

Boomers have got a friend in James Taylor

## When my wife saw the concert tickets, she wept.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue



James Taylor performs at Tanglewood in Lenox, Massachusetts. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Paul Keleher](#).

Last Christmas I gave my wife two tickets to a James Taylor concert at Fenway Park in Boston. Years ago she had told me that seeing him in concert was at the top of her bucket list.

I've never fully understood the bucket list phenomenon. It seems to me that if there's something you really want to do before you die, you should just do it. That's pretty much my approach to buying shoes, for example, which makes me a challenge to those who despair of giving me something I want as a present. I've already bought it.

When my wife took the carefully wrapped box from under the Christmas tree, she was expecting another sweater ordered from the dog-eared catalogs she keeps on her bedside table. When she saw the concert tickets, tears streamed down her cheeks.

We arrived in Boston in time to have an early dinner before the concert. When we walked out of the restaurant we saw a steady stream of people ranging in age from

their fifties to their early seventies shuffling along the sidewalk to Fenway. My wife said, "Oh, my." I whispered, "We're old." Then we took our place in what was obviously our crowd.

Most of us are fully aware of our age, but when you get in a stadium and see over 30,000 people who look essentially just like you, it brings home the point. We're the folks who've reached the time of thinking about bucket lists.

Taylor was incredible that night. He's 68 years old and told us he began his singing career at the age of 18. I remember his photo on one of his old LP album covers, with all of his groovy hair that stretched to his shoulders. Now he's bald and prefers to sing wearing a cap. But as an entertainer he's as dynamic as ever, and his voice is still that signature Sweet Baby James. The crowd went crazy at the end of the evening, not just for the concert, but also for 50 years of his songs that had snuck into our hearts even when we were using them as background music.

At the concert we were able to sit, stand, and sway while focusing on the penetrating poetry of the lyrics. Some of us remembered trying to recover alone in our adolescent bedrooms after a bad date when "Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight" came out. Now his promise of "You've Got a Friend" means even more. And after we spent so many years trying to recover from the "Walking Man" who "walks on by" our lives, we understand the warning he was offering us.

Taylor didn't make a political statement, but near the end of the night he tenderly sang, "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies" and followed it with "Shed a Little Light." That song opens with the words, "Let us turn our thoughts today to Dr. Martin Luther King, and recognize that there are ties between us, all men and women living on the earth." Tears began to flow as I mouthed the song's chorus, "Shed a little light, O Lord, so we can see, just a little light, O Lord." So maybe he did make a statement.

I know only enough about Taylor's life to realize that he came by his insights and probably his music on the hard road. He's had three marriages, struggled with drug addiction that he eventually kicked, and one of the early songs of his career, "Fire and Rain," was completed after being in the hospital for clinical depression. It's hard to find any social or religious prophets who didn't get beaten up finding their insights.

As I walked back to the hotel with my wife, I kept thinking about my generation's devotion to this artist who had shed more than a little light for us along our long

years.

That got me thinking about the aging mainline congregations that fret a lot about their future with questions like, “Where are the young people? They don’t really care for our music, or understand what it has done for us over the years.” Our parents had the same lament when “baby boomer” was a prophetic term for a generation on a “Country Road” that just needed to lead away from the “mama” who “don’t understand.”

The young adults who are inheriting society and its churches have the same anxieties about being understood as every generation before it. They should. But they don’t understand Mama when she describes her bucket list. A James Taylor concert? Really? Even the notion of a bucket list is confusing to them.

And they certainly don’t understand my baby-boomer inclination to think, “Forget the bucket. I’ll just buy the damn shoes.” Maybe they’ve already figured out that my inclination only helps me be more of a “walking man.” And they’ve seen the hurts from that.

I’m going to give young adults the space to find their own Sweet Baby James, one who on hard nights will lead them “Up on the Roof” to find the inspiration they need.

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