



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Buying An Island

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The year was 1969, and I had a plan. A dream, a Big Idea. I had just moved to Burlington, Vermont, and I was a folksinger. Anti-war, pro civil rights, a card-carrying member of the National Organization for Women, and anti-establishment . . . within reason. Even though I was about to spend a winter singing at ski resorts, actually making a living as a folksinger, I had much bigger things in mind. My plan involved a small island in Lake Champlain, just a little off shore from Burlington. I was going to gather some hand-picked friends and buy that island. My friends included an artist, a teacher, some other folksingers of course, two ministers and an ex-minister turned race track announcer. Living on that island, we would dream, plan, and execute our vision of a better world. The possible irony of secluding ourselves on an island to change society may have escaped us, but we knew we had to focus, without distractions, and . . . change things!

Now . . . if you can relate to what I just said with some empathy . . . well, you might have some experience with the 60's as well.

I was formed, as a child, by the 50's, growing up right here in Burbank and Glendale. At that time, everyone seemed to have more or less the same goals. But then came the 60's, and the times, indeed, were changing! The excitement of freedom and the feeling that our voices would be heard energized our lives as we stumbled blindly but happily into adulthood. That energy certainly pulsed through the L.A. music world, and though I was a part of that community, I was a terribly innocent 18 year old, knowing virtually nothing of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll. My fellow musicians humored me, and seemed to find that innocence kind of quaint.

In 1969, the year of my Big Idea, I had just finished two years working in the inner city of Baltimore, Maryland, doing my alternative service to the military as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. I was raised a good liberal, believing that everyone was equal, everybody mattered, that being a good citizen and doing good work in the world was important. I more or less accepted the idea, promoted by parents and professional educators, that my musical adventures were selfish, and temporary, and I thought my two years of social work might be the beginning of my "real" career. But after those two years, I knew that was not my future. Intoxicated by the 60's, it seemed clear that I was meant for bigger things, to lead the change, not be a foot soldier. I was a pretty good folksinger . . . who knew better what the world needed? Folksingers cared . . . and folksingers believed.

We were all excited about the "live on an island and change the world" plan. Great idea! It continued to be a great idea as we continued to sing, and paint, and teach and preach. But entertaining, which gave me untold joy and satisfaction, and even touched a life here and there, didn't bring in enough money to buy that island. And neither did Al's youth ministry in California or John's painting, or Gary's high school teaching in Indiana, or Chuck's life on the

road. That dream, that plan, that Great Idea . . . was never officially cancelled, but slowly it faded into that place where old, sweet dreams live on.

And so our lives went on. After some very satisfying years in music, I changed to what turned out to be a more practical life as an actor, settling for almost ten years in New York City, where I became a Unitarian Universalist, built a moderately successful acting career with lots of work, great health insurance, and are you kidding me . . . a pension plan? "Pension" was not a word often uttered by folksingers. In New York I met my future wife and headed in the direction of what might be considered a more normal life, defined at least partly by smaller dreams and more footwork. And then back to California, where I continued to flirt with normalcy, with two children and a suburban home, even if I was still an actor.

So why am I telling you this? I didn't buy that island. My friends and I didn't save the world. I didn't become a social worker. I left a music career that sprang from my soul and was driven by passion, and turned to another way of performing, with all of the passion intact but maybe a little less soul. Since I meant to change the world but didn't get around to it, would I have wings to fly me home or would I just have to walk? And why did I come up with the life I've made? How about your life? Is it what you planned? Did you buy your island? I imagine some of you did.

If you knew me as a kid, the phrase "future performer" would not have come to mind. I was smart and nerdy, the "student director" of the ninth grade play, only getting on stage when it turned out that Scott, a popular kid who played a lead, got hives whenever the curtain went up. So there I was, playing, I suppose, a nerdy lead. I started playing and singing folk music in high school because I loved it, and soon found out there was a fringe benefit, namely, finally getting invited to a few parties. With guitar, of course.

But I digress. By the time I arrived in Vermont those many years ago, a mere youth with big dreams, I had already run into some difficult places. As a teenager, I saw my two older brothers begin their struggles with mental illness. Too scared and maybe instinctively a little wise, I didn't want to be trapped by the family drama and at 20 years old I moved away. All the way across the country to the other coast. But of course I couldn't escape the sadness, or the fear, or the reality. For years, if the phone rang and it was home calling, my heart beat a little faster. Sometimes a lot faster after the call. In my 20's I wrote a song with the lines, "Life is like a letter sent from my hometown. I never know what's in it, but I never turn it down." That was the reality. I couldn't turn it down.

My brother Mike was three years older than I was. He was a genius, and a sweet, gentle person. He taught himself chemistry in 8th grade and could build a geodesic dome out of a piece of cardboard as he tried to explain to his mostly uninterested younger brother why Bucky Fuller's ideas were so perfect. But as a paranoid schizophrenic, he lived way inside that brilliant mind, with little concern for society's norms. In his 20's, he and his friends invented chemical combinations and ingested them to see what would happen. In and out of institutions, surviving multiple suicide attempts, he died of a brain tumor at the age of 38.

My oldest brother, Ralph, brilliant, talented and accomplished as an artist and a science student in his teenage years, finally took his own life this past November. I say finally, because it seemed a sure bet that life would take him much sooner. At 74, along with a long list of physical ailments, he had over 50 years of pain and frustration, despair, and the debilitating effects of obsessive compulsive disorder while the rest of the family continued to answer the phone with great trepidation. But here's the other side. For many of those years, on a day to day basis, he was happy; he was satisfied to move just a step at a time, to survive another day. His optimism and determination, though alternating with hopelessness, kept him alive against all odds to the age of 74. He never gave up on his early ambitions, but he didn't have the emotional means to achieve them, so he just kept pushing them off farther down the line. Yesterday was wasted, today was a struggle, but tomorrow . . . ? Well, tomorrow would be better, and that kept him going.

Don't we all do that? Keep going the best we can? We put one foot in front of the other, a hundred times, a thousand times, a million times, and at the end we have made a life. My mom was like that, surviving a day at a time, doing whatever the family needed. In her youth, she loved to dance. Ultimately, she spent much of her life trying to absorb the brunt of my brothers' pain and fury so that my sister and I would be spared as much as possible. She finally wore out at 87. Less than year before she died, she asked, "I'm so tired. Is it okay if I don't go on much longer?" She had my permission.

My life, and maybe yours, has had thrilling highs, tough lows, but mostly in-betweens. For our good ideas and inspired dreams, we only occasionally play those out, flying high in our success. If we're lucky, we come down easy, with appreciation for our triumphs, tolerance for our failures, and the grace to go back and forth between the two. Sometimes we fall, really fall, and have to rebuild our lives from places that are difficult and seem hopeless. But for most of us, I imagine, the spaces between those peaks and valleys, between the dreams and the dirt, are where we spend 99% of our lives. We live mostly on smaller rewards and joys, we put up with the annoying bumps in the road, and as long as we keep ourselves going, we write our own stories in simple terms. Let someone else write the Great American Novel and let someone else live the Great American Life.

My brother Ralph was in a coma for a couple of days before dying, and in his last moments, a nurse spoke to my sister in Colorado on the phone. The nurse said, "He's failing fast. Don't try to get here, you won't make it in time. We're here for him, and we'd be glad to read to him from the Bible if you'd like." My sister, thinking of her brother who usually considered religion evil, in a massive stroke of understatement said "The Bible wouldn't be his choice . . . but he really loves Bob Dylan." They played *Knock Knock Knockin' on Heaven's Door*, and *Girl From the North Country*, and Ralph died as Dylan sang. Having desperately wanted, but never experienced the love of a partner, I expect it was *Girl From the North Country* that he took with him.

My idea of heaven and hell is that in our final moments, whether or not anyone is reading the bible or playing Bob Dylan, we give our own lives thumbs up or thumbs down. Who better to judge? But what will we judge ourselves on . . . the times we flew? The times we didn't fall? The times we took a few more steps and found our goal was closer than we thought? How about the good intentions that turned islands into magic . . . and then to faded dreams? "Is a hero's blood more righteous than a hobo's sip of wine?"

My sister Ellen, 5 years younger than I am, is a talented, wonderful singer, songwriter and performer, and a warm, loving, human being. Many of you know her from her concerts and from her singing right here in our worship service. We became close in our teenage years, huddling, confused and afraid, in the shadows cast by the family's pain, and have been close ever since. Without a doubt, she has her struggles. But she works through them, or maybe with them, with a determined optimism, even when something inside her is really afraid, or doubtful, or overwhelmed. In return, she's loved and emotionally supported by the many, many people who know a brave and caring soul when they see one. She is a gift in my life, and in so many others.

So - who's left . . . my dad. My dad was a nice man. Everyone said so. And a very unfulfilled one. Growing up in the depression and leaving college too early because the money ran out, he worked in a respectable but unchallenging career until he developed heart disease in his 50's and died at 64. I know he didn't live his dreams, but sadly, I don't know what they were. He spent way too much time at his job, escaping the challenges of four kids and a cool marriage. I never had that bonding time with him, when I'd tell him my dreams and he'd share his, and we'd become pals. How I envy men who had - or have - that kind of time with their fathers.

As my dad was nearing the end of his life, I was living in Colorado. I came back to see him in the hospital. He was, in those last weeks, in and out of reality. The conversation was pretty random, and he would address me variously as his brother, or his sister or a friend, setting the scene with other characters appropriate to whoever I was in his mind at the moment. But finally it was time to go. He chuckled, and said, "Someday, Steven, we'll fly over the Mediterranean at 10,000 feet and talk about all of this." With his words, I sensed an acknowledgment of the relationship we never had, his confession, if you will, and his forgiveness of the failings that we both felt. What I heard was, "I did what I could. I meant well. I know you did, too. It's okay." I was back in Colorado when he died about a week later.

A few minutes ago, Jim Curry sang the words of a somewhat reclusive philosopher and poet, Joe Henry, put to music by John Denver.

Music and lyrics like those help me feel the majesty, the power, and the ultimate optimism of the universe. I don't know why it is or what it is, but I know it when I feel it. When my soul soars with music like that, I feel like I'm part of it all - whatever it all may be. The hope and the despair, the pain and the love . . . it's all in there, all part of being alive.

I have always felt there's something bigger than I am, though not separate. It's what tells me that dreams can be goals, that pain can end and love can prevail. Spirit seems to describe it. Although I don't usually use the word God, to me it's the same thing. "It lives within each part and is the whole." That works for me. But I don't think that either of my brothers, nor my mom, nor my dad, had much use for the concept at all. But without the promise of a better afterlife, or the comforting vocabulary of religion, they had plans, they dreamed of something better, they cared, they were good people, and they wanted to contribute to a saner world. Sometimes, some days, they felt some success, some hope, some reason to go on and do it again another day. Yet looking from the outside, their lives seemed to end in such sadness, such pain, leaving just the dust of broken dreams.

What did *they* feel as they left this life? Thumbs up or thumbs down? I don't know. We dream, we fly, we doubt, we fail. We remember the times we flew, I'm sure. We should. But don't the other times count as well, when our major accomplishment was doing the best we could, taking one more difficult step, to get back to a place where we COULD dream?

If, someday, I find myself flying over the Mediterranean at 10,000 feet talking to my dad about all of this, maybe I'll look out the window, and notice a little island. I'll turn to my dad, and say, "Hey, look down there! See that island? I don't think I ever told you this, but a long time ago, when I was maybe 24, I was going to buy a little island like that in Vermont, and . . . well, it sounds a little silly now I know, but I was going to change the world. It was a great dream. So Dad . . . when you were 24, what were your dreams?"