



## THE ROAD THAT LEADS US HOME

I

*On this road we travel down  
It isn't wealth or fame somehow  
Or power that we may hold now  
That makes this life worthwhile*

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Those are the first lines of a song called The Road That Leads Us Home. The lyrics are my adaptation of some thoughts on life written by James Michener. Ted Brancato wrote the music. In the summer of 2002 after more than 20 years of friendship and occasional musical projects Ted and I decided to write songs together. The idea was to take the best of them along with some songs where I wrote both the words and music and record a studio album in Seattle that he would produce, arrange, and play on. Because Ted lived in New Jersey we decided to record a dozen tracks when he visited in March of 2003 and finish the project when he returned a year later. The whole process was going to take nearly two years from dream to CD.

It was the most ambitious solo project I'd ever undertaken. We committed to it a few months before one of my Brothers Four band mates appeared to call me out as a musical imposter. That confrontation released fears I had unconsciously harbored since the beginning of my career. Suddenly the recording project took on an unintended and unexpected significance. It could even be a chance to prove once and for all if I'd been faking it for all these years or if I might instead be the real deal.

Looking back it was essential to have been totally committed to the project before adding that imposing psychological piece. It's tough enough when the motivation is simply to write good songs and record them well.

The recording in March 2003 went just fine. Studio X, a world-class recording venue managed by our friend Reed Ruddy, was available. We brought in the finest Northwest musicians to do the basic tracks. I was happy with my vocals. I kept from getting overly anxious in part because I was familiar and comfortable with most of the songs. At the end of the week there was a surreal moment when someone came into the control booth with the news that the United States had just invaded Iraq. Shock and awe indeed.

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That night we celebrated my birthday and the next day we finished the last of the vocals before putting the recording away for a year. You could say I passed the midterm. Little did I know how difficult those final exams would turn out to be.

## II

*It's not revenge or many loves*

*And glory never is enough*

*For in the end all turns to dust*

*After all of those miles*

There is a song written by Pete Seeger called "Turn, Turn, Turn." He borrows from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes proclaiming that to everything there is a season. In all our lives there are seasons when we know things are about to turn. There is that spring before a June graduation, the summer before a child is due to be born in September or the fall before a December wedding. There are other times when it is only looking back we recognize and fully appreciate how we have gone through a season of change. In the winter of 2004 I knew things were going to turn. What I didn't know was the direction they would be turning.

In previous campfires I've talked about my family's unspoken history of mental illness and my dad's last gift that made that secret public. I compared his gift to being given the key that unlocked a door to a previously unexplored room in a house I had inhabited my whole life. That gift allowed me to examine my relationship with things like secrets, and anxiety, and depression. I began to understand more completely who I was and why I did some things I did. I put what I was learning into a story and I shared it with select friends and family. The sharing somehow freed long hidden unconscious fears. Somewhere in the ensuing chaos with the help of counseling I began to name and so claim those fears. Fears that I was un-loveable, fatally flawed, not very smart, wanting to be known though afraid what people might discover if they knew who I truly was.

The more I learned about those fears the more I was willing to challenge them. In the recording studio in March of 2003 I began to discover that I might have what it takes to create something meaningful. A bigger test would come when the recording resumed in the spring of 2004. First I would need to get through that winter season.

The last two weeks of December of 2003 and the first week of January 2004  
The Brothers Four did a series of concerts in Taiwan, and Japan, and South

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Korea. It was John Paine's last international tour. After 45 years he was hanging up his guitar for good following a couple of concerts in Kirkland in March one week after I was scheduled to finish the vocals on my solo recording project.

The time between returning from Asia and going back into the studio was spent working on new songs I hoped to record while wondering if my days with The Brothers Four might be numbered. With John leaving I thought it was possible that Bob, the last original member, might recast the group, keeping Terry and adding two other musicians with similar talents who shared Terry's philosophy of musical precision and professionalism. I pressed ahead that winter writing songs. The harder I pressed the more stilted the songs appeared to become. The more stilted the songs appeared the more worried I became about my musical future so naturally I pressed even harder. And then thankfully a moment arrived when all seemed to matter was finding the right word or the right turn of phrase. And then another moment. And then another. And finally spring came and it was time to go into the studio and finish making a record.

### III

*Our journey is to find ourselves*

*To share and care and love as well*

*Be witness for somebody else*

*And in the end to know*

In March of 2003 about half the songs Ted and I recorded were my words and music. For the songs we recorded a year later most if not all the music was Ted's. At the time we were struggling to combine his sophisticated jazz leanings and my simpler folk sensibilities. Working together was complicated by the fact that we lived on opposite sides of the country. Also leading up to the recording he was so busy that he wrote one of the melodies and polished a few others while on the road between New Jersey and Seattle the week before we went into the studio. None of that might have mattered if I had been a faster study as a vocalist and less anxious in a studio setting, susceptible at the time to what I called "red light fever." In other words tending to tighten up or choke when someone in the control booth pushes the "record" button and I hear the words "rolling."

We were set to record at Ironwood Studio in North Seattle beginning Tuesday, March 15<sup>th</sup>. Ted arrived the previous Friday with all the songs including the just completed melodies. We worked together that day. I spent the rest of the weekend and Monday getting as familiar as I could with the music. Because of

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the skill of the musicians we recorded all eleven basic tracks-bass, drums, keyboard, and guitar-on Tuesday. That left three days to record the vocals.

Until this project my previous studio experience had been as a member of The Brothers Four or playing guitar while singing when I recorded with McCoy or by myself. Now here I was standing alone in the studio listening on earphones to the instrumental track we recorded the previous day. I am looking at the music at the stand in front of me. We chose the first song "Find To Love In Me" because I wrote the words years earlier and I knew them well. We hadn't counted on how deeply the music and phrasing I've used previously with those words is embedded in my psyche. Things are fine until they aren't.

We roll tape or in this case the digital equivalent. I cup my hands around the earphones. I lean toward the mic and start to sing. We stop and start again. I clear my throat. Record. We play it back. Try again. We take a break. I walk outside. Start one more time. My confidence dips as my anxiety rises. The recording studio is not one of those places where the harder you push the better the results you get. Breathe. Listen. Be in the moment. Think of what the words say. I try every trick I know. Everyone in the control room is encouraging and patient and doing all they can to make this work. After who knows how long, we give up and move on to the next song.

We are trying to limit each day's session to six hours. If we do more than that there's a chance my voice will begin to sound strained or even wear out before we're done. After the first day we are satisfied with the vocals for two songs. That night Ted comes back to the Olympic Peninsula where we go over and over the four songs we hope to record on Thursday. The next day we get them all. We decide Ted will stay in Seattle that night and I will work by myself on the final five songs for Friday's recording. We are told if we need to we can use the studio on Saturday until mid-afternoon. It turns out the owners have sold the contents of the control room and toward the end of the day on Saturday people will literally come in and haul out the console and the mixing board. For some reason that fact brings me a sense of relief as well as adding pressure. One way or another on Saturday afternoon the recording of vocals will be over and all that it symbolizes and has come to represent should somehow become clear.

While the pressure keeps building throughout Friday's session we end up satisfied with the vocals for three more songs. That leaves two to record on Saturday, the one we had unsuccessfully tried to record first, "Find to Love in Me," and the song that's part of this Chronicle, "The Road That Leads Us Home."

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We decide I will stay in a hotel rather than make the 90-minute trip home that night and back the next morning. It's Friday. Most hotels are full. There's a room available at a hotel in the U District. After Ted and I spend time with the songs sitting around the piano in the studio I check into the hotel and start playing the two songs on my computer going line by line, musical phrase by musical phrase, for an hour or more as Gonzaga University silently prevails over Valparaiso on the muted TV in the corner in the first round of basketball's March Madness.

When the morning comes I'm ready. By Saturday afternoon it's over. Everyone is satisfied with the vocals for every song. The feeling I have is some strange and unexplainable combination of knowing I can do it and knowing that I've done it.

I will call myself an imposter no longer!

## IV

*And in the end to know*

*The depth of our determination*

*The extent of our dedication*

*The place we seek our inspiration*

*Our true and honest goals*

The Monday after we finish recording Bob Flick calls and asks if the two of us can meet for coffee. We haven't talked since January. John Paine's final Brothers Four concerts are scheduled for that next weekend in Kirkland. Driving to the Kingston Inn where we will meet I have no idea what Bob's vision for The Brothers Four might be or what role if any I'll be playing. I arrive early and watch him through the window as he walks from the ferry landing toward the restaurant wearing a baseball cap. I meet him at the door. We shake hands, walk to the table where I've been sitting in the nearly empty restaurant. He orders coffee. They refill my cup. He takes off his cap, looks up at me and says, "Well, for now it looks like it's the two of us."

It takes a moment to register what he is saying, but once it does I let out a deep breath and do my best not to smile. He explains he's had some talks with Terry over the winter and that Terry will be leaving the group at the same time as John. He agrees with me McCoy will be a good addition. He says he'll call McCoy and invite him to the show on Saturday. Bob says he is thinking of asking

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someone named John Hylton to fill the other spot. He explains that years ago Hylton was a member of the New Christy Minstrels and we met him last fall when the group played at the Puyallup Fair.

A couple of years earlier when I thought The Brothers Four were having sort of an identity crisis I met with Bob and told him I thought we needed to choose to be either a group or a band. Both are professional and work hard but a group I explained was spontaneous and organic and who we are on stage is often as important as what we do. I think of a band as precise and choreographed and defined more by what we do than who we are. While he listened carefully and I knew he heard me nothing further came of the conversation.

There at the Kingston Inn as we are finishing our coffee I couldn't help myself, I looked at him and said, "Well, I guess we're gonna be a group." He laughed, and shook his head.

When we get up from the table we give each other a long hug and say we'll see each other in a few days. It is only when I get back to the car that I let myself acknowledge how big a role anxiety and uncertainty played during those last few months. I take deep breaths. I sit there a long time before turning the key and heading for home.

## V

*The reason we find to believe*

*The way we set our demons free*

*That place where we will not retreat*

*Though we must stand alone*

Successfully completing the recording let me see my place in the musical world and myself with new eyes and confidence. Having a new role and added responsibilities in The Brothers Four offered challenges I was more than ready to face. To life changing opportunities coming early in the spring of 2004. And the season wasn't over yet.

For most of my life my older brother has been most comfortable keeping his distance while I have spent much of mine trying to close the gap between us. Growing up I did everything I could to keep up with him never truly understanding or appreciating the advantages his twenty-one month head start had bestowed on him. In high school he was the Student Body President, the valedictorian, the coordinated athlete who never carried a pound of extra weight. The one time we both showed an interest in the same girl she naturally

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chose him. Patterns set when we're growing up can be easy to fall into and hard to escape. He left a big imprint and shadow as he headed off to Stanford where he graduated with honors before going on to medical school.

With all that as background there was one moment that became and remained a flash point for our adult relationship for more than twenty years. In 1983 a friend of mine died. I called my older brother who offered condolences. He did not, however, ask how I was doing or drive the 30 miles to see me or attend the memorial.

There are a lot of different ways to react when we are hurt, especially when someone we grew up idolizing is the one who we feel has hurts us. Though I was angry at my brother that he didn't come on some level I blamed myself, I made myself responsible for his absence, and tried to figure out ways to make sure that he would want to be there the next time.

At the same time I continued to recognize certain things about myself. There is a scene in a movie I had a visceral reaction to. It involves someone who becomes terrified at night but does not call for help. It is not that they're afraid no one will hear them but instead they fear that someone will hear them and not come. I believe my reaction came as a result of my having similar fears. I also realized later in a conversation with a friend how much I wanted and felt I needed to receive my brother's blessing.

In the spring of 2004 my brother wanted to marry in the Catholic Church. It meant annulling previous marriages. He needed character witnesses to help make his case before a Catholic Tribunal. Witnesses would provide the church with written answers to a number of personal questions. My brother asked me to be a witness and I accepted. The only thing I asked was that he and I get together and talk before I filled out the questionnaire.

For years I've written things down as a way of clarifying and understanding. A few days before our meeting the writing I did took the form of a letter to my brother. In it I told him the hurt I felt years earlier and how I'd carried that hurt around like an IOU and how I continued to hope for and even expect some kind of compensation perhaps in the form of an explanation of why he didn't come after my friend died. And as I continued to write without premeditation these words appeared on the page: there is no more IOU. Whatever debt I thought was owed I now consider paid in full. Tears formed along with those words. I cried again a few days later when I read the letter to my brother. Tears accompanied by an unexpected and overwhelming sense of relief and release.

What I've come to understand more fully over time is that for years I longed for the blessing of others. On some level I believed if I received that blessing

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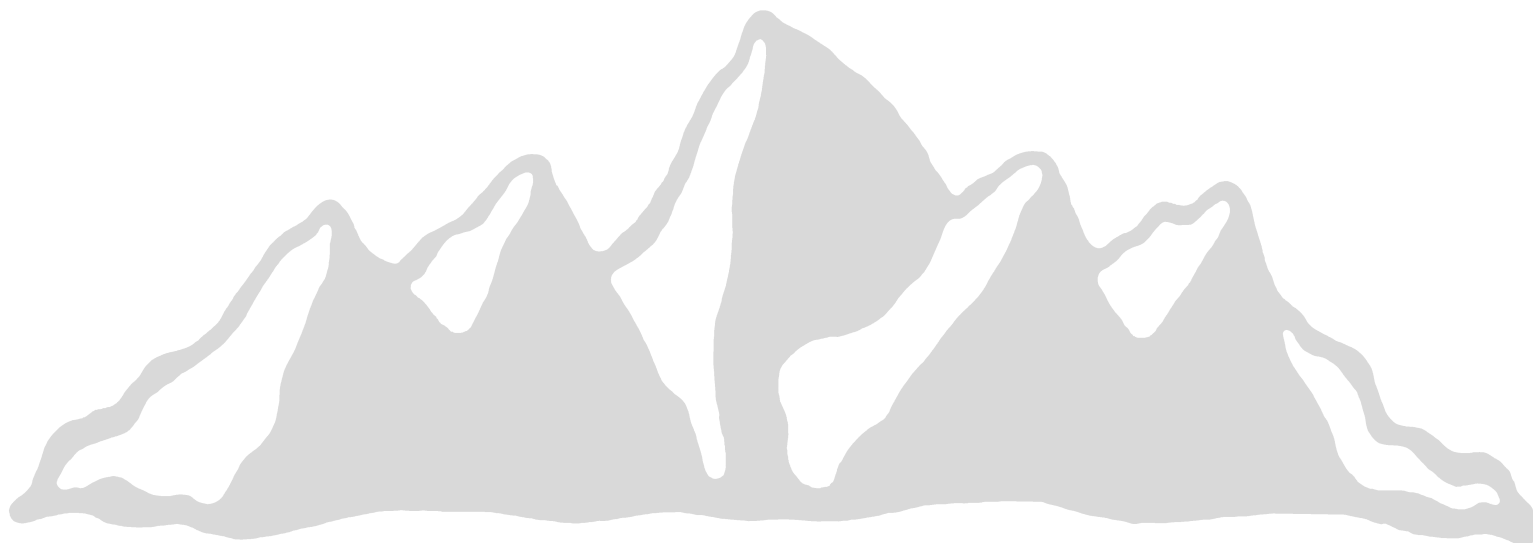
something inside me would change, on some level I might become complete. To my complete surprise the change came when I was able to offer a blessing to another, to my brother. Another gift in a season of gifts.

## VI

*What we are counted on to do  
The limits of our courage, too  
What we have found to be the truth  
On the road that leads us home*

It was clear at the time that significant things were happening in the spring of 2004. Looking at those moments now-when the vocals for the last song were successfully completed, when Bob Flick said, "It looks like it's the two of us," when I sat with my brother and told him, "Paid in full"-I realize more than ever how important those times were, that that time was. In a way each moment represented the face of a long held, deep-seated mostly unconscious fear, fears that a few years earlier had been found set free and began to run wild. Then at each of those moments I stood face to face with those fears the running stopped and to my surprise those fears appeared to smile back at me.

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