

## THE ROAD TO GOING HOME



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I

*The summer of two thousand four was finally clear to me  
That all the stages of my life had found a harmony  
And I knew for the first time that wherever I might roam  
Whatever road I'm traveling is the road to going home*

That's the first verse of a song called "The Road To Going Home." The song for the last campfire was "The Road That Leads Us Home" and the one before that was "Finding My Way Home." Clearly there's a pattern here.

There are at least two prevailing views about our life's journey. One might be described as a series of random events and after we've lived through them we have a strong human desire to arrange them in some meaningful way. Another view is that each of us is led or follows what might be called a golden thread as we live out our destiny and discover our fate. I imagine either could be true or maybe it's some combination of both or perhaps those perspectives and others like them are simply constructs that help us explain and understand our lives.

What I do believe is that on some level we are all searching for home and all that that might mean. Stories of looking for home were shared around campfires long before Homer is credited with writing one down and calling it *The Odyssey*. Our search for home is one reason so many of us continue to respond so completely to Dorothy and her companions as they thread their way down the yellow brick road.

At the last campfire I described three moments of standing face to face with my fears and though I may have blinked away a few tears at the time in the end there were smiles all around. What became clear later was how each of those moments was bringing me closer to home. That understanding came only after I did the work to make those moments and what they represented a part of my life.



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## II

*That fall there was a bus tour folk revival a review  
The Kingston Trio, Brothers Four, and Glenn Yarbrough, too  
We sang "This Land Is Your Land" at the end of every show  
Had everybody standing on the road to going home*

The moment, when The Brothers Four was simply Bob Flick and I didn't last long. Mike McCoy and John Hylton filled the other spots in early June of 2004. Because neither had a career as a professional musician, McCoy was a first grade teacher and Hylton a commercial airline pilot, the spirit was more like it was when the group originally formed. Four guys, singing and playing for the pure joy of it. Hylton might have said it best when he declared that being in the group was living the dream.

We also worked incredibly hard for two months before our first show. I welcomed the veteran's role and the responsibilities that came with it including taking over the instrumental solos that Terry had previously played so masterfully.

There's an old joke about an out of townner who asks a native New Yorker how to get to the iconic performance venue, Carnegie Hall. The New Yorker's response is *Practice, practice, practice*. After a summer of practice and a couple of local shows to test us the four of us completed our transformation from four individuals into The Brothers Four by that other proven route, *perform, perform, perform*.

The first couple weeks of September we did club dates in Japan. We were on the stage the day after we arrived doing two shows a night. The fatigue helped us concentrate harder and trust each other more. By the time we got on the plane back to the States we were ready and thankfully an enthusiastic audience was waiting to hear us.

A year earlier the success of the PBS program, *This Land Is Your Land*, combined with the hit movie, *A Mighty Wind*, reminded people how much fun popular folk music can be and the role it played for lots of people growing up in the late 50's and early 60's. Forty years later many of those same folks were ready to relive their youth. There was a promoter who was going to help them by putting together a national yearlong tour starting in the fall of 2004 featuring The Kingston Trio, The Brothers Four, and Glenn Yarbrough and his group.

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There was much about that season of touring that made it special. The venues were larger and more prestigious than when The Brothers Four performed alone. There was that magical moment at the end of every show when all the groups were on stage singing "This Land Is Your Land" with the audience on its feet singing, shouting, or simply smiling along.

Having grown up a huge Glenn Yarbrough fan I delighted in sitting across from him on the tour bus and listening to him tell stories of the early days and peppering him with questions about his relationship with the songwriter and people's poet, Rod McKuen. It was also sad to discover during those offstage moments how unhappy Glenn appeared to be as a person and as a performer.

Dick Foley, a founding member of The Brothers Four who left the group in the early 90's, was singing with Glenn on that tour. Dick is one of the truly good guys and it was a bonus for me to have a chance to hang out with him again.

That season everything was new for McCoy and we had a great time every night on stage and every day discovering some new city or simply watching the world go by from the window of a tour bus. I especially remember one morning on the coast of Florida. McCoy and I have our toes in the sand and he calmly says, you know, I've never stood on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean before.

For health reasons Bob Shane, the last founding member of The Kingston Trio, retired from the road just before the tour began. Bill Zorn, who a year earlier had been singing in the folk group, The Limelickers, replaced him. That left Bob Flick as the only original member of The Brothers Four or The Kingston Trio still performing.

That fact led to an important realization. As much as the audiences might have wanted to see the young men grown old who had sung to them years before they came instead to hear the groups, to listen to the music of their youth, to perhaps be reminded of their dreams, and for a few hours to remember how it felt to be young again.

For those of us lucky enough to be on stage it was a reminder: take the music seriously but not ourselves. A few years earlier before every performance I started asking myself two questions: What if this was my first show? What if this was my last? It remains a way of helping me to be and stay in the moment. During the "This Land" tour I added a few more questions: Where would I rather be than here? Who would I rather be with than these people? What I would rather be doing than singing these songs? When I am sure the answers are *nowhere else, no one else, and nothing else* I am ready and I'm able to walk on that stage knowing I'm on the road to going home.

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### III



*A singer and songwriter faith enough I believed  
For a long time I'd been puzzled now had found a missing peace  
And I could feel it standing on the stage with my guitar alone  
Whatever road I'm traveling is the road to going home*

The moment in the recording studio when I nailed that final vocal and realized on some profound and penetrating level I could both do it and had done it was transformed by the end of that summer into a CD appropriately called "The Missing Peace." Completing the project involved some overdubbing in other words adding occasional instruments or vocal harmonies to what we'd already done. There was the mixing process where we took the various instruments and voices on each song and made them fit and work together. We mixed the songs in stereo: the drums on the far left the bass on the far right the keyboards middle left the guitar middle right and the vocals in the center where we also put the occasional violin or horn solo. It was a slow and a careful process. We listened on big speakers to hear the smallest nuance and on small ones to approximate how people might hear the music if they were driving in their car.

We did that with all twenty-two songs. We then chose what we thought were the best eighteen. We put those in an order that appeared to make the best sense and that we hoped would offer the most satisfying listening experience. We made the title track, "The Missing Peace" the finale and for the song that preceded it we chose "The Road That Leads Us Home." As a last step we brought what we'd done to the mastering studio where we both watched and listened as eighteen individual songs were woven into a single musical entity timing out at 59 minutes and 53 seconds.

As all this was happening the CD artwork was being created. For the cover we chose a picture of me on the beach with a guitar. I've always liked to be able to look at the words to the songs as I'm listening so we put the lyrics in a booklet along with the credits and made it all a part of the package. We also had a website created.

At the end of the summer a friend of ours was playing a folk festival in Colorado. He convinced the people that were putting it on they should invite one of The Brothers Four down to sing and sell a few CD's. It was a warm and friendly welcome back to the marketplace as a solo artist.

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Even with all the touring The Brothers Four were doing I decided to promote The Missing Peace CD around the Northwest in early January. Ted said he'd like to join me. Performing together further solidified our friendship and musical partnership. Besides getting new songs ready I spent a long time looking at and to listening to songs I'd written over the years. I ended up choosing somewhere the thirty or thirty-five songs that best represented my life and career. I put some of them together in a way I hoped would tell a good story. While the songs I share have evolved over the years it is the philosophy I continue to use today.

Ted and I did five shows in five nights. Something felt different. While people appreciated what I've done over the years after those shows lots of them were jumping to their feet. I wonder if because I no longer had an underlying fear about being an imposter if it was easier to connect with audiences and for them to connect with me. I don't know.

What I do know is that when I got back on the This Land Is Your Land tour bus I was sensing in my marrow what I knew in mind, that it can be a lot more satisfying, healthier, and a lot more fun to learn to live *with* fear than it is to continue to live *in* fear.

## IV

*McCoy was there beside me now part of this traveling troupe  
Dear partner and old soul mates after all we have been through  
Down fast lanes and the dirt roads wherever we might go  
The road that we were traveling is the road to going home*

One of the first Brothers Four performances with McCoy was on Blakely Island near Anacortes. The sun was beginning to set as the group returned by water taxi to the mainland. McCoy and I stood together alone on the bow of the boat. I remember looking over at him and then toward the city lights. In the gathering dusk it was as if a whole new world was starting to be illuminated waiting there for us where anything was possible.

That first year as we shared the American folk song book in Japan and Taiwan and on that bus tour across the US it felt like each morning was a chance to discover some new place and every evening an opportunity to sing our hearts out grateful that after forty years of friendship our dreams were a match for our memories. We continue to try not to take any of that for granted. At least

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once during every show we still look at each other as if to say, “how did we end up here?”

In part because we were traveling and singing together as members of The Brothers Four we also discovered a new spirit and renewed joy when we sang as Pearson and McCoy. In 2006 we re-mastered an album we made in 1981, adding six of our favorite songs from that time that we recorded but never released. We put them together on a CD we called the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of “Between Friends.”

That spring Ted joined McCoy and me at a series of performances where we shared what we considered our best work from the 1980’s. I think it was the singer-songwriter, Bill Staines, who said that there is no “use by” date for a good song. As we re-introduced our songs a lot of them had stories including how Johnny Cash almost recorded “Dear Partner”...on two separate occasions.

Something else happened as we performed those songs that if we’d been looking for it we probably wouldn’t have found it. Call it a redemption of sorts. For lots of reasons there had been rough edges around our career in the 80’s. There were misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and differences of opinion. Those come with the territory. Back then I also had trouble going on stage alone and that put pressure on our relationship that at times left both of us uncomfortable. Like many if not most musical partnerships we couldn’t find a big enough audience to sustain us. In 1987 after I’d been back with The Brothers Four for some years I told McCoy I needed to do some singing on my own. It was a hard day for both of us.

After that we continued to perform from time to time. Our friendship grew in amazing ways especially those couple of years in the mid-90’s when we talked every day as McCoy worked his way out of the darkness and into the light of a new day. Singing and traveling the world together as members of The Brothers Four gave us a present and a future to rival anything in our past.

Then a quarter century after we created “Between Friends” we tee those songs up one more time and we get what many of us long for at least in some aspect of our lives: a mulligan , a second chance, a do over, one more good shot. And while it may have too late for those songs to carry us to unexpected height who we were as we sang them in the spring of 2006 and what we saw from those stages proved to be enough.



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## V

*Looked out of lots of windows bus, cars, trains and through the years  
Was I coming was I going well it wasn't always clear  
Till I felt some things inside myself and yes, I finally know  
That any road I travel is the road to going home*

Those moments with Bob Flick at the Kingston Inn and the one in the recording studio they're what I think of as "outside-in" moments. In other words they led to some tangible change-I started singing with new people in The Brothers Four or a CD was successfully completed-then those outside changes eventually helped transform who I was on the inside and over time I was able to become something more and different than I was before.

The third moment from the spring of 2004, when I hoped to receive my brother's blessing and instead ended up offering him one, is what I would describe as an "inside-out" moment. In other words while I knew almost immediately something inside me was different nothing appeared to change. To this day I don't believe my brother even realizes he received a blessing that day. One of the reasons could be that it wasn't until much later I could truly comprehend that that's what I was doing and fully understand what that moment had done.

For so long I believed I needed someone else's affirmation or blessing for me to be okay. Then unintentionally, even accidentally, I discovered I had the power to affirm or bless someone else. Once I could accept that as true a part of me began to believe and to slowly understand that I also might have the power to affirm myself, to offer myself a blessing, and in fact, that such a blessing might both be necessary and long overdue.

That moment slowly became a lesson in personal empowerment and though it was not clear at the time it's clear to me now that I was taking a big step on the road to going home.

Whatever road I'm traveling is the road to going home.

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