



A SEASON OF THE HEART

I

*Every day for a year after my father died
I thought about that man and about his life
How who he was was now a part
Of what I called a Season of the Heart*

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That's the first verse of a song called Season of the Heart a name that for me would define the spring of 1997. I turned 50 on that season's first day and in a combination of careful planning and simple serendipity over the next two weeks I was part of three amazing concerts each of them feeling a little like a homecoming. The first one in Seattle included every group I'd ever performed with. The second on the Saturday of Easter weekend was a return to my hometown of Spokane as a member of The Brothers Four as well the opening act. A few days after that The Brothers Four performed in North Seattle a few miles from where my wife and I were living.

All the things that were about to happen made that fortnight more poignant and pointed as the season unfolded. One of the most surreal involved a conversation I had with my dad at Easter. I told him that I'd invited Jim and Mike, my two brothers, for a little getaway. It would be the first time just the three of us had gotten together in who knows how long. My dad replied in his typical style that if I remember right made us both smile. What he said was I can die a happy man.

My brothers and I did get together on Mothers Day weekend. I'd spent the previous few weeks thinking about them and even created a little book for each of us. In it were thoughts about them and about us together as well as simple musings of growing up in a culture that appeared to glorify three brothers. There were TV shows like Bonanza, My Three Sons and of course the Camelot years starring the three surviving Kennedy brothers. My book ended with a question I hoped we'd ponder: What does it mean to have and be brothers? We hadn't gotten there as we stood around saying goodbye in the parking lot on Sunday morning talking about how our parents were coming back the next day from an extended road trip.

The next night I called my folks and welcomed them home and wished my mom a belated happy Mothers Day. They talked about their trip. I told them about how Pat and I were going to La Push for our annual third weekend in May gathering and then to Sun River for Memorial Day. We all agreed we were excited to be together in less than three weeks for The Brothers Four cruise to Alaska. It was ewsy stuff really. Yet for some reason after I hung up I felt uneasy. Nothing I could put my finger on. There certainly was no premonition. Though we often don't talk for weeks at a time I called my folks back two days later. I didn't know what to say except that I'd been thinking about them. My dad was the last one on the phone. The last thing I said was I love you. Though he didn't often say I love you when I

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was growing up the last thing he said that night was I love you, too. They would be the last words I would hear my father speak.

II

Slowly those thoughts turned into stories and songs

About all that remains after all that is gone

What goes together what comes apart

When we're in a Season of the Heart

My dad suffered a heart attack in Spokane early the next morning. I was walking around Green Lake with a friend when the phone call came. By the time I got home Pat had loaded the car including the one suit I owned just in case we would need it for a funeral.

After his heart attack the doctors performed an unsuccessful angioplasty followed by a quadruple bypass. Because dad was taking blood thinners they had trouble stopping the bleeding. By 5 o'clock that evening after 22 pints of blood products dad was alive and in the Coronary Intensive Care Unit at Sacred Heart Hospital hooked up to a dozen tubes and wires. Around ten the doctors said the best thing for the family to do was to go home and get some rest. So we would spend the first of what would become a series of long short nights. The next morning the family was allowed to visit for three minutes each hour spending the rest of the time in a windowless waiting room. That afternoon a new nurse on duty changed everything when she said she knew my dad would want his family around him. With that blessing and a combination of common sense and love from that moment on except for a few hours at night he was never alone.

It didn't take long before the rest of the world disappeared. The only thing that mattered was in that room. Every day a little different and yet each one somehow the same. Believing it was all a little crazy somehow helped keep us all sane. The Spokane River was running high. Each day we took turns walking along it, sitting next to it, or standing in awe of it before returning to the hospital.

For the most part my father remained alert. He was courageous and showed what grace and dignity can look like wearing a hospital gown and tethered to a dozen tubes. There were setbacks galore. On the second day when they removed the breathing tube, he went into cardiac arrest. On Sunday his kidneys shut down. On Monday his liver began to fail. Tuesday he underwent surgery to remove the breathing tube and needed a tracheotomy. His vocal chords paralyzed. On Wednesday his heart went into atrial fibrillation. On Thursday his blood pressure drifted throughout the day. It was about that time that the doctor said that each day without improvement was a day lost.

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Things stabilized for a few days beginning Friday of Memorial Day Weekend and then went terribly wrong on Monday when he had one final cardiac arrest. He lived two more days though his eyes were now blank and his spirit had left him. My mom spent those last nights with him at the hospital. We surrounded him with songs and prayers and tears that Wednesday when he died.

The next four days lurched forward in fits and starts. I called the circle of friends who had held my father in their prayers to give them the news. Thursday was spent writing the obituary, preparing for the Memorial, telling my singing partners that I would be going on the Alaska cruise after all with my stepdaughters instead of my parents. Then that evening we celebrated my mom's 75th birthday. Friday was spent in Seattle tying up as many loose ends as I could as well as writing what I was going to say about my dad the next day. Back to Spokane on Friday night. The memorial on Saturday. Back to Seattle that night. Into the car the next day bound for Vancouver and an Alaska cruise that sailed that afternoon.

III

*A year to the day my father was entombed
Shared those songs and stories in my mother's living room
It was on that night they became what they are
A blessing for a Season of the Heart*

People couldn't have been nicer on the cruise. Everyone had heard about my dad's death. They reached out gently and carefully while at the same time giving Pat, my stepdaughters and me lots of space. There were moments. The four of us had our own table for meals. One of the first nights the staff cheerfully delivered an anniversary cake. It took a while to remember we'd made arrangements months earlier to celebrate what would have been my folks' 53rd anniversary on that cruise. Maybe the hardest thing to process was the idea that I was originally going on this cruise as the son and suddenly I'm the parent wearing a sweater I'd given to my dad for his 75th birthday. That was more than I wanted to think about.

A few days after we got back from the cruise I was in Spokane helping my mom go through stuff and deal with things. One of the hardest was emptying out my dad's desk. I kept looking over my shoulder to make sure he wasn't watching. A few days later on the first day of summer I was on a plane to Japan with the season of the heart finally behind me.

Still my first thoughts when I got up in the morning and my last thoughts as I went to bed at night continued to be about my dad. Knowing him he would have urged me to start moving on. Instead I made a promise to think about him as the centerpiece of every day for one year. I figured when the year was over there might be some kind of celebration or ritual and it truly would be time then to move on as I

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knew my dad would want. I didn't know what form any of that was going to take.

After spending a bunch of days writing things down about his life I realized I had pretty much told that story getting ready for my folks' 50th anniversary. It was when I began to see the last few weeks, months, the last season of his life as a microcosm for life that my writing found focus and purpose feelings reinforced one weekend in the waning days of summer.

Because so many of my dad's older siblings couldn't make it on short notice to his memorial in May there was a special family graveside service they all attended in Spokane in September. The next morning I got up and raced across the state because The Brothers Four were singing at the Puyallup Fair that night with The Kingston Trio. The joy and the sorrow of those few days reminded me to my marrow of what it had been like to live through a Season of the Heart.

IV

When the stories were told and the songs had been sung

I knew that time was gone that the time had come

After making it through the hardest part

Saying goodbye to the Season of the Heart

It was an incredible gift to take the year after my dad died and spend much of it thinking about him and focusing on him and our relationship. Grief takes time that we don't often have time to take. There is also something about the length of a year that I've learned to trust to go once around the sun and as TS Eliot says arrive where we started and know that place for the first time.

One thing I discovered early that year was that though there was a lot I still wanted to say to him that'd we'd left nothing unsaid. That felt good. As the year went on I was also able to see things that had previously been lost in a fog of grief or shock. The most important is what I've come to call My Dad's Last Gift.

A few years before he died my dad wrote twenty-five short essays in longhand in a blank book given to him by a friend. Because his handwriting was stereotypical of a doctor I got his permission to borrow the book typed out the essays wrote a short introduction bound them into something called Feelings and Philosophy from the Notebook of Roy T. Pearson and again with my dad's permission gave copies to select family and friends. The day after my dad died, mom lent her copy to their friend and minister, Don Gilmore, telling him he was free to read anything he felt appropriate at the memorial. For reasons still unclear he chose to read about my dad's depression and hospitalization. What Don didn't know was that that part of my dad's life had never previously been publicly shared. Then suddenly in my father's own words three days after he died in the most public of ways unbeknownst to his family the secret was out.

The magnitude of the gift of those words would only begin to become clear to me months later talking with a friend in Nashville about John Steinbeck's East of Eden.

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My friend spoke eloquently about the gift the father in that story, Adam, gave to his surviving son, Caleb, in the form of a single word at the end of that amazing book a Hebrew word, timshel, roughly translated as thou mayest.

Somehow I realized after that conversation that my father, three days after he died, had given me my own gift of thou mayest. What I didn't and couldn't know was that it would take me ten years to understand what the gift was and what a gift it was.

V

Sometimes we must stop before we go

On to the next adventure, you know

That's how we find out who we are

How we are changed by the Season of the Heart

By early March what began as a way of daily celebrating my father's life as well as grieving his death, had turned into a musical memoir featuring 40 new songs. While the main purpose of the songs was to illuminate the last season of his life they also explored some of life's crueller ironies, how close life is to death, how near joy can be to sorrow, how often love is connected to loss. I decided the songs and sentiments were strong enough to be shared, to be used to mark the end of a year of daily grieving and finally to celebrate life and the dawn of a new day.

At the time it happened the fact my dad died the day before my mother's birthday was simply cruel and devastating. A year later that coincidence felt a little like an opportunity. On my father's dying day we would grieve and remember his whole life and the next morning get up and celebrate my mother's birth. In a way it would become a personal echo of Easter and a reminder of the last time I saw my father whole and seemingly healthy.

So the decision was made to first perform *The Season of the Heart* in my mom's large Spokane living room filled to overflowing with friends and family on her birthday a year and a day after my father died.

It also felt important to stage the memoir in Seattle. Together with my youngest stepdaughter, Lindsey, we found an intimate theater space on Capital Hill at the Richard Hugo House, (just off Broadway I might add,) and rented it for four days the first week of June. Of course once these commitments were made a certain reality set in which in this case meant having to learn forty new songs, continuing to have faith in them as well as getting comfortable performing them. The Brothers Four traveled extensively that spring. I remember so many mornings in hotel rooms in places like Tokyo and Hong Kong going over and over the songs before getting out for a while in the afternoon and then performing with the group at night. I remember a warm evening sitting outside in Prescott, Arizona sharing songs from the memoir with friends who had driven up from Phoenix.

Then suddenly I'm in my mother's living room overflowing with a lifetime of familiar faces. And though I was so nervous I couldn't swallow somehow the songs got sung and the story

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MARK PEARSON
MUSIC

told. In Seattle the next week each performance got more comfortable and felt more natural until that last performance for special friends and family. When it was finally over a curtain rose behind me and revealed a celebratory feast lit by candlelight. And celebrate we did.



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