

In the Brotherhood (unpublished)

I am looking for a way to step outside of linear time without wandering into “circle of life” territory. I want to dissolve some boundaries, but I am too old for hallucinogens and too comfortable with my untutored desires for Buddhism. I need in particular a way to convince myself that death might be both beginning and ending, but I approach this task empty-handed. Heaven I abandoned long ago, reincarnation seems hellish (*again? this time as what?*), and I have never encountered a ghost. I could take heart in the fact that I will provide nutrition in due time for dogwoods and azaleas, but it is not immortality I am after. This is not about myself, decomposed or otherwise.

I need a way to stay in touch with my brother – a way that does not immerse me in a recurring cycle of grief. That is what I found myself inhabiting four years ago – nearly three years after his death. I wondered why the pain was still so intense, worried that there might be something wrong with me. I needed some help but felt wary of all offers of assistance. I sought nothing psychological. Nothing so bounded as a self needed repair. I doubt that repair is the right word for what I hoped might follow a proper reckoning.

It is not enough just to remember, the way we might recall an important event in history or a childhood incident. Memories perpetuate contact, but with whom or what, exactly? The brother who shows up in mine is certainly not the living one I once knew, but neither does he seem inanimate. Some kind of will exerts itself during these encounters that does not accompany other kinds of memories. That willful presence, I am certain, does not reside in my head. It visits of its own accord, arrayed in adornment and circumstance of its own choosing. It feels like a tugging from without, more insistent than a garden variety recollection. And that raises the question - what exactly is being tugged and where should I situate that on the “me/not me” divide?

Perhaps the information that might help answer this question could be found in the details of the encounters themselves. No more somber speculations. It was time to get scientific, make some distinctions, break something down. I decided to attempt something like William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* - subject a mystical impression to empirical scrutiny, not to dismiss it but to confirm its existence and, indeed, its entanglement with what we like to think of as rational. The emotions sparked by my encounters with my brother might contain clues to such mysteries as I hoped to unravel, but I could not let them obstruct a clear view of real particulars. I could not let them determine the answers in advance.

When I examined my memories with an empiricist’s detachment, I perceived two versions of my brother. One appeared in spectral form, the other in the fullness of health. My brother died of pancreatic cancer. He walked into a doctor’s office with digestive problems and, after some tests, received a diagnosis that measured the time left to him in months rather than years. He wasted away in a fashion most akin to starvation. The spectral brother who visited me wore the

inquisitive half grin that the living brother often wore, but it was pasted on a face that was literally skin and bones. It was a horrifying sight. This visitor jolted me awake when he crashed my dreams, caused my skin to prickle when he accosted me by day. He was completely disembodied, a horrid face thrown against blank walls or peeking around dark structures. Neither the walls nor the structures were part of any world I recognized. This vision lingered like a silly song you replay unwillingly in your head, or an image burned into your retina after staring too long at something bright. Visits from the spectral brother felt like a haunting – an eruption of regret and yearning taking shape as menace and mayhem.

The healthy brother always showed up fully formed within a familiar setting. He did not appear out of nowhere but comfortably settled in places my brother and I once occupied together in real time. We grew up in the Blue Ridge mountains of central Appalachia, not far from where the Potomac and Shenandoah converge. As kids we did a lot of fishing on both rivers, either with my mom and dad or with an uncle when my dad had to work on the weekend. We would start on the bank and then slowly work our way out across swift channels and along rock outcroppings, pausing as we went to dangle a baited hook in front of whatever might be within casting range. By midday we were standing in the middle of a majestic river with no other humans in sight – warm sun; abounding maples and oaks; rushing chutes, sparkling riffles, and still pools; perch, channel cats, and an occasional smallmouth bass in the creel.

This brother also appeared regularly in a tavern and on his back porch, both located in the small college town where he settled and raised a family. We were musicians as well as fishermen, and after I returned from the university we played together for several years in a rock and roll band. We worked the “animal circuit” – Moose clubs, Elks clubs – that supplies cheap liquor and live entertainment to small town folk. Sometimes we got better paying gigs in the lounges of the big chain motels sprinkled along a nearby interstate. Our preferred venue was a tavern known as “The Rafters.” Once we had set up our equipment, the place held about 50-60 people, but they were all friends or lovers, all devoted to hard drinking and wild dancing, all as receptive to the songs we were writing as to the Creedence, Stones, and Dead covers. I either spied the music-making brother across the stage, furiously shaking a tambourine as he belted out “Fortunate Son,” or felt him at my side, sharing a microphone as we harmonized a chorus in one of my own songs.

During the back porch visits my brother and I strummed guitars and tightened harmonies. He sang his last notes there – the third verse in The Band’s “The Weight” (*Go down, Miss Moses, there’s nothin’ you can say ...*). We often closed shows with that song to mellow out the crowd, trading verses until the last one (*Catch a cannonball now to take me down the line ...*), which we sang together. The back porch memory is particularly vivid – weatherworn floor, leaves in the corners from arching trees overhead, faded chair cushions, full ash trays, my brother’s powerful voice reduced to a thin whisper, an unvanquished will pushing that voice to perform one last time the rite that had always made him feel most alive.

Finally, the robust, fully formed brother sometimes materialized in the front seat of his pick-up. After oil prices skyrocketed in the wake of the 1973 embargo, many people went back to heating their homes with wood. They installed massive cast-iron stoves in front of old hearths, wedged some 6" pipe up the chimney, and commenced to burn. To conserve fuel, they would burn a packed stove at full throttle for 30 minutes, then damp it down to heat a large space for many hours. That kind of a system needs regular maintenance to avoid a chimney fire that could burn the house down. My brother and I were both now well into our twenties. He had his first daughter and needed more money than small venue music-making would deliver. He started a chimney sweeping business and I became his assistant. He was licensed and insured, so he did the roof work. I taped the fireplaces and stoves shut, then vacuumed what he brushed down the flue and chipped away at creosote deposits with an assortment of junk chisels and scrapers. We spent a large portion of every workday in the truck, driving the back roads from job to job. We usually had time for a cigarette, a conversation about the last job or the next, some reworking of old family stories and parental legacies. More often we goofed around, joking and singing. A six-pack always lightened Friday afternoons: my brother made sure to book Friday customers who wouldn't mind if the sweep and his assistant had started their weekend a little early. These select customers usually had a beer or joint waiting for us in any case.

So, introspection had generated two brothers, each one starkly dissimilar in appearance and emotional resonance. The next step was to compare these two visitors using empirically sound criteria. Upon further inspection, for example, I realized that the number of visitations from the spectral brother had diminished significantly over time. The fearsome, disembodied grin was definitely making fewer appearances by day or night. That observation sparked relief, yes, but also the dread that causes so many people who have suffered grievous losses to nurse painful memories. Grievors are afraid that if they run from the pain they will lose touch with all that's left to them of a loved one. They also fear that they will start to shed bits of themselves – the parts of their personality that emerged in the course of a prolonged affectionate relationship. In my case, those parts were precious – my best parts perhaps. My brother picked up a guitar and started to sing while I was still plodding stiffly through classical piano pieces. He pulled spirited communal music and playfulness out of a guarded, bookish kid. We knew all the Beatles songs by heart and had an inventory of phrases and verses we sang together in well-rehearsed comic renditions. We frequently entertained ourselves with an over-the-top version of Frank Zappa's "Sofa No. 2," a mock German opera song from the *One Size Fits All* album. Where in this world or any other was I going to find someone who could sing *ich bin der Chrom Dinette* with me in the proper style? Was I now destined to become dull and humorless, a studious introvert again, without my brother as carousing partner? If I allowed him to fade year by year, was I going to shrink bit by bit? These were the fears, I figure, that caused me to cling for too long to painful memories. Here was a likely explanation for those three years of dedicated grieving.

But that period had ended. My condition improved and that improvement also demanded explanation. How did I finally manage to let him go while keeping myself intact, including the music and mischief he had called into being? Why had the frightful visitations from the spectral

brother faded, while the pleasurable ones from the river rat, the musician, and the chimney sweep continued unabated?

Answers to these questions eventually arrived, but not by any exercise of logic on my part. I did not so much solve as enter into a mystery. More precisely, I discovered a place where the contours of the mysterious appeared in relief against the crust of the ordinary. On the day I received news of my brother's diagnosis, I was constructing a patio in a small shaded area behind my house. I cleaned up some old bricks left behind by the former owner, bought some cheap concrete pavers, and arranged them in a pattern commensurate with the demeanor of the place. It was strenuous, hands-and-knees labor, as I had to hack away at rock-hard dirt to create level ground for each bit of patio – one piece at a time and with much lifting, scraping, and reseating to create a surface smooth enough for inattentive dawdling. I spoke to my brother on the phone every day for the next several months and all those conversations took place on this worksite. His cancer and my patio progressed together.

I completed the patio not long after he died. Now, seven years later, it is the place where I take my morning coffee and lounge with neighborhood squirrels and birds. For obvious reasons, my brother is also a regular visitor. One day not long ago, as I was entertaining all these guests, it suddenly occurred to me that for all the powerful memories that pervade this place, the spectral brother had never intruded upon it. The patio was charmed somehow. The whole brother's presence felt no different from that of the non-human visitors – we could not exchange thoughts, but we occupied and found enjoyment in a common space. The spirit of the place suffused the encounters that took place within it, whether these were with the living or the dead. On the patio, my relationship with my brother proceeded like it had when he was alive - sometimes he would call or stop by, sometimes I would, but we always ended up in the places where good company and good times were ready at hand. These were the visits that seemed too tangible - too corporeal - to be going on in my head. Here was the tugging, the insistence, the willfulness. The number of these encounters was not diminishing with the passage of time; the fate of this brother was not tied to the natural lifespan of fear or grief.

These observations gave me a fresh perspective on the spectral brother. He now stood revealed as my own fear of death, assuming the hideous form that a fearful imagination is prone to concoct. But that form was an image – an unchanging face stamped on nondescript surfaces. The spectral brother blazed and shimmered but was never a bodily presence. He could not make himself comfortable on the patio or delight in the doings of squirrels and birds. He had no home outside my head and thus was destined to fade with my horror at how my brother had died and my sorrow that he was gone.

The healthy brother did have such a home. The corporeality I struggled to understand did not emanate from my brother, I realized, but from the places that drew us most deeply into real physical communion. The tugging was like the magnetism of the hearth, pulling the weary traveler towards warmth and fellowship. That insight led me to situate the patio alongside the other happy meeting grounds – the river, The Rafters, my brother's back porch, the front seat of

his truck. With that connection established I suddenly perceived these charmed places, when grouped together, as a new kind of domain. My patio existed in the living present, the other places in the remembered past, but that difference was now less significant than another, equally demonstrable fact – all of them served as setting for the same event. I was alive and my brother was dead, but a territory had opened up where that distinction carried less meaning than the tangible quality of our ongoing encounters. An analogy might clarify: If I write “-2” and “2” on a blackboard and ask how they differ, we would have to explicate the meaning of negative and positive numbers. That difference is a real one – ignore the “-“ and you will botch every equation in which that sign appears. But if I write “-10”, “-6”, “-2”, “2”, the difference between negative and positive suddenly becomes less salient than the value of each item in the series. You would not want to forget that three of these numbers are negative and one is positive, but their meaning now lies in the commonality – the shared interval – that makes them a cohering series. I remain keenly aware of the difference between life and death, but my desire to stay in touch with my brother led me to a place where the border between them mattered less than the experience of trespass. This was the realm towards which the raw particulars of my encounters had always pointed, a place where a distinction between mind and matter more thwarted than furthered rational understanding. And I do mean rational – I have posited no immortal souls or cosmic spirits, no rifts in space or time, no joyful reunions in heaven or ecstatic dissolutions into oneness, nothing at all beyond the realm of lived experience.

At long last I had stumbled into the brotherhood. That name seems most appropriate for the place where all this warm and welcome craziness is being enacted. Not the brotherhood of the Christians or the socialists, hammered to thin abstraction and buffed to high polish so it might dazzle all who behold it, regardless of time or place. My brotherhood is more modest, a neighborhood rather than a global kingdom. The idea of a neighborhood has remained concrete because it always references a bounded territory and a specific group of inhabitants. Neighbors are people who borrow extension ladders and eggs from one another and come together on Independence Day to share food and drink on a cordoned street. The brotherhood I inhabit is such a domain. It spans past and present, dead and alive, but does not extend beyond the places where my brother and I had once spent and still do spend time together. It is present to my senses and houses a real brother – one who still makes me smile and adds harmonies that I can hear to songs I have written since his passing.

However tangible to me, the brotherhood does not meet the standards in force since the seventeenth century to fix the boundaries of the real. By such criteria as Bacon and Descartes acclaimed as rational, these encounters could only be happening in my head. As a particular assemblage of matter in motion, my brother is gone, pure and simple. These visitations are *my* memories, nothing more. We employ psychologists to explain the frequency and intensity of a remembered experience, pharmaceuticals for those who insist that psychological explanations fail to capture the most distinct qualities of that experience. But those qualities were the raw material for my analysis – the introspected particulars that undergirded what had been, up to this point, a sober and productive inquiry. It was the tugging, the kindly persistence that made one class of memories stand out from the rest, one brother distinguishable from the other. This was

immediate sense data, but of a kind that defied the injunctions by which modern science segregates mental and physical worlds. I can find no name in the lexicon of modern science or modern religion for the liminal place where my brother and I hang out together, no way to designate a felt presence that is neither psychological outgrowth nor otherworldly avatar, no insight into encounters that are neither wholly imagined nor measurably physical.

I intend nonetheless to defend this enchanted place against every variety - religious, scientific, cynical - of condescending smugness. Its character is mysterious and will remain so. We do not really understand how sounds arrayed along two dimensions (high and low, long and short) can project spatiality. We do not, in a word, know exactly how music creates places for everything from somber exploration to ecstatic flight. But who among us has not brooded or danced in those places? These experiences are as real as anything can be despite the mystery of their composition. If the places where they occur defy the mind/matter duality of the modern world, so much the worse for modernity.

Such places come in other sizes and shapes. My brotherhood, for example, exhibits features common to the sacred grounds of indigenous people. These too are places where the living and dead cohabitate, where mind and matter blend and fuse, where recorded and mythic events mingle promiscuously in the substance of song and story. A dwindling number of Appalachians retain ties of that sort to mountains and ancestral settlements, but I am not one of them. I am a child of the great post-WWII unsettling. A scatterling. I left West Virginia to pursue a career and landed in California, where I raised my family. I have put down no roots, but I am still there. Unlike Wendell Berry, I cannot return to a family farm securely nestled among rolling hills. My parents died, my brother and I sold the house, and that was it. *Poof!*

But the brotherhood remains, modest as it is. It is the best I can manage in the way of a sacred grove and, having sorted out to my own satisfaction its claims on my understanding and affections, it is good enough. The defiance it calls into being binds me to others fighting to protect what is sacred to them. In the places where *that* kinship thrives, a requiem for a dead brother becomes a battle cry raised in defense of dying rivers, blasted mountains, shuttered taverns, deserted back porches, and desecrated burial grounds. Where mystery is respected, understanding again becomes a matter of seeing things alive and whole. Where that kind of understanding is valued, regeneration can begin.