

## A Time to Weep and a Time to Laugh

By

Daniel E. White May 12, 2025

Lara Nelson’s three daughters are quizzing her about her life as an actress when she was in her 20s. Ann Patchett’s narrator in her book, *Tom Lake*, had connected in her high school years with Emily, the lead character in Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*. Lara had been able to capitalize on her being the perfect Emily in a community playhouse production to be cast, by a producer who saw her perform, in a Hollywood movie and as Emily again in a prestigious summer stock theater company in Michigan, at Tom Lake.

Never wholly committed to the idea of a lifetime as an actress, Lara still relished the freedom her success as Emily at Tom Lake and in the movie had provided her. In Michigan, she met, dated, and fell in love with a man who went on from Tom Lake to a career of stardom in movies and television. Both her future as an actress and the relationship with the actor crashed the day she tore her Achilles tendon playing tennis with the actor’s brother.

The evening she gets back to Tom Lake from the hospital, she goes to that night’s production of *Our Town* to see her understudy play Emily, noting that, “you don’t see the play when you are in it.” About that actress’s performance, Lara says “When she [Emily] went back to her mother’s kitchen, I cried like I had never seen the play before. I cried because she [her understudy] was that good. I cried because I would never play Emily again. I cried because I had loved that world so much.”

The second time I read those lines, it had to be through tears.

How many times have I left a world that I had loved and found fulfilling to venture into something new? How many times, People of a Certain Age, have you?

“To every season, turn, turn, turn, there is a season, turn, turn, turn, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” On October 1, 1965, the Byrds released, as a single, the title track from their album, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, released two months later. The single rose to be number one on the Billboard 100. King Solomon would have been pleased.

Solomon is credited with authorship of *The Book of Ecclesiastes* in the Old Testament. It was the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, verses 1-8, that inspired Pete Seeger to write “Turn, Turn, Turn” about 2900 years later. Verse 4 reads: “A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance.” Lara’s time to weep was the night she realized that something she loved had ended.

Of course, she is talking about those times to her three grown daughters who have been raised in a loving and stable family on a cherry farm that, though requiring much work, still provides well for the Nelson family. At the play that night in Tom Lake, Lara could not know the future. Now she cannot imagine living a life other than her current one. Now she was in the “time to laugh” and the “time to dance.”

Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers, once noted that “often when you think you’re at the end of something, you’re at the beginning of something else.” Certainly, Lara was. Just as surely, I have been there as well. Haven’t you?

I remember times as a child being mournful as our family moved to a new pastorate for Dad, my leaving good friends a consequence. I remember wanting to back out of a paid-for circumnavigation of the world in college, resisting the idea of leaving my college and my sweetheart for such a trivial thing as visiting 16 different nations. I remember my momentary but heartfelt sadness at leaving at least four different jobs in which I felt comfortable and had success for the unknown of something new, generally with a tear or two in my eyes. Each time, I was leaving friends as well as a job.

At such times, I was not paying attention to King Solomon, Pete Seeger or the Byrds. The weeping and mourning were real to me, even if short-lived, just as they were to Lara.

Scholars believe that Solomon was near the end of his life, writing around 935 B.C. That makes sense to me. Just as Lara notes that “you don’t see the play when you’re in it,” developing the wisdom implicit in what Solomon wrote, Seeger adapted, and the Byrds sang about likely depends upon one’s having a lifetime of experience with life’s vicissitudes.

I wonder if the other birds, the ones that fly, can teach us something here. They probably don’t “see the play when they are in it.” Their seasons are Nature’s seasons, and they live lives according to those seasons.

Solomon’s “times” concluded with “A time to love, and a time to hate; A time for war, and a time for peace.” Seeger dropped the time for war. His last line is “A time for peace, I swear it’s not too late.” Solomon, in his age, was a realist: Seeger, writing in the 1960s, the optimist. Both recognized that “to everything there is a season.”

I find reassurance in that thought.

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