

# I Don't Have Time . . .

Thomas Merton Brightman

My family of origin and I live in quite different realities. My recollections and theirs are separated by each of our needs which seem unfathomable to the other. Yet we are bonded by biology and struggle to relate in reasonable ways. Conflict and unexpressed emotions are an ongoing family legacy. The really important things seldom get said and when they do come out they are almost never accepted.

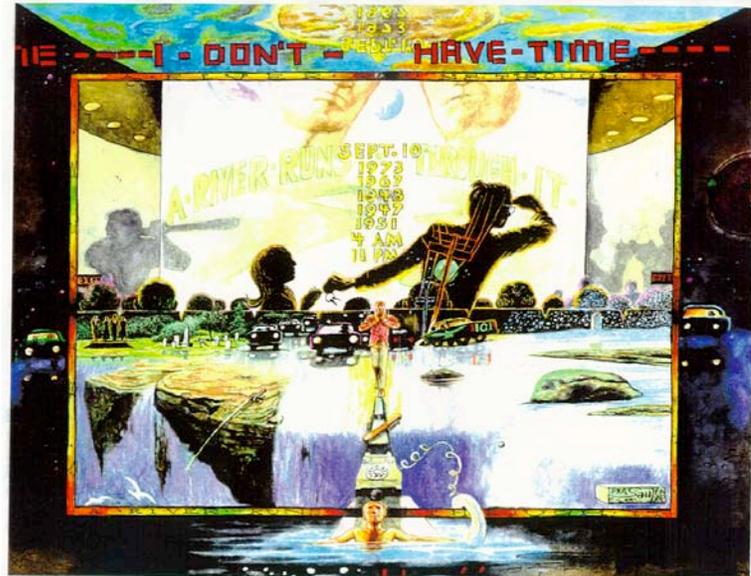
As “acting out” children, we took out upon each other what we could find no relief from with a parent.

Things were dealt with indirectly except for the rage that eventually exploded from the suppression. These early learnings shaped much of my world view and the most painful lessons are still unearthed in charged family situations.

Twenty-five years ago, my world was shattered in a way quite unlike anything before or since. Remnant feelings still reverberate. I recently watched the film, set in Montana, “A River Runs through It.” I had just returned from Missoula, Montana. After years of day dreams, I finally fly-fished a Montana stream. The evening began with my expectations of movie scenes bringing forth pleasant memories of this trip. What came forth was psychodrama.

At the end of the movie, my date saw me dripping tears and shaking. She said, “That’s the story of you and your brother, isn’t it?” Those words pushed me beyond the ability to restrain and my feelings mushroomed. I handed her the car keys and rapidly left the theatre. Despite years of work, my grieving was not complete. As the dots of the movie plot progressed, I easily connected them with the lines of my own life experience. I needed to quickly get to a safe place to rock and sob.

I was born in 1943, my brother in 1947 and my sister in 1951. There were so many years between my sister and me that we see the world quite differently. My brother and I fought a lot. One day he hit me in the head with a baseball bat. I lay there as if I were dead so that he would not hit me again. I allowed enough time for his temper to subside. He had his own ways of coping.



Despite the upset, competition and acting out, alliances formed among the children – sometimes against the parents, sometimes against each other. The alliances were almost always against someone or something. Yet, a strange sort of love also helped to close the spaces of dysfunction. In the heat of unfolding life, the true depth of attachments was beyond my comprehension.

One evening, in upstate New York, my brother and I were in the same village. I was visiting from Pennsylvania. We talked and did a couple things together. Then, just before I returned to Pittsburgh, he said to me: “Let’s go out and have a drink together.” My reply: “Not now, I don’t have time. We’ll do it another time.” O.K.!

I was sound asleep. It was four o’clock in the morning. The phone rang. Groggy, I picked it up. It was my uncle calling. In his usual diplomatic way he said, “Pinky’s dead.” “What!” “Pink is dead. He was killed tonight in his car.” “Wait a minute, what do you mean . . . he’s dead?” “Yes!”

His name was Ronald. An aunt called him “Pinky” because of his red hair. The name stuck until he grew to over six feet and informed his friends that his name was Ron. He was in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Screaming Eagles, training complete, Nam orders in hand. The year was 1967. For years, I had dreams about losing Ron, but most were related to Viet Nam. Many of his unit did die in Hue. Now, on the eve of his departure, he was gone. He didn’t die there but here in a late night collision with a telephone pole, his passenger unharmed.

My emotional outburst woke up my wife and so began an imprinting experience that has defined much of my remaining life. There was not going to be “another time.” It doesn’t take much imagination for you to surmise what I did every time someone in my future asked for . . . some time.

So into my first-born syndrome I stepped. How would I tell my parents that their other son was dead? Not willing to wake them as I had been awakened, I waited. The next day I called their local Red Cross and police department. My father worked for the city. I told them what I was about to tell my parents and they agreed to stand by.

My sister answered the phone. I gave her a phone number and asked her to call that number if she felt mother or dad needed support after I talked to them. I refused her curiosity and asked her just to call the number and have my father come to the phone.

For the first time in my life experience, I heard my father cry. Ron was my father’s favorite child. Quite a statement for a man who wanted no children. Then my alarmed mother took the phone and I told her. Then my frightened sister took the phone back I told her.

By this time, I was fully into responsible child. I was suppressing survivor guilt and feeling responsible for everything, including his death. I should have been there to help. It should have been me. I should have taken more time with him. I was asking God to trade places, taking me and leaving him. I wished for a mistaken identity. For years my dreams produced his miraculous return to life from MIA, prison camp, etc.

I packed my finest suit, my best shoes, a new shirt, tie, socks, etc., everything I thought would provide for my brother's burial. I called relatives in New York, where he had died, to ask questions and get information for the part of me that did not accept that he was dead. Then, into my car I leapt and drove off to New York. My parents were in Tennessee and I knew much would need to be done before they could get to New York.

Despite my insistence to see his body, they refused me. I was not willing to believe his death without seeing him. I played the family hero role with unconscious competence. I thought of and did the things everyone else was too scattered to do. I suppressed supremely. Then, my parents arrived. At first I held it together. Then, I began to cry and went upstairs to bed where I was left to sob and stutter. I hurt so that I couldn't talk. In order for others to deal with my pain, they would have had to deal with their own. So I was left alone. I came around by the next day.

Then, at the funeral, when his casket was opened for the last time, I began to shake again. However, I insisted on being a pallbearer. After the burial, I wandered in the cemetery weaving between tombstones until I collapsed at the foot of a tree and cried myself inside out, alone, as most adult children do.

When I could, I walked back to the Brightman homestead and listened to the trite remarks at the funeral gathering until I could leave. One of many insensitive relatives commented: "It's a shame to see Ron buried in a suit. He didn't like suits. It didn't look like him. He should have been buried in his military uniform." My first reaction was to feel wrong and ashamed for not thinking of that myself. Oh, how the legacy of a shame bound family system respects no boundary. One of the messages is that you'll never be loved because you'll never get it right. I could only feel the cold and see the snowflakes that were coming to rest on my fallen brother's grave. I wanted him to be warm. I wanted these people to go away.

Until 1980, my brother's name was never mentioned. In family fashion he disappeared. Sometimes, apart from my parents, my sister and I would touch the subject lightly. A prison of silence cloaked the subject. It was 1990 before my father told me that he was responsible for the suppression. He said he had told my mother that he could not bear to discuss it. My mother isolated herself with total immersion into her seamstress business. On her wall hangs a quotation: "Work your grief into art and it is gone." I know the pain of a brother. I can only imagine the pain of a mother.

My own suppression continued until a cold, rainy September night in 1973. I was playing cards with my wife and another couple. It was approaching eleven o'clock. The date was September 10<sup>th</sup>, my brother's birthday. Yet that had not come to mind – at least consciously. Then the newscaster announced the date, September 10<sup>th</sup>. I did not get the connection of the birth date bypassing my defenses and triggering the grief until later when I reconstructed the events.

I startled everyone. I began to cry, stood up, bolted toward a door, knocking down those who tried to stop me. I was overwhelmed with grief. I wandered off into the dark, the cold and the rain with only a shirt and trousers. They began a search for me. They split up and went in different directions. When I was found, I was wandering on the main highway in front of

oncoming traffic. I was crying, incoherent, babbling about my brother. I was not consciously trying to commit suicide; I was simply and utterly in so much pain from repressed grief that I could no longer reason. I had to split from the pain to survive. In the split I could have died. This is one reason that I tell Twelve Step audiences that alcohol and drugs are not the only addictions that kill.

Once they brought my wife to me, she was able to connect the events in terms of my brother's death when she heard me stutter his name. She took me home, bathed me and put me to bed. With this volcanic episode past, the mountain of grief returned to slumber. The release saved my life, but more permanent relief was to require much conscious effort. What followed was years of experiential workshops and therapy to learn to feel and express emotions in safe non-judgmental places.

One of the deep subterranean rivers that runs through my life had broken to the surface, swept me away in violent rapids, but fortunately dropped me into a quiet pool rather than send me over the falls into the undertows that drown. God wasn't finished with me yet. I've used these events to focus on living and spontaneous expression of my inner reality. Censoring powerful emotions can be a form of Russian roulette.