Poetry Archive: Part I

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Section 3: Coping in the Dark (1997-2000)

Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for,
great enough to die for. – Dag Hammarskjold (1905-1961)

After the strangest and loneliest Christmas I ever had or expect to have, I was released from hospital in January of 1997. My mood was stabilized and my outlook was better. The cycle-breaking medication and removal from all daily sources of stress for a few months had combined to stop the rapid cycling.

But it was a very tentative spirit that came home that day, feeling almost like I was out of the hospital without permission. This turned out to be a temporary effect from staying in the hospital for so long, and the feeling was tucked away for future reference in writing. Soon I was once again trying to make a start from scratch with a fresh attitude.

My writing continued a week after returning home, and along came a poem with a familiar and recurring theme of mine: my love of children. Disturbed by Canadian child poverty statistics in the news, and having spent a couple of days researching the history of the subject at the London public library, I wrote:

Patriotism

Without the same, with needless need.
They live in squalor, broken dreams.
Forgotten children.

Home has not enough to eat.
Nutrition a non-issue.
Forgotten children.

Tattered clothes they must accept.
Always hearing never.
Forgotten children.

Many bear neglects, abuse.
Enduring all in silence.
Forgotten children.

One in five are suffering,
sad and learning not to dream.
Forgotten children.

Those with more, they just ignore.
Choosing not to help these poor
forgotten children.

Churches, State, and all who can
enjoy themselves, and hope be damned.
Forgotten children.

A third world country? Look no more.
Hide your shame. Yourself abhor.
Oh, Oh, Canada.

With my heart and mind moving around in the realm of social injustice, another poem about the plight of the homeless came soon thereafter:

Society-less

The hell-bent city spits them out.
No longer valued, for some reason or other.
Family refuse.
Corporation crap.
Government glut.
In any case, they are certainly there.

Resplendent in their motley layers.
Street worn, living day to day.
Desperate pride.
Borrowed bites.
Cardboard castles.
Even if you don't look, they are there.

Forgotten, yet somehow unforgiven.
Like principles lost in the push for civic expediency.
Won't let us in,
so we won't come in.
And people freeze to death.
Pretend it isn't happening, and they are still there.

The streets betray a society's negligence,
Hardly anyone treating causes or symptoms.
Wasted worth.
Lost lives.
Products of putrid policies.
Call it what you will, they are there.

Maybe they'll just go away.

These two poems were vital in helping me to regain confidence in myself.

* * *

Sometimes an artist suffering from some form of spiritual/mental disturbance fears the removal of the disturbance will also remove the precious creative element. The problem: mood disorders are bound up closely with one's personality, and I wasn't yet prepared to say they were utterly separate. And there is much to be said about society's inability to accept all its members, regardless of health or necessarily unusual lifestyle; unusual because it doesn't resemble that of the average person.

Be that as it may, my writing was very much alive, and so was I; and this realization gave rise to a poem on the subject:

On Words

Through life's long trail of brambles thick,
I have toiled and recoiled,
and only writer's pen has given solace.

Whether other pens or mine,
I've enjoyed and been bouyed
by words that strike the balance of the truth.

In youth I listened quite intent
to story, song, short or long,
poem, drama, anything that plied the written word.

I came to so appreciate
nuance, rhyme, every line,
and grew to grasp a literary bent.

And now in spite of tribulations,
rhyme and prose I compose,
and find expression mine to make a life with.

Whatever else my words can do,
they keep me whole, they are my goal.
And more than ever I enjoy the expression of another.

When summer came, the sight of children playing inspired yet another poem. Again, innocence was the theme, and it was expressed as something to which adults should aspire anew. Someone once asserted that adults are nothing but corrupted children, and this came to my mind while I was writing. I was still not confident enough to claim to have clearly heard my own poetic voice, but I could nevertheless feel a growing sense of command over the genre and the language generally. I was getting closer. When it was finished, this one prompted a close friend to say it was my best writing to date:

Lest We Become

We are lost.
We have forgotten, and will not remember,
no longer in touch with the clarity of innocence.
Image has become object.
Meaning has decayed into glib banality.
And the surface masquerades as truth.
Gone are wonder and perfect trust.
Pure love has been pawned to pay for security.
And life?
The mere passage of painful time.

Find the way.
Remember what has not been memorized.
Return to that world of wide-eyed wisdom.
Recapture the idea and release the thing.
Exchange what for why.
Embrace the play of play.
Dance past the obvious and sing what remains.
Learn that life is learning love, and love learning life.
Go back there for the first time,
if you would go forward.
Suffer yourself.
Be.

* * *

As we moved into another winter, I was finding I wasn't quite as well as I thought. Dark moods reappeared and old coping habits of avoidance, societal withdrawal and self-isolation were creeping back into our life again. My son's behavioral difficulties compounded the situation, some of which I'm sure had to do with his father's illness, and through the advancing fog of sadness and anxiety I confusedly wondered about my wife's happiness.

We moved into a townhouse in a nice London neighbourhood, and we both felt it would give us another fresh beginning. It did, but only for a brief time. The sensation that something was amiss between us was barely detectable to me amid the blackness of my depression, but what I did sense I tried to address in the first song I had written in years. It was written to let her know that, despite how wrapped up I was in despair for most of the time, I knew she was there and had been supporting me unfailingly. It went unnoticed by me at the time, but in retrospect I know this one did not have the desired effect. Even so, the lyric was from the heart:

Contemporary Saviour

This man leaves a lot to be desired.
Don't know why she treats me like I don't.
Sad and mad, whether weak or wired.
I say I will and then I say I won't.
You see I came upon a flower in a clearing,
weary from the path that I had worn.
Sun-filled, kissed by rain and so endearing.

And ever since that day I've been a shattered soul reborn.

I thank the Lord for patience that he gave her.
I pray that I'll be always in her favour.
Oh, she is my contemporary savior.

I have always needed a companion,
just to help me people pages in a way.
But you've become the author, Baby, then some,
just by being with me every day.
I don't know how you manage to be selfless,
'cause like the man himself you suffer too.
Wise and brave when I am almost helpless,
taking me from nothing to being strong enough for two.

Living is a liberating labour,
and to my bitter life she adds a flavour.
Oh, she is my contemporary savior.

She ought to leave right now and who can blame her?
But instead she keeps a check on my behavior.
Yeah, she is my contemporary savior.

* * *

Well, in June of 1997 she did leave, and it shattered my heart. But to this day I can't say I really blame her. Out of respect for someone I once loved and who once loved me, I will give no details about the end of my second marriage. It needs to be said, however, that it was not my idea. It took me completely by surprise. She just left and we haven't spoken since.

I was given no idea where she went; abandoned and left to conclude that dealing with my darkness simply became too much for her. I am sure it was, but at the time I could only try to deal with what was a totally unexpected and terrifying situation. And I still loved her very much, insofar as I was able.

Without warning, I found myself alone and depressed in a half-filled house, and I was going through a period when I was unable to answer the phone or the doorbell. All I could do was get up at about eleven in the morning, come down to the kitchen for a beverage, and go to the basement. My day then consisted of sitting on the basement couch in the dark, eating very little, smoking cigarettes until about two in the morning, then to bed. And the next day it would start all over again.

A month before she left, I had no choice but to make arrangements with my son's mother to have him go live with her in Toronto, at least temporarily. Only later did I realize that she took his going to Toronto as her chance to get out too, with the removal of parental responsibility.

My sole goal each day, the only thing I was capable of accomplishing each day and night, was to stay alive. It is impossible to say how many weeks or months this solipsism lasted, but I know it was utterly necessary to my survival. I constantly wished not to have ever been, and I had to constantly fight to make sure I would continue to be. It was inconceivable for me to take my own life and leave a son without a father, wondering if he will end up the same way. Whatever was necessary to stay alive simply had to be done.

I remember being nauseated when two lines of grotesque optimism suddenly popped into my mind, haunting me for days:

Where do I turn when there's nowhere to turn?
I turn inside out.

It was something like that, but my self-imposed isolation felt more like I had crawled into a shell like a slug. And it was difficult at this point for me to hold on to my identity, because everything I considered myself to be seemed to have abandoned me. It is devastating to be a gregarious, optimistic, well-educated entertainer and writer who suddenly finds himself afraid to speak to anybody, depressed, pessimistic, and unable to remember most of what he's ever learned. I didn't recognize myself.

To tell one's story with honesty and any semblance of completeness, there will be certain people and events that cannot be left out completely because they have had such a profound impact. Though it is important to be careful, it may help to look at such things differently with respect to this archive, to understand why I cannot divest certain people from my life story. We have here a depressed, broken-hearted poet in the fight of his life, expressing himself in verse; and we need the context of the particulars of his life to understand what happened, the better to appreciate the expression of his thoughts and feelings in those contexts.

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My first attempt to deal with feelings of abandonment and loneliness in poetry didn't come for a while. Though countless writers find creativity in being blue, this has its limits. If you go down far enough, there is nothing to be found. A long agonizing period of being unable to write a word came to an end in late August of 1998, and after more than a year of unmitigated misery, I was succinct:

Hypothetically Speaking

What if good works bore no fruit,
and children's playing voices mute?
What if songs could not be sung,
and growing only made one young?

What if nothing could be blessed,
and love for God was ne'er expressed?
What if sun could never rise,
and bitter blackness filled the skies?

Then this is how it has to be,
for none makes sense since you left me.

For some reason this poem still strikes me as one of the more finely crafted set of verses I have ever written; in the vein of **At Home…In Germany** – not a wasted or unnecessary word. It may be because it allowed me to demonstrate to myself that I had made it through the worst year of my life, my tattered heart was still beating somehow, and my writing was still intact. In any case, it was a crucial poem for a pivotal place in my personal history.

Alone in London and poverty stricken, as I almost always was until well into my forties, my parents offered to send me a one-way plane ticket home. So poor of spirit as I was, I eventually had to give in and accept their offer, but it took a lot of convincing. Upon arrival home I was compelled to move in with my parents, and the very next day I watched my sister get married to one of my best friends. I had no plans and no way to see the point in making plans. I was once again back to square one, with an even longer, more varied story of failure behind me.

* * *

Once I got myself set up with an all too limited fixed income in St. John's, a bed-sitter downtown became my new home. It was pretty rough and ready, on the top floor of a run-down, four-storey rooming house, but I had my independence and my own full bathroom. Ever the optimist, the first evening in my new place was cause for some celebration, albeit only a party of one; and I had bought myself a half dozen Jockey as a housewarming gift.

The song I wrote to commemorate the event did have a celebratory melody and beat, but the lyrics sounded like the ramblings of a demoralized man with a wry resignation to his fate. And, of course, that's exactly what I was:

Heavy Load

Well, I just opened a beer,
I got the keys on the wall.
The phone is off the hook
'cause I don't want to get a call
me crazy if you want to,
or call me a fool,
but nowadays I feel like the exception to the rule.
Life seems to leave me by the side of the road,
and I'm still dealing with this heavy load.

Someone keeps on knocking
at the place next door.
I've opened another,
now I'm starting to pour
all my heart out here
with a paper and pen,
trying to make the exorcism happen again.
I can't abide living in this humble abode,
and I'm still dealing with this heavy load.

Kicking and a-scratching
for a little piece of something I can call mine.
But I'll be a-patching up my wounded heart
and have a better life further on down the line.

Well, now that I think about it
I'll be alright.
The beer is really working
and I'm ready for a fight
the good fight, soldier,
and hold up your heart.
I can tell you tonight I feel like making a start.
But tomorrow I could feel like old Tom Joad,
and I'm still dealing with this heavy load.

The writing's on the wall, but I think it's in code,
And I'm still dealing with this heavy load.

I liked the song, and I was pleased with the lyrics. But I had no idea how I was going to patch up my wounded heart, never mind have a better life.

The few months spent in this cramped, decrepit old place were brutal. I sent several letters to my estranged wife with no way of knowing if they were read or even received. At some excruciating point, a few terse lines on a small piece of paper showed up, insisting she was happy and advising me to get on with my life. The days that followed, just trying to somehow accept this, will never leave me.

One night about a month later, I dolefully took a walk in the direction of the downtown nightlife. With all of seven dollars and seventy-five cents in my pocket, I tried to get a quick look around in what used to be my world, our world. I slipped into a familiar haunt and an old friend was there with a glass of wine, and we ended up spending a pleasant evening together. She was leaving for the mainland in a couple of weeks, and she made me feel almost normal again. Later that night I wrote a poem of loving appreciation:

Thank You

I really didn't feel that strong,
hiding deep inside a song,
and holding up my heart in two
when you came dancing into view.

Dancing, yes, and just the same
as when I first was told your name;
as free a spirit as I know.
I rested in your child-like glow.

I was fragile, you were kind,
and gave so freely of your time.
Hopes and dreams, the things we shared.
"Let's have a special taste," I dared.

I was surprised when you agreed
to have that kind of trust in me.
So, we slipped out, up to my room,
and found that we were more in tune.

You let me tell you why you're sweet,
which only set my heart to beat.
A strange sensation nowadays,

thanks to your endearing ways.

We talked and, well, it could be me,
but I felt electricity.
An awkward moment, a warm embrace,
and we returned to join the race.

The band played on and so did we.
We spoke, I pulled you close to me.
The passion rose inside and then
we agreed to meet again.

As I walked home, and this is true,
I thanked God for seeing you.
The time we spent an answered prayer,
a lady showed me that she cares.

Without judgement, without ploy,
you gave me hope with playful joy.
Your eyes, your smile, your gentle touch;
and when you laugh it means so much.

I really only want to say,
you did much more than make my day.
And though I know you'll soon depart,
You've done much to mend my heart.

She has never seen this poem. And wherever she may be today, she has no idea how vital that evening with her was for me and my future. I can only hope she gets to read it here someday.

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In late winter 1999, I somehow managed to acquire a modest subsidized apartment uptown. The fact that it was a basement unit didn't help my mood, so it was a tradeoff. Then, after a slip on the ice, followed by a similar incident in a swimming pool change room, I needed surgery to remove a smashed tailbone. Three long months of recovery from the coccygectomy, lying on my belly on the floor of my basement apartment, left me wondering if my life would ever be tolerable again.

She was on my mind as much as ever. Then one morning in July 1999, at precisely 4:02 AM, an idea for a lyric woke me from my sleep, and parts of a tune were lurking somewhere in the vicinity. This had never happened to me before. Fearing I'd wake the next day unable to remember it, I got up to write it down and never went back to bed. By six that morning I had the makings of a song and by ten it was finished, with a melody and a beat that sounded like a Top Ten radio ballad from the sixties:

Paradise Lost

Give me a word that I can count on now, Baby,
just before I lose my mind.
You know what I heard made me cry out loud, Baby,
'cause I'm the trusting kind.
This ain't the way you said it would be.
How could I know you would do this to me?

Give me the heart that you have broken now, Baby,
'cause I'll need it on my way.
Now haven't I always treated you just like a lady,
like I promised on that day?
I really meant it when I pledged you my love.
I gotta ask what were you thinking of?

I… cry as you go.
Now I face life without you.
Oh but I… want you to know,
that I will if I have to,
and then
I'll find love again.

Give me a chance to get this world off my shoulders,
then you'll regret your choice.
'cause she's out there somewhere and when I find her I will hold her,
and together we'll rejoice.
It's not that I want to lose what we made.
I can't spend my time wishing you'd stayed.

I… cry as you go.
Now I face life without you.
Oh but I… want you to know,

that I will if I have to,
and then...
I'll find love again.
I'll find love again.
I will find love again.

This song was a turning point in terms of dealing with my second wife's departure. My optimism, as is clear from the chorus and last verse, was returning with some vigor.

It was followed by a rather pessimistic offering a few days later, however, but it was a catharsis. It was about my life in that apartment, missing her, feeling so alone:

Meaninglessness

I start each day the same way that it ends:
empty as a bed, where words of love are never said.
I try to face the morning with a cigarette.
I draw it into me,
the smoke a welcome enemy.
I see again what's wrong,
no love to make me strong,
and this day will be longer than the one before.
Now I'm hurting even more.

Without my true companion there's no meaning.
There ain't no point, there's nothing worth redeeming.
Alone with all my plans and crazy notions.
Without you I'm just going through the motions.

My friends know just how much all this is killing me.
They don't know what to say,
and words don't help me anyway.
How can I look forward with you in my past?
A prisoner of time,
with a mountain much too high to climb.
And even if I could,
oh, what would be the good?
Just another place I stood without you next to me,
in obscurity.

Without my true companion there's no meaning.
There ain't no point, there's nothing worth redeeming.
Alone with all my plans and crazy notions.
Without you I'm just going through the motions.

I end each day the same way it begins:
Empty as a bed, where words of love are never said.

The confidence derived from writing these two songs was significant. A power came over me that I hadn't felt in years, and maybe never had before. Making it through this far, a better life seemed just a little more possible now.

In Between came to mind, and calling out to "whomever she may be" seemed like a good idea again. Elvis Costello has always been one of my favorite songwriters, and my next song was an effort to write in his style, with his attitude. Only the most astute Costello fans can say whether I succeeded:

Next Wave

You say that the men on the make are legion.
You say that they're after your nether region.
I'm not that kind of guy.
Anyway you've yet to say: "Don't be so shy."

I had a girl who could not be a woman.
Then I had a woman, but I was too human.
They say that three's a charm,
and I only want to be your arm in arm.

Passion to burn, all I need is a flame.
Don't know if I'm going to make it to my next Thanksgiving Day.
Thanksgiving Day.

The American Dream is a fatal obsession.
So, if they're all asleep how can they learn a lesson?
They say in God we trust,
but I think they're just afraid of going bust.

We have a duty to take a position.
And those who refuse, they don't know what we're missing.

I'm not a simple man,
But I'm pretty sure that I know who I am,
and I'll do all I can.

Walk with me, talk with me, show me the way.
You could be the guest of honour at my next Thanksgiving Day.
Thanksgiving Day.

It may not be in the cards.
Then please give your heart my regards.

You may decline, but I'd love you to say:
"Yes", then I'd know I've arrived at my next Thanksgiving Day.
Thanksgiving Day.
Thanksgiving Day.

Still unwell and lonely, it nevertheless felt like there was something alive in me again. I was able to look forward, lyrically, with tongue firmly planted in cheek. Once again, something deep inside me found a reason to go on.

It even seemed like something positive may be dawning in my life, and I had the feeling that I was still alive because there was something more I needed to accomplish. It is not for me to say if I succeeded over the years since then, but I distinctly remember feeling this, and it became a survival principle that I willfully brandished as I fought my way forward.

I made a booking, and performed well to an appreciative crowd, but I went back to my room extremely stressed. After a nightmarish two days resisting the power of the feeling, I broke down. As it turned out, this proved just a bump in the road compared to London, lasting just a few weeks. It was one of those one-step-back-two-steps-forward things, but at the time it was a disheartening setback. Those weeks were tough.

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Back in my apartment again, I was making plans to record a demo of five original songs: **Paradise Lost**, **Meaninglessness**, **Contemporary Saviour, Heavy Load** and **Next Wave**. This was done within a few weeks in my sister's basement, with a couple of my old musical friends volunteering their time to sit in and play on the recording, which was also possible thanks to an old friend's recording equipment. Drummer Steve Squires and bassist Glen Abbott laid down some fine tracks for me that I appreciate every time I listen to these songs (see "Tunes").

Meanwhile, my depression and anxiety seemed to be lifting somewhat, and again I adopted the attitude that the future was bright enough to look forward to. But there would be several other challenging peaks and valleys to endure over the next couple of years. So far, I had three years of searching unsuccessfully for the right treatment behind me, and it would be two more years before I'd find it.

Coming into 2000, my weight had ballooned to almost 300 pounds and my cigarette consumption was out of control. I was a prime candidate for a massive stroke or heart attack at any time, with a cholesterol level well over twelve points. Resigned to being lonely for the rest of my life, I never expected to be with anyone ever again and my outlook became very bleak indeed.

I was at a crossroads in my life, yet again; and yet again, I would have to rise to the occasion and start from scratch. Only this time it would last. And soon I would be hearing the poetic voice I had been waiting so long to hear – my own.