

## CONCORD BRIDGE

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A burning light  
*The life and message of Johnny Cash*

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*“It is man’s personal duty, commanded not by the laws of any government but by common humanity, to lift these unfortunates up...”*

On Friday, September 12, 2003, Johnny Cash departed this world, 71 years of age. Such a simple announcement would most likely have met with the approbation of the man who exemplified the beauty of simplicity in both his music and his life. Despite this simplicity, Cash’s music seethes with an energy that forces the listener to confront the social, religious and political commentaries embedded within his artfully constructed songs and lyric narratives. Cash the storyteller presents the listener not only with tales of love, family, murder, drug abuse, faith and country, but also delivers a strong message about each topic that he engages. Not surprising for a man of his artistic genius, such messages are often not explicit in the lyrics of the song, but are rendered transparent by a guitar chord or a particularly melancholy turn-of-voice from Cash himself. Often this lesson is not an end unto itself, but provides only a starting point from which the listener is expected to further consider and develop his views on the subject. Given the diverse subjects upon which Cash has dwelt within his vast repertoire, a critic or admirer would be hard-pressed to find one phrase which might describe, and do justice to, his life’s works. Serendipitously, this perfect phrase originated outside the world of music and was not even applied to Cash by its coiner, President George W. Bush. The phrase: compassionate conservatism.

Despite the fact that some would protest this phrase as an oxymoron, and some are simply not clear as to what it might denote, when viewed within the context of Johnny Cash’s life and music, the expression takes on a definite and powerful meaning. It is an argument for God, for faith, for strong families, for patriotism and for personal responsibility for one’s deeds. But above all, it is an argument for love.

Conservatives are generally disposed to argue for smaller government. As a result of the power of the conservative movement, there are constraints upon the government preventing it from attempting to realize a utopia. The presence of these constraints, and the social shortfalls that they necessarily entail, would seem to compel men to work – unaided by the state – towards the realization of the best feasible society; if not a utopia, at least something better than the status quo. The fair criticism of much of conservatism is that it is quick to condemn those that falter where a stronger government might have righted a wrong step and is slow to offer a helping hand to the same misguided and unfortunate men.

Johnny Cash would never have suggested that personal failure was the result of anything but the actions of the individual in question. He advocates personal responsibility in its most powerful form in the murderous characters of the protagonists of “Folsom Prison Blues” and “Hung My Head”, the former being condemned to imprisonment and the latter to execution. Notably, there

is no protestation in either song; both men accept the fact that they must be punished for their misdeeds. However, the plights of both characters are presented in such a way as to provoke a sense of profound pathos and sympathy in the listener. Cash is clearly telling the listener that these men, however heinous their acts, are still deserving of society's love. Moreover, it is love, or simply caring for and taking an active interest in the affairs of one's fellow men, that is needed if we are to progress beyond a society in which such events are commonplace.

Just as the freedoms of adulthood carry with them certain burdens – such as drinking responsibly, driving safely, and voting wisely – the liberties and freedoms of limited government engender certain responsibilities toward one's fellow man: to forgive his shortcomings, to help him when he cannot help himself, and, most fundamentally, to do him no wrong whenever possible, however legally permissible the alternative may be. In his song "Man in Black", Cash explains his never-changing black attire as symbolic of the burden that he bears in the name of the world's unfortunates. It is man's personal duty, commanded not by the laws of any government but by common humanity, to lift these unfortunates up, however unpleasant the undertaking. To accomplish this task in the spirit of faith, family and country that Johnny Cash embodied is the true realization of compassionate conservatism. Johnny Cash has rejoined "the family circle at the Throne." It is time for society to hear and heed his call.