

TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Rich Mullins

AN ARROW POINTING TO HEAVEN

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FOREWORD BY BRENNAN MANNING



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First Family

UNDERSTANDING HIS ROOTS

*Never picture perfect
Just a plain man and his wife
Who somehow knew the value
Of hard work good love and real life*

Think, for a moment, about your lineage. Try to imagine your ancestors, at least two or three generations back. See if you can picture them. What did they look like, where did they live, and what did they do? Do you think it is possible that they ever dreamed of your existence one day in the future? What did they hope for, dream about? What hurt them? Did they ever fall in love, know heartache, savor joy?

Thinking about these questions forces us to realize that our ancestors were real people. A part of Rich's spiritual journey, and one that had a great effect on him, was the awareness of his own legacy. He was keenly interested in the coming to America of his great-great-grandparents, in his Irish/English/French heritage, and in his father's Appalachian upbringing.

In an interview Rich related:

A few generations back, there were twin brothers who were orphans in France. As young teenagers eager to find a better life, they

stowed away on a ship bound for America. One of them was my great-great-grandfather. I remember the first time I flew into New York and saw the Statue of Liberty. I thought of those twins, my ancestors, both of them fifteen or sixteen years old, standing there on Ellis Island. They had come to begin a new life. They didn't even know the language. And I wondered what it felt like to them, years later, when they were eighty years old, with grandchildren, knowing that the dream of a better life had come true.

I remember, too, the first time I ever saw the Lincoln Memorial. I probably spent three or four hours sitting on the steps before I even went in to read the speeches. I'm not particularly patriotic, but that experience was just overwhelming. I don't know that the United States is "God's Country," but the church has been so strong here, and because of its influence, we hold life to be sacred and we believe that individuals have dignity. This is part of our legacy. I thought of this when I stood before the Lincoln Memorial, and when I saw the Statue of Liberty for the first time. Imagine the millions of people who have fled to America because of those very ideals. Somewhere back in my ancestry, from several different directions, people came to a country that was totally new. If any of them had not done that, I never would have happened. At least, I would not be who I have become.¹

PURSUING OUR LEGACY

One of the first things we learn as children is our name. Our surname and our mother's maiden name become the dots through which we connect our past, as we discover the names and dates, births and deaths of those who went before us and somehow led to our being. But the people who form the branches of our family tree are more than names. Rich became interested in who they were, what they dreamed about, how they lived, and what they loved.

We carry in us the genes of a thousand men and women long gone. For many of us in America, those thousands of people came from other

parts of the world. Even as a child Rich wanted to hear about these people. He said, “From when I was real little, I heard stories about people from Holland, people from Ireland, people from France, wherever our family came from.”²

Some of us trace our roots hoping that one of our ancestors was a king or a queen or a famous hero. Much of the quest is fueled by pride, but for Rich the journey to find out where he came from actually had the opposite effect:

What I discovered is, heritage doesn’t puff you up with pride. It really humbles you. If you look at the lives of the people you have come from you kind of go, “If they had married anyone else, if they had moved anywhere else, if their lives had been one iota different, I wouldn’t be here.” And so you have, not a big debt, not a crushing debt to pay, but you are part of an ongoing thing. You are not alone in the world. You are part of an ensemble.³

Rich discovered that his own life was the product of an amazing process of endless decisions made over countless centuries. If one of our ancestors had married a different person or died before giving birth to the next branch of the tree, we would not be here. This was a startling insight for Rich.

THE SERENDIPITY OF LIFE

Rich grew up in a small town near Richmond, Indiana. Even the way his family ended up there was, for Rich, a serendipitous circumstance, an accident that would forever affect his life. He told the story this way:

My dad grew up back and forth between Kentucky and Virginia because his father was a coal miner. And when my dad was fourteen my grandpa came home and told my grandma to load up the truck ‘cause they were gonna move. And when they took off they were going the wrong way—she just assumed they were going back to Virginia—and they were headed somewhere else. So my grandma said, “John, where in the world are we going?” And my grandpa

said, “Well, Rose, we’re going to Detroit.” And she said, “Why in the world are we going to Detroit?” And he said, “Because I don’t want my boys to grow up to be coal miners.” And so they got as far as Indiana and ran out of gas—and that’s how I got here.⁴

Not only are we dependent on whom our ancestors chose to marry; even the place we call home could depend on something as simple as how full a tank of gas was. The whole process was, for Rich, mystifying and humbling. Somehow, in the midst of the myriad decisions, God orchestrates our coming to be. Before the foundations of the earth were laid, the Scriptures tell us, God foreknew our existence, even through the happenstance of human choice (Eph. 1:4–5).

What is passed down to us determines much about our lives. Rich’s maternal great-grandfather was a gifted man who was educated to be a doctor. But a series of events led him down a path into alcoholism. Unable to function as a doctor, he worked at different jobs but sometimes disappeared for weeks at a time, leaving his oldest son (Rich’s grandfather) to take care of his family.

Commenting on this, Rich said in an interview, “A legacy is something that is passed on to you that you have no control over. I had no say in that my great-grandpa was an alcoholic. I had no say in the fact that my grandpa and grandma moved from Kentucky to Indiana. . . . There are all kinds of things that are pushed on us and we have no say over, and they shape the way we see everything.”⁵

Despite our insistence that we are self-made men and women, we are dependent creatures. We like to think that we determine our destiny, but in reality we have very little to do with it. The people who raise us, our parents and our older siblings and our extended family, have tremendous influence on who we become.

The Bible is full of genealogies. Though we may find them dull, dry reading, they are there for a reason. The writers knew something we easily forget: that we are a part of an ongoing process, that we are dependent on others for our existence, and that our identity is related to

genealogy. The blood of our great-great-grandparents flows through our veins, and a part of them continues on in us.

MOM AND DAD

No one influences our lives as much as our parents. Rich was born Richard Wayne Mullins on October 21, 1955, to John and Neva Mullins in a small town in Indiana, near Richmond. His family called him Wayne. Though his first name was Richard, he went by the name Wayne until he went to college. Friends there called him Richard. When he began his music career, he became simply Rich. He insisted, though, throughout his life, that his family still call him Wayne. On one visit home a niece greeted him by saying, “Hi, Uncle Rich,” and he gently reprimanded her, saying, “When I am with you, my name is Wayne.” It was his way of guarding his family identity and staying connected to his roots.

Neva Mullins is a quiet woman with a reputation for godliness. She comes from a long line of Quakers, a denomination that focuses on silence, simplicity, and nonviolence. Rich’s father, John Mullins, who died in the spring of 1991, was well known for his hard work and honesty. Having grown up the son of an Appalachian coal miner, he learned quickly that life is difficult and not kind to the fainthearted. He was raised in the Christian church, a movement that emphasizes the authority of the Bible, hymn singing, and weekly Communion.

Rich had a very close relationship with his mother. In her he saw many of the ideals he longed for. She was kind and nurturing, and though very intelligent, she was not outspoken and rarely raised her voice or spoke an unkind word. Rich recalled how his mother was friendly toward an eccentric woman. “You know, I have a great mom. It is just wild that this woman and my mom are friends. I asked, ‘Do you ever feel weird around her?’ and my mom said, ‘Yeah, sure I do!’ But here’s the deal: No one was ever won into the kingdom of God through snobbery. We come to know Christ through love. I really believe that.”⁶

His mother’s love won Rich into the kingdom as well. In fact, all of the Mullins siblings attest to the power of Neva’s faith and commitment in

their lives. Rich's sister Debbie Garrett says, "She gave me birth, but she also gave me life, life with God." Neva's gentleness and desire to be holy were two qualities that dramatically influenced Rich.

John Mullins worked with his hands, first as a tool and dye maker, then spending the latter part of his career running a nursery. Rich admired his father, who grew up in difficult circumstances, and was curious about his dad's Appalachian upbringing. He labored to understand this man who was, on the surface, very different from him. Rich said:

My dad was an Appalachian, which is a very polite way to say that he was a hillbilly, and in junior high I was always embarrassed about my dad. He never dressed right, he never had a suit that fit him, and always had dirt or grease under his fingernails. In my junior year of high school we went to a funeral in Kentucky where my dad had grown up. My dad, who wasn't a sentimental, gushy kind of guy, pulled off the road. We walked around for a bit, and my dad said, "This is all changed. Somewhere out here there was a swimming hole and a vine we used to swing out over the water on." And I suddenly realized that my dad had been a kid once. At the time the most convicting verse in the Bible was "Honor your father and mother." And I realize now that that verse means that if you cannot honor your father and mother then you can't honor anybody. Until you come to terms with your heritage you'll never be at peace with yourself. That was a real breakthrough moment for me. So, what I needed to do was come to understand the Appalachian life, so that I could know more about my father, who had been a stranger to me all my life.⁷

As a way to gain understanding of his father's Appalachian heritage, Rich purchased a hammered dulcimer and quickly learned how to play it. In the years to come, that instrument became a key part of much of his music.

It is a strange awakening to discover that our parents were once children, that they were lonely and afraid and unsure of themselves. It helped Rich to realize that much of what he could not understand about his father

could be explained by looking at where he came from. It is a healthy moment in our lives when we realize that our parents are human beings.

Rich appreciated his father's work ethic and especially his unpretentiousness: "My dad was very honest about who he was [and] . . . his weaknesses and strengths. He never pretended to be something he wasn't."⁸ Most who knew Rich agree that if he had one outstanding quality, it was honesty. Sometimes Rich was painfully blunt. He had a kind of courage that allowed him to be vulnerable. This quality that he saw in his father, perhaps more than any other, became a very real part of Rich.

After they discovered Rich's love for music and obvious gifts, his father was the first to insist that he receive music lessons, and he worked hard to pay for them. His mother also did whatever she could to make sure Rich got the necessary training. She went without a coat one winter in order to pay for his piano lessons. When asked about this story, she replied, "Well, I probably didn't need a coat that much."

Rich said of his mom and dad:

I think my parents were really smart parents. I think they were, actually, pretty progressive for the time. The one thing that they really wanted me to know is what makes me tick, what I am about, how I approach life. And I think what my parents really wanted for me was for me to be who I am. I think a lot of parents hand people over a blueprint and say, "This is how you're supposed to do it." And my parents, I think, kind of drew a picture and said, "Here's the good stuff in life. How do you get there?"⁹

For his parents' fortieth wedding anniversary, Rich wrote a song. In it one can sense his appreciation for them and for the impact his early home life had on him.

First Family

My folks they were always the first family to arrive
With seven people jammed into a car that seated five

There was one bathroom to bathe and shave in
Six of us stood in line
And hot water for only three
But we all did just fine

Talk about your miracles
Talk about your faith
My dad he could make things grow
Out of Indiana clay
Mom could make a gourmet meal
Out of just cornbread and beans
And they worked to give faith hands and feet
And somehow gave it wings

I can still hear my dad cussin'
He's working late out in the barn
The spring planting is coming
And the tractors just won't run
Mom she's done the laundry
I can see it waving on the line
Now they've stayed together
Through the pain and the strain of those times

And now they've raised five children
One winter they lost a son
But the pain didn't leave them crippled
And the scars have made them strong
Never picture perfect
Just a plain man and his wife
Who somehow knew the value
Of hard work good love and real life

Talk about your miracles
Talk about your faith
My dad he could make things grow
Out of Indiana clay
Mom could make a gourmet meal

Out of just cornbread and beans
And they worked to give faith hands and feet
And somehow gave it wings

John apparently liked the song very much, but one day he turned to Neva and said, “How come you get to be described as the one making gourmet meals, and I am the one out cussing in the barn?”

Neva replied, “The truth hurts, doesn’t it, honey?”

As related in the song, John and Neva Mullins raised five children and lost one, Brian, to spinal meningitis when he was only a few months old. Rich was only two at the time of Brian’s death, but as he grew he admired how “the pain didn’t leave them crippled,” and in fact, the scars “made them strong.” John and Neva, “just a plain man and his wife,” gave Rich faith and a steady example of strength and godliness put to work.

The Bible gives us a commandment and a promise concerning our parents: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exod. 20:12). Rich found it easy to honor his mother because he had a deep respect for her and he constantly felt her love. But he found it difficult to honor his father during his teenage years even though he admired him, primarily because his father had difficulty communicating his love for him. Neva explains, “John’s generation of men did not express their feelings to their children. As long as they didn’t say anything to you, you were OK. It was the mothers who expressed love for their children . . . not the men in those days. I think it is a great thing that this has changed.”

Very few people have “perfect parents.” They are human beings, which is a way of saying that they, too, can be shortsighted and petty, that they are not all-knowing and all-seeing, that they can be as selfish and sinful as the next person. Why would God command us to honor them? The command to honor them has to do with the fact that, like it or not, they are the parents God gave us, and to honor them is, in a sense, to honor God. It is to live in the awareness of our dependence, which is the death of pride. In short, it is coming into the right order of life.

God created the system we call the family. It is his design, and in order for it to work properly, parents are to train and care for their children; children, in turn, are called to honor and obey their parents. When these two things are happening, there is harmony. When either or both of these are missing, there is chaos. Always. The command to honor our parents is not a painful burden but a prescription for happiness. That is why the commandment carries with it a promise: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

Rich’s father could never tell him that he loved him, and this made Rich feel angry and distant. But the trip they took to Kentucky helped Rich to see his father as a human being, as one who was once a kid, as one who was the product of his environment. Rich realized that even though he didn’t verbalize it, perhaps his dad really did love him. It was just not something he was trained to do.

Though the two had a difficult relationship, later in his life Rich made peace with his father. Rich went on a private retreat with Brennan Manning during the last year of Rich’s life. Brennan gave him several exercises to do, including writing a letter to his father and writing a letter as if his father were writing it to him. This was the most healing event of Rich’s life, he told me later. When he wrote two words—coming from his father—“Dear Wayne,” he began sobbing uncontrollably.

Neva recalls, “When Wayne left home, he grew his hair out and often had a ponytail. His dad did not like it at all, and sometimes they fought about it. Eventually they just stopped talking about it.

“Several years later John and I went to a concert, and Wayne didn’t know we were there. John came up from behind him and gently tugged on his ponytail. Wayne turned around and saw his dad smiling at him. Wayne told me that it was at that moment that he knew his dad loved and accepted him. That was a real turning point for the both of them.”

It is a glorious thing to think about Rich and his father in heaven. I am certain that John was the first to meet Rich when he entered the gates, and I imagine that his father hugged him long and hard. Maybe he even came up from behind and tugged on his ponytail.

DISCOVERING HIS LOVES: MUSIC AND THE CHURCH

One of the ways we learn to survive in the world is to discover our uniqueness, our talents, and our gifts. For Rich, music would become a passion. He would work out his pain, as well as his highest aspirations, through music. He showed unusual musical abilities from an early age.

Rich's sister, Debbie, describes the first time they realized he had musical gifts: "When I was about ten years old and Wayne was four or five, I was taking piano lessons. My teacher told me to practice the hymn 'Abide with Me,' and I played it over and over but kept messing up on the same part. I got up to go into another room. Mom had been listening all the while as she was working in the kitchen. The next thing she heard was the hymn being played without a mistake, and she said, 'Oh, Debbie, you're really getting it.' She walked into the room, and there was little Wayne playing the song. He had been sitting there listening to me practice it for so long that he knew how it was supposed to be played."

From when I was real little, I always liked music. My great-grandparents lived right next door to us and they had a piano, and I would go over all the time and play. And—I think my dad didn't want me to get involved in it totally because he wanted me to be a jock. And, like, there was just no way that was gonna happen. So I think he finally just gave up. Then, in elementary school he let me take piano lessons as a consolation prize. And actually the consolation prize turned out better than the grand prize.¹⁰

Sometimes our parents have an agenda for us that does not fit who we are. Rich's father was a farmer and an athlete, so it made sense that he would expect his son to be the same. It was probably difficult for John to have a son who had a passion for something that was foreign to him.

Rich was not particularly good at farm work. Every member of the family has a story to tell about his ineptness. Once when he was riding the tractor, the wheel inexplicably fell off. Another time, his father had dug several holes in which to plant trees. While driving through that part

of the field, Rich managed to get not one but all four wheels stuck in holes. His dad had to tow him out. Rich simply had no real mechanical skills. He wanted to be a good farmer and athlete; it simply wasn't in him.

As his mother puts it, "He just had music in him. He had to play." They eventually arranged for him to take piano lessons from a woman who would have a great impact on him. She helped Rich develop an overall understanding of music, why it is important to God and how it ought to be played. He described that relationship:

I had a very good music teacher, Mary Kellner, who not only introduced me to some of the great composers, but she was able to capture my imagination and make me excited about what I was supposed to be learning. When I was in fourth grade, I got asked to play the Communion meditation at church. I practiced and she worked with me, which was cool because she was Quaker, and they don't even have Communion. Anyway, I went back Tuesday to my lesson after I had played Sunday, and she said, "How did you do?" and I told her, "Everybody said they loved it, everyone said I did great." And she said, "Well, then you failed." I was crushed, but she put her hand on my shoulder and said, "Richard, when you play in church, you are to direct people's attention to God, not to your playing."¹¹

That experience shaped the way Rich looked at music, especially in church. For the rest of his life, if asked to play in church, Rich would lead worship but never perform for fear of drawing attention to himself.

Rich's family discovered that he had another unique love: the church. Neva says, "There were two things I never had to tell Wayne to do: practice the piano and go to church." Even as a little boy, Rich came home and retold all of the stories he had learned. His sisters marveled at his ability to understand the preacher's sermons. He could recite parts of each sermon in detail.

While most children want to grow up and do something exciting or heroic, Rich wanted to follow God. His sister, Debbie, said, "Wayne was a funny kind of kid. . . . When you asked him what he wanted to be when

he grew up, he said he wanted to be a missionary. . . . No policeman, no fireman, he wanted to be a missionary.”¹²

Rich learned a lot about the Christian faith from his extended family, particularly his great-grandmother, who he described as “a wonderful woman [who] had a very down-to-earth approach to religion. She said bad words sometimes, and I loved that. That’s why I always liked Christmas—because it was the only time you could say ‘ass’ in church. I used to sing that line out of that carol over and over again.”¹³

Rich often described his family tree as being filled with “a bunch of heavenly saints and a few notorious sinners.” He believed that our families teach us about life by their example. If their lives are exemplary, we see in them certain virtues that we would like to cultivate. If their lives go badly, it may be that we try to shun the vices that spelled their demise. Either way, they—both the saints and the sinners—represent all of humanity and are in a sense a microcosm of the world.

The early years of Rich’s life were shaped by great-grandmothers, uncles, cousins, and all kinds of people who in their own way communicated the faith. But he would learn that his faith would not make life easy.

ADOLESCENCE: THE OUTSIDER

During his teenage years, Rich struggled to fit in. He was raised in Indiana, a state known for basketball and farming, and Rich was not good at either. Musical proficiency and spiritual understanding were not high on the popularity list. Consequently Rich was shy. As he noted in later years, “I have no physical genius about me. I can’t dribble a ball and run at the same time, I can’t do lay-ups—I’m not an athlete. But my experience as a kid was, I was made fun of so much that what I did then, is, I wouldn’t participate. And I think I cheated myself out of a lot of fun.”¹⁴

Rich further reflected in a radio interview:

When I was young, I was angry and I was kind of going, “God, why am I such a freak? Why couldn’t I have been a good basketball player? I wanted to be a jock or something. Instead I’m a musician. I feel like

such a sissy all the time. Why couldn't I be just like a regular guy?" The more I thought about it, the more I realized that, you know, sometimes God has things in mind for us that we can't even imagine. And I think that maybe it was good for me to grow up being picked on a little bit, because then I realized what it meant to be kinda the underdog. And then to have someone who is not an underdog, someone like God, say, "Hey, I want you to be with Me," then you kinda go, "Wow!" And so maybe for that reason, grace is more important to me than people who have been able to be more self-sufficient.¹⁵

Not fitting in forced Rich to shy away from a lot of typical activities growing up. Our peers can be ruthless with their teasing, and the common result is that we stop trying to fit in altogether and carve out a niche that suits our talents, but we miss out on a lot.

Yet Rich had trouble fitting in with religious types too. He was too saintly for the sinners and too sinful for the saints. He was always active in the church, which made it difficult to fit in with the non-Christian crowd. But Rich was always searching and questioning, and he liked to bash people's sacred cows, which made it difficult to fit in with the Christians. In later years he reflected: "It seems that I always am and always have been an outsider. I've never really fit in. I was always too religious for my rowdy friends—they thought I was unbelievably hung up—and too rowdy for my religious friends—they were always praying for me."¹⁶

FINDING HIS PLACE

Though Rich had trouble fitting in on the farm or the basketball court, he was always comfortable behind a piano. His sister, Sharon, sang in an all-county choir that had lost its accompanist. She told the director that she had a brother who could play for them, and the director agreed to let him try out. When Rich showed up for the audition, the director gasped. Rich was only thirteen years old, but he proceeded to astonish the director and the whole choir with his skills. He could play anything and play it well. The only criticism he received was that he improvised too much.

Rich went on to create and lead a touring ensemble he formed from within that group called Children of the Light, though he was only sixteen at the time. Rich wrote many of the songs himself, and the six-member group played in churches throughout the region. During this period he began to write songs with real seriousness, and his passion for music seemed to increase each day.

When Rich was a senior in high school, he spent his free time practicing piano in the sanctuary of his church. Just before graduation, he cut his afternoon classes to practice. A teacher saw him and informed the principal, who in turn called his mother. They threatened not to let him participate in his commencement ceremony but later relented.

After graduation Rich attended Cincinnati Bible College. There he formed a small Christian band called Zion. The group played at colleges and led retreats in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio. Rich recorded his first album with Zion. His next home would be Nashville and later Wichita. His final earthly home was on a reservation in New Mexico. Rich never put down many roots. He sometimes referred to himself as a “homeless man” in the same sense that Jesus, too, was a man “who did not have a home.”

HOME

Rich’s musical gifts took him all over the world, but he often stopped in Richmond to see his family. During one of his last visits with his mother, in the summer of 1997, he said as he was about to leave, “Well, I gotta go home.” She asked him where “home” was, and Rich told her he really couldn’t answer that. In his earthly life, even with all of the accolades and attention he received, he was never quite at home. His sister, Debbie, says, “The audiences applauded for Rich, but what he wanted was to be loved as Wayne.”

Our parents create an environment in which we can grow. We call it the home. The home is the most powerful place on earth. It is the cradle of the soul. Our minds and personalities, our loves and our hates, our fears and our dreams are all molded in the home. The home is the workshop of God, where the process of character making is silently,

lovingly, imperceptibly carried on. We search throughout our lives for love and identity, and if we are fortunate, we may find it.

The quest for our identity will always lead us back to our families. They are the ones with whom we discover our potential, as well as our limitations. They are the ones through whom and with whom we learn how to live. It is sheer hubris to think that we are “self-made” women and men. We learn how to live from other people. We did not develop in a vacuum; we were taught how to function from other people and by no one more so than our parents and our siblings. Rich’s family shaped him, and he in turn shaped them.

We have families because we are weak creatures, and God knows that we need them. Throughout our lives, those people who knew us first are a part of our makeup even if they are difficult to live with. Old men and women can see their parents in their minds as if it were yesterday. Even in his last years, Rich could still picture his dad cussing in the barn and managing to grow plants out of the tough Indiana clay. He could see his mom hanging laundry and could taste her cornbread and beans. Jamming seven people into a car that seats five may not be comfortable, but it is family. In terms of soul shaping, it is the most powerful place in the world.

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