



## Dear Partner: Part One

I

*Dear Partner and soul mate we've come a long way  
Down fast roads and dirt roads crossed an ocean or two  
Shared adventure and danger with friends and strangers  
Doing the best that we thought we could do*

That's the first half of the first verse of the song "Dear Partner" a live recording from June 11, 1983. It's the first time McCoy and I performed that song publicly. We've been singing it now for over 30 years and as a testament to our friendship it gets me every time.

That first time was at a concert in Meany Hall on the University of Washington campus. We had sold around a thousand tickets in that 1200 seat theater. It was a homecoming of sorts. McCoy and I met at the University in the fall of 1965. That year the old Meany Hall with its 2600 seats was being torn down after being irreparably damaged in a 1964 earthquake.

What became known as the 60's was scarcely underway in 1965. Young women in sororities were still required to wear dresses or skirts on campus. The big student demonstration that year was to demand that the administration build the new Meany Hall with as many seats as the old one had.

In September of 1965 US combat troops had been in Viet Nam for seven months. As college freshman we might not have been able to tell you that our country's involvement in World War One had lasted 19 months, World War Two forty-four months, or the Korean War euphemistically called a police action lasted for thirty-seven months. Yet our collective consciousness (or unconsciousness) seemed to comfortably count on the fact that whatever was happening in Viet Nam would be long over by the time our class graduated and our college deferments went past their use by dates in 1969.

Of course we knew differently that night in 1983 as we stood together on the stage of the no longer new new Meany Hall. We introduced a lot of songs that night including *Dear Partner*, *Magic Carpet*, *Mad Man on a High Wire*, *I Don't Know Where the Good Times Go* and *Sometimes I Get Weary*, songs we still sing and are now sharing around these campfires. While the songs I was writing were becoming more personal thanks to a small supportive publisher in Nashville it suddenly seemed possible they might also be shared with a larger audience.

These were good times for McCoy and me. We had perfected a singing style that often involved alternating lines of verses and using McCoy's ability to find a most unique harmony part on the chorus. That night we also reunited with the musicians who had helped record *Between Friends* and we'd rented a remote recording truck to record this concert in hopes that we might have enough material for a second album.

Because the concert took so much preparation leading up to it and so much concentration in the midst of it I had little appreciation for what we'd actually accomplished. Some friends from Arkansas who had arranged their vacation to be at the concert were continuing up to Alaska and they invited me to come with them. I told them thanks but I'd be taking some time to catch my breath. What I couldn't imagine was that when the week was over I would receive a phone call that would more than take my breath away.

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



## II

*There're more lines on my face than I've left for the ladies  
More no's than ever were yeses or maybes  
More times I wonder where do I belong  
My boots have worn out 'fore I could die with them one*

There were no cell phones, answering machines, or caller ID's in 1983. When the phone rang sometime before 5 AM on Father's Day Sunday June 19th it meant getting out of bed and instinctively walking the short hallway to answer the single rotary phone that was on a cord connected to a wall socket in what an architect designed as a dining room but now contained a desktop made up of an unfinished hollow core door held up by two two drawer metal file cabinets. There were also a couple of wooden Captain's chairs on an oversized area rug and a roll top desk upon which that light blue telephone was ringing relentlessly.

It was Milt Jones, Pat Sands mentor and minister, saying that Sands back only a few days from Israel had been admitted to Overlake Hospital and I needed to get there as soon as possible. I dressed quickly. These were the longest days of the year and when I opened the front door I was stunned alert by how bright the outside world was that early in the morning. Without traffic the drive to the hospital took about 20-minutes including crossing Lake Washington on the Evergreen Point floating bridge. At the middle of that bridge I remember fighting off a desperate urge to turn around.

The halls of the hospital were deserted, dark, and quiet. I found Milt, Maureen, Pat's girlfriend, his parents, and a few familiar church faces in the waiting room of the ICU. In a flurry of hugs and quiet conversation I learned that Pat had been admitted late the night before after likely suffering a cerebral hemorrhage.

His parents, known affectionately as Mama and Papa Bear, had arrived a few hours earlier after making a two and a half hour drive from their home on the Olympic Peninsula. It was Mama Bear who took me by the hand and walked me to a nearby room where we stood for the longest time staring at her son. I remember the sound of the machine that was breathing for him and how shamefully hesitant I was to reach out and touch him.

Before long most everyone left for church. A doctor came and talked to Maureen, Mama and Papa Bear, and me about Sands' condition. I remember hearing something about how it might take as many as 40 days before the swelling in his brain would go down enough for them to operate. In the moments that followed I thought about the 40 days and 40 nights that Jesus was tested as if that might somehow help explain what was now happening to my friend in the next room. I remember desperately wanting to do something. And with that desperation came a revelation that in this kind of situation the only thing we can truly do is to be. It was then continuing to follow a religious thread, something I didn't do very often, that I realized that all Jesus asked of his friends the night he was captured and later killed was for them to be with him and to watch and to wait and to be awake and to pray with him in the garden. I realized that I would do everything I could to watch and wait and on some level stay alert and awake for however long Sands needed me. While that hospital was the last place I wanted to be I realized it was also now the only place.

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



Then the news that Sands' condition had worsened and nothing more could be done. Because he hadn't made prior arrangements someone came and asked his parents if they could harvest Sands' organs. I remember the look on Papa Bear's face as he imagined someone cutting into his son and how in his grief and disbelief he couldn't do more than look down at the floor and shake his head. That was it. There were last goodbyes and then shortly after 2 PM in the afternoon of Father's Day the machine that was breathing for him was turned off and Pat Sands was dead.

The next 72 hours remain a blur though lots of it was getting and being in touch with that large circle of friends that Sands had created in his too short but widely lived life. There were many quiet conversations on the phone and in person. There was shock and disbelief in every voice. There were countless stories and a relentless need to share them. People who hadn't seen Sands since his conversion needed to know how and who he'd been in the last couple years.

There was an open casket viewing on Tuesday. One of his old friends, John Tholl, worked at a Gene Juarez hair salon at the time. He said Sands didn't look like himself so he took out his comb and scissors and he trimmed Sands' hair right then and there. It was one of many sweet moments. The memorial and graveside service were Wednesday. I remember wanting to do something special and it took the form of deciding to put on a tie. The problem is I didn't own a tie at the time so I asked Milt's assistant, Bill Lawrence, if I could borrow one from him. He gave me one and told me I could keep it. And I did. I kept that tie in my office for 25 years until Milt took a position at a church in Texas. Before Milt left I cut the tie into three equal lengths. I kept one and gave one each to Bill and Milt and told them it would forever be the tie that binds.

For Sands' memorial the church where he had studied the last two years was filled with a lifetime of friends and a sense from everyone that the world was now a lesser place. I sang up in the choir loft. I don't remember what. Milt spoke and quoted from Timothy about fighting the good fighting, running the good race, and keeping the faith. Lots of us drove from the church in north Seattle south to the grave sight that was near SeaTac airport. It was the only time I have ever carried a coffin. I remember McCoy breathing behind me and how light the coffin felt and how short the distance was from the hearse to the grave and how it was all over too soon but not before clouds appeared and what started out as a light rain turned into a squall.

My younger brother had come from Spokane and stayed with me the night before. I remember standing next to him at the gravesite. He was wearing a light brown leather coat that suddenly became marred and marked by raindrops and then darkened completely as he stood without moving. In my pain I was clearly oblivious to his pain. We hugged at the gravesite and he drove back to Spokane.

The day ended at Gerry and Kathy Gordon's house. Gerry was the guy who had stopped with Sands at every exit between Vantage and Seattle to get something to eat in as a way of staying awake coming back from a fishing trip. That story and lots more were told and liquor flowed and it no longer mattered who knew Sands when or for how long. We were simply and finally together in our grief.

The next ten days were filled with more phone calls and get togethers and stories shared. Although it came as a surprise it became clear to me that besides being sad I was mad.

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



I knew it wasn't logical but I directed a lot of that anger toward Sands for abandoning me. I had learned growing up how to suppress my anger. But there it was unwilling to be restrained or stopped in any way.

And then soon it dawned on me that Sands was somehow teaching me a lesson and giving me a gift about truly being in touch with my feelings. Still there was so much pain involved I hoped that it would be a while before there were more lessons that had to be learned. Then phone rang at 5 in the morning on the morning after the 4th of July.

### III

*Thought we'd go out in a great ball of fire  
Get shot or arrested fooling with desire  
Thought we'd be gone when the piper came around  
Before life filled us up and started slowing us down*

Before 1983 I don't remember receiving early morning phone calls delivering bad news. That year there would be two fifteen days apart. The first brought news about Pat Sands. The second came at the same early hour with word that my younger brother was in a psychiatric ward at Sacred Heart hospital in Spokane. The similar time of day, awakened from a deep sleep, the similar type of day, warm and bright, the similar trajectory of the day, heading hastily east across Lake Washington on an eerily floating bridge as the light from a rising sun danced on the surface of the lake somehow tied those two moments together in a macabre Kabuki theater of the heart and mind.

Then in the middle of that second crossing an awareness of how much had changed in a fortnight. A primal urge to turn around had been replaced by a stronger need to go forward. The uncertainty of what I might be able to do was now supplanted by a knowing that it was enough to simply be awake and alert in the figurative garden of someone I loved and that while the last place I want to be was driving toward that uncertain future it was also the only place.

So at 10:30 that morning I pulled into the driveway of my brother's house, reached my hand across the fence to open the gate, and walked toward the whispered conversations and the anxiety that was waiting.

Before I reach the two worn wooden steps that lead to the painted deck I will stop and step out of that moment and talk about the difficulty of telling my personal story while at the same time trying to protect the privacy of those I love. It's made more complicated because after a century of silence there are different levels of comfort with such conversations. I went back and forth many times trying to decide whether and how to describe my brother's hospitalization. I determined the best way was to state that fact while leaving out most of the details knowing that thirty years later he remains an inspiration for me when it comes to creating and composing a full and meaningful extraordinarily ordinary life.

While I want to state loudly and clearly there is no shame and should be no stigma talking about mental illness I know there is. At the same time I continue to grow more confident in the importance of and the healing power of sharing stories and our shared story.

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



With that I return to that time in July in 1983. Although my parents and brothers and I struggled with how to be together we wanted to be together and knew it was important that we were (like we had been in 1969 when we had met as a family to hear about my dad's hospitalization.) We each had our own way to understand and explain what was now going on. While love united us differences in experience and perceptions and needs kept us from finding a way to truly be truly together.

After five days my brother came home. It was time for him and his wife and their family to begin to find their way and it was time for me to go back home. I am trying to remember exactly how I was feeling during that drive. A numbness I guess in some ways shut down yet in others ways was on alert and reacting to everything that had happened in the previous three weeks. I'd quit smoking eleven months earlier. The only thing that kept me from buying a pack of cigarettes on the drive back was a stubborn intention to make it at least a year without smoking.

#### IV

*Thought we'd go out in a great ball of fire  
Get shot or arrested fooling with desire  
Thought we'd be gone when the piper came around  
Before life filled us up and started slowing us down*

Someone had come in and cleaned the house while I was in Spokane. There were flowers by the phone and a pint of Haagen-Dasz in the fridge. It could only have been Susan. We met in the fall of 79 both recovering from failed marriages. While the passion had cooled some we remained committed and unwilling to end our relationship. The fact that we had keys to each other's houses became a romantic symbol that some day we would unlock love's mysteries and end up together.

She had been incredibly supportive leading up to the concert. She was at the hospital on Father's Day and at the memorial three days later. She listened patiently in the days that followed as I tried to make sense of Pat's death. Signs of her care were now clear in the flowers, the ice cream, and the quilt she made months earlier that I wrapped myself in as I lay down in my bed.

Why I didn't get up and drive across that floating bridge this time to her house and throw myself into her arms I may never completely understand. The same for the fact that a few weeks later I chose not to meet her and her kids in Sun Valley. She took two days to make that drive from Seattle to Sun Valley. She called from Pendleton and talked about how hot it was and how the dog was sick. I remember coming this close to saying I'd meet her there in a couple of days. But I didn't. When she got back two weeks later everything changed. She had met someone else.

Suddenly life became a desperate quest to win her back. If the previous months could be described as an awkward portrayal of Hamlet the weeks that followed might be seen as a desperate Don Quixote. In a life that was filled with questions I made her the answer to them all.

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



It was much later that I was able to see that relationship and that time in a more complete context. What I had learned in the time in between was there were two strong and often unpredictable forces inside me. They're still there but instead of me belonging to them for the most part they belong to me now because I've named and explained and claimed them. The first is a desperate need to be and feel loved. The second a feeling that I am less than and somehow lacking and even fatally flawed. Over the years that conflict became distilled down to an apparently unanswerable riddle. The riddle went: How can someone love me unless they know me well yet if someone knows me well how can they love me? Over the years I've learned that though the riddle may be unique the struggle is much more universal. I've also found out that while we may work long and hard and search far and wide often seeking the knowledge of masters and the blessings of companions in an attempt to solve such riddles the answer is usually there all the time inside us waiting to be discovered. For me once I learned to finally and fully and was able love myself my riddle was solved.

Not long ago I was able to say thank you to Susan for our time together and to tell her how sorry I was. Some of the most important words in the English language.

That gratitude was a long way from being felt and the riddle years away from being solved and the words far from being spoken when we met one day that September and gave each other back the keys to our houses.

*Dear Partner and soul mate we've come a long way  
Down fast roads and dirt roads crossed an ocean or two  
Shared adventure and danger with friends and strangers  
Doing the best that we thought we could do*



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