

Relating to family and friends (Part 1)

These are the poems which connect to family and close friends. The compositions range from thoughts of profound love, to wonderment about the people I have come to know, through to dislike or distaste for a certain situation or relationship. These are poems which are full of feeling, having been penned on the spur and motivated by those inner most thoughts that all of us are prone to encounter from time to time.

We begin with two poems, written many years apart, and many miles apart also, but both relating a profound love for my own children and the wonder that is life itself.

A child is born

*A child has emerged
The world to view,
A joy to behold,
That shared is ten-fold.*

*Mother and foetus have parted,
And with parting has come
A wondrous admiration
Immersed in incomprehension.*

*For who are we to know
This life and all it holds,
When our own boasts of invention
Are minutely insignificant
Beside this beauty that is life.*

*All the money, all the machines,
All else is lost, beside this creation
That is joy,
That is peace,
That is love.*

*A child is born
And that is hope itself.*

For Kate Louise
Adelaide, 12.08.1986

A child is born (above) This early composition came into my thoughts as I watched the birth of my firstborn daughter, Kate, in Australia. I guess that many people are affected in a similar way: to see a child born can engender incredible feelings of awe, unlike anything else. And in this case those terms ‘incredible’ and ‘awe’ are used literally, not as the throw-away words they tend to be. Judged in comparison to that which humans strive to achieve the miracle of birth is so much more significant and sends a message of hope to the world.

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Suddenly it was Spring (below) was penned in early 2004, during one of many visits to Italy. It was a magical day in April, as I clambered with my 12-year-old daughter Alice, away from the busy streets of Assisi, up to the walkway which ran alongside the rocca (castle) walls. We walked for a short while, but then decided to sit on the lush green grass.

Suddenly it was Spring!

*Way up beyond the town,
Far from the cobbled streets,
A moment in time to hold.*

*We sat there, Alice and I,
Looking down on the ochre rooves,
Breathing the newborn air.
Released from the tourist throng
It seemed like a new world on view,
In the late afternoon sun.*

*Beneath the majestic rocca
We scanned the Umbrian plain,
Spread out from Assisi town.
I chewed on green clover leaves,
Alice picked flowers and seeds –
To throw on her dozing dad.*

*The clock on the quarter hour,
The bird song from everywhere.
Suddenly, it was Spring!*

Assisi, Umbria, Italy
April 4th, 2004

I recall looking out, as far as one could see, across the Umbrian plain; the mood of the moment intensified by the fact that we had just escaped from a long English winter. It was wonderful to lie back on the uncut lawn, under a cotton wool sky, listening to birds chirping in the background. The regular chime from the Assisi town clock, as I dozed in the afternoon sun, was the perfect accompaniment for this unforgettable moment.

The innocence of childhood. What a joy it is to be with children. Their company allows one to ride on a swing, make sandcastles on the beach, and lie on the grass in the afternoon sun: acts that often disappear with the guilt of adulthood. I live in dismay for the suffering of so many innocent children, at the hands of guilty, misguided adults.

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Harmony worth holding

*Over, almost before it began:
Missed opportunities squandered.
But then,
They found with each other
A common chord,
As fish glide with each other
In fragments of time:
This way and that,
Linked then dispersed.
A moment together,
Then lost to this Earth.*

*They couldn't see how close they had come
Till looking back through time,
From afar:
Their time spent together,
A wondrous thing.
Walking and talking,
Feeling as one:
Grasping the moment,
But afraid to prolong.
Two beings in time,
A chord, not a song.*

After Singapore
1996

Harmony worth holding (above) is a personal favourite because I feel it encapsulates so much meaning and shade in just a few flowing lines. The prose version might take several pages, and even then, could miss some of the feeling that the poem conveys.

As an itinerant teacher in Singapore I lived for several months in 'Waffles', a backpacker's haven, not far from the centre. Whilst there I gradually got to know a young German girl - a deep-sea diver by profession - who had similar interests to me. We would often go out together, to an exhibition or a concert, or just for a picnic in the park. There was an attraction between us of course, but the relationship was purely platonic; the first time we kissed was when I said goodbye to her at Changi airport, as she departed for Sulawesi. The poem asks the question: 'what if either one of us had stepped across the line?'.
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My Brother. No Less!

*In the end it came so easily,
Connecting the threads after fifty-six year.
Just dropped from the sky,
As I had done on that very same day,
Home from India.*

*The article read 'Stranger on a Train',
As we had been: strangers in the same land.
Half-brothers, no less,
Separated by the Victorian ethics
Of a bygone era.*

*It was an intriguing piece of journalism
That re-worked the memories of post-war times,
In a line of travel,
Spearing out from Cyprus, through Istanbul,
And back to England.*

*But it wasn't the story that caught my eye,
It was the name and detailed identity card,
And amazingly too,
A map that retraced my airborne journey
Back from India.*

*So there it was: my brother's name,
Known to me for some twenty-odd years.
Handed out on a plate
Or national newspaper, to be more precise,
But brother, no less.*

*A few phone calls later and I
Was speaking to this female voice that said
"Yes, I know him quite well".
Turned out to be a somewhat frivolous line
For her partner in life.*

*And then he called, and we met
In a pub across from The Common,
Over beer and cigarettes.
Filling the gaps in those fifty-six years:
One long gap in truth.*

*Something that seemed so far out of reach
Was all of a sudden so real and alive;
Feels almost surreal at times,
Just showing how life can leap forward
To inhabit the unknown.*

London
30.08.2003

My brother. No less! (above) tells the miraculous (and for me, very special) story of finding my half brother after many long years of not knowing each other. I had been orphaned within a loving family, a claim to fame perhaps not so unusual in continuing Victorian times. But I knew from the 1980s that my late father (whom I never met) had a son, about nine years my senior. I tried for some time to find him but was unsuccessful.

Twenty years later, returning on a night-time flight from India, I noticed the path the plane took, over cities such as Istanbul, Frankfurt, and Paris. At home the next morning I was shown an article in *The Weekend Independent*. The piece included a map showing a track across Europe that was similar to my journey the night before. At the top was the writer's name and just below that an old identity card: he had been de-mobbed in Cyprus, before travelling overland back to Britain. The article was laid out in the form of a very clear signpost to me, that this was the brother I had known about for more than twenty years.

The next week in London, after making contact through the newspaper, we met in a pub on Clapham. Later that day ... a little past tipsy ... he took me home to meet his wife, who it transpired was the lady I had spoken to earlier in the day at *The Independent*

I still marvel at the similarity of those pathways across Europe ... more than forty years apart. Lucky I guess, that I subscribed to *The Independent*.

How would you feel?

*My life stretches back for fifty-plus years,
To the time when I stood centre-front
Of a large family gathering,
Assembled to toast
The marriage of my erstwhile mum.*

*She'd fallen in love with a tall Aussie guy
Who was to whisk her away from the throng,
And leave me believing
My mother to be,
The grand-mum who stood in her place.*

Fast-forward twenty-three years:

*I stared at the scrap of paper,
With its typewritten words
And hand-written script
On dotted black lines.
Such a small piece of paper,
To hold the truth of my life.*

*How would you feel?
Twenty-six years old
And able to learn the truth
That most people know
When they begin to walk!*

*How would you feel?
Knowing you've been told
A pack of lies for years,
Only to protect
Your mother from her sin!*

*How would you feel?
You just don't fit the mold,
Relations turned upside down,
And history's confined
To only half the truth!*

How would you feel? (above) is not such a happy poem; it conveys feelings of bitterness towards my mother and her family that welled up in the 1970s, after finding out the true facts of my own birth (more than 20 years earlier). The truth came to me in the form of an extract from my birth certificate sent (on request) from London by the English authority that oversees such things.

After a few years of resentment, my dark moods subsided, only to re-surface after unearthing my half-brother in 2003 (see *My Brother. No Less!* above). This poem came a couple of years after that, showing quite clearly the degree of animosity that lingered on. It was the deceit which hurt the most: that the people who had gained my most intimate trust had deceived me completely. And for me, like all others who don't know all the details of their biological parents, a very practical aspect emerges related to inadequate knowledge of medical history and other aspects which might impact on later life.

Both my mother and my half brother have died since the two poems above were written. Looking back on it all, I now feel we don't have time to dwell on such minutia of situation in our relatively short time on Earth. I should have been more forthright with my mother and could have held my brother closer, for the short time we were together.

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