

Chapter Twenty

LOOKING BACK

A memory may be a paradise from which we cannot be driven. It may also be a hell from which we cannot escape.

John Lancaster Spalding

O **Mind-traveling**

It feels so strange to be sitting in my easy chair in the early morning, a cup of coffee in hand, my cat Leela nestled on my lap, sitting and listening to quiet rain plip-popping on the roof, a fire gently crackling in the woodstove.

It feels strange, because my mind seems to have a mind of its own. It travels where it wants to, sometimes to the immediate future (need to bring in more firewood after I finish sitting), to the immediate past (need to answer yesterday's e-mail from S this morning), to the further future (are we going to be able to weather this horrideous economic downturn, losing hundreds of dollars a day on the failing market), to the distant past.

Indeed, the distant past creates all manner of strangeness for me, something to do with roses, kisses, smiles, laughter, blood, music, tears, and merry-go-rounds.

MR

Memories: Partially There, Partially Vanished

All is well here. Just got back from a brief trip to L.A., where people from the BBC in London interviewed me about Tim Buckley. They talked with me in the Troubadour bar, which, happy to say, has changed very little since the times when Tim and I played there a thousand years ago — shiny wooden bar, dark wooden walls, wooden pillars, and pictures of famous people who have played there (alas, not Tim, although if the owner/founder Doug Weston were still alive, I'm sure he would have a pic of Tim on the walls. He liked Tim, helped Tim get his start, regarded Tim as a friend).

The BBC people and I talked in the bar for about two hours. The next morning, I took them down to Venice beach and showed them the places where Tim lived, I lived, and where we used to hang out, go swimming at the beach, etc. On the whole, a good time.

Felt strange revisiting places that meant so much to me all those years ago. Many things have changed in the Venice area. Old buildings and landmarks torn down, a lot of new construction. But many other buildings, houses, stores and cafes remain in place. Very odd to jump into a memory and find it partially there, partially vanished, altered by time, sun and my own physical aging and mental evolution.

I found the entire experience worthwhile. Glad I did it. It was not impossible, nor unduly difficult, as I have for a while now been spending time in those zones while writing *Blue Melody: Tim Buckley Remembered*. So it felt good to see the old places, talk about some of the yesterdays, discuss Tim in relation to his son Jeff, and float comparatively easily in and out of the mind-clouds.

TC

“You Can’t Go Home Again.”

You hit on several major points along the way, one of them being the futility, frustration and disappointment of trying to go back to old neighborhoods, or to previous musical, intellectual, and/or emotional stages in one's life. It just can't happen. The most that can come out of looking back is nostalgia. Listening to the old songs; remembering the old girlfriends and the good times; recalling the hopes and dreams that seemed so possible then, but which never panned out, or panned out only partially at best. At that point in the nostalgic dream, I always snap back. Nostalgia is fun only if it gives us good feelings about the good feelings we had already. When the thought-stream moves on to the disappointment part, well, forget it. As Thomas Wolfe once said, "You can't go home again."

It's not just that you personally may have failed by completing your mission only partially in the past. We all fail. We never fulfill our dreams entirely. We all get some of it done, and of that, we get only some of it done well. And so we're put in a strange position when looking back. What do we choose to focus on? The parts that worked? Or the parts that didn't work, or worked only a little, or the parts that we never even got to because we envisioned more than we were capable of?

Myself, I stopped looking back. Not exactly. I stopped *nourishing* the looking back, because every time I came to the place where the good times stopped. The faults appeared. The failures arose like specters. The missed opportunities and mistakes loomed high in the fog. Terrible disappointments, blah-blah-blah. So looking back became a pain, not a pleasure. Even listening to favorite old songs, or great musicians I loved when I was younger, or looking at photos in an album, or at yellowed letters and photos in the files. I keep all that stuff, but rarely look at them. And when I do, I always wish I hadn't.

As a writer, I often mine the past. Otherwise, herenow works for me.

JS

Dancing In The Afternoon A Thousand Years Ago

Hi, J,

Late at nite here, just thinkin' about you and one of the best times I ever had. You may remember when I dropped over to your Hollywood house on Carlton years ago. It was in the afternoon, a hot summer day, as I recall. I was a little depressed, not drinking, but modestly stoned on Valium. We sat and talked in the living room for a while, then went back to your dance studio behind the house.

You put on some terrific disco music. I don't remember what it was, might have been the Trammps' "Disco Inferno" or Marvin Gaye's "Got to Give it Up." We danced in front of the mirrors together and separately, attuned with each other and with the music and with our inner lives. The music kept pumping and we kept dancing, getting high, intoxicated, liberated.

I relinquished self-consciousness and danced the way I always wanted to, full-out spontaneous movements, letting my body feel the music directly, responding naturally to the rhythms, urgently, energetically, with whatever grace, strength, beauty and emotional intensity I possessed. How good, how very good, it felt, as thoughts and concepts and the cares and problems of the day disappeared. Only body, only feeling, only heat and skin and muscle and emotional urgency remained.

You and I twirled in arcs, spun around, bent low, stretched high, let it all go in the drive and flow of the sweet heat and searing voices. The music pumped, our images mingled in the mirror, personalities dissolved, you/me, dark/light, woman/man, yesterdays gone, herenow in sensuality, drums, guitars, voices, melodies, afternoon heat, physical intensity, torsos swaying, arms spinning, minds empty, vitally alive, relief, release, bodies electric fluid flowing in rhythmic grace.

Dancing in the afternoon with you: that was one of the best moments I ever had, J. It stays with me, beautiful, vivid, intense. That beauty helps me remember what is real and true in you and me and life itself. I treasure it forever.

Afterwards, you said I could have been a good dancer. I had to smile, knowing I was a good dancer already, because I had just danced, not as a trained technician, but as a natural flowering. Body-music is an important part of my nature, although I never had much of a chance to show it off until you and the circumstances of that otherwise bleak and lonely afternoon gave me an opportunity to open my wings and fly in the heat of the day in your studio in front of the mirrors with you, transcending the passing misery of the moment, reconnecting, through dance, with the beauty within you and me and the heart of the rose. Thank you for being there. Thank you for being understanding and compassionate enough to create that expressive context for me.

Moments like that remain between us and give light and love and beauty, humor and laughter to our lives together. It doesn't matter what comes and goes between us. It is all a river, is it not? I never ever see us as yesterday, only as the whole of everything we have always been — the meeting (that electric moment when we passed each other in the doorway of Peggy Seeger's guitar class at Princeton), our days in New Jersey, Mexico, San Francisco, New York, and of course Venice, California.

God, those were grand times, J. It does not matter if details are not remembered. They are with us even now, part and parcel of our flesh and blood and body and mind and spirit even as we speak through these e-mails.

And so you see, no matter what happens, what is said or not said, what is understood or not understood, what is held or relinquished, I care forever about you and your life and how you are. Give anything and everything to whatever or whoever is important to you, celebrate your life and love and good humor, and I remain with you always.

There, in the still place behind the things we see, I whisper love and understanding to you. Everything you do is worthwhile, and all that you feel and give to me and others makes the world around you a better place. Thank you for being in my life. Thank you for being my friend.

Hey, Sweet Pea, keep on keepin' on,

Love, Lee

SL The Dimension That Never Changes

This whole area — identities then and now, life changes, the timeflow, who we are today — is interesting, not only in terms of my personal trip, but in terms of everybody's life journey.

Most interesting of all, there is that dimension within us that never changes. Through all changing stages, all events, all traumas and joys, there is that within us that simply observes. It is pure consciousness. It is rather like an inner light that shines without judgment on all that happens to us and within us. Connecting with that changeless witness deep within is a life-job in itself. That connection, and that witness, that objective listener, is what got me through the Dallas airport difficulties on my recent trip back East to visit my folks. No way I can talk about "witnesses" etc. with very many of the Buckley folks, as Buckley did not live long enough to tap into this zone.

So I whine about that a little, when really I should be expressing my gratitude to the fates that I lived those nine years and put them to good use, and that people still care. I had a terrific time, lots of transcendental joys, lots of insane turbulence, and,

Buckley days in the 60s, now suffers from Parkinson's disease. Esta C., a lovely banjo-playing girl I knew in college in the late-50s, died of cancer. There are others. I see them in my mind, remember them clearly, and find myself troubled.

There is simply nothing to be done. Sounds obvious, doesn't it. But it startles me every time. When I was younger, I thought I would understand such things by now. But the mystery remains. We're born, we dance, aspire, struggle, love, get angry, try again, do whatever we can with friends, lovers, co-workers, laugh, cry — and then die.

What was it all about? What did all that noise and laughter, and those tears, fears, excesses, triumphs and disappointments amount to? And what about the dying, and what about death itself? I find myself moved even when some musician I never personally met but whom I deeply appreciated dies, or some film star, or some writer, poet, dancer, or painter I care about suddenly falls. One day alive, the next day, an obituary in the New York Times. With their loss I lose part of myself.

The strangeness I feel when memories appear as if on their own has to do with my own outlook. Virtually all of my life, I have valued my rather exceptional powers of remembrance, if only because vivid memories serve my writing well. As soon as they are used in my writings, they dim, or even vanish. Rarely have I remembered the past simply to enjoy it, to feel good about this success or that long-ago pleasure. On the contrary, whenever memories surface, they nearly always follow a certain trajectory.

They travel along their arc to the end. And the end varies. Sometimes, a handshake or a hug and a kiss. Sometimes, a simple fading away. Sometimes, the end is painful. Whatever the quality of finality, *things end*, because they're done. One way or another, relationships fulfill their potential.

In so many cases, the relationship goes along fine for a while. Then a gap appears. Disagreement or serious conflict ensues. The relationship ends. Then new

relationships appear. And the cycle repeats itself. Only once in a while does a relationship last for years in fulfilling ways. Old friendships we still enjoy are to be cherished. Differences should be set aside. Agreements nourished. The relationship should be valued in and of itself. No two people mesh completely, without differences. Accept the differences. Don't go into them. Embrace those domains where life, love, laughter, and agreement flourish.

Since memories often end in pain to one degree or another, I have hardly ever spent time indulging them. The moment I see memories coming, I re-locate my mind instantly back into the present. Hence, the strangeness I feel these days.

I now find memories surfacing from the depths of my psyche, bubbling up on their own like spring water. They come without my bidding. I find myself wandering down those hallways, recalling smiles, connections, visual snapshots, and then come the pain-parts where disagreements entered, or the seemingly "sudden" exit into the maw took place. A friend dies. And I mourn, and wonder still again what this thing called "life" is about. Not a new question, to be sure, and certainly a futile question, if only because any answer is purely personal.

Seems to me, the dance is all. That's what it's about, the dance itself. Not any particular results, just the process, the dreams, aspirations, and struggles, hopes, successes, disappointments. It's about *being* the dance. And then it's over. And the rest of the world keeps on dancing. I'm in there someplace, too. My friends and loved ones will continue to die. Then my time will come, and I will be gone, just like everybody else. New people will grow up, dance-dance-dance, then they will disappear. And it goes on forever.

There is no meaning to it, and that is not a bad thing. Meaning is not "out there" in some *place*. Meaning comes from within. We must create it. We bestow it upon our hopes and activities. We live out our life, celebrating or cursing it. We live with gusto and joy, or with resignation, or with daily pain, sometimes with variations of

all three. We generate, aspire, try things out, and evaluate ourselves moment by moment — experience and our interpretation of it creates the meaning.

Those who live in fear, desperately needing guidance, goals, and hope for immortality, create meaning a different way. They imagine gods and goddesses, heavens and hells, rewards and punishments — thereby giving themselves comfort. They create their gods and heavens, then genuflect or prostrate themselves and worship the products of their own fear-based imaginations. It's pathetic, to be sure, but in many ways enviable. Sometimes, I wish I could mask my questions and insights that way.

But those such as myself cannot live a lie. Indeed, by living in the here-now present, I find my joy and meaning in the dance we dance, the love we share, the heartaches we experience, the pain we create for ourselves, the pain inflicted arbitrarily upon us, the wondrous beauty of love, the magnificent forests, the sky, the singing streams, falling snow, gentle rains, the innocence of animals great and small, and especially Sonia's warm smile and gentle touch.

The dance is all. I love it. I weep for it. I am now able to remember my friends and lovers in great detail. And while these recollections seem strange to me, because I have rarely experienced this flow of images to such an extent, I now come to embrace the flow instead of rejecting it. I remember, and smile. I remember, and shed a tear. I remember, and cherish all of my dances and all of the friends, lovers, family, and gentle animals I danced with along the way. What a joy.

The dance is everything. The dance is all. This sweet joy-dance is more than enough to make life worthwhile.