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Amy Winehouse and the spirituality of a restless heart



In an [open letter](#) written after the death of his friend Amy Winehouse in 2011, the comedian Russell Brand lamented their “shared affliction: the disease of addiction.” He closed his letter with a call to “adapt the way we view this condition, not as a crime or a romantic affectation but as a disease that will kill.”

It is hard to deny that Winehouse’s mental and emotional struggles, which included addictions to substances, destructive relationship patterns and bulimia, needed professional treatment. (As much as she may have protested in her most popular single, “Rehab.”) But should we reduce Winehouse’s drama to something that medical and psychological treatment alone could have cured?

Winehouse’s pain seemed to come from her emotional instability and chemical addictions, but I would assert that her pain was rooted in a keen awareness of her heart’s yearning for love and meaning. This is something Brand would likely acknowledge. He himself is a practitioner of the [12 step program](#) (which is rooted in abandonment to the divine—turning one’s will and life over to God) and [a convert to Hinduism](#). And yet this more nuanced understanding of the factors that drive addiction, the desire for love and meaning, are rarely acknowledged in mainstream culture.

Should we reduce her drama to something best left to medical and psychological treatment?

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Recently I researched the life and music of Winehouse for an exhibit I curated for [the New York Encounter](#)—an annual cultural festival, taking place this year from Feb. 18 to 20, hosted by the Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation. I was surprised to find how much I identified with the late singer’s experience.

Winehouse, like me, was a millennial, both of us trapped in a culture that struggles to understand the nuanced distinction between two powerful life forces: on one hand, an existential ache for transcendence, and on the other, mental instability rooted in traumatic experiences or chemical imbalances in the brain. Many of us were not given the tools or language to make sense of these distinct sources of pain and grew up being offered reductive “solutions.” My reflections on her life have shown me how important it is to understand both the yearning for the divine and the struggles of mental instability, and how they both require their own respective “treatments.”

A larger-than-life voice

I first happened upon Winehouse, as did most Americans, after the release of “[Rehab](#)” in 2006. Her unusual sense of style and larger-than-life voice caught my attention, reminding me of the Motown records my father raised me on. I didn’t give her much thought beyond that until I read [a homily given by the Rev. Julian Carron](#), who was then the president of Communion and Liberation.

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“Notwithstanding all our confusion, something resists....” he said, speaking of the infinite yearning for happiness that marks all human beings. “This is how, after a long and tormented journey, the evidences that characterize our ‘I’ present themselves again. “Do what you may to avoid thinking, the pain explodes in your chest.”

In other words, we cannot drown out that longing for long.

He went on to cite Winehouse’s song “Wake Up Alone,” in which she sings about trying to keep herself busy in order to avoid having to face the memory of her ex-lover, which “seizes my guts” and “floods me with dread.”

Though Winehouse was not religious (she considered herself a secular Jew), Father Carron pointed to her as an example of someone who allowed herself to live out this God-given desire for happiness, as much as it pained her. She did not settle for a “bourgeois” sense of complacency and self-sufficiency. “As far as my heart,” she sings, “I’d rather be restless,” evoking the famous dictum of St. Augustine that “our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”

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This year’s New York Encounter is called “This Urge for the Truth,” which is taken from a line in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science*. It refers to how after the pandemic and social unrest of the last two years, many of us:

feel both trapped in our certitudes and afraid of the unexpected. We are left dissatisfied with the

feel both trapped in our certainties and afraid of the unexpected. We are left dissatisfied, with the nagging feeling that we are losing ourselves. And yet, a subtle, relentless desire for what is true

remains.

Can we ever know what is real and who is trustworthy? Why does truth matter? And how can we reach it? These are the questions we have been asked to explore at Encounter, and we did so through the lens of Winehouse's life and music.

As we prepared the [exhibit](#), we relied on Winehouse's albums, several biographies (including those written by her parents), as well as a short but powerful elegy of Winehouse written by Irish music critic John Waters:

An artist like Winehouse can become reduced, perhaps even in her own mind, to a "performer" or, worse, "entertainer." But really, she was a shaman, a medium, channeling through her frail frame and structure the pain and potential of human experience at full power, and bearing witness to the mysteries that make this condition bearable.... She was wounded, not because she abused herself, but because she was called to be the voice of the walking wounded, which is to say the totally human. On behalf of this humanity, she begged in song for answers and reassurance.

Winehouse contained a prophetic sensibility that is "obscured" by "the way the world sees and depicts the condition of rock 'n' roll hero."

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Waters asserted that Winehouse, along with the many other talented but troubled artists who died at the age of 27—Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, among others—contained a prophetic sensibility that is "obscured" by "the way the world sees and depicts the condition of rock 'n' roll hero." We often forget, said Waters, that contemporary pop music derives from Gospel and Blues. "Outwardly reduced to 'show business' and 'entertainment,' the holiness of the song is forced inwards into a closed circuit, a communicating and receiving that becomes mistakable for something else and deniable in its true nature."

The entertainment industry was not exactly hospitable to the moral and artistic integrity and convictions of the "prophetic" members of the so-called "27 Club," or to other artists who have understood their craft as a calling to transform the deepest yearnings of the human heart into art. "We note the existence of 'passion,'" continued Waters, "but seem not to remember what the passion is for. Thus, the artist is caught in a bind: she is of the heavens and yet not permitted to comprehend or believe it."

Things have not changed much since Jesus himself proclaimed that "no prophet is welcome in his hometown." Thus is the conundrum of artists who are painfully aware of their need for something infinite, but are forced to conform to the expectations of an industry that prioritizes "finite" realities.

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This conflict also raises the question of why such artists involve themselves with commercial record labels in the first place, knowing full well the compromising situation they are putting themselves in. They could instead remain content signing with independent labels and playing for smaller scale audiences.

“When I was eighteen,” Winehouse said, as quoted in the biography, *Amy Winehouse: The Biography*, “I wasn’t banging [record labels’] doors down. I didn’t go out looking to be famous. I’m just a musician.” Winehouse clashed with her manager on several occasions because she refused to “play the part” while doing press interviews, once commenting, “the thing is, I’m not trying to protect ‘Winehouse, the Brand,’ know what I mean?”

Many artists for whom music is a means to express a yearning at the core of their humanity have found that their art form has brought them to an “answer” in the form of a religious conversion. Take figures like Lauryn Hill, Prince and Bob Dylan, whose faith enabled them to hold firm to their artistry in the face of pressure from record labels to conform. Winehouse’s public life was defined in part by her struggles with addiction and unhealthy relationship patterns, as well as the crushing power that the industry and tabloid news held over her life. Would her life have panned out differently if she had such an encounter of faith?

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Similar journeys

The research I did on Winehouse’s life and music made me reflect on the parallels between her journey and my own. I, like Winehouse, grew up with divorced parents who were both extremely affectionate and overly permissive. My parents sent me to a child psychologist as soon as they divorced when I was three years old. I found that my work with the therapist did not help me to articulate the neurodivergent tendencies and spiritual despair I was beginning to develop.

I also felt an intense desire to be loved, a desire that no person—whether family, friend, or romantic interest—seemed to be able to fulfill. I found that the beauty in art and nature left me wounded, yearning for more and more. I discovered that the suffering and injustices that existed in the world wounded me even more deeply, as I wondered how evil could exist in the first place.

This spiritual woundedness, combined with obsessive thought patterns, a tendency toward paranoia and social anxieties, left me confused and isolated for much of my adolescence. Psychologist after psychologist told me that my “self-diagnosed” mental instability was an exaggeration. My need for some kind of spiritual breakthrough would be cured by asking less questions about life and “just accepting myself as I am.”

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It was not until I hit my lowest point that I came across a psychiatrist who affirmed my experience in its entirety without trivializing it. He taught me how to distinguish between the mental and existential aspects of my experience. He told me that my existential questions about life and God were an essential part of who I was. Psychiatric treatment would not “erase” my questions, he said, but rather would give me the clarity with which to seek the answers to them more freely.

In my college classes, I was given the grace of meeting professors and classmates who understood the questions and longings that plagued my heart. It was in their loving gaze toward me that I encountered the presence of something that fully corresponded to that longing.

As much as I cannot say this longing has been “fixed” or that I never experience low points anymore, I can say that I now have a place to turn to. I know I will be accompanied on my journey toward unity

with the ultimate Answer.

I wonder if Winehouse's fate would have panned out differently if she had encountered people who understood both her cry for truth—for a kind of lover that would fully satisfy her heart's restlessness—as well as her emotional and psychiatric pain. I am filled with an immense sense of gratitude and unworthiness for having found people like this in my own life.

As much as listening to Winehouse's music fills me with sadness for the loss of such a young and beautiful person, I cannot help but feel like she has become my friend. As much as she struggled and hurt, she refused to silence her heart's yearning. She was determined to make something beautiful out of it. I pray for Winehouse, that she may finally experience that same embrace that I have experienced: the embrace of a Lover whose affection for her is unconditional. I pray that those who are conflicted both mentally and existentially continue to seek and find her music as a beacon in the night.