



Some Brothers and a Mother

I

*May you find someone within you who is gentle and is strong
May you know a somewhere where you know that you belong
May life always fascinate you, may wonders never cease
May you find the missing peace*

Those are the first few lines of *The Missing Peace* a song I wrote toward the end of 1984 a few months after that all consuming Seattle concert. While songwriting remained fundamental to what I was doing after that concert I decided I would try to fulfill a dream and write a novel. I'd written a children's story, *The Beginning of the Rainbow*, when I was living in LA and I'd studied different books on writing especially John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. In the fall of 83 I had attended a night class on novel writing at the University of Washington taught by a guy named Jack Cady and now a year later I was re-taking the class this time as I began to write a novel.

Jack Cady was an ideal teacher for a 37-year-old would be novelist. He was 15 years older than I and had his first novel published when he was 49 years old. A conscientious objector during the Korean War he ended up serving in the Coast Guard working as a cross-country truck driver and finally having his first short story published when he was 40. He made becoming a novelist feel accessible and possible.

He would come into class at the last minute with his German shepherd and a large cup of coffee sit on the desk at the front of the room and simply start talking. One night a week for ten weeks he gave us keys to unlocking the mysteries of novel writing. With a rich knowledge of American history he talked with passion and compassion about process. He taught us about points of view. Voice. Narrative. Scene. His rule of thumb for writing dialogue was to imagine two people walking toward each other speaking in a normal tone of voice. He said from the time they could hear each other until the time they reached each other was as long as any written conversation needed to be.

Every day during the week I would write. Though I'd bought my first Macintosh computer earlier that year word processing was in its infancy. Jack believed the tools we use when we write help inform what we write and how we write so I chose to use a fountain pen on the first draft with a fountain pen and then a typewriter to create a revised manuscript.

The story was called *My Brother's Keeper*. Using both third person and omniscient points of view it takes place in the summer of 1979 when the protagonist, Warren Nelson, has just finished his junior year of college. The day he finishes his finals he impulsively joins the navy. The story begins with him breaking the news to his pacifist artist mother, Elizabeth. We soon learn that Warren made his startling choice in a desperate attempt to get free of the shadow of his older half-brother, David. The half siblings were born ten years apart on August 26th. David died somewhat mysteriously a few weeks before what would have been his 21st birthday. When the end of August arrives in 1979 Warren will be older than his brother ever was. David's death was so traumatic the family could only speak of him in reverent whispers and all the remnants of his life were buried in the basement in a steamer trunk that years before had carried everything Elizabeth and her young son David owned as they left their Midwest home in search of a new life, a life they found on

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the west coast in the person of Dr. Jim Nelson who married Elizabeth and adopted David. The family became complete when Warren and his sister were born and suddenly broken asunder with David's death.

Warren spends the summer of 1979 trying to learn who his brother was. He contacts David's former girlfriend who is going through a difficult divorce. They become romantically involved as they try to resurrect David the young man who had "abandoned" them ten years earlier.

The book's climax comes as Warren battles David's ghost on high bluffs patterned after those in Seattle's Discovery Park. It is not a battle to the death but one for life. The question is can Warren make David become alive enough and real enough so that those parts of Warren paralyzed and locked away by David's death will be free enough to live again. The story ends with Warren older now than his older brother ever was heading off to basic training having made a sort of peace with his mother, his brother's ghost, and most importantly himself.

For the next year I developed that story. At a workshop in the summer of 85 Harriette Arnow, one of Jack Cady's heroes and author of "The Dollmaker", chose to discuss "My Brother's Keeper" in class. I was thrilled. Eventually the novel was completed but I guess you'd say never finished. I believe James Michener is correct when he says that writing is really re-writing. Maybe I ran out of energy and imagination to keep at it. Jack Cady got a full time job teaching at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma in the fall of 85 and I never saw him again. Maybe by putting the manuscript away I wouldn't have to worry either about success or failure. Maybe it was more important to know that I could do it than actually getting it done. I don't know. I do know I had less time to work on that novel when I got my old job back with The Brothers Four.

II

*May you be one more time courageous than the times you are afraid
And may you be doubtful one less time than you have faith
May you get to know your demons and sometime set them free
May you find the missing peace*

In March of 1985 six months after I started working on "My Brother's Keeper" I was offered my old spot back in The Brothers Four. The guy who had replaced me was leaving to join The Kingston Trio. The three original guys I was rejoining were between eight and ten years older than I was. In a way I would still be the kid brother but having just turned thirty-eight I was no longer the kid trying to decide whether to make music my life's work. Instead I was trying to find ways to make music work and rejoining the group was a perfect fit.

There was no more wondering why the group kept singing those old songs. I could simply finally and fully appreciate the opportunity to represent 60's folk music, music that meant

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so much to me when I was growing up. It was also good to have a job with a title that people could understand. When someone asked me what I did I could tell them I traveled the world as a member of The Brothers Four. The group had a manager at the time with an office and a secretary in downtown Seattle. And it was fun to be back with the guys.

With a few exceptions in the 80's and 90's the group sang in tuxedos. Our casual style of music juxtaposed with that formal look somehow made people smile. In the fall of 85 the group did a couple of concerts with a Northwest choir at the 5th Avenue Theater in downtown Seattle. The show, called "I Hear America Singing," was recorded and a video made. The idea was that choirs around the country would hear the music and want to add the show and the group to their concert seasons. While the idea never truly caught on it remains a great idea. Watching how hard Bob Flick worked to make it successful gave me an important perspective on the work I was doing in my own career. I will say it's a lot easier to be part of someone else's dreams than trying to make your own come true.

III

*Find the missing peace to every puzzle
Find the missing peace to all your wars
Share the missing peace that is in others
And be the missing peace that someone else is searching for*

Like Warren, the protagonist in "My Brother's Keeper" I grew up feeling caught in my older brother's shadow. My older brother, Mike, was born in June of 1945 a few days before Dad shipped off to the Pacific to be part of the invasion of Japan. When the war suddenly ended those who had been overseas longest came home first so Dad didn't get to see his son for nearly a year. He soon was gone again this time to the hospital first as a physician and then as a patient. When I was born in March of 1947 Dad was a patient in the state mental hospital in St. Cloud. A few months later he came home for good and the only things that mattered were that we were together and that the nightmare of the previous year be put behind us and never talked about again.

As a newborn I understood none of that and in retrospect ended up on some level making myself responsible for and even the reason for the anxiety and the fear that were a natural part of those days. In that world my older brother who was entering what would become known as the "terrible twos" became my roommate, my guide, my protector, my best friend, and my biggest rival. We lived first in Shakopee a town just south of Minneapolis and then when my brother was seven and I was five we moved to Spokane. Mike and I created a world we called Dinkytown made out of clay and a brand of metal cars and trucks called Dinky toys. We could keep each other entertained for hours on end speaking a language using a sort of duck talk that only the two of us truly understood.

I grew up a natural competitor who hated to lose and was terrified of falling behind. The unspoken rules that I created and played by did not include a handicap for our difference in ages so I never understand or accept as I rode my smaller bike I was not expected and

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could not expect to keep up. Instead what I remember is that terrible feeling of watching him with what seemed like no effort get farther and farther ahead.

Besides the age differences I struggled to read. My mom would say years later it was likely undiagnosed dyslexia. I've always struggled with my weight and for the longest time when it came to sports could not figure out whether I was left or right handed. The fact that my brother ended up being the student body president as well as the class valedictorian who went to Stanford where he graduated with honors before going to medical school made him a hard act to follow. The fact that when I was in the 8th grade we liked the same girl and she chose him that wasn't an ego boost. During those same years my brother and I were taking individual banjo lessons from an old guy named Dutch Groshoff and lots of my half hour lessons started with Dutch spending 10 minutes smoking Salem cigarettes and telling me my brother was by far the best student he ever taught except maybe the kid who in the 1932 drowned on Liberty Lake during a picnic. I remember leaving lots of those lessons doing my best to keep from crying. Sometimes unsuccessfully.

One of the best things about *One of Those Times in a Life* this project and these Chronicles is continuing to discover how much of it is a journey of gratitude and grace. A few months ago Mike was over for dinner. A few days earlier I realized in some ways for the first time how proud I was of him and all he had accomplished all those years ago. Finally free of jealousy and fear I told him so. It is never too late for precious moments of healing.

He and I had a couple of nice moments years earlier in the summer of 85. He turned 40 that June. We had dinner together on his birthday. I read him a letter I'd written about being his brother. Then when I was in Spokane one weekend that August I found out he was having arthroscopic knee surgery the next Monday. I decided I was going to be with him. My car was in pretty bad shape bad enough that the clutch went out near Ritzville on Sunday morning heading west. I couldn't get the car out of 3rd gear. The gas station attendant promised me I couldn't hurt it by driving it so I drove the 250 miles to Seattle luckily finding a big enough parking place in front of my house so I didn't have to go in reverse. I got on my bike and rode the 25 or so miles to his place on Vashon Island. It was a warm summer evening. Seattle still retaining its small town feel. Along the waterfront. Across Harbor Island. Through West Seattle and Alki Beach to Lincoln Park. A ferry ride to the Vashon. Up the hill. A dozen miles to the south end of the island.

We had a nice dinner that night. I drove him to surgery the next day. The knee got fixed. Eventually the car got worked on. And then at dinner so many years later some childhood memories were re-remembered and repaired.

IV

*May there be someone who knows may you know them in return
May you find new ways of giving always something more to learn
May the world that you have hope for in time be yours indeed
May you find the missing peace*

In the mid-80's McCoy and I weren't doing much performing but we did get together to finish and polish new songs and we often went into the studio to record them. While we've discovered over the years how much we have in common what first attracted me to

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this "brother of a different mother" was how dissimilar McCoy and I were. While my older brother Mike and I grew up doing our best to stay inside the lines McCoy was one of those guys who simply needed to go outside them. He had to test the limits. He was perpetually mischievous.

He grew up in a small town was good looking charming in a James Dean sort of way, quarterback on the football team, point guard on the basketball team, played trumpet in the band. He was on the honor roll. He was easy guy to like and an easy one to enable. I knew I wasn't going to call him on much of anything. He was the Golden Boy.

In the fall of 1985 we had been friends and we'd sung together for 20 years. I had helped him build his house. Participated in his triathlon and never would have guessed we were just getting started and didn't know he would grow from the Golden Boy he had been to the Loving Man he became.

When his dad died in 1986 McCoy told me he was going to learn to fly a plane so he could take his dad's ashes and spread them on Mt. Rainier where his dad had worked as a young man. After hearing the story I went home and I picked up a guitar and for one of the few times in my life I feel like I was just given a song a song that starts:

*When my days are over and the race has been run
Turn my body to ashes and fly toward the sun
Over the mountain let those ashes go
Down to the forest and the river below
I'll be part of the river that flows to the sea
Part of the great waves that crash on the beach
Part of the gray clouds that thunder to shore
Then I'll be a raindrop that falls in the storm*

With a few exceptions like *Part of the River* and *The Missing Peace* during those years I tended to write songs I thought Nashville would like rather than songs that expressed how I was feeling and who I was. During a trip to Nashville in the mid-80's someone recommended a book by Sheila Davis called "The Craft of Lyric Writing." That and one she wrote later called "The Songwriter's Idea Book" are the two best books on songwriting I've ever read. I still refer to them when my songwriting feels stuck or feels uninspired.

V

*May you welcome new adventure may you know you have a home
May you share yourself with others and share with yourself alone
May your need for faith diminish may your faith itself increase
May you find the missing peace*

This Chronicle is called *Some Brothers and a Mother*. Last year during the holidays my mother at 90 gave me then 65 a most precious gift. For the first time she was able to tell me that with her husband in a mental hospital unsure when or if he would come home and who he would be if he did, caring for a two year old, living yet again with her parents, unsure about the next day much less about some uncertain future she simply wasn't ready for me to be born.

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Nearly a year after that surprise sharing one way to explain the significance of her gift is to say that once I heard that I could finally understand and had a place to stand regarding things that had consciously or unconsciously haunted me for years. It's a gift that I feel is so valuable I have struggled with whether I should keep it for myself or share it with the world. I've decided it's a gift too precious to hoard.

In December of 1986 I recorded 25 minutes of me playing the classic guitar and made cassette copies with a picture of my mom as a young woman on the cover and I called it "For Ruth." That's is her name. A year earlier I decided that I wanted to grow and be challenged as a musician. The route I chose was to study the classic guitar. I found a perfect teacher, Gary Bissiri. He was a working musician who knew how to teach and every week he taught me something new.

He advised me to divide my practice time into thirds using a third each for technique, repertoire, and sight-reading.

"Would you recommend an hour a day?" I asked.

"An hour is a good amount of time," he replied. "But if you have three minutes on a given day do one minute each."

What a great answer. There is a quote I attribute to perhaps the most important classic guitarist ever, Andre Segovia. He said if he doesn't practice for a day he knows it, if he doesn't pick up a guitar for two days his manager knows it, three days and everyone knows it. Now if that is true for Segovia what about the rest of us?

Classic guitar technique is precise. Because I'm naturally casual in my approach studying it made me think and practice with a different mindset. Once after he heard me sing Gary urged me to make my fingers as expressive as my voice. I began writing ideas for a series of essays I called "Music as a Second Language." I wore rubber gloves when I did the dishes to protect the fingernails on my right hand. I practiced every day for three years. If I was having a bad day songwriting an hour of playing the classic guitar made any day feel worthwhile. I even got a paying jobs playing classic guitar. In the fall of 87 Gary was leaving teaching. For the last lesson I met him at the music store wearing my tuxedo and played an hour of repertoire from memory. A special moment in my musical journey.

VI

*Find the missing peace to all your wars
Share the missing peace that is in others
And be the missing peace that someone else is looking for*

One of my favorite quotes is from Robert Folgum. "I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope triumphs over experience. That laughter is a cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death."

I have a couple of stepdaughters who have chosen very different paths through life. The way I describe their choices is that one chose a track and the other a trail. While I am proud

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of and happy for both of them it's the one who chose a trail whose life most mirrors mine. As I look back on my life in the mid-80's while I didn't know it at the time in a lot of ways I was taking a respite from blazing trail.

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying that "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Looking back when that big concert in Seattle in the fall of 84 was over and after the hopes of Johnny Cash recording my song "Dear Partner" had faded I had trouble imagining a way forward. Or maybe I ran out of the kind of energy I needed to keep hacking away and it was time to simply gather knowledge.

I was lucky to find good teachers and guides. Learning about novel writing, returning to The Brothers Four, having unique moments with family, continuing to share the journey with McCoy, studying the classic guitar were all ways to find ways to imagine ways into a still uncertain future.

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