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Heart of the Heartland

I

He stands to the side as the young auctioneer

Sells off the pickup and then the John Deere

His eyes trace the lines of the tall golden ears

The world puts a price tag on forty odd years

That's a Brothers Four recording of "Heart of the Heartland" a song I wrote with Leslie Eliel, a woman I met in the spring of 1987. That song has been a part of The Brothers Four concert repertoire for over 25 years. It remains a creative bright spot in what I realize now was a pretty dark time for me. I had turned 40 in March of 87 and as I look back at that milestone birthday it appears to be the midpoint of what might simply be described as a midlife crisis.

While I was feeling lucky to be back with The Brothers Four I was also worrying that I hadn't grown much or gone very far in the previous fifteen years. At the same time Nashville didn't seem to appreciate or sometimes even notice the songs I was writing for them. It had been years since I had performed as a solo artist. My career with McCoy lacked direction. I no longer had mentors for the classic guitar, or novel writing, or watercolor painting so I struggled with what to do next in those areas.

While I couldn't or wouldn't admit it, it was hard to watch people I knew who were my contemporaries having the kind of success that I was hoping for. A guy I knew in my high school, Terry Davis, had published a novel about wrestling called Vision Quest that had been made into a successful movie starring Matthew Modine and featuring music by a young Madonna. My good friend from college, Gary Drager, had become a world-class painter and children's book writer using the name Cooper Edens. Jamie O'Hara who I'd met and stayed with in one of my first trips to Nashville was having success as a recording artist and songwriter including winning a Grammy Award for the song he wrote called Grandpa (Tell Me About the Good Old Days) recorded by the Judds.

Then there was some nagging macho pride or perhaps more precisely shame that at forty instead of being at the peak of my earning powers I was still having to make choices between heating and eating. I could only dream about that red sports car some people buy to drive through a midlife crisis but even then in my dreams I didn't have a garage to store it in.

When it came to relationships and my personal life I struggled with a riddle I still hadn't found a way to articulate which of course made it hard

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to solve. Words I found for it years later went like this: "How can someone love me unless they know me well and yet if someone knows me well how can they love me?" A conundrum that was too often keeping me a safe but unsatisfying distance from people I cared about.

Now as I listen to myself describe that time I realize I am dishing up enough cake and lighting enough candles for a full-fledged pity party. A part of me is even embarrassed to talk about that time even now. Yet as I relive those times around this campfire it feels good to just get it out. Too often it's harder to cut ourselves that slack we often cut other people.

II

On this Wednesday morning in his old Sunday tie

He smiles greets the neighbors and tries not to cry

Wonders how you keep living when part of you dies

Four generations and he's asking why

Chorus

In the heart of the heartland that beats in woman and man

Tonight breaks in still one more place in the heart of the heartland

One of the hardest things about being in a funk is finding a way out of it. A midlife crisis complete with cake and candles is no exception. A month or so after my 40th birthday Ted Brancato's sister, Mary Sue, headed to the South Pacific and was going to be gone for almost two months. As soon as she left I wished I'd gone with her. Instead I embarked on what I called a personal Vision Quest. With apologies to Native Americans mine was along the lines of Loudon Swain's the fictional character in Terry Davis's novel "Vision Quest."

In order to reach his goal of wrestling his toughest opponent Loudon first needed to lose weight. As someone who's struggled with weight most of my life one of the first things I wanted to do to hopefully change what I saw when I looked in the mirror was lose weight. I joined a Weight Watcher's program called Inner Circle. It involved 9 meetings over 8 weeks with a small group of hopeful and hopefully dedicated people sitting around a table discussing issues involving relationships with food and eating. Each week we would weigh in literally and figuratively as a way of measuring and seeing how we were doing.

My quest began five weeks before McCoy's annual triathlon. That first

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of those weeks I spent a few hours each day on my bike riding on what was still a mostly undiscovered Burke Gilman Trail. And after losing five pounds I added running to my daily routine. As the weight kept coming off I began running further and further until I was running from where I was living on the east side of Lake Union to the Ballard Bridge and back again. Seven to nine miles depending on the route. Farther than I'd ever run before.

A few days into my quest I stood a few feet away from the singer and songwriter Nancy Griffith at a club in Ballard. Her presence and performance were exactly what I needed to make me excited again to be a singer and a songwriter. Soon after that I joined a songwriting group where I met Leslie and together we wrote "Heart of the Heartland."

The third weekend in May I joined friends for an annual gathering on the coast that included good food and singing songs around a beach fire and that was a good connection. When I got back I impulsively shaved off a graying beard that I'd had for nearly fifteen years. The face in the mirror startling me.

On Sunday nights I attended the Compline services at St. Mark's on Capitol Hill. Those evenings included ageless music and timeless language that always inspired in me. The word compline comes from Latin completorium and means completion. It was a perfect way to finish a week and get ready for a new one.

After eight weeks I had lost nearly 25 pounds and written over a dozen songs. For the first time in nine years I went into the studio alone with just my guitar and simply recorded the songs. I'd also filled a couple of blank books with thoughts, quotes, articles, and words that rhyme. For eight weeks I had paid attention and lived with intention doing everything I could to shoo a midlife crisis away.

The quest success but not surprisingly those days proved unsustainable. Slowly the inspiration wore off and the weight went back on but not before I'd found places inside myself I had never been before and discovered things about myself that I had never known before.

Over the years in lots of ways I've learned that life is really and metaphorically about breath and breathing. During my quest I discovered at least figuratively that I could hold my breath for weeks at a time while remaining focused and energized. What I still had to learn was how to find that kind of focus and at the same time keep breathing.



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III

*His wife silhouetted through their front door screen
A door she first gazed through when she turned nineteen
The tired eyes now close on this too painful scene
Be a long time before they will know what it means*

At the end of June I contacted Seattle's Broadway Performance Hall and I reserved that 295 seat theater for the last Saturday of October. My intention was to do a solo concert. I hadn't done one for more than nine years. Looking back I realize when I returned from LA in 78 I didn't have the confidence or I was afraid to be on stage alone. The performing I did was either with McCoy or as a member of The Brothers Four. Having turned 40 a few months earlier a part of me must have known that if I didn't go out on stage alone soon I might never do it again.

Once I realized that's what I was going to do I knew I needed to talk to McCoy about my plans. After years of needing him beside me I was now going to tell him I needed him to step aside. Though he was starting his 11th year of teaching had become a dad and continued to be a reluctant about performing it was going to be hard to tell him I wanted him in the audience and not on the stage. Sharing feelings and talking directly these are things I continue learn and try to do better.

When it came to communicating the best McCoy and I could do in college was stage dramatic wrestling matches and then fight over who won. His quarterback quickness against my lineman stubbornness. Then using the likes of Waylon and Willie and Newman and Redford as role models we would often communicate by gesture, verbal shorthand, and cliché. Over time we did begin to find each other and ourselves. In 83 we talked seriously about drinking and singing and this talk would be one more step.

I told McCoy I needed to talk to him. He came by the house. We sat on opposite ends of couch. The words stumbled out about needing to stand alone for this next concert. He acted as if he wasn't hurt and talked about how hard it would be to come to the performance and not be singing and I acted like I wouldn't be hurt if he didn't come. Then I think we just sat there. We nodded. We stood up. We shook hands. We walked together to the door. I stood at the threshold and watched as he walked to his Land Cruiser without turning around.

When I went back inside I knew that what had just happened was important although I wasn't sure if we might be burning some bridge without meaning to or if after twenty something years our best days were behind us. It didn't occur to me that our best days would be in front of us.

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IV

When the auction is over they are driven away

In the back seat of their oldest sons Chevrolet

Photograph albums about all that is saved

Of a dream that is lost and found on each page

Chorus

The heart of the heartland that beats in a woman and man

Tonight breaks in one more place in the heart of the heartland

It's only in talking about it now that I realize how important that solo concert was for me personally and professionally. Fortunately my cousin, Joanne, realized it at the time and commemorated that moment by giving me a gold pocket watch that belonged to her engraved with my name and the date, October 24, 1987. Since I was a kid pocket watches have fascinated me. For years I used a pocket watch instead of a wristwatch to keep track of time. Two pocket watches have a special place for me. Though neither keeps time anymore both are significant symbols of another time and their importance continues to grow with time.

One watch is silver and belonged to my dad's oldest brother, Peter, who died when he was twenty-nine and my dad was twelve. I never learned how my dad ended up with that watch or why he gave it to me when I was twelve. A part of me is amazed that I didn't lose it during those first years. I remember carrying it to school and taking it out and simply looking at it. When I was in high school my first suit came with a vest and the vest had a pocket into which I often put that silver watch that was now connected to a silver chain. All those memories and experiences with that watch happened long before I learned that Uncle Peter died in a mental institution and my dad had been confined to one when I was born. And after learning those things the watch also became a symbol of a secret. And now these days it's also part of a story connecting me even more closely to those two amazing men.

The other watch is a gold one the one from my cousin. For some reason it's the only memento from that evening. I haven't found a picture, recording, set list, or ticket stub from that show.

Certain things about that night are easy to remember. The anxiety wondering whether anyone would show up. I also remember how I arranged three guitars and two banjos behind me on stage. How I performed the classic guitar number "Recuerdos de la Alhambra" for the first time in public. I don't remember taking a moment that night and giving that moment its due.

Life doesn't come with instruction books or maps. There are no blueprints. It doesn't come with guarantees or warranties although it is filled with

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possibilities. Moments that once seemed important begin to fade while others that felt insignificant continue to grow. When I pick up the gold watch and look at the date engraved on its case it's clear now how important that moment was and how I needed to get there to that stage in order to find the ones that followed.

Tonight breaks in one more place in the heart of the heartland

The heart of the heartland.



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