



MARK PEARSON
MUSIC

Journey to Discovery

I

*I'm gonna be an old man
That's all I've really got planned
Back on the top of my list
Wrote it on the back of my list
All I really know is when I really grow up
I'll be an old man*

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That's the chorus of *When I Grow Up I'll Be An Old Man*. It is a song I wrote and first sang in my mid-twenties when being an old man seemed so far away. It's different singing that song these days at this stage and this age. It's also something to look through the years at experiences that brought me to this place, for instance the experience of deciding in high school to play tackle football.

In September of 1962 I was fifteen and about to start my sophomore year at Lewis and Clark High School. The three previous years I had gone to three different schools. In 7th grade I was at the grade school I'd attended since first grade. For 8th grade I went to a private school. In 9th grade I was at Lewis and Clark in a homeroom for freshmen taking classes with sophomores while my grade school classmates were attending the junior high a few miles away. I was a pretty lost kid. I thought one way I might find myself was to start playing tackle football but as a freshman I hurt my ribs and walked away before coming back to sit on the bench for the last game of the freshmen season and that was kind of it.

And then before school started that next fall, the fall of 62, the seniors, the juniors, and the sophomores, the ones turning out for football, we practiced together for a few days before splitting off into varsity and a B-Team, the B-Team that had its own season. It was the first time I was on the field with these older guys and also with the kids who had been in junior high the year before.

For some reason I missed the first day of practice when uniforms were handed out and the different drills were explained. I can't remember now whether I forgot, got confused on the date, or maybe I had a family obligation. Like I was saying I was a little bit lost back then. The only pants left that came close to fitting were shiny and from a different era as well as two sizes too big. I was either in a hurry got confused or simply didn't know but I ended up putting the thigh pads in backwards meaning the pointy ends were on the inside instead of the outside which made it incredibly hard and I might add a little dangerous to run. I found a helmet that I thought fit before racing tentatively out the door holding up my pants. Once outside I slowed down and was trying to look like I knew what I was doing when somebody yelled "Grass drills" and what only a moment earlier had had been a hundred guys standing around became two large circles with coaches in the middle. All these years later I vividly remember at that moment thinking, well, one circle's as good as the next so I found a spot in the one that was closest to where I was standing.

Let love go forward from this time and place...



Then suddenly the whistle blew, everyone froze and the world went silent and we all followed the coach's eyes trying to figure out where he was looking and who he was going to talk to. He was looking right at me. "Pearson," he said, "you're in the wrong circle. Go over with the lineman." Unable to keep my embarrassment down and struggling to keep my pants up I meekly made my way to the second circle. My football career was underway.

II

*Maybe I'll grow a soft snow beard
Maybe a 'stash crooked and weird
Maybe I'll keep myself warm in beer
Or maybe I'll carry a cane
Wear an old fashioned pink carnation
Or dream under sweet scotch intoxication*

*Chorus
But I'm gonna be an old man
That's all I've really got planned
Back on the top of my list
Wrote it on the back of my list
All I really know is when I really grow up
I'll be an old man*

That rest of that first week of practice is kind of a blur. I found a pair of practice pants that fit although there were holes in the knees. Without consulting me my mom patched them with a paisley fabric so my on the field look remained far from cool although the guy with the locker next to mine once he stopped laughing was able to show me the correct way to put in thigh pads thus saving my manhood. Much to my surprise at the end of the week when coaches told the sophomores to go to the adjacent field and form the B-Team they asked me to stay with the varsity.

The previous year's team had gone undefeated. They'd been ranked number one in the state until a heartbreaking loss the last game of the season. There were great linemen on that one loss team, Jerry Campbell, who was named all state that year and John Harshman who was a senior my sophomore year. As a fifteen-year-old kid those two guys were it as far as I was concerned.

With a few exceptions the offensive and defensive starters on that team my sophomore year were seniors. As a defensive lineman I practiced against Harshman who was playing mostly offensive tackle. When he was pass blocking I simply couldn't get around him. Unfortunately John got hurt early that season and didn't play much though he was still named to the All-State Team.

In those days we had a five-team city league made up of four public high schools and the all boys Catholic school, Gonzaga Prep. Each team played each other twice and usually in the middle of the season a regional game outside the league for a nine game season. Football was a big deal in Spokane in the early 60's.

Let love go forward from this time and place...



Our first game that season was against Gonzaga Prep. They had a fullback from Canada named Ted Gerela. Though he was only a junior he was so big and strong that rumor had it he was twenty years old. Looking back it was just kids talking. We lost that game by a touchdown. I went in for a few plays and on one of them Gerela literally ran over me.

At practice the following Monday the head coach, Bob Bartlett, announced the starters for the next week's game and I was one of them on the defensive team. Years later I was talking with a new secretary in The Brothers Four's manager's office. She told me her husband went to high school with me. He was a senior when I was a sophomore, she said. She wondered if I remembered him. She told me his name was Joe McCollough.

Even a quarter century later I felt my body tense a little bit. You see he was the senior whose place I took on the defensive team. The way the team was structured on Mondays anybody could challenge the named starter and try to win the position from that guy. Most weeks I was named the starter and each of those Mondays Joe would challenge me for that spot to start that next week.

What that meant was that with the whole squad looking on he and I would get in our stances across from each other blocking dummies on each side of us and first one of us would be the blocker the other the defensive player who tried to tackle a third player running between the dummies with a football. Then Joe and I would switch positions and the one blocking would become the tackler. And every week the seniors would cheer on their friend Joe who they hoped would join them on the starting defense. Every week except for the rematch against Prep I remained the starter.

A few years ago one of the other seniors reminded me of another incident from that year. We had mandatory team meetings one night a week called chalk talks where we met in a classroom and the coaches drew up plays for the upcoming game on a blackboard. I had just become part of a singing group and somehow the group had said yes to a job on a chalk talk night. I don't know what I could have been thinking. Clearly I wasn't thinking clearly. I ended up telling the head coach that I needed to miss a chalk talk. Personally I had forgotten that I'd even done that but the guy telling the story was laughing his head off remembering how nobody could believe somebody could dare to go up to the coach and tell him that he was going to miss a chalk talk.

That year our team lost twice to Prep and finished second in the city league. There was a moment at halftime of the last game when I was sitting with my helmet in my hands and, Butch Slaughter, another one of the seniors said "Pearson it looks like you've lost your suspension." The plastic helmets from that era had fabric webbing and inside at the top of the helmet there was a place to put a circular rubber disk called a suspension and help absorb the hits when you're blocking and tackling.

I thanked him and tried to act cool as I went to find a student manager to have him put a suspension in my helmet. Inside I was totally embarrassed and mortified because the truth is that I'd played the whole season without a suspension in that helmet and I hadn't known the difference.

Let love go forward from this time and place...



III

*But I'm gonna be an old man
That's all I've really got planned
Back on the top of my list
Wrote it on the back of my list
All I really know is when I really grow up
I'll be an old man*

The next year I moved from defensive to offensive tackle. While my sophomore year the starters were mostly seniors that next season lots of us were juniors. That didn't sit well with seniors on the bench thinking they should be on the field. The team never discovered a sense of connection and camaraderie. The older I get the more I realize how important that is whatever we do in and with our lives.

The team lost 3 games including twice to Gonzaga Prep who went undefeated and were named state champs. I was named 2nd Team All-City. Because I'd spent a year in private school I had enough credits to graduate from high school a year early. If I had done that my football career would have ended right there. Thankfully I decided to stay for my senior year.

While I'm a little embarrassed to admit I missed the first day of practice that year as well. This time my coaches and teammates had a uniform waiting for me including a new helmet and the right size pants. I definitely knew which circle to go to when someone yelled, "Grass drills." Like my sophomore year the starters were primarily seniors who liked and supported each other and now I was one of them. That season I played on the defensive line and was a pulling guard on the offensive team.

At the time the Green Bay Packers were the ultimate professional football team. Their signature play was called The Packer Sweep that involved a pulling guard from the state of Idaho named Jerry Kramer making the key block for a glamorous running back named Paul Hornung. Although it was at a very different level it was fun to think of myself somehow playing the same position as Jerry Kramer.

We won our first 3 games before playing Gonzaga Prep in front of nearly 20 thousand people. I'd never been on a team that had beaten Gonzaga Prep. We won that game 52 to 6. It was as much fun as I have ever had in organized sports. We won every game after that until the last one when we played Gonzaga one more time. It snowed all day. They scored on a kickoff and a punt return. They beat us by ten. I remember sitting in the losing locker room and slowly taking off a wet football uniform for what I was sure would be the last time.

A few years ago I was talking to one of the other seniors from that team, Lonnie Olsen. Unfortunately Lonnie was dying of cancer and that conversation would be our last. He talked about how Coach Bartlett told us before that final snowy game that we would remember that moment for the rest of our lives. I didn't have the heart to tell Lonnie I didn't remember what the coach had said. What I will never forget is Lonnie's and my last conversation and though the conversation was high school football we both knew we were talking about a whole lot more.

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Because Gonzaga lost twice that year we were the city champs. The quarterback and I got to drive over to Gonzaga Prep and take the City Championship trophy out of their trophy case where they'd displayed it for the two previous years.

Back then the newspapers didn't pick both an offensive and defensive all city team. They just named one team of the eleven best players. The evening paper took a picture of eleven of us in our uniforms. Six of us from Lewis and Clark. If you look carefully you will see I'm the one in his stocking feet having forgotten to bring my football shoes for the picture.

At school a few days later some of us were talking at lunch about how the morning paper was going to bring a photographer to school that afternoon and take pictures of those who were named to their All-City Team. I hadn't been notified. I assumed I hadn't made that team. I congratulated the guys who had and figured that making one All-City Team would have to be good enough.

Someone found me toward the end of the school day and told me I needed to go and get my picture taken. I was as pleased as I was surprised. A few days later the paper published the results of their all city team. There was an asterisk by my name and an explanation saying I was named honorary captain. A week or so later the All-State Team was announced. I'd made that team as well. In fact I was named Lineman of the Year. A few weeks later a few days after being elected Student Body President I was named to the Scholastic All-American Team.

It was a very special time. While the best honor was being voted captain by my teammates, the most satisfying moment was when our line coach, Gene Archer, introduced me at the awards banquet saying that he had coached some great lineman including Jerry Campbell and John Harshman. Pearson, he said, is the best I've ever coached.

IV

*Maybe I'll rock away in some cabin
Rent a flat and play golf in New Haven
Maybe I'll get some tools for a garden
Or collect tin foil and string
Lose my mind, go blind, or just turn gray
And like my song kind of fade away*

*Chorus
But I'm gonna be an old man
That's all I've really got planned
Back on the top of my list
Wrote it on the back of my wrist
All I really know is when I really grow up
I'll be an old man*

For much of my life I've struggled with feeling on some level like an imposter. My senior year in high school often felt like an inside out or upside down version of The Emperor's New Clothes for while the press clippings said I was an All-American

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a big part of me knew I was simply that kid who was still trying to keep his pants up and find his way into the right circle.

That doesn't mean that I wasn't excited and flattered when I started getting recruiting letters from major colleges and visits from coaches including an intriguing one from the Air Force Academy. The University of Washington had gone to three Rose Bowls in the previous six years. They said having me play for them was their highest priority. Looking back I don't know how many kids were told the same thing but when you're seventeen years old and coaches with Rose Bowl watches and rings tell you something like that it's heady stuff. And I told them, yes, I'll play for you. Somehow I had gone from believing my football career was over to dreaming of Rose Bowls and even dreaming maybe someday replacing Jerry Kramer on the Green Bay Packers.

In the meantime I found the perfect way to keep from taking myself too seriously. To stay in shape I decided to turn out for wrestling that winter. In eight dual meets I lost seven matches and managed one tie with a last second escape. The hecklers made it clear that though some might consider me the toast of the town in their minds I was simply toast. But then something happened in the qualifying matches for the state tournament. I pinned my first opponent in less than twenty seconds. I was so excited I forgot to shake his hand. I wrestled eight matches over two weekends. My only losses on points to a guy who had pinned me earlier in the year. I was named an alternate to the state wrestling championship.

Now, major college football was different then. There wasn't the money, exposure, or commercialization. It was as much regional as national. Freshmen were not eligible to play with the varsity. In the fall of 65 the University of Washington freshmen football team had it's own five game season. Fifty guys turned out with lots of us on scholarships. In facet Mike McCoy was one of them. Sometimes when we're traveling these days especially when I'm trying to remember something he reminds me of the misadventure with the missing suspension.

The players' last names were scrawled on the front of our helmets in black ink on masking tape. One of the ways the coaches tried to find out how tough players were was to send eleven guys out to play offense, defense, and special teams until they were totally exhausted and then send out another eleven guys out and see how they did.

After the first week the coaches posted a depth chart that included four groups of eleven guys. The first eleven were given gold practice jerseys; the second group white, the 3rd red, and the 4th green. The last five or six guys got orange jerseys. I remember looking for my name on that piece of paper on the bulletin board and finally finding it at the bottom of the page with the names of the other guys who like me had been assigned orange jerseys.

A few days later my shoulder pad broke in the middle practice. I stayed on the field and continued to play. Maybe the coaches saw that as a sign of toughness. Anyway the next day I wore a green jersey. After the first game I wore a red one, before the second game a white jersey and before the third game against the University

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of Oregon I wore a gold jersey in practice. The last game of the season was against Washington State in Pullman not far from Spokane. I was named one of the captains. I have a very nice memory of the night before that game when the coach came by room and told me he was proud of me.

When I took the uniform off after that game I remember being glad I did it played football, college football, and that it meant something to know I could do it. But mostly I remember feeling that I was done. It was the last football game I ever played.

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V

*I'm gonna be an old man
That's all I've really got planned
Back on the top of my list
Wrote it on the back of my list
All I really know is when I really grow up
I'll be an old man*

A phrase that is becoming more and more familiar for those on the road to *recovery* is that we are as sick as our secrets. I would posit that on the road to *discovery* we may be as healthy as our stories, as healthy as the stories we tell ourselves and each other around the campfires of our lives.

Just as the song *When I Grow Up I'll Be an Old Man* takes on different meanings when I sing it in my 60's as opposed to my 20's (maybe a little like Paul McCartney singing *When I'm Sixty-Four* now as opposed to when I first heard it in my teens) the story of playing football defines, explains, and gives meaning in a different light at this stage at this place at this, *One of Those Times in a Life*, than it did when I first took off that uniform for the last time. Ironically it becomes both more significant and less important as those experiences become a smaller part of a larger tapestry.

As I continue to untie the knots and untangle the tangles in the threads of a life and attempt to spin those threads into meaningful and entertaining yarns and continue to be filled with gratitude for the opportunity to be amazed and amused as well as for the chance to share what I find around these campfires.

Because you see *All I really know/Is when I really grow/Up/I'll be an old man.*



Let love go forward from this time and place...