

LOVE ABIDES

May 2014 until March 2015

In May of 2014, I signed up to be part of a Civil Rights Pilgrimage scheduled for October. An interracial, intergenerational group of adults and students would be boarding a bus to spend nine days visiting sites that were important to the Civil Rights Movement of the 50's and 60's, talking with people along the way. The idea of participating in this pilgrimage struck a rich and immediate chord with me. What became clear, in the time between May and October, was how that chord resonated throughout my life and my career--from the time I first picked up a guitar and throughout the years.

Some of the first songs I learned to play and sing were *We Shall Overcome*, *Kumbaya*, (which I can sing to this day without a hint of irony) and *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. These, and others like them, are songs of faith and protest and clandestine communication concealed in simple rhythms and melodies. Even as a fourteen or fifteen year old, there was something both exhilarating and meaningful about these songs that enthrall me to this day.

The Brothers Four departed for five-weeks of concerts in Japan a few days after signing up for the Pilgrimage. For me, it became a tour like no other. Instead of spending free time exploring the places we played, I downloaded Taylor Branch's trilogy about Martin Luther King, Jr. onto my iPad as well as Peter Guralnick's *Sweet Soul Music* and spent hours reading in the hotel. Times of my youth came brilliantly back to life. On YouTube, I watched every episode of the 1980's PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize* as well as other programs on the Freedom Riders, Freedom Summer, and George Wallace. I was reminded of the magical year of 1968 when I spent the summer on the Lower East Side of New York City trying to change the world; instead, I was changed. That same summer, the singing group I was part of in college competed in the nationally syndicated "Your All-American College Show." In fact, I watched the taped broadcast of the episode our group won on a black and white TV placed on a chair on the sidewalk near the walk-up apartment I was living in on East Broadway.

Every day of the 2014 Brothers Four Tour in Japan felt like it brought new discoveries and reconnections to something in my past. Perhaps the most significant connection was a visceral one to my 21-year-old self. I talk about it in the introduction to a songbook I created as part of the upcoming Pilgrimage:



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



A few days after committing to the Pilgrimage, I left for a five-week tour of Japan with The Brothers Four. One night in a hotel room in Tokyo, in a combination of memory and imagination, I remembered who I had been and what I believed when I turned twenty-one in March of 1968.

It was clear to me, as I began the spring quarter of my junior year at the University of Washington, that Robert Kennedy should and likely would soon become President, that Martin Luther King, Jr. would continue to preach non-violence and social justice for years to come, that the Viet Nam War would soon be over, that the Kerner Report, issued a month earlier, would, as Dr. King said, offer a prescription to heal our divided land. Mine was a faith rooted in the religious values of a small town and what I believed to be an All-American family.

Within weeks, King and Kennedy would both be dead and Lyndon Johnson would choose to not even invite the members of the Kerner Commission to the White House. By 1969, Nixon's secret plan for peace would morph into a secret war in Laos and Cambodia culminating the shooting deaths of four Kent State students by National Guard troops. At the same time my anger at being told not to sing anti-war songs at an All City Young Life meeting would prove catalyst enough for me to turn my back on organized religion. In June of 1969, I was told that my father had been in a mental institution when I was born - and suddenly all I had learned growing up and my place in the world was somehow in doubt.

In that Tokyo hotel room, all these years later, it was finally and suddenly clear to me that at twenty-one, my world was abuzz with faith and hope. Then, because of the agony the country had experienced in 1968, at twenty-two I had lost faith in God, country, family, and self. What was also suddenly clear in 2014, as I watered those memories with tears, was that I knew with certainty - in the very marrow of my being - that faith was strong, hopes were high, that joy abounds, and love abides.

In no small part, I credit committing to the Pilgrimage as a catalyst for that insightful moment in that hotel room.

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



It was with gratitude and grace and the spirit of song and singing that I embarked upon the Pilgrimage, joined together with you on a most amazing journey.

Being part of that Civil Rights Pilgrimage in October of 2014 inspired me on many levels and in any number of ways. Silently walking across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, I felt connected to all who'd gone before as well as those who were sure to follow. The George Zimmerman verdict earlier that summer in the murder of Trayvon Martin as well as the events in Ferguson, made the songs, sites, and stories of the 60's more poignant, and the need to face our continuing Civil Rights Freedom Struggle as a nation more urgent.

A Pilgrimage can be described as a transformative journey toward a holy place. I felt my personal journey of Gratitude, Grit, and Grace being transformed into a pilgrimage. I knew then, when it came time to light the final campfire, I might return from where I came, but I would not be returning to the same place.



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