listen deeply for all human commonalities and differences.”

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Even though he calls himself a “novice student” of meditation, he sets aside time each day to meditate, explaining, “It is our duty to be in the Presence; to come into the sacred, however it happens.”

Mayer directs his mind activity by repeating to himself, “May I be filled with life and love” and he expresses simple gratitude for the everyday events of life. “I thank my body for taking care of me,” he says, believing that spiritual grace “turns our world inside out. We learn that we are a ray of God’s own light.”

THE GIFT OF FAMILY

Mayer admits that cancer can be a scary word. “A cancer diagnosis can bring a flood of conflicting emotions,” he acknowledges, “grief, anger, shock and sometimes thoughts of ‘What did I do wrong?’ or ‘Why me?’ I struggled often but found assurances of healing, goodness and love through my family.”

When his wife, Patricia, heard of his illness, she responded, “We both have this disease. You are not alone.”

Mayer said his wife’s words of love and support were like a “fingerprint on my soul,” adding, “She was gravity and solid ground for me.” His daughter, India, and son, Brendan, offered substantial emotional support as well, and now Brendan, himself a talented musician, often tours with his dad.

“The greatest joy of my life is working with my son,” Mayer says proudly. “There is no denying the harmony that exists between us.”

Mayer reveals the good that his entire family experienced from a cancer diagnosis. “Out of that dark time has come a precious closeness between us and a thankfulness for even the most challenging days together.”

FORGIVENESS FOR HIS FATHER

During his chemo treatments, the 60-year-old musician took time to contemplate a complicated relationship with his father, who died at 59 of cancer. The similar father-son journey of illness

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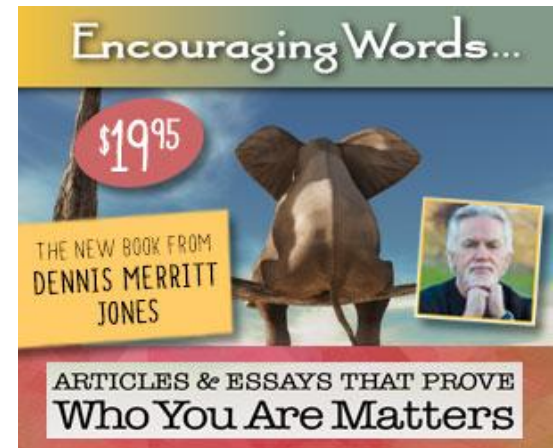
brought him the unexpected gift of forgiveness for his father after remembering a Christmas at age 4 in the rural Southern India village where his parents served as missionaries.

“Our family sang Christmas carols under a big Scotch Pine which had cotton placed on its branches for snow,” he remembers. When opening gifts, he discovered that through an accidental oversight, there was no present for him. As any child might, he started to cry. Immediately his father went into his office and fashioned some gifts out of junk, including a lighter that wouldn’t spark, a typewriter ribbon spool, a pipe cleaner; then presented them to his young son. “I was so happy,” Mayer remembered, adding, “My father was a hurricane of a man – stern and compassionate. On that Christmas, I saw his heart, not just his bluster. To me his homemade gifts symbolize what Christmas is all about: seeing those things that are useless, hopeless and forlorn being made new with love.”

This memory inspired Mayer’s song “A Junkman’s Christmas Eve” and a book by the same title, which he poignantly shares during his annual Peter Mayer Group “Stars and Promises” Christmas concert tour:

*“Wrap it up in yesterday’s newspaper
 Whatever you’ve got to give we can use as well
 A most unlikely place for Christmas
 In a junkyard shop to find Emmanuel
 For this worn-out world he loved so well
 With a troubled and treasured story to tell
 There’s not much time but it’s yours and mine
 Before the night is through
 If you’ve got anything left to give
 This song is for you.”*

— *A Junkman’s Christmas Eve (Mayer)*



THE DANCE OF LIFE

“I long for stillness and quiet,” Mayer says. “I recall that Gandhi once said, ‘You must reduce yourself to zero.’ I also heard it said that God needs empty space.”

Mayer takes silent walks to connect within his own being and to reflect on his life. “My time here on Earth is limited in this body,” he adds. “Each day I say to myself, ‘What are you waiting for? Step into this moment fully alive and living well in body, mind and spirit.’ There is great beauty in the dance of life.”

He shares a final musical thought. “In our Christmas concerts each year, we sing a song called ‘Evergreen’ about the beauty of the Christmas tree as a symbol of hope in the darker days of winter and the promise of a seed.”

“May you be the branches for songbirds in the silence

Mirror to the stars that shine on you and me

Trusting of the darkness that covers up the seed

Reaching for the light that’s ageless – evergreen”

— Evergreen (Mayer)

For more information about Peter Mayer or to purchase “A Junkman’s Christmas” CD (which features the song “Evergreen”) or the book by the same title, visit www.PeterMayer.com.

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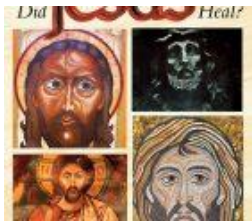
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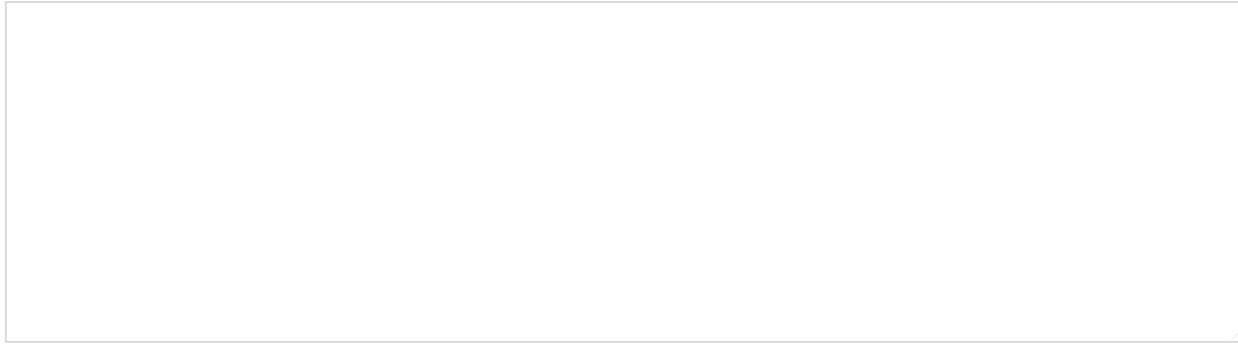
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