



I

*As a kid I never wanted new days growing old  
I didn't want to go to sleep and so let any day go  
Mom tried to convince me as I lay there in my bed  
It's time to let old days go time to look ahead  
Chorus  
And she'd sing  
Rock-a-bye hush-a-bye time to renew  
Close your eyes knowing how much I love you  
So much has happened so much more awaits  
When you awaken on a new day*

*MarkPearsonMusic.com  
(360) 643-1705*

*P.O. Box 65002  
Port Ludlow  
Washington  
98365*

That's the first verse and the chorus of a song called "On a New Day." It was inspired by an experience shared with family and friends singing, crying, praying, struggling to find words as we created a circle around my cousin Jane as she lay in her bed the hour after she died the morning of March 24, 1994.

The references in the song to my mom are simply imagined. What I never could have imagined was how Jane's death and the eight months that followed would continue to be filled with reminders of how close life is to death and how near love is to loss.

It would begin innocently enough. A dozen days after Jane's memorial The Brothers Four were singing in Japan before continuing to Thailand for our first ever performances there. I remember the sauna like heat of Bangkok and how the concerts began with everyone in the audience standing and singing their National Anthem a picture of their King prominently displayed.

Gold and precious gems were a relative bargain in Thailand. Some friends who lived there recommended a jewelry store. I bought Pat a ring and my mom a chain and pendant that would be engraved with the title of a book I was creating for my folks' golden wedding anniversary, "Fifty years. A Love Story."

My folks were married on June 10, 1944. The month after I returned from Thailand was spent finishing the story I started for them the previous winter dividing their life's adventure into seven stages made up of fifty chapters one for each year they were married. The book included two new songs a few I'd written for them over the years a couple that my brothers and I played together on our four string banjos as well as songs my dad sang on family road trips and ones my mom loved to sing in church.

The book also contained an unexpected preface hastily inserted that began:

Ten days before my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, my father had a stroke. My folks were together during those first hours when he could not speak, when his face was distorted, when his right side was numb, and when there was the

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



possibility that the next few hours might be their last together.

Those hours became an all too real chance for them to examine their lives and their life as a couple. What Dad wanted most to communicate to his wife was that he loved her, that he had a good life with her, and that their life together had been enough.

As they faced death, their natures showed themselves as they fought hard for life. As he had so many times before, my father pushed the limits of what was possible. No matter how frustrated he became or how futile his efforts, he would not stop attempting to speak, reason, or write. And when the results were not what he wanted he would simply, with great effort, try again. My mother, as she had been for so much of her married life, was there to both cheer him onward and to assure him that it would be all right to stop for a moment.

“It’s okay you don’t need to talk after fifty years I can read your mind.”

After several hours though not easily some words were coming back.

“Try to write” my dad said scrawling the air with his right hand.

Mom gave my pen and paper.

“Why don’t you try to write, ‘I love you?’” she asked.

He moved the pen tentatively. The words appeared shaky on the page. ‘Love’ the most indecipherable one of all. Yet every word was legible and lovely to his wife. They both knew now more than ever what those words meant.

With my father’s recovery appearing quick and complete, the family gathered as scheduled to salute fifty years, celebrating as if there was a tomorrow knowing but not wanting to acknowledge how close life can be to death and love to loss.

A few days after that celebration Pat was off to Europe to join her oldest daughter, Jodie, who had been studying in England. The two of them were having a holiday in Spain with Jodie then continuing to travel and Pat coming home. Pat wasn’t gone twenty-four hours before the phone rang her anxious but resolute voice explaining how mother and daughter had gone out for tapas that first warm and festive night in Madrid. Two knife wielding men had grabbed Pat’s purse, cut a golden chain from around her neck, then left her stunned watching them as they chased her daughter down the cobblestone street.

Because Jodie escaped into a busy cafe and the robbers quickly disappeared into the night all that appeared lost was time, money, a passport, a treasured, sentimental piece of jewelry. And yet also gone was some intrinsic faith in the night replaced by the nightmare of what might have been as one watches one’s child disappear into the darkness.

Pat’s friend from high school was not so lucky. Among the mail Pat opened when she returned was what appeared at first glance to announce a high school graduation that of her friend’s daughter. Instead it was the announcement of her

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



death complete with the years that this young girl had lived listed underneath her smiling senior picture.

After graduation this young girl and some friends had taken a ferry from Seattle to Port Orchard where they went to celebrate. Between ferry and party there was a crash. In a cruel and eerie twist the car left the winding road and hurtled into a tree at the beginning of a long driveway, a driveway that led to the house where Pat's parents now lived and had lived since moving from Seattle years earlier. My way of dealing with the tragedy was to spend time writing what turned into a small bound volume containing six new songs.

Not long after that accident someone dealt with it by placing a white cross at the crash site. A reminder, every time Pat and I drove up or down that driveway to visit her parents, how close life is to death and love is to loss.

## II

*Through the years Mom has sung my own kids to sleep  
Telling them all the same things she told me  
When she'd tell them all about all a new day would bring  
I'd stand in the hallway listening to her sing  
Chorus  
And she'd sing  
Roc- a-bye hush-a-bye time to renew  
Close your eyes knowing how much I love you  
So much has happened so much more awaits  
When you awaken on a new day*

In the mid-1980's Pat and I each signed up to be part of the national bone marrow registry which simply means going to a blood bank where blood is drawn and pertinent information, a lot more than just a blood type, is entered into a database. Medical professionals around the country can access that information to see if their patients suffering from leukemia or other blood related diseases might be given another or a better chance at life by having their sickened bone marrow replaced by your healthy marrow. If they believe you are a possible match more blood is drawn more tests are run. If it's then decided you are a close enough match the marrow is harvested usually from your hipbone in an outpatient procedure. That marrow is quickly transported and then transplanted by means of an intravenous drip into a patient somewhere in the US. The idea of having marrow removed can be scary. It takes about a week to recover from it. And yet there is no question you are part of something bigger than yourself and there are few things more satisfying than being able offer another chance at life to someone who is quickly running out of chances. I know this because in 1994 Pat was found to be a match and a few weeks after

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



she got back from being with Jodie in Spain she donated bone marrow in hopes of giving life to someone, someone she did not know.

That anonymity offers a layer of protection especially if something goes wrong. If things go right and both sides agree after a year that veil of anonymity can be lifted. In Pat's case things went very right. The recipient turned out to be a young girl from Florida an only child who had been sick half her life. Pat's marrow was truly her last chance. The match so perfect that at first the doctors thought the procedure had failed. It turned out the only difference between Pat's marrow and the young girl's was that Pat's was cancer free.

Two images remain vivid for me. One is of a photo that girl's mother sent not long after names and addresses had been exchanged. It was of her holding her daughter's hand as the daughter lay with her eyes closed in the hospital bed as Pat's life giving marrow dripped slowly into her body. The other image is simply in my mind of a moment the mother described in a letter. A few months after the transplant the young girl now home from the hospital came into the kitchen where her mother was working. The girl began to dance. To just dance. The simple spontaneous act of being a child. It was the first time the mother had seen her daughter dance in years. It was at that moment the mother explained that she knew—she truly knew—she had her daughter back.

An image so vivid that when the girl came to visit five years after the transplant came to Seattle I created a song about that touching mother—daughter scene.

No one needed to explain to anyone involved how close life is to death.

We knew none of that when McCoy got married in August of 1994. It was a great celebration. It was a second marriage for both Coy and Connie. He has two kids. She has three. Connie's kids are older and at the time two of them were married themselves. This whole gang that was now becoming a new family made up the wedding party. The celebration in the yard of the home of one of Connie's daughters. Those of us who came were asked to bring our favorite dish. It was the first potluck wedding I'd ever been to. Though they stipulated no gifts I did put together a book containing thoughts and stories as well as poems and prayers and pictures. It also included songs I'd written for McCoy over the years as well as two songs written for the wedding. Connie wrote the lyrics to one of them. The chorus to her song goes:

I'd like to think you'll be there for all that comes my way

Have nothing in your life that hurts have peace surround each day

But there's no way to know for sure so I'll give you my today

And if we're given more than now "thanks" is what I'll say.

There was no way of knowing at that moment in the warmth of that August afternoon all that was coming their way how their love was going to be tempered and tested to find out if it was true and that in that process both would truly learn how close love is to loss.

In September I did a concert in Spokane. One of the highlights was singing Tom Paxton's song Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound with two high school friends

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



of mine first singing partners, Dan Eaton and Joe Allison. We hadn't sung together in over thirty years.

At the same time a book I wrote for Jane was finally complete. It's called *One Dying Day in the Circle of Life* and it's built around the last day of Jane's life using flash backs and flash forwards to tell a part of Jane's story about someone who lost her battle with cancer but was not always or simply a cancer patient. There are songs at the end of the book including the ones for Emily and Kristofer as well as a song that uses the words Jane wrote about planting tulips with her daughter from the letter I shared at the last campfire.

Lots of Jane's friends and family came from Coeur D'Alene for the concert in Spokane in part so I could give each of them one of Jane's books. But it wasn't to be simply a moment for healing and remembering but also a moment heavy with the open wound of new grief. One of Jane's good friends one of those who created a square for the quilt Jane wrapped herself one of those who visited Jane when the candles were lit in her window had herself been taken to the hospital a few days before the Spokane concert diagnosed with what is known as the flesh-eating virus. By the time of the concert she was dead.

God, how many reminders do we need in order to know how close life is to death? Driving back to Seattle the next day I thought for sure I had been reminded enough.

### III

*Mom tells us she's ready doctors say that it's time*

*Family is round her bed saying goodbye*

*Kids, grandkids, great grandkids forming a ring*

*As she closes her eyes we begin to sing*

*Chorus*

*Rock-a-bye hush-a-bye time to renew*

*Close your eyes knowing how much we love you*

*So much has happened so much more awaits*

*When you awaken on a new day*

Pat's youngest daughter, Lindsey, was beginning her senior year in high school in the fall of 1994. She is smart. She loves to sing. She always had a part, often a significant one, in the school play. Her SAT scores were high. Her options were many. The week before Halloween she and her mother took a road trip across the state to Walla Walla to visit Whitman College and see if beginning that next fall that campus might be a good fit for her talent and temperament. In some concoction of memory and imagination I remember the high spirits of mother and daughter heading out the door on that clear fall football Friday afternoon for their weekend away.

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



The next twenty-four hours remain islands of memory in a sea of shock and disbelief. A few hours after they left the phone rings. Yes, I am I say. There's been an accident a stranger's voice says. Only one car involved, she continues. Quite serious. Yes, the car rolled. A number of times. Yes, they're alive. She says she will call me back when she knows more. An hour goes by. Confusion. Another hour. Silence. I honestly can't remember who finally called and told me where they were. I load the family van with blankets and pillows and race into the mountains where it's raining hard and trucks are everywhere on the darkened Interstate. Crossing two mountain passes I finally arrive at the hospital in Prosser, Washington. Pat's foot is badly broken foot. Her nose as well. She's badly bruised and blackened around the eyes. Lindsey has suffered a concussion. Her nearly severed ear is covered with a netting that looks like it might have once held a Japanese pear-apple.

The darkness is giving way to a new day. After being assured that they will be all right I make a quick visit to what remains of the car in the wrecking yard and am amazed they are alive. Both alive and the hospital says ready to go home. On the way out of town we stop at the crash site gathering a few personal items. A book. A few sheets of paper. A cassette that appears to still be playable. The scattered contents of a purse. All of it covered with a thin layer of dust and grit.

The trip home is quiet and uneventful though a few hours after we get home we're in the emergency room because Lindsey starts throwing up and can't stop. Mother in a wheel chair. Daughter in a fog. Lindsey's dad and sister there in supporting roles. Everyone in a state of shock. We are that group that everyone else in the emergency room glances up to look at while keeping their distance in the off chance that what we have is catching. A few hours later we are sent home to begin tending to various wounds.

The living room becomes a recovery room with mattresses on the floor and soon a poster on the wall from Lindsey's high school mates telling her and her mother to get well soon. "Soon" takes the form of the first school dance Lindsey attends after the accident bruised but unbowed.

At first the accident is all we talk about. Eventually as the bruises heal that talk slows down and finally stops. In the spring Lindsey chooses Willamette University for college. All appears right with the world. Then sometime near the anniversary of the accident the phone rings again. We are told that Lindsey's dear friend and fellow actor, JP Hennessey, along with his mother has died in an all too similar accident on their way to Salt Lake City. At their shared memorial later that week no one needs to be reminded how close life is to death and love is to loss.

As Pat and Lindsey are convalescing in the fall of 94 I began to create what I hoped would be a meaningful gift for my dad for his 74th birthday. A few months before he had his stroke a friend gave my dad a bound blank book. He began filling those pages with his thoughts about life and love and the world. I asked him if I could borrow the book. He said sure. My hope was to have a typed and edited version of his thoughts ready by his birthday.

My dad was born on Election Day, November 4th, 1920. His Swedish born mother nearly named him Warren Harding Pearson after the newly elected President.

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



Instead she chose to name him after the local newsboy, Roy, with the middle name of Thorvald that translates as “ruler of the great god Thor.”

While my dad never thought he had a great name growing up in Spokane it was clear to me he had a good name. Well respected. Doctor. Businessman. Friend to many. Like Will Rogers it seemed he never met anyone he didn't like and because of that everyone seemed to like him. Forever, and I mean forever, positive. Except I would find out later for those few times when the shadow of depression overwhelmed him. He somehow always found a way out of the darkness except for that one time when back from World War Two my mom pregnant with me he ended up in a mental institution. Thanks to love, God's grace, his strong will, and an untested treatment involving insulin shock my dad came home a couple months after I was born.

The story goes that at first that time was too painful to talk about and then too hard to talk about and then as life filled up and got busy the hope was there was no need to talk about it and somehow that ending up evolving into an unspoken pact to never talk about it. That held true even after 1969 when a few months before my brother got married my mom felt compelled to tell us kids about that time. It and the fact that my dad's brother died in a mental institution somehow ended up as our secret family stigma, shame and scandal.

My mother did write about it gently and briefly in a memoir she created when she turned 70. I touched on it in the story I wrote for their 50th anniversary. Yet those accounts were to be shared only with a select few. The unspoken but clear understanding continued to be that while depression may be a secret part of our family's story it could and should be dealt with in some combination of detachment, denial and determination.

None of that was on my mind as I typed and gently edited the twenty-five short essays my dad wrote in a voice upbeat and grateful including the one that talked about his stay in the mental institution.

Those essays bound typed and titled “Feelings and Philosophy from the Notebook of Roy T. Pearson” was my gift to my dad that November. Two and a half years later preparing for my dad's memorial my mom would give my dad's friend and minister a copy of those essays telling him there were no restrictions if he wanted to read some of my father's words at the service. Shockingly he chose to read my dad's thoughts on his time in the mental institution. For me my father's words shared in a most public way unasked by the secret keepers would break a lifetime of silence and prove to be my father's last great gift to me leading to this moment around this campfire. A moment where love is clearly interwoven with loss.

There was to be one more event in 1994 to serve as a reminder of the fragility of life and love albeit a gentler one. Eight days after celebrating my dad's 74th birthday Pat's oldest daughter, Jodie, turned twenty-one.

While her younger sister Lindsey and I had a chance to find our way and to develop a relationship after her mother and I got together, Jodie and I weren't so lucky. She was getting ready to start her senior year in high school justifiably angry, confused, and in a lot of ways on her way out the door as I came in it.

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



Four and a half years later a distance remained between us. In the hopes of acknowledging and with a little luck giving voice to that elephant for her twenty-first birthday I wrote ten songs with short introductions for each bound them together and bought ten small often-silly gifts to represent those songs.

She came by the house and after cake and candles we sat around the living room and sang the songs smiling and laughing at the gifts. While that experience didn't get us home it helped set us on the road. Sometimes that's all we get. We also got lucky a year later when Jodie chose to live with Pat and me for eight or nine months. She'd studied James Joyce's Ulysses in college and during the time we were together we read that book as a family with Jodie as a mentor. Sitting together once a week after a good meal talking about what we'd read was a great way to be together. That book is a look through Joyce's eyes at the most enduring story about going home in all of literature, Homer's Odyssey.

Searching for home is among our most fundamental and basic human urges. If we do it wholeheartedly we are certain to be reminded of how close life is to death and love is to loss. While that might be enough to give us pause and sometimes even stop us in our tracks somehow we keep on going.

*So much has happened so much more awaits*

*When you awaken on a new day*



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