

What I Learned About Heaven From American Idol

True confession: Steve and I have watched every episode of *American Idol* this season. Every, single one. This is astounding because there are virtually *no* entertainment choices on which we agree. He's sports and action movies. I'm documentaries and *You've Got Mail*. We haven't always watched *American Idol*, and we've *never* watched an entire season until this year. This year, as Steve has been stuck at home, we've looked for ways to spend time together and AI has become our regular date night. Even when it fell on the opening night of a conference I was very involved in, the decision wasn't even a little bit hard—no way was I going to leave Steve on AI night.

Tonight was the finale. The last show. And it was surprisingly, weirdly painful for me. I have no particular attachment to these competitors; but this show has marked a specific stretch of road for me. It opened on Jan. 7, exactly one month after Steve went on hospice. I remember wondering if he would be here for the end of it. Each Wednesday and Thursday, it marked an escape for us from our reality. I talked incessantly through it. "I don't like her vibrato." "Why is he wearing a hat again?" "Is that tattoo real, do you think, because I didn't notice it last week." That kind of riveting, never-ending commentary. Steve doesn't have the energy to respond much but that doesn't stop me from talking. We were together and that's what mattered.

So, back to tonight. The show itself was a pretty epic disappointment. I didn't enjoy the hours of filler and a lot of it seemed sort of ... desperate and maybe a little bit tired and sad. But when it was time to announce the winner, I found myself overwhelmed with emotion. The decision hung in the balance between two young, handsome, talented men. They were

both worthy competitors, but when Nick's name was called, I was so happy for him. I mean, like *unreasonably* happy. Tears-streaming happy. I cried as he was pounced on by his competitors' fierce hugs while he tried to sing his new song and then I *really* cried when he left the stage, mid-sentence, because he just needed to find his dad for a hug. Confetti fell thick all around him, all around everyone. And you could see it in his face: This was a moment beyond his craziest dreams—the kind of moment where you know everything is about to change.

And in that very same moment, in the magic of Nick's victory, I suddenly knew what I hadn't known before: the reason we'd been watching it all this time. Call me crazy, but I think I was seeing a picture of Steve's future as he enters heaven ... the winner. Microphone in hand, he'll sing the song of the redeemed (and oh, sister, mercy, my husband can *sing*!) as confetti falls and those who've gone before cheer, because they know what we cannot possibly know from our place in the cheap seats—they know that everything is about to change for Steve Stern. He'll try to keep singing, but he'll have to stop to find his dad in the crowd and go hug him, long and hard. And more than anything, he'll understand what the long fight was for.

What might seem like a disappointment of a finale will now be known as the doorway into life beyond his dreams. Beyond all our dreams. And from that vantage point, on that stage, he will finally and truly understand what it means to say death has *no sting*. None.

Nick finally pulled it together and returned to his spot on the stage in time to sing the very last line of his victory song, and the line was,

"Oh, what a beautiful life."

Yes. Beautiful, indeed.

Bo Stern is a sought-after speaker and writer, and a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Oregon. She is passionately involved in raising awareness and funding for ALS (Lou Gehrig's) research, with which her husband was diagnosed in 2011. For more info and to follow her story, visit .