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FORM C
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Meet My Father
Project Title

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Meet My Father

By

Justin Bracken Carlson

For my dad, who walks beside me.

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Part One

My Story

Meet my Father

Wide Awake

A wooden bedroom door can only do so much to stifle the shattering of hearts. I sought a restless refuge as I fumbled through my bedroom sheets and shoved my head under my pillow in order to miraculously make the screaming stop. I guess I didn't believe in miracles at that moment. I wanted to fall asleep hoping that even a bad dream would appease the unforgiving anger between my mom and dad. I did not possess the courage to open my door and reveal my confusion and hurt to my parents because it seemed that a child's brokenness would do little to distract them. I could only crack the door because, even in the midst of fear and through the fog of tears, I was still curious as to what they looked like when hate was the expression on their faces.

Everything moved so fast. I don't remember what they said as if they were speaking a different language, but I do remember what my mom looked like. She threw her bedroom door open and stomped down the stairs and through the kitchen and out the back door crying out for something to rescue her from the shattered covenant. It's funny that when a holy and beautiful covenant such as marriage shatters, the children have to walk on broken glass for the rest of their lives. I did not want to leave my room because I was barefoot, and I didn't want to cut my feet. Little did I know that the glass could cut through shoes made of steel.

I heard the car door slam and sprinted to the window to see my mom racing out of the driveway as if she was running away from something. I knew that she would be back because it was hard to run away from something that was already gone. I knew that the woman walking through the back door later that night would be different. She would no

longer be a wife, but she was still a mother. I was frightened to see my mother so angry, and although I knew she would return, I did not want to go to bed in her absence.

I do not remember the reaction of my father that night. His disposition escapes me, and all I remember after my mom left was a silence—a silence that in no way appeased the torment that kept me awake. Ironically, it was a silence I hoped would chase the violent noise away, but the silence was the very thing that shook me deeply and kept me awake that night and for years and years to come.

Even a child can notice that something is terribly wrong. I did not know exactly why my parents were fighting, but I did know that it was abnormal—that it escalated far beyond the arguments in previous years between them. Something was different. People do not yell like that just to argue. They yell like that because their anger is so fierce that death is the only thing that can stop it. I had never seen my mom like that, and it frightened me. How can someone be so angry? What could possibly motivate a gentle woman such as my mom to transform into such an angry being? The sin of this world and its destruction is so evident when it kicks down the door of your own mother's home and raids her heart. It is even more painful to realize that it was not even her sin.

I remember when I learned why my parents were fighting that night. The phone rang late one evening, and my mom answered it, thinking I was fast asleep. I laid in bed and listened carefully to her muffled and troubled voice, but curiosity eventually pulled me out of my room and into the foyer where I could hear too clearly the conversation with a friend. I do not remember a great deal of the conversation, but a child only needs to hear a little bit. Although my mother's voice remained soft, her words were coarse and hard to swallow. She spoke of my father's unfaithfulness to her and to my brother and I,

and then the word 'divorce' rang out. Divorce is a child's worst nightmare even when he does not realize it. Little did I know that divorce was the sugarcoated description of what my father had really done. I did not know what to do, so I clung to the banister and allowed myself to experience my first dose of real pain—a pain that I knew nothing about and a pain that would soon control the deepest parts of my soul. My mom thought I was asleep. She told her friend that she would wait to tell me, but she was already telling me. Maybe it was better that way because, in my head, it took away some of the painful burden of hearing it directly from her mouth in her presence. It was not better because my mother never wanted to speak those words to me, her son, and I never wanted to see my mother hurting. My mom thought I was asleep. I was awake. I was wide awake.

Then Came a Knock

I grew up in Cottonwood, a good size neighborhood on the edge of Franklin, Tennessee. It was the perfect place for me growing up because it overflowed with kids my age. Boredom was rare, and if I ever trudged around the house proclaiming it, I was either too lazy to take the initiative to call a friend or I secretly enjoyed it and was looking for some sympathy. Something was always going on.

I was outside a lot. I occupied my time with basketball, field exploration, bike stunts, and hundreds of other things that would label me as a pretty outgoing kid. I injured myself quite a bit, whether it was being hit in the face with a baseball, crashing heroically on my bike, holding on to a firecracker too long, or getting in a fight with my friend over teddy bears—yes, that really did happen. Even though most of the time I would run crying my eyes out to my parents, I secretly enjoyed the bruises and the cuts. Looking back, there was something so reckless and uplifting about it. I built huge bike

ramps and peddled towards them as fast as my little legs allowed. The ramp usually won, but in a way, I learned the joys and the failures of taking risks. An obstacle was in front of me; it wouldn't kill me to challenge it. My cuts would heal. The black and blue always disappeared. It was just a bike ramp. I was a kid. I did not understand pain beyond a broken bike chain or scraped knee. I did not know that one day I would have to peddle even faster and take on the biggest ramp ever to stand in my path. I did not know that pain goes far deeper than any stitch or scrape.

The neighborhood was very family oriented. It was not just the kids that spent time together. Parents talked on the phone about their experiences and the lives of their kids, they invited other families to Christmas parties, they laughed while waiting in the car pool, and they shared meals. Life just seemed easier when the parents and the kids got along because I could enjoy family and friends at the same time. There was one family that my family spent a lot of time with, the Wilsons.

The Wilson house was hardly a mile from ours. You could walk there with your shoes untied it was so close. It was like a second home even though the pestering from my brother Peter continued there along with his faithful sidekick, Joel, the only Wilson child. Yes, I was the younger one, and although I succeeded little in holding my own, I had fun with Peter and Joel. We would play war, ride bikes, use tape and rubber bands to alter the identities of G.I. Joe figurines, watch movies, and go to the neighborhood pool. The house was comfortable; it was a place that two families enjoyed. It was a place where we would have Christmas Eve dinner together. Suburban American looked on us with a smiling face. What could possibly go wrong when two happy families gather in fellowship? Who would ever want to taint this blessing? Something apparently knew the

Wilson address and came knocking one night. It was loud. It was disturbing. It knocked again. Who would answer such a knock? My father.

The Divorce Talk

My brother and I were called to the living room. The call resonated through the home and arose in me a fear that knew something was terribly wrong but could not quite figure out what it was. Honestly, a house with dirt on the floor and crooked shutters could never achieve the same emptiness as my house at that moment. The home became a house, and the people within the house became strangers.

I stepped into the room, and my parents asked me to have a seat. I shuffled forward and fell into the shining white sofa—one that didn't offer any comfort. It was so quiet. It was that same silence—the silence that screams and disturbs your heart and soul. I looked down. They asked that I look at them. I did not want to listen. They asked that I listen. I lost all the energy to rebel against the inevitable hurt and cracked my ears.

I do not remember who spoke first, but I do remember the words being slow and calm. The conversation did not last long, but when a meeting is held for the sake of pain, a second seems like an entire day. An entire day would have been hell. It was the typical 'divorce talk'—or watered down explanation as one could call it. My mom and dad basically sat next to each other in separate chairs and presented to my brother and I an understated version of their failed love for one another. The explanation was full of 'not workings', falling out of love, mistakes, and so forth. It struck me as odd that two people could be so in love for so lengthy a time period and then sit next to each other without the slightest hint of affection. The distance between them was disgusting.

My dad fell in love with another woman, and he fell in love with her behind our backs. What does a child say? How is a child to understand? Well, I guess my understanding is not applicable because I am not a part of the 'Divorce.' A divorce is between a married woman and man, not a child. The relationship ends between the husband and wife, but it remains for the children. *I hope you detect my sarcasm.* My dad did not detect it. The child is hurt, too. I was hurt and abandoned. I guess it was just too difficult for my dad to admit that he had left his wife and his son.

A lot was left unsaid that day, but a lot preferred to be unheard. There is no doubt that I was angry and that this anger could have shaken the room, but I chose to hide it away. Hiding was easier because it prevented conflict, and as a kid, I wanted to be a good and reasonable little boy. I did not want to face my father, but even more, I did not want to be his son.

The 'divorce talk' finally came to an end. It reminded me of a short heavyweight boxing match, and I was the fallen athlete. Going into the fight, I knew I was going to lose, but as a son, I was obligated. The words were fists pounding at my head and bruising my heart, but eventually they stopped. I lay motionless before the beast and found no strength to stand and continue fighting. Tired and humiliated, I rolled out of the ring at the sound of the bell. Unfortunately, this bell did not in any way indicate the end of the fight.

I walked out of the living room—a room that once fostered community with the entire family— but was now walking away from separation. It is strange to refer to your parents as a separated entity because I was raised in the embrace of a beautiful partnership. True, they always were different, but their differences once complimented

one another. I guess the differences were shockingly different than anyone could have ever imagined. I imagined my parents together and content, but what I imagined was only for the sake of my imagination, not reality. My imagination and the sacred intentions of marriage never again agreed within my family construct. They never again agreed with my father. His intentions of being a devoted husband and father never seemed to compete with his selfish intentions of finding pleasure in another woman. I would begin to refer to my parents as two completely different bodies—one as a shaken survivor and the other as an arrogant fugitive.

My father and I did have something in common that day; we both ran away. This is probably a stretch, because when you compare what we ran away from, it is like comparing the innocence of a mouse with that of a rattlesnake. I ran out of the living room and away from my pain and into my mother's patient arms. My father compromised and lost possession of a family and ran into an embrace as cold and inflicting as the devils. He ran from me. He ran from my brother. He ran from my mother. He ran from home. But the greatest escape was this: he ran from God and I was pretty certain he would never come back.

A Beautiful Mask

It is pretty strange hanging out with your dad every other weekend. I always packed my bag to go to a slumber party or to camp, but it never seemed right to pack for a weekend visit to my dad's place. He would pick Peter and I up on Friday afternoons after school. I would climb into his white 4-door Honda accord and put on the mask that I designed just after the divorce. It was a brilliantly crafted mask. It had my eyes but

they never looked directly at my dad. It had my mouth, but it spoke only what he wanted to hear. My dad would ask me, “How are you?”

I would always respond, “Good.”

It was easier to respond with a simple ‘good’ or ‘fine’ because it required nothing of me. I could say one word, and my dad would ask no more questions. I could smile, and he would smile back. It was always easier to lie because anything else would have shown my dad that I was hurting. I was a child. I did not want to hurt, and I certainly did not want anyone to know that my pain existed. What child wants to be weak? Not only did I wear that mask, I protected it. It was the only way my heart could breathe. I was hiding from my dad, but I did not realize that I was also hiding from myself. Masks can do that.

My dad would pick us up, and we would drive to his apartment. It was an old apartment that sat a story above Highway 100. The only entrance was a sliding glass door that had two locks—one a standard door lock and the other a wooden stick wedged between the door and the wall. It was terribly small, and it in no way felt any bigger when my brother and I stayed there. It basically consisted of two rooms. One room was divided into the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom, and the office. The other room was the bathroom. The only privacy I had was in the bathroom because I could shut the door—the only door besides the front door. The apartment also backed right into a working railroad, and at random times during the day—and night unfortunately—the train would race by shaking the cabinets and the walls. I already was shaken up enough. The sound of a rumbling train in the middle of the night never appealed to me.

I knew that apartment well. I sat on the old couch countless times, I typed stories on the blue IBM computer screen, I played my dad's guitar, and I watched movies on the small television set against the wall. I put gifts under the Christmas tree and opened mine on "our" Christmas Day. I ordered pizza. I played board games. I ate. I slept. But it was never my home. It was always a place I visited, and I always felt like a visitor. It was hard to be a son. A son should never have to pack his bags to visit his dad. He should never have to leave his home and expect to find home somewhere else. Home was where my brother and mom were, and my dad wasn't there. He was in that apartment, waiting to pick up my brother and I on Friday afternoons.

Christmas Day

I couldn't sleep, but I wanted to. The longer my eyes remained open, the further away the next day seemed. I was convinced the clock was ticking backwards and was certain that I would have to lay hostage to the longest night a child could ever know—this is an exaggeration of course. I rolled over on my left side to avoid the clock, but I always returned to the red beacon of light that would soon permit me to jump out of my bed and race into my parents' bedroom. They always slept great that night because they understood that a child's anticipation equaled an early morning. I had to fall asleep, and finally, I did.

My eyes squinted at the clock, which read 6:30 a.m. A squint turned into wide-open excitement, and I exploded out of my slumber and into my mom and dad's bedroom. I whispered in the darkness trying to wake them up calmly but was unsuccessful. I tapped my dad on the shoulder hiding beneath the sheets, and he opened his eyes. A smile cracked across his tired face, and he began to move. He swung his left

leg down to the floor and then his right, both working hard in labored synchrony to move him towards the closet where he would slide ungracefully into his morning robe.

Nothing is graceful at 6:30 in the morning. My mom followed. I was eager. My brother was eager. My parents were getting there. "Merry Christmas," I shouted. They both smiled, and the day began.

Every year was the same; it was the morning ritual I guess. My dad would tell us to stay upstairs while he would go down and prepare the living room for Christmas Day festivities. He would click the small Christmas lights on, start a warm fire, and shuffle some gifts around. I remember the sound of the wrapping paper as it crackled and teased me. What would it be this year? Did Santa read my letter? Did he eat my cookies and drink the milk? I yelled down to see if my dad was ready, and he usually told us to wait a bit longer. Honestly, I bet he was sitting on the couch enjoying our anticipation and laughing to himself that he had complete control over the situation. He could have cooked a full country breakfast and read the entire morning paper before he called us down if he wanted to. Thankfully, he didn't.

I bolted down the steps and into the living room. The tree glistened and the fireplace danced with red, blue, orange, and yellow. The stockings, full of candy and trinkets, hung awkwardly from the mantle. Gifts, big and small, stood out in the open and were tucked beneath the tree. The plate that once offered cookies now only had crumbs, and the glass was empty and streaked with white residue on one side. This was a glorious sight in the eyes of a boy, and even more for my mom and dad, because they loved to see their children happy. I remember them sitting on the floor with my brother and I smiling. I think a small part of their contentment that day rested in the fact that they

had given the gifts we really wanted, but their joy ran deeper. They were smiling at us. They did not need anything that morning. They already had it. We were always a gift, and that is why they smiled on Christmas Day. They were smiling because they had two wonderful children. They were smiling because they had a family.

Christmas changed one year. The anticipation, the ritual, and the family changed. The first year after the divorce was a rough one. The anticipation on Christmas Eve was still there, but the absence of my dad hindered it. I still had trouble sleeping, but that year, more was dancing in my head than sugar plumbs. I slept knowing I would wake up the next morning without a dad to prepare the living room. He was no longer the one who got out of bed first. I didn't see his face in the early sunlight, but I was thankful that my mom's face still managed to shine brightly and faithfully. My brother and I ran into her room and whispered and tugged at her pajamas. She was the one that stumbled out of bed willingly and turned on the lights, started the fire, positioned the gifts. She was the father and the mother, and she did a marvelous job being both on that special day. She took pride in her gifts and glowed with delight when I offered my appreciation for her generosity and love. She had to learn a new kind of love—one that served out of loneliness, one that had to give out of brokenness. She gave, and she gave with a smile on her face. Sure, a small part of her smile that morning was due to the enthusiasm we showcased when we received our gifts, but she was thankful for something different. She smiled at us. She had lost what seemed to be everything, but now she had all she needed—two wonderful boys that could still laugh in the face of adversity. There is no doubt in my mind that somewhere in that house that day, my mom wept. I wept, too. Our tears were different but somehow the same. She cried out for a husband, and I cried

out for a dad. What is the difference really? We both hurt and suffered a similar pain. It did not matter what type of love was shared between my mom and dad or my dad and I because love was lost. It was the kind of love that, when it left, I did not want to find it. Why would I want to find something that chose to run away? Would I even find it if I tried? Maybe love was not lost. Maybe it just chose to disappear.

I remember getting a bow and arrow set that year—exactly what I wanted—but I remember, even more, sitting on the edge of the couch and shedding tears that saturated my mom’s robe as she held me quietly. I missed my dad. It is amazing when you miss someone so much even after they have hurt you deeply. I cried and cried because I knew he would never turn the Christmas lights on again, start the fire, or tease my brother and I with the crackling of wrapping paper. I knew that the breakfast table would be lacking a place mat, fork, knife, and spoon. It was my brother, mom, and I sitting around the old wooden table, thankful for the holiday. My mother prayed before the meal, and she thanked God for Jesus, who entered the world a heavenly light and grew up to die so that I, a sinner, could be forgiven and have hope. My mother was so thankful, especially in times of unbearable brokenness. It was hard to be thankful that morning. It was hard to have hope because my father took it when he left. I wonder what he did with it.

Although my dad was gone, the sun still rose. The cold air still whirled outside. The flurries still fell. Christmas still came, but it was different. The sun wasn’t as bright, and the cold air felt cooler. The flurries didn’t stick. It was the first Christmas without dad. I cannot imagine what he felt like that morning because it was his first Christmas without us.

No Rollerskating Tonight

Friday night was usually the night my brother and I would go to the Brentwood Skate center in Brentwood, Tennessee. We hated to miss a week at the skating hot spot because it was a time of freedom. Every other weekend, my dad picked us up on Friday, we devoured some dinner, and he then dropped us off at the front door of the skating rink. I jumped from the car with a crumpled wad of cash and sprinted to the line, thinking that the earlier I got in line, the more exciting my experience would be that night. The swinging glass door to the inside was the gateway to freedom—it promised a few hours of joy regardless of a bad day. Inside I felt alive in laughter, and the loud dance music and flow of roller skaters on the scratched hard wood surface stimulated my childish spirit. I laced my skates tightly and glided to the edge of the rink, where herds of skaters, from beginner to experienced, raced by. It was like sitting at a stop light waiting to turn left on a busy interstate. I searched intently for a small pocket of space, and when I found it, I took a risk and pushed myself out onto the floor. My hand ran along the carpet wall and offered support as I built momentum, and when the speed was sufficient enough, I sailed away from the wall and merged into the busy rush of my fellow skaters. I weaved and dodged. I skated backwards and spun around in circles. The only worries I had when skating was that I would fall down or that I wouldn't be fast enough to keep up with those that skated on the inside part of the rink.

What child could ever worry about anything else in a place like that? It had bright lights, prizes to win, tickets spitting out of video game machines, popular music, pretty girls, and few adults. It was a different world, and I was a different kid inside. The other

worries, I left at the door, but they always waited patiently outside for me to finish. They always waited for me in that white 4-door Honda accord.

One night, my brother and I did not get to go skating. The night started out the same as always, but a mile out of the driveway, my dad broke down. He tried to drive and cry at the same time, but there were not windshield wipers for his eyes. He had to pull over. It was frightening because this was the first time I remember seeing my dad cry. He didn't cry the day he talked to us about the divorce. He didn't cry when he left. But he flooded the car with tears that night.

He didn't have any money. All my brother and I wanted to do was go to the Skate Center, and I certainly did not want to accept my dad's inability to make that happen. I guess it was the anger that initially prevented me from sympathizing with my dad's incompetence. I didn't want to hear it. I wanted to skate. I wanted to throw the car door open and run home. I wanted to be anywhere but inside that sedan. I couldn't because it was my weekend with dad; it was his time with us. I didn't want to listen, but I couldn't help it.

He couldn't afford to pay for a night of skating. Since the divorce, his funds depleted and left him with little, but in my head, he lacked far more. He cried because he was broken, and he knew that his brokenness went far beyond financial stability. I wanted to shout, "I don't care. I don't care that you have no money. It is your fault. Your tears mean nothing to me because it hurts me to see them. I don't hurt because you are hurting; I hurt because I am hurting. And you can't do anything about it. You can't even give me ten dollars to go roller skating!" I wanted to shout, but I didn't. This was the story of my life as a child—hold it all in and it will make things a lot easier.

It was powerful thing to see my dad cry; his honesty was dreadful. It was humbling to see a man, who once stood as a strong pillar, crack and break beneath the home he once held. Stability is in the heart of a man, and I was afraid to see my father's heart. Seeing the tears was enough for me. I could barely stand to look at my dad's eyes stained red with tears because I was looking into the eyes of a stranger. The stranger cried. My dad cried. It was the first time I saw the reality of his false strength. He was weak, and it was a weakness that only pointed to further weakness. He was a stranger, but he couldn't be my dad, too. He had to be one or the other. I didn't care what he was at that point. I just didn't want him to be both.

The tears finally dried up, and the silence shared between my brother and I ended. I couldn't bear to sit there one more second without a response. My dad was probably anxious to hear what we would say. Our potential response terrified him. Would we understand? Why should we understand? I don't know if I really wanted to understand because understanding his tears meant connecting with them—it meant knowing him deeply. I feared the depth of my father because, if I dove into such depths, I would surely drown. I was a good swimmer, too. I did not want to understand because it would make my life more painful. I always believed that my pain had more credibility than his; exploring his pain was not appealing. Who wants to sympathize with a liar? A liar will eventually search day and night for sympathy because he knows the truth of his lies. He knows the truth that lies are what led him to feel the piercing agony of running from the truth. Well, truth always finds the liar. Truth found my father. The truth hurts? I had no idea what that really meant.

“It's okay dad,” I uttered, “We can do something else.”

That is all I could say. I still wanted to go to the Skate Center, but I knew that it was impossible. I was angry because I knew the divorce had not only shaken the biggest parts of my life, but it had affected the small things, too. The simplicity of my life did not seem very simple at that point. It was “okay” because it agreed with my father’s present situation. Although I felt anger, I feared it at the same time because I knew it would only incite more pain in my father. The last thing I needed was greater confirmation of the pain created by divorce on both sides. I knew my pain, but my father did not. My father began to reveal his, but I did not want to know of it. I feared hurting his feelings, so I accepted his defeat with a conquered reply. It appeased the intensity, and Lord knows that all I wanted at that moment was an ending. It was only the beginning.

Instead of going to the Skate Center that night, we just ordered some pizza and rented a movie—something we did quite often. We pulled up to the old apartment, ascended the flight of stairs, and stepped into the grossly familiar setting. I collapsed into the couch and adjusted my mask. We didn’t talk anymore about the ride over for the rest of the night, which made things a little more comfortable. We just enjoyed the pizza and watched the movie. Our conversation focused mainly on catching up; I talked about school, cars, and music—the safe things. Although they were safe, I still struggled to share them because their simplicity was sacred. What I mean is that when you share a life with someone, the smallest things such as hobbies and a favorite color are often the most enjoyable. Knowing the small things is important in any relationship. I cringed at the awkwardness of telling a simple story, and that is why my stories didn’t last very long. The storyteller longs to tell his stories, and I was no storyteller. I wasn’t proud of

my stories because my father was the audience, and even when his eyes were warm and intent, my body was cold and unrevealing.

I didn't go skating that night. Instead, I sat in an apartment with my brother and father staring at the television and talking about this and that. But my father's tears revealed something about that apartment. It was a hiding place—a place where my dad could be a stranger and a place where he could cry. I wonder how much he cried when I wasn't looking. Maybe he was crying all the time, and I just never looked. Regardless, my brother and I saw him cry, and my dad probably regretted what we saw. He hung his head in the presence of his children, and his children could do nothing to lift it up. I didn't care to try. It was his sin—sin that he couldn't hide forever. Unfortunately, the exposure of his sin increased my anger—my pain. I guess the apartment no longer was a hiding place because when my dad left that night to pick us up, he forgot to leave his pain in the closet. When I stepped into his apartment that night, I found my hiding place. I hid from my anger. I hid from my father.

My Brother and I

My brother, Peter, dealt with the divorce differently. His anger was obvious, and I think he wanted it to be that way. We seemed to be different in every way—he was short and stocky and I was tall and skinny, he expressed his anger ferociously and mine came in a whisper. It was difficult to identify with his anger because I didn't know how to be angry like he was. My dad would ask 'How are you?' and my brother would say 'I am so angry.' His response was a far cry from my 'fine.' I watched my brother's demeanor change in the presence of our dad. As we waited for my dad to arrive on Fridays, he would pace through the house quietly, occasionally expressing a censored

disgust about the coming weekend. Then the white car pulled into the driveway. The sight of it turned my brother on and turned him off. He became a warrior ready for a war of brutal honesty and lost the innocence of a thirteen year old. He didn't need a shield because he was confident that a sword or a swarm of flaming arrows would never kill his anger. They wouldn't even delay it. His anger seemed to be too much for a boy—for a son—but he knew no other way to be. Being real meant being honest, and being honest meant being angry. His emotion was striking and evident—exactly the way he wanted it. I feared him. I cannot imagine what my dad felt around him.

I kind of envied his anger. He possessed what I didn't and expressed what I couldn't. Sure, we both shared in a similar experience and built up our anger, but the manifestation of the anger was different. He ran recklessly out in the open proclaiming his rage while I ran on a treadmill behind a closed door talking to myself between breaths. I wasn't getting anywhere. He was getting somewhere, but it was a place that I don't think I could have handled. It was a place of open scars and deep hurt—a place that couldn't be uncovered through passivity. Peter wanted my dad to know exactly what was stabbing his heart. I just figured my heart would heal over time, but a heart will never heal as long as the knife is still lodged inside.

I didn't understand anger. I wanted to be angry, but I wanted to be loved. I didn't realize that the two could coincide, and that, in fact, love could be made stronger through expressed anger. Outward anger was never a solution in my head; it was more effective when I dealt with it alone. I kept it to myself, and Peter displayed it. I am not sure if his goal was love; the look in his eyes didn't give me any indication of forgiveness. He struggled to control it, which oftentimes led to amplified arguments and bitterness. I

feared my anger because my brother's stood as an example for me to learn from. If I expressed Peter's anger, I surely would lose my father's love. If I hid my anger, I would grow content in the frustrated relationship between my father and I. It was silly to think that I could lose love, but I had never heard my anger aloud. That scared me.

Peter's anger was different, and although there were times when I admired his enraged enthusiasm, I lacked the boldness to even admit my anger. My dad probably knew that I was angry, but how could he really know if I never said anything? Maybe he saw it in my eyes. Maybe he saw past the mask. My brother did not wear a mask because he had nothing to hide. He spoke the words of his heart. The words of a battered heart are never pleasant. I grew tired listening to Peter's anger, but hiding was far more draining.

Peter and I rarely talked about the divorce, but we still shared the loss. Our words often were unspoken and actions always different, but we loved each other. Our hearts were both aching, and we sought healing in different ways. My brother ran away, and I stood still. He screamed, and I remained silent. We were both angry. We sought healing, but I don't believe either one of us achieved it. My brother wanted healing for the sake of himself, not for the sake of a relationship. He was broken and did not want to ask for my dad's help to fix it. Ironically, his anger was the very thing that sustained the brokenness because it was aimed at my dad and never shared with him. Anger can bring healing, but only if the person is truly willing to move beyond the anger.

Watch Me, Watch Me

I was once a bicycle stuntman. The training wheels came off and my childhood recklessness began. My dad no longer had to hold on to the back of my seat as I road

down the driveway, and I no longer had to depend on him to stay balanced. The day those wheels came off was a huge day for me because I had total control to go faster, skid farther, and fall harder. I could go beyond the driveway and tread where training wheels feared to tread.

I spent hours perfecting my bike-riding skills. Riding down the street and leaping over small bumps became mundane, so I began to explore the ways of the stuntman. I always practiced my tricks in the grass because it promised a softer fall. I would peddle at a moderate speed and quickly bring my knees to my chest, careful to maintain my balance. I would then align my feet—one foot in front of the other—on the top bar and stand up with my hands still pressing on the handlebars. It was such a rush to defy the rules of the bike, and I always wanted people to notice my skills. When a child accomplishes something, he wants onlookers. I wanted my brother to see because I wanted him to be jealous of me, the daredevil. I wanted my mom to see because I wanted to see her laugh and show concern at the same time. I wanted my dad to see because I loved when he delighted in me, his son.

I did these stunts so often that everyone had the chance to witness them. In fact, I remember watching myself on the home videos that captured the events. The video camera was a part of the family. My time on the camera often was preceded by a ‘C’mon dad, not right now,’ but when I stood up on that bike, I expected the spotlight. My dad, holding the camera, would move with me, and his voice in the background would cheer me on.

“Dad, Dad!” I shouted. “Watch me, watch me!”

“I am, Justin. You’re lookin’ great!” he responded as he tried to hold the camera steady. When we watched the video on the television, the picture shook a little. The shaking was due to my dad’s inability to hold the camera steady, but no man on earth could ever hold one of those old video cameras on his shoulder without an unsteady final product. I liked to think that the unsteadiness was due to my dad’s inability to keep his eye in the camera. When one eye is looking through the camera, the other is squinting, so I liked to think that he was so proud of me that he wanted to look at me with two eyes. He just couldn’t look through the camera and fully enjoy me at the same time. The camera’s view of me could not even begin to capture the sight of a son in his father’s eyes. I wanted him to watch, and he did. I was glad for that.

I didn’t watch the videos much after my dad left because they became his eyes. I knew that he was watching me, but only in the past. He was not there daily to see me speed down the driveway or devise new tricks. What is a new trick without the audience? Sure, my mom and brother were still around to applaud my efforts, but my dad was not. His presence—his joy—was important to me, even in something as simple as riding a bike. Again, it’s the simplicity that mattered to me. Three million people could have been present to cheer me on, but if my dad wasn’t in the forefront, my attempts toward glory were watered down. It wasn’t a matter of glory anymore; it was a matter of disappointment. I’ll tell you how many people I needed in that audience: one. It wasn’t a lot to ask was it? One person? Yes, it was a lot to ask.

“Dad, dad!” I shouted. “Watch me, watch me!”

“I am, Justin. You’re lookin’ great!” he responded as I turned off the television.

Pain's Greatest Accomplishment

My mother cried a lot in church. The tears crowded in her eyes and, one by one, collected small pieces of mascara and ran down her cheeks. It was always a quiet cry—one that you didn't notice unless you looked over at her. She stood and embraced the resounding words of sacred hymns and sang them as if she was competing with the angels. Her voice still echoes in my head from time to time. She sang loud enough for the congregation to notice her joy and wept quietly enough for God to hear her pain. She hurt, and I knew it. I sat beneath her in the pew as she stood above me because I rarely stood. I occupied my time with drawing and boredom, but I always noticed her. And she noticed me. Occasionally, she would turn to me and smile. I always tugged at her dress when I completed one of my church service works of art, and she always grinned in approval. She wasn't smiling at the picture. She was smiling at the artist.

She cried because she hurt. She was victimized, and all she could do was weep at the feet of Jesus. Just like Jesus, she sought love in pain; she sought redemption. Was there redemption? Was there a place of comfort and joy in the near future? No one wants to wait for redemption because the process is painful. The pain can be so intense that the possibility of recovery is a hopeless speck on a distant horizon. My mom had been replaced, but she was willing to walk straight towards that horizon. The horizon wasn't going anywhere. It only got further away or closer, depending on which way she chose to walk. She walked forward, and she cried the whole way.

As a child, I didn't know the depth of her tears. I often was confused and uneasy when she cried because I didn't know what to say or do. My dad had weakened her, and the weakness was obvious. It was a weakness that made me weak when I felt strong; her

tears made me cry when I was happy. I didn't know how to help her, but I wanted to. I wanted to dry the tears, but a child cannot dry a river of tears with a box of Kleenex. I offered a tissue anyway. The tissue stopped the tears temporarily, but I was the one my mother desired to sit with. I was her son, and nothing in her life would ever take that away. I was there. My brother was there. We couldn't heal her, but we could be with her. We cried, too. My mom didn't always know why we cried, but she was always there to offer an embrace, which was better than a tissue.

It was my mother I desired to sit with. Her words soothed me. I thought she could heal me, but like my brother and I, she was incapable. I think it encouraged her to see our tears because she knew she wasn't alone. The greatest accomplishment of pain and suffering is convincing the victim that he or she is alone. My mom felt alone because she didn't have a loving husband. I felt alone because I didn't have a committed father. But, together, we didn't feel alone. We rejoiced together and grieved together. We found the ultimate healer, togetherness.

Playing Catch

My mom didn't lose her beauty after the divorce. She became more stunning in the presence of greater pain. She also was given the great task of raising my brother and I. Honestly, my mom had a tougher time raising my brother, but I believe she found equal joy in her two sons. It was just a little easier with me. Peter was about thirteen at the beginning of the divorce, and he entered adolescence with a roar of stubbornness and aggression. I was around eleven and quietly waiting for the day when I would become a teenager. There was something so grown up about the teenager, but little did I know, I was growing beyond a number of years. Although I was young, my heart was aging. I

had to grow up a little bit faster than my peers because of the recent trial in my life. I didn't mind the challenge, but I would have traded it in any day to have my dad back. I would have rather been a careless child in the presence of my dad than a grown-up child in the presence of a ghost.

My father didn't live in the house anymore, and that was hard. He wasn't there to prepare hot chocolate when I came in soaking wet from sledding crashes in the snow. He wasn't there when I called my "crush" on the telephone, wasting hours talking about nothing and probably repeating half the things I talked about. He wasn't there when Peter started shaving and wasn't there to teach him how. Peter learned anyway. He wasn't there when I learned to tie a tie, and he wasn't there to teach me how. I learned anyway. He wasn't there to read the paper and drink dark coffee in the morning while I would sit obnoxiously sipping the leftover milk from my cereal bowl. He wasn't there to rebound my basketball shots in the back yard. He wasn't there to discipline me. He wasn't there to be present. He wasn't there to be a father.

My mother was there. She used to play catch with me in the front yard. This may not seem like a big deal, but it was and still is. I loved baseball. I would run to the garage, slide on my dirty cleats, grab my glove, and yell to my mom that I was ready to bring the heat. I was a pitcher, and every pitcher must have a catcher. My catcher was the prettiest to play the game. Her stature was petite and delicate, and her smile was radiant. Her willingness to catch my pitches—no matter how fast or wild—was unmatched. She would go to the edge of the yard, kneel down slowly, and lift the glove in front of her face, indicating that she was ready for the ball. I hurled the ball. It slammed into her glove. She peeled it from the leather and casually threw it back.

Again, I stepped in my usual wind-up and fired away. Some of the balls dipped between her feet, some sailed above her head, but she always made an effort to catch them. She understood the simple importance of playing catch with me. She grew more patient with every pitch, and I grew more confident in her ability. She was the best catcher I ever had. No, she was the best coach I ever had.

My mom didn't have to throw the baseball with me, but she did. She did because she loved me, and she knew that if she didn't sit behind the plate, I would be throwing to the air. She did because she was the only parent in that house. I am willing to bet there were times when she did not want to play catch because she was tired—not physically, but emotionally. Did she have the strength to carry on one more day in a three-person house intending four? Would she be able to fill the shoes of a father and a mother? The answer was always yes in my mind, but I think she wanted to believe the devil at times. He always answered, "Of course not." Thank God, the devil is never right.

Home Improvement

Living in a single-parent home was unintended to say the least. If anyone believes that the intentions of marriage are to fall in love, have a couple of kids, enjoy the relationship, fall out of love, tear the kids in half, and expect a cheerful willingness on everyone's behalf to accept the changes, he is a fool. Unfortunately, the world is full of them. I didn't accept the change because I hated the divorce. I hated the consequences of divorce. I hated that when my dad left, he didn't take the furniture or the house; he took a part of the family. He took the home. I was thankful the house stayed.

My mom, Peter, and I began to rebuild the home, but the rebuilding process was agonizing. It asked that we lift heavy hearts with sore hands and that we pry rusted nails from a shaken foundation. Sure, the heart is small and fits comfortably into your chest behind the ribcage, but it weighs a ton. Imagine carrying one heart; I had to carry my own and help with two others. My mom and Peter did the same. Rebuilding was like the game Jenga. Jenga starts out as a tower of stacked wooden blocks. The object of the game is to remove one block at a time from the tower and stack it on top. As more and more blocks are pulled from the structure, the tower becomes unsteady. Eventually, the tower falls. The last player to stack a block without making the tower fall wins the game. Each piece we removed felt like the last piece, and each brought an anticipation of the roof caving in or the foundation breaking beneath our feet. The house never fell. A house only falls if it is left alone. My father left the house alone, but we did not. We removed the painful shards and placed them on the top where they became something to build upon. Unlike Jenga, our tower grew steadier with the removal of more blocks. We took the painful things and made them better; we rebuilt our happiness out of pain. Again, it was a long process, but the promise of renewal came to fruition. We had a new home, but we had to learn how to live in it.

Learning how to live again in that house was tough because it was such an unfamiliar setting. Mom, Peter, and I were all dealing with our pain in different ways and at the same time were striving to grieve together. It was difficult to grieve together amidst so much anger. Oftentimes, the anger was silent, but its aroma always lingered. It crept patiently on the floor and crouched in every corner. When my dad left, I wanted him to collect the anger in the house and pack it away with the rest of his things, but I did

not realize that anger finds its refuge in the family, not the house. In fact, when my dad opened the front door of the house to leave for the last time, the anger intruded as a cool breeze and made itself at home. The door closed, and the house wept, for it had lost something wonderful and gained something terrible.

Anger Everywhere

It would have been easier if the anger had just been directed towards my dad. Anger doesn't work that way. Things make us angry and distract us from the source of the anger. We become entrenched in it, and it becomes the puppeteer tugging at whichever strings it desires. We fool ourselves thinking that we can pull down when anger yanks up. It controls us when we do not want to be controlled, and the control is relentless. It invades your character and deceives your soul. It begins to affect those that you love and those that are determined to love you.

Fortunately, I had a mom that loved Peter and me well. I like to think that I loved her well, but honestly, I didn't know how to love her most of the time. I was young, but I could tell when she was troubled. I saw her eye pockets stained with mascara, I heard her muffled cry behind her bedroom door, I watched her sit aimlessly on the edge of a chair staring out a window, I watched her drown in thought, and I always wanted to rescue her. She would turn and notice half my face peering around the door and would smile and invite me to sit with her. I approached her willingly and helplessly. I fell into her arms and often cried. I cried because she was crying, but it was always good for me to cry. I had enough reason to cry, and that is how my anger came out a lot of the time. It didn't come out as a tantrum, but as an innocence that longed to understand why a dad could be so happy and a mom could be so sad.

My brother didn't cry as much—well, not to my knowledge. His anger raged as one would expect it to. He yelled at our dad, and he yelled at my mom and me. I hated it because I wasn't that way. It scared me when we were with my dad, and it scared me more when we were at home. The last thing I desired in that house was the same thing I felt at my dad's apartment. I lived in one place, but the anger resided in two places. Peter was only vulnerable in his anger. Sensitivity was weak, but I never believed that he was any stronger by screaming at my mom and me. Peter and I argued a lot, and looking back, I wish we had shared more than our anger. We shared a similar anger, but we also fought each other because of that same anger. The relationship always was unspoken. Anger did its job, and we were helpless to do ours. We could not escape the prison of anger, so we grew content within our individual cells and carried on. The anger wasn't contained within the dynamic of my dad, brother, and I. My brother and I went back and forth between my mom and dad, and unfortunately, the anger did, too. It brought everyone to a place of desperation. We were desperate to feel alive again. We were desperate for each other.

Not My Mother

My mom loved random acts of kindness. She had countless joys, and one of those joys was bringing excitement to her two sons. We had an old television that sat in the corner of the family room, and for years it pleaded for a replacement. It had entertained long enough and was tired of providing a quality product, so my mom, one random day, decided to honor this dying plea. Later that day, and to the surprise of Peter and I, she entered the home with a giant cardboard box containing something new and heavy. We carried the box upstairs and quickly opened it. It was a brand new television.

We were ecstatic, but our excitement could not compete with her joy that day. She was proud of that television. Peter and I set it on the television stand and began to unfold the cables. At this point, I stepped back allowing Peter and mom to hook it up. They pulled the stand out so they could squeeze behind the television. They began to prepare the television for its first viewing, but they soon ran into a problem. Peter, in his stubbornness, opted to fix the problem with no help—not even the help from the one who had given the gift. My mom didn't give up and continued to offer her assistance. That didn't work. I sensed the frustration brewing quickly, so I retired to the back corner of the room where I thought I would be safe from the inevitable explosion of anger.

“Peter, let me help you,” my mom said. “I think that might go there.”

“Mom, no...I...can do it...just let me do it!” Peter snapped as his short fuse burned to nothing, thus setting off the bomb.

“Fine, you do it. I didn't buy the T.V. or anything,” she responded sarcastically. “Your welcome!” She trampled down the steps, and the thunderous vibrations shook the house and shook me to the core. Before she reached the kitchen, my brother fired back, and he chose to say something that a son should never say to his mother. He stopped himself from completing the phrase and ended it with a breath of annoyance. Although my mother didn't here the entire phrase, she understood every word of it. It was then that my mother escaped from her character. She completed the phrase, and not only did she complete it, she screamed it at the top of her lungs. It was so loud that you could hear the veins standing up in her neck and her hands trembling. I had never in my life heard my mom say something close to that. I was scared of her as I stood frozen in the corner, starring dumbfounded at my brother. He didn't look at me; he just went ahead and

finished with the television. I was mad at him. My mom bought us a T.V. She wanted to help, but my brother didn't need any help. You would think that in a house as broken as ours, we needed all the help we could get.

I followed my mom's footsteps down the stairs and into the kitchen. I carefully picked up the chair that she had knocked over in the tirade, and began to search for her in the house. I moved slowly and silently because I was still frightened. I peered into the living room and found no sign of her. I turned into the foyer and still no luck. I then heard her upstairs. It was her cry that was so familiar—the one I had heard too often since the divorce. My toes pushed against the base of the mountainous stairs as I contemplated climbing to the summit where her bedroom door stood. I slid my hand along the railing and climbed, finally reaching the top. I knocked. She invited me in, and I immediately saw the pain and regret in her eyes. She apologized. I didn't even need an apology because I ached at the sight of her. Her tears were enough. The woman that yelled at my brother was not my mom. It was the helplessness she felt as a single mother. It was the anger towards a man. It was the pain that came out of giving alone when she desired to have a husband that would share the gift. The soft apologetic voice was my mom. The beauty she miraculously maintained in the midst of so much hurt was my mom. She loved her sons, and we both knew that. It was not my brother that drove my mom from the family room. It was the helplessness of being the oldest man in the house. It was the anger towards the father that should have always been that man. It was the pain he carried.

It was hard living together. My dad moved out and anger took his place. We were not excited about his stay, but we had to learn how to live with him. It was too much to ask him to leave because we quickly grew attached to him. He gave us a reason to scream and an even greater reason to justify our screams. But we could never justify the anger that came between us. We had no reason to be angry at one another because we shared in our sufferings. We had reason to be angry with my dad, but even that would someday have to be relinquished. My anger didn't understand that concept. Why should anyone ever have to forgive the cause of so much pain? They shouldn't. My anger would remain unjustified. That was the child in me.

Joe

I spent many summers at Grace Youth Camp in upstate Michigan. I had a lot of family in Lansing, and a couple times a year, we would pack up the car and head north. Lansing was a shorter distance, so we would stop there for a few days and make the rest of the trip up to the camp. It was the perfect place for a kid my age. It had wide-open fields to play kickball, baseball, capture the flag, and so on. Capture the flag was the big game of the week. The camp was split up into two teams, and we spread across the entire camp, striving to dodge opposite team members and searching carefully for the hidden flag. The camp also had a shooting range with guns and bows, a great fire pit, a beautiful lake with all the necessary floats, sailboats, and canoes, and I cannot forget the inter-cabin competition for the end-of-the-week six-foot long sundae. I am proud to say that I had the priviledge of feasting on that dessert more than once. Victory tasted so sweet.

The first summer without the voice of my dad saying, “Bye, Justin, have a great time at camp,” was hard. But my mom was faithfully there, even after the twelve or so hours of driving, lifting my baggage from the trunk and walking me to my cabin. I was both happy and sad to see her leave, and if I was sad, I got over it pretty quickly. I was at camp. Nothing would get in my way as long as I was far from home and enjoying the unruliness of summer camp. Nothing would distract me. I was free—well, not completely. Some sadness just doesn’t dissolve as quickly. It is not up to you when grief will strike, and grief doesn’t always keep in mind that you are at summer camp. If it hits, it hits, and you just have to cry. A boy named Joe taught me this.

Joe was my best friend at Grace Youth Camp. He was from Grand Rapids, Michigan, so the only time I saw him was during the summer. We exchanged letters, but a boy can only write so many letters a year before his hand gets tired. He was a great friend—one that I would have liked to have year round. We played basketball constantly, we joked around, we talked about how cute the camp nurse was, and he was the mediator for my first summer camp romance. Isn’t young love a wonderful thing? Joe was probably more excited about it than I was. He was a loyal friend, and one summer night before skit night, our friendship changed.

I was so sad. I cried outside of the dining hall because my dad was gone. The divorce followed me to camp, it found what cabin I was staying in, and it dwelled within my heart. I fought it all week, but it was difficult fighting something that wouldn’t go away. I gave up, and I cried. Joe sat beside me listening intently to my cry for a dad and to the tears splashing on the concrete. I was looking down when I noticed a different set

of tears falling. Joe was crying, and I had no idea why. I lifted my head slowly and looked straight through the blur covering his eyes.

“You should be happy that you have a dad,” he said softly but defensively.

“What do you mean,” I sputtered as I attempted to stop crying.

“My dad is gone. I saw my own dad get shot. I watched him die.”

He let go of his strength, and the tears fell harder. Joe witnessed the murder of his father.

One night, they were walking together through an alley, and a man approached them.

The darkness hid the stranger’s face, but Joe’s dad could not run or hide. Joe was helpless. All he could do was scream for help. He couldn’t save his dad’s life. The murderous man didn’t lay a finger on Joe, but he took something precious from him. He took his father. Take everything he owns, but please don’t take his father. He took everything.

I was shocked. I didn’t know how to respond or if I even deserved to respond. I was humbled because I did have a living and breathing father just twelve hours away. His father lived in his dreams. Who was I to weep for a father when his father was gone, impossible to see and impossible to touch? Who was I to offer words of encouragement when I could not even begin to understand that kind of pain? Who was I to cry over my dad? Joe wanted me to cry, but he did not want me to lose hope. It was not a competition to see who had a dad and who didn’t; it was a conversation that inspired the fellowship of suffering. We cried together because we had both experienced loss in our lives, but Joe’s tears were different. They cried in pain but also pleaded that I not live the rest of my life without my dad. I didn’t want to live the rest of my life without him, but I did not know how to live a life with him.

Joe was right; I did have a dad. He said that I should be happy because I have a dad, but I wasn't happy with the dad that I had. I wasn't happy that my grief, which knew no boundaries, snuck into my luggage and invited itself to camp. I didn't want to deal with it, but I had to. Maybe one day Joe's words would ring true, I thought. Being happy with my dad became a foreign idea after he left, and I believed that his absence was nothing but a hopeless absence—one that would never return the happiness of a renewed relationship. Would sadness always strike me when I just wanted to be happy? Maybe. That summer, did the sadness show me anything? Yes. It showed me that there are people who want to help me carry the burden and that the aloneness I felt was only deception. Joe was the first of many friends to come—friends that embraced me and walked patiently with me. I also learned that I had a dad, but the thought of him pursuing me was frightening. Joe's words echo in my heart today because I eventually chose to embrace them. At the time, I was not ready to "have a dad," and I think Joe knew that. He told me anyway.

Cancer's Return

I climbed out of my car after a long day of class and track practice. I moved to the trunk and gathered my bags and began the trudge to the back door of my house. I stepped into the garage and my brother was just leaving to go somewhere. We exchanged few words as I continued towards the door and he got into his car. He started the engine, began to back slowly out of the garage when the car stopped. I turned as he rolled down the passenger side window and called my name.

“Hey, Justin,” he said quietly but very audibly.

“Yeah,” I responded.

“Mom has cancer again.”

“Ha, ha, very funny, Peter,” I said hoping that it was a joke and knowing deeper that my brother would never joke about something like that.

“I’m serious.”

The window rolled up, and he left. I was left standing in the middle of the garage holding my bags and dreading the possibility that I might have to carry even more baggage. My books were heavy enough that I didn’t need anything else placed on my shoulders. I did not want to open the back door and step into the kitchen where I knew she would be waiting for me. I didn’t know what to think; I didn’t know how to respond. It would be hard to stand before her and look straight into her fearful eyes. I had to go inside. I quietly ascended the garage steps and stepped into the kitchen. She was not standing behind the counter, and it was peacefully quiet. I heard my mom call my name, and she came around the corner and into the kitchen. I couldn’t move; I just stood on the other end motionless yet eager to run into her arms. Before she could say a word, I cried, and she immediately knew why I was crying. I still couldn’t move, so she came to me and pulled me into her warm breast. I threw my heavy arms around her convinced that I wouldn’t have to let go. We always have to let go. She led me to the living room and sat me down on the couch.

“Mom, why?” I cried.

“Justin, I am fine. Everything is gonna be okay,” she said confidently.

“I’m scared.”

“There is no reason to be scared.”

Maybe there was a reason to be scared. That wasn’t the first time that my mom had been sick. Cancer was a constant battle in her life, and she always fought it willingly. The first time she had cancer, it was a terrible and weakening thing for everyone, but she prevailed. The other times were minor occurrences that always guaranteed victory. My mom was a fighter, and she never lost. So, maybe there wasn’t a reason to be scared. Maybe my mom was right when she said that I shouldn’t worry about her health. I couldn’t doubt the mother who embodied strength and humility at the same time. The assurance of my mom was sweet, and all I could do was believe her. I guess I had nothing to fear, but I still did not want to leave her.

“Mom, I am going to stay here with you tonight.”

“No, Justin, go out with your friends like you planned to do. Go and have some fun, and do not worry about me. Do not stay here. Be with your friends.”

I did go out with my friends that night, but I thought about her the entire time. Her reassuring voice resonated in my head and distracted me from the laughter and conversation of my friends. The warmth of her embrace stayed with me and held me the whole time. I loved my friends, but I loved her more. The time with my friends was important, but the time with her was sacred. She insisted that I spend time with my friends, but she didn’t have the power to alter my thoughts. I thought of her constantly, but I think she thought of Peter and me more. She was standing at the introduction of a new cancer, but her sympathy extended to us. I didn’t deserve comfort. She was the one in pain, but she didn’t see it that way. She saw the fear in her children’s eyes—a fear that

was stronger than any cancer—so she stepped out of her pain and gave care to ours. That night, I imagined her alone in the house crying out to God for her sons. Part of me thinks that she forgot to pray for herself. She was that kind of mom.

She Waited On Me

It was May when I learned about my mom's cancer. A couple of weeks later my first year of high school ended, and June came quickly. I didn't mind June's eagerness because it meant a sooner departure to California, where a beautiful summer camp nestled in the mountains was waiting. I was excited to get away for a while, even in the wake of my mom's situation. My worry had calmed down enough that leaving her for two weeks was not disconcerting. She smiled when I talked about going to camp, and I smiled when she looked at me. I left on June 20th, confident that my mom was going to be okay. She seemed fine when I left. What seems is not always what is, but it can be a lot easier to rest in the "seems."

The mountains were mighty. They towered around the camp. They basked in the sunlight during the day and touched the stars at night. I could have sat in a chair starrng at them for hours at a time and never have grown tired of their magnificence. But I guess I had forgotten that with every mountain comes a valley. When we are high in the mountains, at some point we have to come down, and oftentimes, what is out of our control leads us into the valley—a place that is flat but very hard to walk through. On July 4th, the day I arrived home from camp, I came down from my summit and stood at the edge of the deepest and longest valley I had ever seen. I just didn't think that I was really going to have to walk through it. I had walked through a valley before and knew that the mountains were better. They stood taller. The mountains always seem better.

I exited the plane, walked down the long tunnel, and stepped into the open airport lobby, where I expected to see my mom. I saw many familiar faces but did not see hers. Where was she? She is probably a little late, I thought. She was not late; she was not there. Bill Delvaux, a high school teacher and coach of mine, was there to greet me.

“I am here to take you home,” he said.

We grabbed my luggage at the baggage claim and walked to his car. I collapsed into the front seat, exhausted from the trip, and I continued to search for excuses for my mom’s absence. I did succeed in finding one that made sense. It is late and she is tired, I thought. The excuse was enough for me, and I later realized that I was partly right. She was tired, but not because it was late. She was dying; that is why she was tired.

“How was camp?” Mr. Delvaux asked, as we merged onto the interstate to go home.

“It was great,” I responded as I struggled to sum up the wonderful camp experience in one car ride. I enjoyed Mr. Delvaux, and it wasn’t awkward riding with him. He wanted to hear about camp, and I wanted to tell him. The conversation then changed suddenly. He wanted to tell me something and knew that I needed to hear it. I didn’t want to hear it.

“Justin,” he slowly spoke. “Your mom is sick.”

I knew that already and attempted to change the subject.

“So, how are things at the school?” I asked trying to fight off his words.

“No, Justin...your mom is very sick.”

I couldn't say a word. I just sat in utter silence listening to the latest updates I had missed while climbing the mountains of California. I was ready to get home; I was ready to see my mom. I didn't think that she would be awake, but I just wanted to see her face. We pulled into the driveway, and I noticed that her light was still on. She was awake, but suddenly, I was nervous to see her. Again, I was scared to see her weakness.

I stumbled into the house with all of my dirty laundry, and immediately went to my mom's bedroom, where she was quietly waiting for me. She looked sick, but she looked even more stunning. The dim bedside light hid her sickness and revealed a tired smile that took away my worry for those moments before she fell asleep. It was strange that I had just heard about the seriousness of her illness yet was so content and confident in her presence. Well, it wasn't my confidence; my mom just rubbed off on me.

I then noticed the letter I had sent her while in California. One night at camp, we were urged to write a letter of thanks to our parents. I found great joy in writing that letter and even greater joy in sending it. The letter was tucked in between the clock and a picture frame, and I could tell that it had been carefully opened—my mom was gentle, even with the act of opening letters. I stared at the envelope wanting to know what she thought of it. I knew she had read it; she probably read it a hundred times. Before I could ask about it, she responded.

“I got your letter. I loved it. Thank you.”

I still have that letter. The handwriting has not faded, and it still sits in the same envelope, addressed to *Cindy Carlson*. She didn't need a letter to know that she was loved, but I am glad that I wrote it because I can read it now and remember her smile when she thanked me the night I got home from camp.

Mom, thank you for waiting up for me. I know you were tired.

The Builder's Last Day At Home

An ambulance came a couple of days later. The rushing sound of sirens flooded the house and startled me. I hoped that the sound would just sail on by, but it intensified as the ambulance pulled into my driveway. The sound stopped, but the lights continued to spin causing a slight dizziness in my eyes. Two men jumped from the truck and jogged to the front door, which I had already opened for them. I pointed them upstairs where my mom was fending off death, and they moved without asking me any further questions. I stood silent in the foyer waiting for them to bring my mom down the steps, and then they came around the corner carrying her on one of our dining room chairs. She sat upright against the back of the chair with her eyes closed and pointing to the ceiling. I couldn't say a word. Paleness had overcome her body, and it appeared that death had already defeated her. Her skin was a powdery white, her arms dangled helplessly beside her, and her fingers curled around the underside of the chair to hold her balance. At the bottom of the stairs, she turned and looked at me and wanted to speak, but she couldn't. I knew what she wanted to say, and that was enough for me. Her eyes always had great things to say. The men carried her out the front door, down the sidewalk, and into the back of the ambulance. I didn't even walk over to her; I just stood on the porch and watched the spinning lights disappear. That was my mom's last day in her home. I guess it was mine, too.

The Last Conversation

The door to the hospital room crept open, and I slid in, careful not to wake her up. It was a tiny room furnished with a bed, a small table, and a couple of chairs. A lamp in the corner cast a dim but comforting orange tint across the room, leaving just enough light to see my mom's resting form. I stepped to the edge of her bed and just looked at her. That is all I could do. She then began to move, causing the sheets to rustle and the bed hinges to squeak.

"Hey, Justin," she whispered. The sound of her voice cracked my heart.

"Hi, mom."

"Are you okay?" she asked in unrelenting humility.

"Yeah," I lied.

She couldn't say a lot, but the sound of her breath was exhilarating. It was hard for her to speak, but she did it anyway. It was hard for me to speak, but I wanted to. I wanted her to hear my voice over and over again. I wanted her to know that I was there.

"Hey, look on the bright side," she laughed, "at least you will be able to get a new car."

I couldn't help but laugh. Her sense of humor remained, and I wouldn't have traded in her laughter for the most luxurious car in the world. Give me an old bicycle. I wanted my mom to live.

The door opened, and it was my brother. We smiled sadly at each other, and I fell back into one of the chairs, leaving open the spot next to mom's bed. I leaned back and watched my brother move to her side. Without hesitation, he grabbed her hand and held it with undying gracefulness. His lips began to move, but there was no sound. We both

had something in common in that room: we didn't know what to say. Suddenly, he burst into tears. He gasped for air trying to gather any words, but the tears had so much to say.

"I...I...I am so sorry," he sputtered. "I am sor...sor...sorry for everything I did and f...for lying. I am sorry for every...th...thing. I didn't m...m...mean to hurt you, please know that. I love you so much."

"I know, Peter. I love you, too," my mom replied.

Peter's tenderness was unflinching. It invaded the room and moved me to rejoice in his weakness. I was both sad and happy to see his tears because I knew that those tears were genuine. They couldn't hide anymore. His head fell gently upon her breast as she placed her other hand upon him, stroking his hair in careful reassurance. It wasn't a reassurance that she would continue to live; it was a reassurance that she would continue to live after her death. He wanted her to stay. She did stay, and she is with him everyday of his life.

That was the last time the three of us had a conversation together. The moments of sitting by the fire on Christmas Day, the long car rides to Lansing, and the many nights at the dinner table could not compare to the enjoyment of that day in that tiny hospital room. It was a time of rejoicing, though the tears and the horrible cancer would not want you to believe it. I rejoiced because my brother was actually breaking, and my mom was there to see it. My mom rejoiced because her two sons were near. My brother rejoiced because he embraced the beauty of our mom. We really did enjoy that time together, and I left that room certain that we had built a home that would never fall again. Death laughed at the thought, but I'll just say that we had the last laugh.

The house still stands.

She's Gone

The Doctor told me that my mom had about three more days of life, but a doctor's words never take away the feeling of surprise when death actually does happen. It doesn't matter how many days, weeks, months, or years someone has. I had three days, or so I thought. The day after the doctor's news, I was hanging out at the hospital unconsciously counting down the hours in my head. My mom was now in a different room, one that was bigger and more conducive to visitors—and believe me, she had a lot of them. I spent much of my time sitting on a thinly cushioned chair just outside the door. On this particular day, many of my mom's closest friends were at her bedside offering peace and love. I went in and out of the room as I pleased. I just couldn't bear to sit with her for long periods of time because it was just too hard. I grew restless in the chair and decided to walk around the hospital. I walked to the elevator and nodded at doctors and other familiar visitors as they passed by. The elevator button light clicked off, and the gates opened. Just get me off this floor for a little bit, I thought. I climbed on and descended to the floor that overlooked the main lobby. I walked toward the gift shop hoping that some cards or trinkets would entertain me for a while, but a voice stopped me.

“Justin,” someone yelled from the lobby below.

I looked over the railing and noticed my dad rising from one of the lobby couches.

“Yeah,” I responded.

“They just called from upstairs. They want you to come up.”

“Okay,” I said calmly. I didn’t think anything of it. I just thought that maybe our pastor wanted to pray with me. My dad didn’t appear anxious or troubled. He just said plainly that I needed to go upstairs. I turned around and headed back to the elevator and landed back on my mom’s floor. I ambled down the hallway and to the door of my mom’s room. I reached for the handle, and before I could turn it, the door opened. There before me stood Carol—a friend of my mom’s—stained with grief.

“Justin, she’s gone.”

Just then, a sea of friends and family parted and created a path leading me to the foot of her bed. The heaviness of my soul increased with each step toward her still body. I fell at her feet and began to weep. I buried my face in my hands and cried out softly enough for me to hear my pain. I looked down at the floor, and watched my tears collide with the tile. It was hard to lift my head to see her motionless. The sheets didn’t rustle and the bed didn’t squeak. I couldn’t hear her breathe. Yes, she was gone. Mr. Delvaux was in the room, and he sat beside me, gently resting his arm around my shaking body.

“Do you want to go see her? He asked.

“Y...y...ye...yes,” I answered.

He helped me rise from the seat and led me slowly to her side. Her body was beginning to cool beneath the covers, and her eyes were closed. I lifted my heavy arm hesitantly and placed my hand upon her face. It still felt warm, and my fingers glided smoothly along its contours embracing every inch and every moment. I ran my fingers through her hair, recognizing each delicate strand and every curl. My tears soaked into the coarse cloth of her hospital gown and gave it an unfamiliar softness. I didn’t stand beside her for very long, but I stood there long enough to notice the smile that arose

beneath her skin. Her soul was resting because she was finally where she longed to be: in the presence of the Lord. I am sure that if you go to that hospital room today, you will find many tears of grief soaked into the tile, but you will also find tears of joy.

“I love you, mom,” I whispered as I left her side.

Suddenly, My Father

My dad came up from the lobby, and I met him in a vacant room down the hall. My brother had to race to the hospital from work, and when he arrived, he fell into the arms of my dad and I. We all cried in that room. We just stood in the middle of the room and cried. I didn't feel uneasy about my dad being there because my grief was so intense that the presence of any other pain was ignored. I did acknowledge my dad's boldness in not only stepping a foot onto that floor but holding me with every bit of strength that he had. It was the first time, since the divorce, that I felt vulnerable before my dad. It was the first time he saw me cry like that.

Three men stood together, but separate in that room. My mom's passing had suddenly brought us together in all our pain and grief. Before I could question my dad's presence, he was there. All three of us were there, holding on to whatever we could. We were reunited because of a woman that Peter and I loved and my dad once loved. But no matter how absent or present the love was towards my mom, we had to find a way to love each other. We had to find a way to be a family again.

That wasn't the last time we cried together. The last time was at the funeral. I honestly do not remember much of the funeral because the embrace of my father and brother was too consuming. I remember faintly the kind words of my grandmother, but my tears were too much to recall the details. The three of us just stood and cried. No one

asked that we listen, and no one asked that we stop crying. They wanted us to cry, and I think it surprised them that we cried together because they saw a distant father holding his distant sons, who were crying out for the love of their mom. My mom was gone, but my dad remained. My mom was gone, and my dad was there to hold me as I wept. It was a strange situation and one that I was not ready for. It all happened so fast. I wasn't ready to hold my dad. I was too tired to cry out for his love.

He Was The Last To Leave

Peter and I sat quietly in our 1984 Honda Civic hatchback waiting for the funeral procession to begin. My brother was upset because we were not the first car in the line. I didn't really care and responded to his frustration with silence. The hearse began to slowly roll, and we proceeded closely behind as the second car in line. We didn't say a word the entire way. I just listened to the murmur of the old engine and observed the respectful oncoming traffic pulling onto the shoulder.

We finally arrived at the cemetery. We slowly exited the car and walked to my mother's gravesite. A handful of chairs was arranged in two rows beneath a tent, and family members were making their way to those seats. Friends stood just outside of the tent under the clear summer sky. I sat down and just stared at the coffin. I then stared at the hole where the coffin would rest. I noticed the cemetery workers hovering discretely in the background and assumed they had become numb to their work. Death was no surprise to them because they experienced it everyday. They didn't look sad. My mom's death was a surprise, and even though I was aware of its inevitability, I was surprised at every click of the lift that set her coffin down into the soil. I was sad to see her go.

Someone stood up, said a few words, and ended with a prayer. The rest of the work was given to the workers, who with great ease and efficiency buried my mom. The crowd slowly dispersed and some close friends and family stuck around. A group of my friends surrounded and consumed me with overwhelming love and compassion. Mothers kissed me and fathers hugged me. I just stood there and accepted any love that came my way. Eventually, it was time to leave. I found my brother and we made our way to the car. Everyone else was doing the same except for one man. My dad stood like a statue with his arms crossed staring at my mom's grave.

“Dad, are you coming?” I asked.

“No, I'm gonna stay.”

I started the car and looked past Peter, sitting in the passenger seat, and watched my dad. The workers carried on, but he remained still. I continued down the gravel road and around the corner and eventually lost sight of him. I don't know how long he stayed, but I do know that he stayed. I don't know if he spoke to her. Maybe he didn't say a word, but I like to think that he did:

“I'm sorry,” he whispered.

My dad was the last one to leave that day.

Running in Place

I pulled up to my dad's house, a house that I would begin to call my own. The car door groaned as I opened it, and I stepped onto the driveway. I shut the door behind me as I slowly made my way to the front door. I was used to a different neighborhood, a different mailbox, a different driveway, and a different front door. There was no doubt

that things were different now, and I realized it as soon as I pulled onto my new street. It was a foreign place, and I was more than just a visitor.

I approached the front door and lifted my hand as if to knock, but remembered that I didn't have to knock. Why must a man knock on the front door of his own house? It would have been easier to knock because it would have assumed that I was just stopping by. I would have assumed that I did not have a key to get in. I didn't want a key to get in. Why would I want a key that not only opened the front door to the house but also the door to all of my hidden pain and anger? Maybe I could continue my success in hiding my anger towards my father, but it would be difficult to do in his own household. I did it before, and I would do it again.

I pressed the button on the door handle and pushed. The door swung open revealing an uncomfortable silence. The furniture, the piano, and the mail on the kitchen counter sat still, but something within me moved. It was a feeling that screamed, "Run!" I couldn't run because if a man runs away, he must know where he is going. I didn't know where to go. He must be certain that the place he is going is better than his current position. Maybe there was a better place, but I was in my father's house. Is there a better place than in the presence of your father? Although he had hurt me, he was still my dad. He had run from our home years before, and I wasn't going to do the same.

"You are welcome to come live with us," people suggested.

"Thank you, but I am going to live with my dad," I responded.

The feeling rushed in a second time and said softer, "Run." I stood in the foyer surrounded by all my clothes, books, posters, and everything else from my old room and considered turning and running out into the comfortable world where I felt safe from my

anger and from my dad. I couldn't do it. I couldn't go back because my mom was gone, and there was nothing I could change.

"I will not run away," I said to myself.

Just then my dad came around the corner and said, "Hey Justin, welcome."

The sound of his voice reminded me of something. I didn't have to walk out the front door in order to run away. I could stay in one place and run as far away as I desired. I stood right in front of my dad and ran away. I had a conversation with him and ran away. I walked into the kitchen, made a sandwich, and ran away. I stood right in the middle of the foyer and ran away from my father and from my new home.

I took my things up to my bedroom, and after I dropped them on the floor, I fell onto the bed. I laid there quietly and uncomfortably, wallowing in the realization that I had a new address. Thoughts of my mom arose between unsettling thoughts of being in a new environment. I wrapped my arms around my pillow and stared out the window.

"I can't believe that this is my new home. This is where I live, and this is where I will sleep every night," I said to myself.

I laid on my bed and ran away. It is amazing how far I ran my first day at home.

Knock, Knock

My mom was a secretary at my school. Everyday, I would go and see her just to say hello, ask permission to go somewhere later that day, or ask for some money. I always slowed down at her desk. There was something about her—her smile, her posture, her voice—that promised comfort and patience. I was never in a hurry when I looked into her eyes across the desk. She loved that job, and just about everyone who came in contact with her loved her. They talked about her kindness, her warmth, and her

incredibly contagious laugh. I heard the compliments all the time and never grew tired of them. They got to see her during the day, but I got to live with her.

My sophomore year in high school began, and it was very different. My mom wasn't sitting at her desk anymore, she wasn't answering incoming calls, and her laughter couldn't be heard from down the hall. I still walked by her desk on the way to lunch, and I still imagined her speaking to me as I passed. The school was different because she was not there, but everyone still talked about her. They talked about her kindness, her warmth, and her laugh, and I never got tired of it. I always wanted to hear more.

I got in my car after school and drove a different way home. I pulled up to a different house and ate dinner at a different table. The conversation at the table was limited to the episodes of that day, but I usually didn't mind. I was awkwardly content in just eating my dinner and retiring to my room, which is where I spent a majority of my time. It was easier in my room because it was adorned with distraction. I had books, a television, a computer, a stereo, my own phone line, and a guitar, which I constantly played to settle my mind. I closed the door, and I was comfortable again. I felt uneasy sitting in the living room with my dad and step mom, and they grew frustrated at the amount of time I spent in my room. My door stayed closed a lot, and I hadn't begun to open the other door.

The first year living with my dad and step mom was easy in the sense that nothing about the past was brought up. Beneath the surface was a great deal of unfinished business. The unspoken words were quiet but very evident; they hid in our throats, waiting to spring forth. It was good that nothing was said for a while because it allowed me to grow somewhat accustomed to the household, and I believe that my dad and step

mom wanted to respect my transition. They understood that I had just lost my mom, and it didn't seem necessary to resolve the implicit conflict between us immediately. So much was unresolved and unsaid that eventually someone would have to say something.

My dad came knocking on my door one day. The knock was so familiar, but I had never answered the door before. He knocked again. I had no choice. I walked to the door, turned the knob, and the door violently swung open. I looked straight into my father's eyes for the first time. He knocked, and I finally answered. My anger crossed the threshold, and I had no intention of shutting that door again.

Out of Hiding

I sat uneasy in the burgundy leather chair positioned at the edge of the living room. My dad's steps were loud and provoking as he entered the room from the kitchen. I didn't want to look at him but couldn't help it as he moved around me to sit down on the adjacent couch. I glanced at him and looked away and repeated this many times before he finally spoke the first words. I could tell that he was eager but hesitant to speak because of the uncertainty of my reaction. He was determined to speak the truth, and I was prepared to believe it to be false. I was determined to hurl my truth back, proud that it was soaked with stubborn anger. I wasn't going to move, and movement was exactly what my dad wanted. We didn't want the same thing, and our conversations didn't understand the meaning of common ground. The line between us would not be erased for years to come, but for a while, we each took sides. My dad took his side. I took mine.

The conversation began. The silence that preceded it was both dreadful and intense. I wanted to hear what my dad had to say, but I wanted even more to tell him that he was wrong. My anger was aimed directly at him; it wasn't expressed toward him. I

no longer feared my hidden anger, and I would have been ashamed to hide it any longer. After sitting dormant for so long, I finally erupted and had no intention of settling down. I longed to hear his words only so I could proclaim mine.

“Justin, I think it is time to talk about some things,” my dad initiated.

“Okay,” I responded as I prepared my defense. My fingers began to curl into my palms, and my jaw tightened.

“We wanted to give you some space for a while because we understand that you are in a tough place, but we also want it to feel like a home here. We want you to feel that this is your home, but in order to do that, we need to work through some things.”

When he said that, I felt that he wanted to solve everything right then and there. I thought it silly that my dad should expect so much out of one conversation. We were talking about healing years of hurt and denial in a half an hour. He was tired. He was ready for me to mold to the new dynamic, but he didn’t know that I was too comfortable in my own dynamic—the one that consisted of me being angry all the time. I wouldn’t heal in thirty minutes, in thirty hours, or in thirty months. I convinced myself that the justification of my anger had no time constraint. I was going to be angry forever, but I was also going to be happy. I thought that my anger would offer me a place of contentment and happiness. The two never work hand in hand.

“What is there to work through?” I asked already knowing the answer.

My dad looked down for a second as if to gather his thoughts and then answered my question.

“I know that you are angry at me for everything that happened, but it is now time to move on. It will be too hard to live in harmony if you continue to harbor this anger. I

understand that your mom is gone, but this is a new place. I want this house to be one that everyone is comfortable in, and that just won't happen if this behavior continues. Justin, it is time to move on."

"Move on?" I mocked. "Why should I have to move on? Why should I have any responsibility for your mistakes, and why should I move on according to what you want? It has always been about you. You want this so that you will be comfortable, but I can't give it to you because I'm not ready."

Every word I spoke increased in volume and intensity, and the provocation grew increasingly evident in my dad's eyes. I could see the words trying to push through his closed lips as he waited for me to finish, but he could not hold his breath any longer.

"Dad, you walked out on us and—"

"I didn't walk out on YOU!" he interrupted. "I divorced your mom. I didn't divorce you and Peter!"

The battle commenced. I had been sharpening my sword since I was eleven, and this was the first time I really got to use it. I gripped it mightily and pulled it from its casing. Just before my first swing, I noticed a small engraving on the edge of the handle. The engraving said: *Handle with care*. I swung anyway.

"No! You did walk out on me! Divorce goes beyond the marriage! Peter and I were there, too, and we saw mom's pain daily! Were you around? Were you there when I got home from school? No. You walked out on all of us! When you left, it was about YOU, so I made my life about ME without you around! Dad, you weren't there, and you just have to admit that!"

The disagreement between us continued to rise, and it grew more difficult to listen to one another. Anger doesn't always promote listening. I listened only with the intent of reacting. My dad didn't want to listen at all because my words were too real. He thought he had moved beyond his past, but his past was brought back to life in the present. No one wants ever wants to revisit his shame.

“Justin, I know what I did was wrong and that I hurt you, but I have moved past it! You have no idea what I went through after I left your mom! It was hard for me, too, and you need to understand that! I have made some bad decisions, but I worked through them! I hurt you and a lot of other people, and I am sorry for that!”

His apology was an illusion. I heard it but felt that its sincerity was lost in the heat of the moment. I didn't sympathize with him because I felt his apology's only intention was to create his desired harmony in the household. It was too sudden, and it did nothing but incite greater animosity.

“Dad, what do you expect me to say? You made choices, and you suffered the consequences! But other people suffered, too, and they still struggle today! Your choices affect me today, and I just can't move on! I am not you! It just isn't that easy!”

“Justin, I said I was sorry!”

“I heard you, but your apology doesn't automatically change the situation for better! I am angry, and I am not ready to let go of it! I can't just move on because you did! You can't sit here and tell me to move on with the confidence that it will happen. It is my choice. I will choose when I will move on. I am not there, and there is nothing you can do to move me there!”

“Is it just going to be this way forever? Are we going to just have to live with you being distant and unready all the time? Justin, I don’t want this in my house! I don’t want this house to feel like us and then you! I want this to be a family!”

“How can you expect me to be a part of this ‘family’? What you want just isn’t that possible right now, and it is not something that I really want right now! You are just going to have to live with that!”

The conversation ended abruptly. That was the only way to end it. I remained seated, and my dad marched out of the room. His exit fumed me even more because he left in obvious and resenting disagreement. I sat surprised by my anger. I had never expressed myself in that way, and it gave me a sense of power and motivation. I was right, and no one would convince me otherwise. My dad did not want to understand my anger because it was a constant reminder of his absence and selfishness, but for the first time, I witnessed and began to understand my anger. I understood that it was something so authoritative that it could control a household. I understood that it controlled my every move when I was inside that house. I understood that when something was repressed for so long, its release ensured controlling emotion. There was certainly recklessness in my anger, but it was one that I thrived on. It had unpredictability to it that I anxiously awaited.

There would be many more meetings with my dad, and unlike my childhood, I did not fear them. I waited on them. I waited for my dad to say just one thing that would invite further disagreement and quickly joined in. Hesitation was gone; anticipation was the replacement. It doesn’t seem right that someone should willingly anticipate a conversation built upon resentment. I was too angry to think about what was right and

wrong.

The Umbrella

One night, as I pulled into my driveway in the pouring rain, I noticed a patio table umbrella flipping end over end through the yard across the street. It bore a resemblance to ours, but I did not bother to see if it actually was. As I raced to unlock the front door, I looked back once more, noticing that the umbrella was out of sight. If it is ours, I am sure that we will find it, I thought as I stepped inside.

I was the first one home, but my dad followed shortly after. We exchanged a few disengaging comments about the day as I carried my bags to my safe haven, or bedroom as most would call it. Just as I approached the steps, I said something about the umbrella.

“Dad, when I pulled up tonight, I saw an umbrella in the yard across the street.”

“What? What did it look like? Was it our umbrella?”

“I don’t know,” I lied. I knew it was ours because when I got home, I noticed that ours was missing. What are the chances of everyone’s umbrella running around the neighborhood? The chances were slim, and even though I noticed that our umbrella was gone, I still did not attempt to retrieve it.

I answered quickly and retired to my room. Later, I was walking to the bathroom when my dad stopped me.

“Why didn’t you check to see if that was our umbrella? If you saw it right across the street, why didn’t you go and get it?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just thought it wasn’t ours.” My reasons were not very convincing.

“Well, don’t you think that you could have found that out? Did you not even think that there was a good chance that it was ours? I just don’t understand why you would do that.”

My defenses began to build, and the anger was stacking the bricks pretty quickly. I didn’t want to admit that I had made a mistake because it meant admitting it to my dad. I just wanted to yell back, and although I yelled loudly, my defense was still weak. Then my dad said something that set me off.

“Justin, you are so irresponsible.”

I don’t remember how I responded, but I remember being so infuriated. The umbrella didn’t matter anymore. I just wanted to argue, and I wanted to yell just so that my dad would hear my rage. How dare he call me irresponsible, I thought. I didn’t care about the stupid umbrella. I just wanted to be angry, and yet again, my anger convinced me that I was invincible—that I was always right.

I realize now that I was wrong. I misinterpreted my dad’s role as a father and quickly turned him into an enemy. Sure, it was just an umbrella, but it symbolized the magnitude and stubbornness of my anger. I was so angry that I did not want to listen to the discipline of my dad. I am not saying that he responded to the situation in the best way possible, but he simply was approaching me as a father correcting his son. I believed that it was not his place to correct me. He did not have the right to tell me whether a decision was a right or wrong. But was it my right to yell at him? My dad could have placed the umbrella right before my eyes and stated it was indeed ours, and I still would have denied his correction. He could have pointed to his face and said ‘I am your father,’ and I would have been too angry to acknowledge him. It was obvious that I

should have rescued the umbrella, but even the obvious couldn't convince my anger to listen

The Distinguished Senior

I began to create family somewhere else. The house I was living in did not feel like a home, and it certainly did not feel like a family. The house was set up like this: my dad and step mom were on one side and I was on the other. Most of our time was spent on our individual sides, and little time was devoted to healthy interaction. The only vulnerability I understood was the openness of my anger simply for the pleasure of being angry. It was not a vulnerability that promoted healing; it was a vulnerability that wanted to show off. I had no intention of changing, and I had no aching desire to be a part of the family. The moment I stepped into that house, I turned off. I became someone I was not, but to my dad and step mom, what I knew I was not, they thought I was. Many other people did see who I really was, and those people were my family in a sense. I was a different person in different places, and that frustrated my dad.

My high school was a place of refuge. I walked through the front doors every morning at 7:45 and immediately embraced the freedom and completeness of the place. It was a small private Christian school with roughly two hundred students. My graduating class had a mere sixty-five people, but it was sixty-five people that I knew and enjoyed. After my mom's death, many of the students and faculty pulled me in and sympathized with my pain, anger, and fear. Their sympathy and care gave me life. Many of them knew me so well and had walked with me through all the pain up to that point that they were more than willing to stand with me as I began to unload my anger. They saw the tears of my anger, and they listened to my cries for anything but the present

situation. My dad did not see my tears. The only tears I shed at home were behind closed doors. My dad was burned by the fire of my anger, and when someone is on fire, it is hard to listen. He witnessed every day my burning determination to stay the same and to always be stronger. He didn't see my weakness when I was at school. He didn't see me weep out of grief and anger in an empty classroom. He didn't see me smile when I walked through the halls. He didn't see the vulnerability that revealed tenderness and laughter. He did see one thing that every one else saw; he saw the intensity of my anger. I couldn't hide it from anyone, but there was a difference. I grieved it in the presence of friends and enjoyed it in the presence of my dad.

Why was I a different person in the presence of different people? I was comfortable at school because I was surrounded by people that knew and understood me. My dad didn't know me. I was so familiar with his absence that the immediacy of his presence drove me further away into the arms of those that had already been there. I was used to their support and refused any that my dad offered to give. My dad had no right to give me anything, so I sought the care of others. At school, I felt free, but at home, I felt trapped. I stepped into my house every night and turned into something false but at the same time something safe. The safety that came from hiding was uneasy, but it was still safe. The safety I felt at school was different because people were not demanding that I change. The intensity of my anger was shared with those people, but it was not aimed at them. They looked beyond my anger and observed pain and grief at the core. My dad could not see anything beyond my anger because I did not want to show him the depth of my soul. I just wanted to show him my anger. I didn't want to show him the good parts about me. The problem was that he heard about those good things, and he couldn't

imagine that his son, unwilling to change in his own home, would be willing to love and laugh in a place that wasn't his home. He was the only one who didn't know me. He was a father who didn't understand his son. I was a son that wanted it to be that way.

One night, I pulled in around midnight. It was a great night—one filled with the antics and laughter shared amongst friends. It was a time away from the house and from the weariness of my anger, but the laughter quickly faded. I noticed something uncommon about the house as I walked to the door: the kitchen lights were on. I thought it strange that the lights were on, especially at midnight because my dad and step mom usually went to bed around 9 o'clock. Maybe they just forgot to turn the lights off, I thought. They didn't forget. I walked into the kitchen, and noticed my dad sitting in the living room.

“Justin, we need to talk,” he said. His voice promised a bad ending to a good evening.

“Alright,” I responded as I sat beside him. I was not excited.

“I am tired of this. I am tired of your attitude in this house, and it is time for things to change. Why can't you understand this?” He impatiently stated.

“Dad, why do we have to do this right now? It is 12 am,” I said knowing deep down, I wanted to argue.

“Justin, I keep hearing that you are this great guy at school, but we don't see it. People come up to me and talk about all the great things you do, and I don't know how to respond. You are not the same person here. We can't keep living like this. Things are gonna have to change.”

“Do you really expect me to come home and be this great guy? I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t exactly enjoy living here, and I can’t just walk in the door and be happy...because I’m not.”

“It is strange that all those people seem to know you pretty well yet your own father has no idea.”

“Those people were there when you chose to leave. You just weren’t around, and that is not my fault.”

Then I said something that I never thought I would say. The words collected in my throat, and I held them there in an anxious moment of silence. I didn’t want to say them, but in my angry determination, I spoke.

“Dad, y...you...you didn’t have a lot to do with who I am now.”

“Oh, and those people did,” he asked sarcastically.

“Yes.”

My answer tore into and infuriated his wounds. He didn’t agree with my comments, and refused to accept my answer. I didn’t know what to say--as if I could have said anything else. I didn’t regret my answer because I knew it was true, but it was truth engraved in the past. He wasn’t around when I began to grow, but he was suddenly there—a part of my life whether I liked it or not. He was a potential catalyst for growth, but because he had lost his credibility in the past, I couldn’t give him any credit in the present or the future. My anger demanded that his absence continue in the presence and into the future. I planned to hold his past against him for the rest of my life. I planned to grow without him. My growth did not depend on my father, and he could not accept that. It was a strange paradox that I accepted it and my father didn’t, yet we were both wrong

in some ways. He couldn't admit that he had misplaced his role as a father, and I couldn't admit that he could still be a part of my maturity. The answer made us both angry—so angry that we could not accept our faults. It was his fault, and that was my answer. It was an answer that ended the conversation and began a whole different kind of struggle.

My dad's frustration continued throughout high school and carried into graduation. Graduation day was exciting. I put on my purple gown, threw the golden sash around my neck, and stood in the church lobby anxiously awaiting the ceremony. The music sounded, the doors flew open, and I walked down the aisle looking into the eyes of those people who had loved and supported me. I sat in the pew, and the ceremony began. Every year, the school gives a *Distinguished Senior Award* to an influential student in the graduating class. I received the award that year, and when my name was called, I was excited. I was thankful. I was frightened. I dreaded the fact that I had to walk up there and receive the award in front of my dad. I received the award because of who I was, and my dad was not the one who gave it to me. I heard his heart drop when my name was called, and I knew he didn't understand. In his eyes, I won an award for who I was not. It was hard for him to be proud of me. The ceremony ended and the crowd moved to the reception. I dodged unfamiliar faces, shook hands, hugged friends, said a hundred thank you's, and then saw my dad and step mom. I could see my assumptions in their posture. My dad hugged and congratulated me, but there was something distant and unsurprising about it. I felt the coolness of his frustration glide through his arms into our embrace, taking any warmth out of the moment. I do believe they were proud of me for finishing high school, but they didn't really know what "me"

graduated. Everyone else saw a student distinguished among his peers; my dad and step mom saw a stranger distinguished among strangers.

What is the point of knowing who we are if the ones who are closest to us don't know who we are? If the ones that love us don't know us, is what we know really who we are? I knew who I was, but I kept it from my dad. My dad didn't see the "distinguished" part of me because I didn't want to show him. I was too angry to be comfortable in his presence. The only thing I wanted to show him was my anger, and that is all he saw. He couldn't give me a reward because I had done nothing to deserve it. I didn't want anything from him. I was fine being myself without him. Give me a thousand rewards, and I don't need his pride for any of them. My joy didn't depend on his satisfaction. In fact, my joy wallowed in his dissatisfaction. I was angry, and anything that confirmed my anger, I accepted. I was angry that he didn't show more enthusiasm about my award, but I happily accepted that his dissatisfaction was one more reason to hide the distinguished senior.

It is ironic that my identity was separate from my father's love. My anger drove me to be a different person in his presence and motivated me to be the opposite in his absence. Either way, anger was a part of me. I was quick to anger and unwilling to let it go. I received awards and also dreaded them. I laughed with friends and screamed with family. Could I have been "me" for the rest of my life without ever revealing a part of that to my dad? I was convinced that there was no problem in changing identities, but if someone is changing identities, is there one that is more real than the other? Both were very real. One was fierce. The other was compassionate. Both of them were a part of

me, but both couldn't live together forever. I knew who I was, and one day, I would have to show my father.

Anger's Invasion

I couldn't keep the two parts of me separated forever. I was one person at home and another outside of home, and I strived to keep the two separated. Sure, I was angry outside of my house, but I was careful to not allow it to control my words and actions. I expressed my anger but also was aware of the extent to which it manifested. I believed that I could contain it when I was in the places that affirmed my real self. It is impossible to keep anger separated from the rest of your life. It will find its way in and invade relentlessly. All you can do is recognize it and begin to move through it. I recognized my anger, but the recognition was there only to affirm my anger. My recognition did not persevere toward change. I didn't need to change because my life was running pretty smoothly along the two separate paths I had chosen. Suddenly, the paths crossed, and my anger broke into the real me. The conflict left me powerless.

An example of this is found in a particular day at basketball practice. It was a typical practice consisting of constant running, play formations, and drills. It also was a day where nothing was going right. I caught the ball, shot it toward the basket and watched it roll or clank off the rim. This happened over and over again. I passed the ball, and the other team stole it. This happened over and over again. Each mistake was an invitation for my anger to step in. At first, I shrugged off the inevitability of my mistakes, but soon enough, I could no longer accept inevitability. My hands curled into fists, my heart beat faster, the sweat evaporated from my hot skin, and my tongue hurled terrible words and phrases. I tried to play through it, but the anger kept stealing my

determination. My body began to shake, and my arms trembled at my side. I couldn't hold on any longer. I couldn't contain my body or my words. Suddenly, I felt a tear collide with the sweat on my face and fall to the ground. The splash was loud. A man isn't supposed to cry on the basketball court. I didn't want the players to see my weakness, so I turned the other way trying to hide it. Anger doesn't let you hide. It constantly runs until the sink overflows; it swings at you until you break. I broke down, and there was nothing I could do about it. The assistant coach noticed me at half court with my hands pressed against my knees and eyes looking down. He walked over to me, placed his hand on the back of my arm and pulled me toward him. I looked at him angry and tired.

“What's goin' on Justin?”

“Coach, I had a rough morning at home. Th...thi...things with my dad...things at home. It is just hard. I don't know what to do. I am just so mad!” I answered as my angry tears continued to crash against the hard wood.

My coach led me to the side of the court, where I tried to settle down. My body shook as I took deep breaths to stop the tears. I no longer had control over the happy world I lived in. Welcome to the world of anger. It is one big world; it can't be compartmentalized. When you are angry, you are angry, and your whole life is affected by it. Even the happiest of worlds cannot contain that anger. I didn't enjoy anger's invasion, but who ever thought anger was enjoyable?

The Prevention of Change

“Justin, things need to change in this house, so I have decided that we are all going to see a counselor. Nothing is working here. We are all going together,” my dad said.

Obviously, his hope in my desire to change was fading. My hope was never there.

“Dad, I am not going to see a counselor,” I responded.

I had nothing against counseling. In fact, I had actively been a part of counseling since the divorce. It contributed greatly to my growth as a teenager. This was different; I was really angry.

“You will go. You don’t have a choice.”

“No. I DO have a choice. You cannot sit here and just tell me to go to a counselor. It IS my choice. It is not yours.”

“This is my decision, and you will go.”

I succumbed to my dad’s demands and went with him and my step mom to our first counseling session. One thing about each session was the same: my unwillingness to change. Each session was another opportunity to declare my anger. It was another chance to look my dad and step mom in the eye and ensure them that I would not move from the place in which I was standing. It is a waste of time to seek counseling without the desire to see change. I only went because my dad wanted it, but I never went with any intent to settle my anger. In some ways, the counseling made me more angry—which isn’t the ultimate goal of counseling. I didn’t want healing or progress. I just wanted further justification. I didn’t get anything.

I was so angry that the willingness to change and the potential for change were ignored. My anger was so intense that it completely blinded me to the fact that change was still a possibility somewhere down the road. The road had ended in my mind, and I was content living at a dead end.

I was too angry to notice that my father desired a better living environment. The father's job is to take care of his household, and that includes dealing with the conflict that arises within the home. He tried to take on that role, but I didn't allow his persistence to steal the role I assumed. My anger manipulated his desires and turned them into selfish ambitions. It took his desire for change and assumed that he was encouraging change just for his and my step mom's well being. They could live a better life as long as my anger was absent. He just wants comfort for himself, I thought. My anger was too much for comfort.

Anger is dangerous in that it can prevent healthy change. It convinced me that I didn't have to change because I was right. Something incited my anger, and the only change I expected was the experience of greater anger. If you walk into a counseling session resisting change, you will walk out unchanged. You will walk out angrier because it is a time to express the anger and the agents that provoked it. If you express something just to hear yourself talk, the effectiveness of your expression is lost in your foolish justification. In other words, you can't continue to validate your anger with the same defense. You will repeat your reasons while on the other end, the victimizer is seeking change and forgiveness. The ultimate goal is forgiveness. When you are angry with someone, you should seek resolution and forgive that person. In order to forgive,

you have to admit to change, especially if change is hard. Greater change promises greater forgiveness. I was far from change. The change in my life was too hard; it was impossible. I was too certain of my anger that I mocked the expectation of change. All I expected was a life of distance from my dad. If I didn't want to change, I didn't want forgiveness. Forgiveness wasn't an option.

Movin' Out

As I hoped, the counseling didn't work. It simply was another chance for everyone to plead their case, but nothing was really solved because only one side wanted the house to be different. Although I knew that the dynamic at home was far from healthy, I was fine to live within it as long as it didn't threaten me too much. As long as I was angry, I was secure; I was oddly comfortable. I felt I had succeeded when I walked out of counseling unchanged. What a lousy success—to continue to pursue that which harms you. I continued to pursue my anger, and the house continued to fall.

My senior year in high school started, and things at home had changed very little. Conversations never ended as conversations; they were fights that ended in hard breaths of frustration and aggressive stubbornness. Whenever my dad and I spoke, I expected an outburst of disagreement that completely ruined any potential for compromise. It is almost impossible to compromise with someone whose voice motivates anger. The conversations always started out with a purpose but always concluded with more reason to argue. Ironically, argument was the goal of every conversation.

One day, we had a conversation that both surprised and excited me. It wasn't an excitement that said 'Yes, I can't wait!'; it was one that shouted 'Just get me out of here!' My dad was tired of trying to push me along. For him, it was like pushing the Titanic

through concrete. I was not going to move, and I was tired of hearing that I had to. Well, we finally agreed on something, and the resolution was one that I never saw coming.

“Justin, things just aren’t changing around here, and we just can’t deal with it anymore. It is not something that I want or should have to tolerate in my house,” my dad said, as I questioned the direction he was going. I just let him continue.

“I just don’t understand why you can’t move along, but it is something that we cannot wait on any longer. If you cannot change and respect the desires of this house, then we are going to have to ask you to move out.”

I was eager and angry, even though I knew he was right. It was the best thing that I move out because I wasn’t happy there. No one was happy. I guess everyone was looking out for his or her own good, but in the process, we never considered working through things patiently and maturely. Our agendas were too strong to admit weakness. Our stubbornness was too much to admit wrongdoing.

“So you want me to move out?” I reiterated just so that I could be certain that he was the one who proposed it.

“If you can’t change, then yes, we want you to find somewhere else to live.”

Although I didn’t give him an immediate answer, I knew what I wanted right when he spoke. I sat on the thought for a couple of days, and after careful consideration, I approached my dad with an answer.

“Dad, I have decided to move out.”

“Okay,” he said. He couldn’t say much. He had already said enough.

The day after I graduated, I packed up my things and began to carry them out to the car. It was a strange thing moving out of my own house, but it really never felt like a home anyway. The fact that it was intended to be my home made the experience of moving out a bit unsettling. After I put my last bag into the car, I went back inside to say goodbye to my dad.

“Dad, I’m leaving,”

“Okay, Justin,” he said as he grabbed and hugged me. “I hope that this time will be good for you and that we can figure things out. I love you.”

I didn’t respond. His words were awkward in my ears because they were completely opposite from all his other words up to that point. The words ‘I love you’ did not resonate clearly in my heart because love had run dry within those walls. His embrace was frightening because I questioned its sincerity. I just wanted to leave; I couldn’t handle the fickle emotion. I escaped from his arms and turned toward the front door. I walked out, heard the door close behind me as if I had finally closed a book I was tired of reading. I got into my car and watched my dad as he watched me drive away. I turned off our street and saw the house running away in the rear view mirror. The house stood still. I was running away and thought that getting out of that house would make my life a lot easier. My dad’s absence would make things more manageable. My dad was still there. I was still there. I couldn’t run away.

The First Year of College

Living in a different house that summer was strange, but it was more a relief. At the end of the day, I wouldn’t drive to my dad’s house. I would get into my car and drive to a house that I wanted to be far from my dad. He was only about five minutes away,

but in my heart, he was a long drive away. It was easier not living together, but the awkwardness between us remained. The weekly phone conversations were stale and obligated. We met for breakfast occasionally, and it was always something I was slow to rise to in the morning. It was back to the way it used to be. We lived in different places, and one of us was trying to maintain, or build, a relationship (It wasn't me). We both wanted distance, but my distance smothered any fondness that distance promises. I was happy to be civil, but oftentimes, civility meant being fake. I could sit across the table from him and catch him up on my life, but deep down, a willing anger remained. I engaged with my head and ran with my heart.

The first summer in my new house ended, and I went to college. Most people seem to be anxious about the college experience, but I was only anxious to get there. I was excited about the new place, people, and experiences. It was the institution of ultimate freedom—freedom from home, from curfew, and from my dad. At the time, I didn't admit that much of my eagerness stemmed from the troubled relationship with my dad, but it makes sense. My relationship with my dad was not good. Being close to him was hard for me, and the increased distance that college promised offered further appeal. I ran further away, but being in a different city only reemphasized the fact that I could not run away from my anger or my father. It is never that easy.

My dad and I talked twice on the phone my entire first year of college. You would think that a year away from home would encourage greater communication between a father and son. This was not the case in our relationship. I do not remember the conversations because they were short and impeding. I picked up the phone, heard his voice, and quickly started to run. He asked questions, and I answered them with

disinterest. He said goodbye, and I hung up the phone weary and quietly angry. It frustrated me that he didn't call more often, but on the other end, it gave me more reason to be angry and more reason to place all the blame on him. He is the father, I thought; I shouldn't have to be the one to initiate conversation. He can call me, but I refuse to call him. In other words, our communication depended solely on him. I wallowed in the misconception that, because I was the son, I did not have to pursue. A perfect world gives the role of the pursuer to the father and the role of the pursued to the son, but my world was far from perfect. Our present and future relationship depended on mutual pursuit; it asked that I also pick up the phone and call my dad. I never called him because I enjoyed my misconception too much. I never called him because it made no difference whether I had him in my life or not. We talked twice on the phone, and that was plenty.

The year ended, and I felt the same. I didn't make any progress in the ongoing struggle with my dad, but I didn't desire progress. Progress for me was staying the same; it was maintaining the comfort of my anger. I returned home—not my dad's house—for the summer and found myself again a long five minutes away from my dad. I succeeded in growing up without him. I had finished my first year of college without his help, and I was proud of that—what a distorted pride it was. I reveled in a false independence and entertained the deception that I would never need a dad again. That summer was different because I finally realized I was wrong.

I Began to Lose My Grip

“How are you and your dad?” my friend asked that summer.

“Not great,” I responded, and my response implied that our relationship was hardly a relationship.

“Do you feel that you have made any progress, or that you desire to pursue the relationship?”

“No...I mean...why should I? There is no reason that I should pursue something that has done nothing but cause me pain and anger. Why should I continue to pursue that which I do not desire?”

“Is there anything that could happen to change that?”

“I don’t want or see the need to change it,” I responded as my anger began to build behind my breath. “My dad has hurt me deeply, and I still feel hurt. The pain is so deep, and it is a pain that does not just go away when you ask it to. It is a pain that will remain, and I cannot help that. I mean...look at me. I am doing fine, and my life is running smoothly. Why do I all of a sudden need a dad who I have never had before? What will he do for me? He hasn’t been there for so long, and he is not here now. I don’t need him here now because I am doing fine growing up without him. I have had to grow up fast, and he has not watered that growth. Why do I need him now? Surely, the older I get the less I will need him. I just have to move on without him. I just don’t need a dad.”

My friend just listened. There was nothing she could say or do in that moment to compete with my stubbornness. I wallowed in the expectation and assumption of a life without my father, and I was fine to wallow. I based my future on my past, and I did not

realize then that my future would be built on a troubled past. Ironically, I thought my future would be different without my dad, but what would be so different? If you hang on to an angry past, it does not promise the absence of anger in the future. Anger misplaced, or ignored, is anger embraced in the future.

I never really had a dad, so I automatically assumed that I would not need one for the rest of my life. There is a problem with the things we have never had; they leave us with the assumption that because we have never had them, we don't really need them. They confuse our desires and convince us to accept that which we cannot change—what we *think* we cannot change. Why should we ever have to change something that has been the same for so long? Why should we invest our energy into the things that have already taken so much energy? We change things because we desire something different—something better—but the problem, here, is that I did not desire something better. I assumed there was no such thing as a 'better.' I didn't want change because I did not think it was possible. Everyone is capable of change, but the first step is realizing the need for change. The second step is realizing that change is hard.

I was too angry to see hope. I was too deaf to hear my drowning desire crying out for rescue. I was too blind to see a father that wanted a son. I was too stubborn to be a son that wanted a dad. My anger was being weakened by its own strength; its justifications were turning into excuses. I had succeeded in convincing myself that I would be okay without a dad, but success built on hopelessness is like the future imitating the past. I was so sure of what I said that night to my friend, but my certainty rested in something restless. I went to bed that night in a different house, and woke up the next

morning in the same house. Did I want to live the rest of my life in a different house?

We can never be certain when we hang on to our anger.

A Young Girl's Words

The summer continued on, and I was in and out of town, working at a summer camp. The summer was split up into four different camps according to different age groups, which all offered completely different dynamics and experiences. One camp stands out because of one girl, who was preparing for her first year of high school.

We all sat in a room, and the kids began to share the things of their lives—their joys, struggles, hopes, and fears. Some talked about divorce, others about not fitting in, but one girl talked about her dad. She was young but spoke clearly and boldly, and the honesty was impossible for me to ignore.

“What is going on in your lives right now?” The camp director asked.

The girl spoke. “I have been angry at my dad for so long. Sure, he has walked out on our family and has done some terrible things, but I still want to know him. I still want a dad. I just want to forgive him and move on.”

I watched a tear fall from her eye. I watched her fists ease and open to receive the love of her father. I witnessed the desire for forgiveness come out of a place that puts so much energy into avoiding the power of forgiveness. For the first time, since the introduction of my anger, I realized that I could not hold on to my certainty any longer.

When she finished speaking, I just sat in amazement at the poignancy of her words. There she was--not even in high school--desiring not only forgiveness of what her father had done, but also the pursuit of her father. Forgiveness is a huge step, but to then pursue is a leap. It is a hard thing to forgive, but it is even harder to realize that you

might have to also ask for forgiveness. Part of the pursuit is admitting that you also were wrong. I am not saying that anger is wrong; I am saying that anger is wrong if you depend on it to keep a safe distance between you and the one who hurt you. Anger is wrong when it convinces you that forgiveness is a weakness.

I was in college, and I had not even allowed myself to think about forgiveness. The words of a fourteen-year-old girl were stronger than the stubbornness of a nineteen-year-old college student who was so certain about a future without a father. Age is not always an indication of wisdom. We have a lot to learn from anyone if we just choose to listen. I listened, and it immediately changed a perspective that I had carried for too long. Her past was very similar to mine, but her future was completely different. Her future remembered the past, but my future constantly reminded me of the past. Her future did not want to forget the past, but my future did not want to forgive my past. Her future had hope, and mine could not even spell it. That day, in the presence of a young girl, my future changed.

I Want a Father

I left that camp with a lot to think about. I carried her words home and wrestled with them for weeks. It was a difficult transition to think about forgiveness with my father because it was such a fresh thought. For so long, I had convinced myself that forgiveness was impossible and that if it was possible, it was not even an option. It is amazing how quickly my thinking changed. It was really the grace of God that opened my ears to the words of that young girl. I could have chosen to just hear her, but her similar situation made me listen. Prior to that day, I never really listened. My dad tried to talk to me, and I didn't listen. My counselor said important things, and I chose not to

listen. It was easier not to listen because it ensured that I could stay the same. I was an expert at hearing and was even greater at responding to what I heard. I heard my dad's words and responded vengefully. I heard my counselor's words and found more ways to rebel. I didn't listen because I feared that I might have to admit wrongdoing. Listening meant sympathizing with the thoughts and feelings of others, and I was not interested in sympathy. I was only interested in myself. When you listen, you learn, especially when you have to admit your wrongdoing.

I questioned myself everyday and wondered if my new attitude of forgiveness was legitimate. I was surprised by the quickness of my heart's response but did not invalidate it just because it was so quick. I embraced the quickness but did not act on impulse. Forgiveness is too sacred to approach on impulse. I realized the power of forgiveness, but I also realized its powerlessness if it is pursued out of impulse or obligation. In other words, I allowed the possibility of forgiveness to enter but was not ready to act immediately upon its invitation. It was unfamiliar but strong—strong enough to change my mind. I had to ask myself if I truly desired a father, and a couple weeks before this thought, I was asking myself what kind of future I desired without a father. I was so convinced that I did not need a father. I was certain that as I got older, the less I would need him—besides, I never had him anyway. I had to revisit all of those thoughts and admit that I was wrong.

Of course I need a father. What man does not need a father, and further more, what man does not want a father? It was hard to see him in a different light, but I could finally see him. He was standing there ready to receive my forgiveness, and I was standing in the shadow anxious to give it. It was hard to look away because everything

else surrounding was darkness. All I could see was the light in front of me, and when eyes are trapped in darkness, they search for light. I found the light and could do nothing but look into it. The brightness blinded me momentarily, and as my eyes slowly opened, I could see my father inviting me to experience his embrace for the first time. He waved his hand, and I took a baby step into the light.

I Am Ready

My heart was ready to forgive, but my fingers still shook as I dialed my dad's phone number. The tones rang for each number pressed, and it was strange to hear a different dial tone. Before, it incited dread and anger, but it was now the first step towards reconciliation. I was anxious but ready. The phone rang, and with each ring, I wanted to hang up. The doubts whispered in my head, but the certainty of my heart yelled loud enough that I did not hang up. The ringing stopped.

“Hello,” my dad said.

“Hey, dad,” I said with a shaking voice.

“Hey, Justin, how are you?”

“Um...I am...good. I was...uh...wondering if you...wa...wanted to go to breakfast tomorrow morning.”

“Sure.”

“O...okay...well...I'll see you then.”

I hung up the phone thankful that the conversation was over, and I now had to prepare myself for the next morning. I went to bed in the house I had been living in and awoke the following morning ready to move out. I made my way to the little bagel shop where we decided to meet, and I rehearsed what I wanted to say the whole way there—as

we all know, this never works. I had always prepared to yell before meeting my dad, and I was now preparing to just speak. My heart found a new voice, and I was ready to let go. I pulled up to the shop, took a deep breath, and prepared for the most important conversation I would ever have.

It was hard to look into his eyes. We both picked at our bagels and at all the preceding small talk before I mustered the courage to open my heart. He looked at me and could tell that my mind was racing and that my heart was heavy. I looked up and down a thousand times before he asked the probing question.

“So, what is on your mind?”

“Well...,” I started, and then I didn’t know what to say. Everything that I had rehearsed was gone. The confidence I had on the way there was lost, and I just sat there with nothing behind me but a ‘well.’ My dad sat patiently.

“I...I...Dad...I...am ready to move on,” I finished. I don’t know how I said it, but I know that I did.

“I know that it’s been hard, but I just don’t want to do it anymore. I am ready to forgive you, and I am ready to move on. I don’t know what it looks like or how to do it, but I am ready,” I said.

I looked into his eyes the whole time, and they never said ‘it’s about time’ or ‘he finally understands that I am right.’ All they said was ‘thank you.’ It wasn’t a matter of right and wrong at that moment; it was a matter of renewal. There were no disclaimers. I just let go. My dad then responded.

“I don’t know what it looks like either, but I do know that we will figure it out together.”

I never imagined us doing anything together, especially rebuilding the brokenness between us. It was comforting to hear him say that he did not know what to do because it ensured mutuality in pursuing renewal. I was ready to move on, but that did not mean that I had to carry the relationship alone. It is easier to rebuild something with two people, and it is easier to know how to rebuild it with two people. Two hearts are better than one, and when they work together, they are stronger than the sum of their parts—a relationship synergy perhaps. The conversation did not last long, but the effect of a conversation is never measured by its length. The conversation did extend the length of our relationship, and it gets longer every day. We held each other outside of the shop before we climbed into our cars to carry on with our days. That day was completely different. The rest of our days would be different, and for the first time in my life, I was excited about that.

Part Two

Research and Reflection

Introduction

You desire a father, and perhaps, this desire has been lost in assumption and distorted expectation. In other words, the world, overflowing with infidelity and divorce, is not only abusing the father-son relationship, but it is convincing people that when the relationship is broken, it cannot and will not be rebuilt. You may not realize that you are a victim of a selfish society, and oftentimes, you assume that it will only get worse. Sometimes, when relationships break, you are content with just picking up the pieces. Putting the pieces back together seems out of the question. The world has worn you out, and you use your weariness as an excuse to accept what will remain unchanged—what you *assume* cannot be changed. It is easy to give up because it ensures a certain amount of comfort; it permits you to avoid pain and suffering. You assume that, because you have been hurt, you can find happiness somewhere else. This dangerous contentment can drive you from your father. What is the son without the father? What is the father without the son?

Some may have said that your father is gone and that his return is unnecessary for your development as a man and as a father. His encouraged absence has always been your desire, but you cannot long for a father and his absence at the same time. You want to know him, and he is there. He wants to know you, and you are there. Sure, the longing is difficult to admit, but when you hold your father's hand, you will know that his love is necessary. When you let go of your resentment, you will see that your hands can now hold something new. I know your hands are tired. Your fingers are stiff with blood. Try to let go.

I understand that letting go is not easy, but greater difficulty ensures greater redemption. It may take time to realize the joy that could be, but allow time to take precedence over impulse. Impulsive forgiveness is like an ace up your sleeve in a game of poker. You are willing to forfeit a couple hands, but you know that you have the hidden ace that will eventually bring you a winning hand. You are comfortable with folding because of what you are hanging on to. You cannot forgive with anger still up your sleeve. Do not forgive out of obligation because obligation implies that you might not be ready. You are willing to lay down some of your anger, but you are still prepared to justify your anger in the future. Your anger stays hidden to continually question your forgiveness. Forgiveness means laying down all your cards. I will show the aspects of anger and their effect on the forgiveness process—a process that is challenging and redemptive. You cannot hide your anger because it completely nullifies your choice to forgive.

Let's look at the facts. You have been victimized and are angry. The anger came quickly and loudly or in silence, but either way, you knew it was there. You thrived on it and held it proudly because it reaffirmed your stubbornness and tired justifications. Initially, your anger was justified—and rightly so—but your quick and unrelenting response deceived you. It permitted you to scream at your father and at the same time run away from him—embraced anger is paradoxical in that it can drive a man into and away from his father. You continued to carry it, and it began to permeate every detail of your life. You snapped at your friends because you were angry with your dad, and you cried because you hurt them. It is strange that your anger is always your anger. It invades your life, and you run out of excuses. Anger is always prepared to offer excuses,

but your father will eventually learn every trick in the book. Your father will grow tired, too. Anger, processed and handled carefully, is healthy, but there is a thin line between healthy and destructive emotion. There is a lot of integrity in admitting your anger, but depending on your anger will only confuse your character. Understanding the anger you have towards your father is key in achieving forgiveness and pursuing the path to reconciliation.

Forgiveness does not end when you say, "I forgive you." It is a process; it is a matter of continual awareness. It would be easy to claim forgiveness and leave it at that, but the power of forgiveness is evident in what follows it. Forgiveness is not just an idea that you accept. It is a cognitive, emotional, and spiritual act. In order to reach a place of active forgiveness, you have to change the way you think about your father and the way you think about yourself. From a Christian standpoint, you may have to readjust your belief system; you have to live your life upon the foundation of grace.

It is a choice to forgive those that harm you, but remember that the choice came out of a place of pain. You wrestled with the choice but finally realized that forgiveness was the only way to find your father. The journey after forgiveness is very much like the journey toward forgiveness. It is hard, but it promises growth. Isn't that why you forgive? You desire growth, and healthy growth always includes a little pain. Like everyone wants a father, everyone wants to grow. The process of forgiveness guarantees that you will always grow. Besides, there is a lot to learn about your father. You learn how to grow together.

The idea of forgiveness carries a heavy religious connotation, but it has received a great deal of attention in the field of psychology. The importance of forgiveness has

transcended the spiritual realm and is slowly establishing itself in the world of academia. Psychologists are recognizing that forgiveness plays a huge role in the growth of the individual. Models of forgiveness have been developed by a number of psychologists, and these models focus on the different aspects of forgiveness—anger, apology, empathy, etc. My goal is to intertwine the religious and the academic, and to implement them into my testimony. It is essentially a matter of research and reflection. Charlotte VanOyen Witvliet (2001) said of this cross between psychology and faith: “All Christians, no matter what their tradition, should strive for a coherent and integrated understanding of forgiveness that is rooted in Scripture and draws on the best current research and reflections.”

My experience of forgiveness—my desire for a father—is rooted in faith. My Christian faith is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ—the one who bore my shame that I could be forgiven and eternally reconciled. Christ is my source of truth and the expert in the field of forgiveness, but psychology also presents a great deal of empirical truth. My goal is to explain these models such that the act of forgiveness may become more grounded. It also is to support my faith with research and to reaffirm my journey up to this point and encourage the everyday pursuit of my father. In this reaffirmation, I also will look at the dimensions of anger and their effect on the unforgiving person, the role and necessity of empathy in achieving greater forgiveness, and the meaning of reconciliation. The combination of Christian faith and scientific research creates a synergy that sufficiently explains the idea of forgiveness and the effects of anger and empathy on the ultimate goal of reconciliation between the father and his son.

I will conclude by addressing the subtle conflict that comes after you forgive someone. I do not intend to present this conflict as a negative thing but something that promotes the growth I referred to above. When you forgive someone, you are actively choosing to come out of a place of familiarity. You grew accustomed to a life before forgiveness—a life of anger, resentment, and apathy—but you now have new life. Forgiveness is renewal. You did not want to be loved, disciplined, or encouraged by your father before, and now that you desire it, it is uncomfortable in a different way. You want to love but do not know how. Even more, you want to be loved but do not know how. Again, this is an internal conflict, but one that offers a beautiful challenge. You forgive, and you learn to let go of everything. Vulnerability scares you, but it is the very thing that will set you free.

The film, *Forrest Gump*, portrays the beauty and intention of the father-son relationship in one of its final scenes. Forrest enters the apartment of his lifelong love, Jenny, and he sees his son for the first time. He is awestruck by the sight of his own son, yet he is uncertain of what to say to him. He then says what every son longs to hear his father say: “He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.” When you forgive, you allow your father to enter, and you allow him to speak. You want them to see you as beautiful, but you need to let them see you. When you forgive, you invite them to take part in the beauty that they seemingly have forgotten, and when you let them in, you see that they are beautiful, too.

Bound by Anger

Anger is an unusual thing because it draws a very thin line between what is justified and unjustified. It enters a relationship quickly and is fully capable of destroying it quickly. The effects of anger are dependent on those who harbor it within the father-son construct. My father's choices evoked my anger—an anger that hid for years but eventually struck with overwhelming vengeance. I harbored my anger proudly, and my pride came directly from my misconception of justified anger. I believe that my anger was justified at first—that I had the right to grieve my father's loss in that way—but I eventually realized its potential to ruin my life.

You are allowed to be angry, but you are not allowed to be angry for the rest of your life. You have a choice: you can hold on to your anger or you can learn to let it go. The former does not encourage forgiveness. The latter enables you to work through the anger, sorrow, betrayal, and loss of trust (Hill, 2001). Proverbs 29:11 says, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control." When you reach this state of control, you will look back on your pride and see that it was only a hindrance. Letting go of your anger means surrendering your pride and seeking a relationship that seems unattainable. When you let go of your anger, you will desire a relationship with your father. This section will look at the different aspects of anger and their effect on the forgiveness process.

Three Components of Anger

Anger always has an object, and the object of my anger was my father. I was the victim and my father was the transgressor. I was right, and he was wrong—so I thought. The object of anger has three components: the target, the instigation, and the objective, or motive (Averill, 1982). The *target* primarily is of the interpersonal nature, and it deals

with the issue of responsibility—that the transgressor should be held responsible for his actions. Targeting someone is accusing him or her. The most powerful attribution of this accusation is found in what Averill calls affectional relationships, or those built upon a degree of love and care. It is easier to be angry with those we love because we are closest to them; they are the ones who know and understand us the best. “Evidently, anger is more often associated with love than with hate”(Averill, 1982). In other words, anger is more evident in the relationships with those you love because love is the strongest emotion you know. Love is stronger than hate, but if you hold on to your anger in those affectional relationships too long, hate will drive out love. That is when your anger grows out of control; it is when the implications of your anger begin to question the possibility of love’s return. I loved my father, but my anger made it easier to hate him. It can be harder to express your anger to the ones you love, and I think it is safe to say that your anger becomes unjustified when it becomes easy to do.

The second component, the *instigation*, deals with the causes of the anger. My father’s choice to run away incited my anger, and I treated it as constant instigation. In other words, I revisited his choices daily to reaffirm my anger. The instigation was not just one incident but an everyday offense in my mind. Averill (1982) claimed that frustration, loss of self-esteem, and a threat to an interpersonal relationship were the general categories describing instigation. He also placed the instigator within the construct of justification. The highest percentage of incidents causing anger was found in the voluntary and unjustified category. This category explains that the instigator’s actions were preconceived and without right. The Lowest percentage was attributed to an unavoidable accident or event. My situation fell within the highest percentage because I

believed and still believe that my father's actions were selfish and far from justified. He made a choice that instigated a flood of anger. My dad's choices made him a stranger; they turned him into a man who was unjustified and ineffective.

The problem with the high percentage of the voluntary and unjustified category is that it is beyond your control. You may become too proud of the assumption that interpersonal love is strong enough to prevent unjustified instigation, but how can you prevent that which you are unaware of? I didn't know about my father's choices until long after he made them. I assumed that he was my father, and he assumed that he could make his choices without affecting his father status. I could not look beyond the instigation; I could not associate my love with his failure. What is love if I cannot move beyond instigation?

The *objective* is the third component of anger, and it deals with the motives, or goals, for anger. It is essentially the junction of anger. What drives your anger? Is your anger constructive or destructive? Averill explains the motivation of anger:

“Sometimes we become angry, we may simply want to get back at the person or thing that angered us. Often, however, additional motives are involved in our anger. For example, we may become angry at a child for running into the street in order to protect him from injury; or we may become angry in order to get someone to help us out with some work. Although such motives are quite common, we typically are not fully aware of them at the time of our anger. It may only be in looking back and thinking carefully about the incident that we come to realize all that was involved in our anger”(1982).

It is very interesting that the motivation of my anger is not noticed until later. The bond of anger is so strong and deceptive that the longer I am held captive to it, the more unaware I become of its destructiveness. I was motivated by my anger, but I cannot say that I understood the motives of my anger at the time. I was so certain of it that I never questioned its legitimacy. I did not realize that this motivation was the one thing that was destroying my capacity to love. I enjoyed my anger and allowed it to consume me, but when I look back, I cannot equate enjoyment with positive motivation. By being angry, I avoided my father and my weakness, and I obtained nothing.

Averill found that the most frequent motive was “to assert your authority or independence, or to improve your image.” I demanded authority with my anger. I prepared to argue with my dad and was determined to walk away victorious. Gaining freedom was a motivation for my anger, but I now see that my anger held me in bondage. There was more to my anger than just yelling and screaming. My anger was a dictator. It demanded authority and offered my father no independence. Anger makes you unaware of its power, and that is when you become oblivious to your motives. The uncertainty of motivation is dangerous.

Motivations

Staying on this idea of motivation, I will look briefly at two motivational systems in response to a negative interpersonal interaction. The first one focuses on the feelings of being deliberately hurt and responding by avoiding your father. The second deals with the feelings of righteous indignation—anger and contempt—and the motivation to seek revenge (McCullough, 2000). The two motivations are avoidance and revenge. I

displayed both of these motivations at different periods in my life. I did feel hurt as a child, and I responded by keeping my mouth shut. I kept my anger to myself and avoided my father even though I knew I was angry. I built up the righteous indignation that would play a crucial role in my teenage years. I was led by different motivations at different times, but they were interrelated. Avoidance motivated greater indignation, and indignation motivated greater avoidance. The avoidance was obvious when I was younger because I said little, but it was stronger through the later expression of my anger because it reaffirmed that I didn't need a father. My avoidance as a child motivated greater indignation, which enhanced my goal of revenge.

Revenge, or vengefulness, is getting even with your father, and the desire is enough to distract you from the unjustified anger that leads to revenge. Revenge makes it easy to justify that which is unjustifiable (Bellah, Johnson, Kilpatrick, & McCullough, 2001). Vengeance is an expression of the reciprocity norm—return harm for harm. My vengeance was both subtle and evident—much like the interrelation of avoidance and indignation. Before my mother's death, my inclination to fight back, or seek direct vengeance, was not as strong as my desire to quietly claim and accrue my anger. There was a process of reciprocity in my relationship with my father: quiet anger to expressed anger to enjoyed anger to further justification to contentment with the brokenness to the assumption that it would stay broken. My vengeance, or reciprocity, changed forms, and each form brought further resentment.

Justification was a form of reciprocity for me because it continually asserted my anger. Justification was easy because it reminded me that I was right, and that I could hold onto this attitude forever. Besides, I was hurting, and what hurting man does not

find rest in the justification of his hurt? I will follow with this question: Do you want to hurt for the rest of your life? Do not assume that the longevity of your hurt is solely dependent on what your father did. You will control your own hurt as long as you hold on to your anger. At some point, you have to let go of your negative emotion, or you will suffer damaging results (Freedman & Knupp, 2003). When the justification wears off, greater harm is caused—to you and to your father.

The motivation of revenge correlates strongly with rumination, the careful and lengthy thought about the offense (Bellah, Johnson, Kilpatrick, & McCullough, 2001). The more you focus on the harmful event, the greater vengeance you might feel. It has been suggested that high rumination gives way to clear goals of getting even or teaching your father a lesson. “This prediction is supported by the fact that measures of attitudes regarding revenge are positively correlated with standard measures of ruminative thinking” (Bellah, Johnson, Kilpatrick, & McCullough, 2001).

Rumination was the well of my anger. When I was thirsty, I ran to it for comfort and reassurance. I constantly thought about my father’s offenses, and my perceived power grew with every thought. I focused on specific things he did and used them to devise the perfect plan of revenge. Rumination is very subtle because it is more a matter of the mind, but the actions it can craft are violent and full of vengeance. Remember, your thoughts are strong enough to control you.

It is important to resist the tendency to ruminate. Although rumination is more a matter of the mind, it can depend heavily on action. When you express your thoughts, you will see that your anger has the ability to control a situation. The control is dangerous because it feeds back into your thought process. Rumination simply is a cycle

of thought and action, and you can stop the cycle by preventing action. If you are angry, express the anger quickly and accurately because the build-up of anger greatly increases the intensity. Thus, the tendency to ruminate can be prevented by expressing your thoughts in a healthy manner.

There are three kinds of anger—malevolent, constructive, and fractious (Averill, 1982). Malevolent anger expresses dislike, wants to get even, and seeks revenge. Constructive anger desires to strengthen the relationship, but it also includes an element of demanded authority and getting your father to change for your own good. Fractious anger is simply a matter of healthy expression—“letting off steam.” I abused fractious anger, and this led quickly to malevolence. I didn’t just let off steam; I let out fire. My anger was far from constructive, and the problem was that I only wanted to create distance, not togetherness. The primary goal of constructive anger is to strengthen the relationship, but how can you strengthen a relationship with unjustified anger? How can you build a relationship you do not even desire?

The motivations of our anger are very important because they reveal whether the anger is justified or unjustified. Do not infer that anger is wrong, but understand that if you do not handle it carefully, it will take full advantage of your weakness. Anger is justified when it acknowledges the wrongdoing, and if you have been deeply hurt by your father or anyone else, you have the right to be angry. But does your anger have a purpose other than separation or vengeance?

The constructive intentions of anger are hard to understand because they imply a sense of humility. If you are bearing unjustified anger, you have to admit your wrongdoing in order for your offender’s wrongdoing to be totally forgiven. It is hard to

be wrong, especially in a situation that you had no control over. I could not control my father's thoughts or actions, but I eventually learned to control mine. The goals of my anger were to remain justified, to claim my independence, and to scream at my father. My anger was not constructive. The only thing I was building was a wall between my father and I.

Healthy Expression

Be angry, but be proactive. Jack Birnbaum (1973) used the phrase “cry anger” to describe the venting of our anger. He stated the angry person can be “spiteful, vengeful, mistrustful, jealous, bitter, hateful, and violent,” but he also said that “periodically we must express the rage we feel in order to conquer and cure our emotional pain.” You cannot move on unless you first express the things that prevent you from moving. It is healthy to ventilate your anger. Repression is the key to destruction because it prevents you from ever dealing with the hurt in your life. The suppression of your anger is more threatening than the expression of your anger. Expression at least creates movement, and even though the movement may be slow and frustrating, it will eventually lead you to a desire for forgiveness. I “cried anger” for too long until I was dried of tears. I did not have the energy to be angry anymore.

I will use one last illustration from the film *Forrest Gump*. When Jenny returned to Forrest after many tough years, they went on a walk and stumbled upon her old house—a place symbolizing the hate of her abusive childhood. She stood before the brokenness with sadness and obvious anger across her face. She then picked up rocks and hurled them at the house, shouting in anger. After throwing just a few rocks, she fell down in exhaustion. Forrest responds by saying, “I guess sometimes there are just not

enough rocks.” Jenny grew tired of her past—of her anger. She could not throw one more rock. Anger is tiring, but it will always try to convince you that you can pick up one more rock. You will eventually run out of rocks to throw. What will you do then?

It is easy to be angry, but it is better to love. I am not saying that the two are completely separate from each other. I am saying that suppressed anger prevents sufficient love. Of course you are going to be angry with the ones you love, but what do you do when loved ones hurt you more deeply than you could have ever imagined? You love them, but know that your love will be stronger if you express your anger appropriately. Your expression does not make it easier to love, but it sustains the truth of love and the goal of strengthening the relationship. “It is a paradox: expressing your angry feelings frequently leads to the experiencing of the opposite feelings of warmth and love” (Birnbaum, 1973). Strive to understand your anger, but also strive to understand your father. I think he expects you to be angry, but I don’t think he expects to lose you for the rest of his life. Be angry with your father. Tell him how you really feel for the sake of strengthening your relationship with him. Learning to let go will show you what you never expected. Your anger will allow you to love again.

Into Forgiveness

Stepping into forgiveness requires that you step out of the comfort of anger. When you come out of that place, you realize the desire you have to be in a relationship with your father. You cannot be alone; you are not supposed to be alone. You cannot hold onto a relationship and anger at the same time because anger will prevail and stifle

the relationship. Anger creates distance—a distance that destroys your father and destroys you. You fall further and further into destruction and lose the gift of love. Moving into forgiveness means preventing the harm from causing greater damage and offering affection instead of resentment (North, 1998). Move beyond your familiar impulses, and think about what is possible in the arena of forgiveness.

The three basic mechanisms used to deal with anger are important to understand in approaching forgiveness, and they are: denial, active or passive expression, and forgiveness (Fitzgibbons, 1998). The recognition of the first two will lead to the third. Denial is very effective because it creates unconscious anger that eventually expresses itself actively or passively (Fitzgibbons, 1998). I am more familiar with the passive anger because, as a child, I built up my anger and expressed it through a mask. I denied active expression because I feared losing my father, but I didn't realize that my passiveness had the same role. Anger, expressed or suppressed, has the same power. My anger was passive for so long that when it became active, it became destructive. The misunderstanding is that passivity assumes that the anger will just go away, but in reality, the passivity makes anger's presence more consuming. I thrived on my anger so much that my expression was merely a competition with my father. Resolution, or forgiveness, was not the goal. In fact, my anger did not seem to have a constructive goal. Anger without a goal is like climbing a mountain without a rope; you enjoy it until you have nothing to grab hold of. I reached a point where I had nothing to grab, and that is when I asked for a rope. I realized forgiveness was the only way to the top.

In the pursuit of this idea, I will look at the different aspects of forgiveness—such as apology, empathy, and reconciliation—and their importance in the interrelation and

individuality of the psychological and spiritual realms. I will use one model as the structure for understanding the process of forgiveness, and this model, along with the application of other research, will eventually lead to the idea of reconciliation—which is not a part of the original model. The model reveals that forgiveness is not only an active process, but also a challenging one, and when I break down the model into its various items, the importance of each item is recognized. Hopefully, I will show the practicality of forgiveness as it applies to our relationships.

The Empathy-Forgiving Model

The model I will use to support the process of forgiveness is “based on the hypothesis that people forgive others to the extent that they experience empathy for them” (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). The process of interpersonal forgiveness is motivational in that it disposes people to seek a constructive relationship out of a potentially destructive cause (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). It is essentially the opposite reaction to being deeply hurt. Interpersonal forgiveness can be broken into three simple ideas: decreased retaliation, decreased estrangement, and increased conciliation (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). The model, termed the Empathy-Forgiveness Model, associates a high degree of empathy to a high degree of forgiveness, and it supports the idea that without empathy, it is impossible to sufficiently forgive. The basic structure of the model is as follows:

Apology→Empathy→Forgiveness→Changed Behavior (Conciliatory or lack of avoidance behavior)→Reconciliation (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997).

Reconciliation is not a part of the original model, but I added it to the end because it is crucial in understanding the activeness of forgiveness. A greater explanation of the model is necessary before I break it down.

Empathy is imperative in approaching forgiveness, and this model distinguishes it as both a catalyst for forgiveness and a mediator between apology and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is empathy-motivated, but empathy must be motivated by something.

Apology begins the process because it encourages the victim to develop a certain level of empathy for the apologetic offender. Note that apology precedes empathy because it does not have a direct effect on forgiveness. Forgiveness does not depend on the acceptance of the offender, therefore, forgiveness applies also to the unapologetic person.

Apology brings empathy awareness. The sincerity of the apology is crucial because a weak apology would discourage the amount of empathy necessary to achieve forgiveness, which would not change the vengeful or avoidant behaviors of the victim. Therefore, the mediation of empathy between apology and forgiveness implies that apology has an indirect effect on forgiving while forgiving has a direct effect on behavior. Also, forgiving is motivated by empathy, therefore, it has a greater effect on the behavior outcomes. Thus, empathy has an indirect effect on behavior (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). How can I be truly empathetic if I do not understand the offender's perspective? The unawareness of a man's guilt and shame could assume that empathy is unnecessary because it cannot support a man's lack of remorse. Apology makes you

aware of the offender's sin, but it also wants you to move beyond the actual harm caused by showing empathy.

In the development of this model, there were three hypotheses based on empathy and its role in forgiveness: empathy is a mediator between an apology-forgiving relationship, forgiving is a constructive motivation, and clinical intervention that promotes empathy increases forgiveness (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). The goal of the study was to prove empathy as a crucial variable in the process of forgiveness. I infer that empathy is crucial in indirectly effecting reconciliation because reconciliation is the rebuilding of the relationship after the act of forgiving. It is difficult to rebuild a relationship if you do not strive to fully understand each other. Empathy carries on into the relationship; it does not cease after forgiveness. A conclusion was reached at the end of the study of this model:

“On the basis of our empirical support for this theoretical account, then, it appears reasonable to conceptualize forgiving as an empathy-motivated set of motivational changes for an offending relationship partner that lead to greater probability of prosocial actions toward that offender, in spite of the offender's hurtful actions” (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997).

This study is the foundation of my look at forgiveness and the process of rebuilding the broken father-son relationship. Again, it is a difficult and potentially long process, but it is also redemptive and rewarding. The goal is reconciliation, and in order

to reach that goal, I will break down each component of the above model and look more closely at their psychological and religious components.

Apology

Apology is the first step because it is a chance for your father to admit his wrongdoing and define his role in the mutual process towards reconciliation. It is the beginning of healing for both sides because your father must apologize, and you must accept his apology. In essence, apology promotes a special mutuality. Apology may seem insignificant to some, but it is completely necessary in building a greater relationship between the father and his son. If your goal is to experience empathy for your father, then you must first allow yourself to hear and accept his apology—an apology that may reveal honest wounds. It is really up to you what you do with that apology. You can listen and embrace your father’s pain, or you can use it to reaffirm your anger. The acceptance of apology is about saying “I forgive you,” and not “You *should* be sorry.” The acceptance is not about claiming your superiority; it is about being strong together.

I discredited my father’s apology. I chose not to hear it because I was consumed with my anger and the heat of the moment in which he said it. I do believe that his apology was sincere, but I could not consider it because of the wall I built between a relationship that was missing for so many years. I immediately assumed that his absence and his choice to be absent would never initiate a genuine apology. How can a man be so

genuine after being so hurtful? How can a son be so angry that he can never give his dad any credit?

We both were angry in the moment of his humility, and the anger prevented us from listening to one another. I refused to accept his apology and consider empathy while he did not want to hear my unwavering anger. It was too hard because it showed no sign of surrendering to the intended power of apology. I was a constant reminder of the hurt he caused. I was not sorry, and it was impossible to convince me that he was. But maybe his apology was expressed in such anger because of the pain and remorse he had to revisit in my presence. I think it was hard for him to apologize—as it is for anyone—because it affirmed my anger, but that does not permit my anger to continue. What is the purpose of an apology? It is to admit wrongdoing for the sake of proactive forgiveness.

I later realized the depth of my father's apology by experiencing his deep desire to know and understand me, his son. His desire for me implied sincere apology, and it proved that he was as tired as I was of hanging on to resentment. I resented him, and he resented my anger, but we both learned to let go of that. His heart for me was and is beyond measure, and I now know that his humble apology eventually motivated a deeper relationship.

Repentance

When you wrong someone, you sin against him. The problem with this sin is that it convinces you that apology is too hard. When you gossip or slander, you are called to admit your wrongdoing to the person you offended. Wrongdoing without an apology will motivate recurring sin. Never assume that the effects of your mistake will just fade away;

time is not a healer in the absence of apology. For me, time was destructive because I was determined to carry my resentment forever. There is no doubt that my father sinned against me, but he did not accept time as a healer. In utter dread, he had to admit his sin before me, the one who suffered because of it. His apology made him more aware of his sin and its effects, but I did not realize that his realization only added to my sin—a sin that I was too stubborn to confess. Sin should bring awareness, and when you become aware of it, you should move towards repentance. I was so busy judging my father and questioning his repentance that I forgot to look at my own sin. He was struggling to be right with God, and I assumed that I was right the whole time.

Repentance promises renewal. In Jeremiah 15:19, the Lord says, “If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me.” Here, the Lord promises restoration through repentance, and this leads to serving Him. When you repent of your sin, you are given new energy in his forgiving presence and blessed by his unchanging mercy. But how can you experience true fellowship in God without the ones you love supporting you? God desires that the fellowship with family and friends glorify Him, but I did not recognize this. I assumed that my fellowship did not have to include my father, but he was pleading before the Lord to be in fellowship with me. His repentance drove him to be a child of God and to seek his own child, me. Repentance is hating your sin—Psalm 38:18: “I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.” My father not only hated his sin, but also its effects. He repented and sought restoration with me, while I thought that I did not have to repent at all.

Confession

The trouble with sin leads to confession—as seen above in Psalm 38:18. If my father had found no problem with his sin, his sincerity would have been fraudulent, which in turn, would have driven me further away. Again, it is a matter of restoration. When you are not troubled by your sin, you become consumed by it, and it affects the ones you love. May your trouble lead to repentance and then to renewal.

My father was willing to confess his sin to me, and in James 5:16 it says: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” My father confessed his sin to me, but I had no confession. I had no prayer. I could not pray for a man that hurt me so deeply because I was too angry. If you are too angry to pray for your own father, then you are too angry. When my father apologized, he was saying, “Justin, I know that what I did was wrong, but will you still love me and love me deeply?” This was my response: “Dad, yes, what you did was wrong, and I do not have the energy to love again.” My response eventually changed and made me aware of the anger and sin I was holding onto. I was then able to confess and pray that my father and I could experience mutual healing.

Sin

I didn’t think my father’s sins could be forgiven. I held them against him, which implied that I had the authority to compartmentalize sin. Sin is sin, but I have a tendency to rate it in accordance with my own will. 1 John 1:9 says: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Notice that it says “all unrighteousness.” It does not say that God will only forgive those sins that are not so offensive. Yes, my father’s sins were harsh, but God is merciful and

faithful to also heal his sins. He healed my sin, too, and this opened my eyes to view my father as a “human being who deserves love, respect, and compassion, regardless of his or her actions”(Freedman, 2000). God’s forgiveness of our individual sins brought us together to experience each other in a whole new way.

Apology and Remorse

Psychologically, apology and remorse are viewed as necessary for reconciliation (Freedman, 2000). My story proves this statement. Initially, I did not accept my father’s apology, but the process of events leading to the present experience of reconciliation may show that my father was indeed remorseful. He showed remorse, and it was not dependent on my belief in its insincerity. Eventually, I realized that his remorse was genuine, and this led to mutual apology. The process would have failed without mutual apology because it would have defeated the purpose of rebuilding. How can you rebuild something that doesn’t claim to be broken? My father knew he was broken—that our relationship was broken—but the admittance of his brokenness opened me to similar emotions. His remorse led to my forgiveness, which led to reconciliation, which we will talk about later.

Contrition

Ellison and Krause (2003) claim that remorse and the acceptance of apology may be dependent on acts of contrition. In order for forgiveness to occur, the offender must “become aware of his wrongdoing, make an explicit admission of regret or remorse, make restitution not to repeat the offense, and make restitution”(Ellison & Krause, 2003). In other words, people are willing to forgive the offender but only after they have performed an act that exemplifies their remorse. Contrition may allow constructiveness

between the father and his son, but I claim that contrition misplaces a needed sense of unconditional forgiveness.

Contrition has positives and negatives. The psychological well-being may be increased because contrition requires the offender to be aware of a wrongdoing that he might not have been totally aware of. It also grants the freedom of shared negative feelings between the offender and victim. This may lead to a greater understanding of each other and greater constructiveness. Finally, it assures that the act will never be repeated (Ellison & Krause, 2003). Contrition reveals the vulnerability of unconditional forgiveness. It argues that, if you forgive without a demand for an explicit act of remorse, there is greater likelihood that you will experience the offense again. I disagree. I believe there is nothing more powerful than the grace of unconditional love.

Negatively, contrition may enhance anger, thus affecting your psychological well-being (Ellison & Krause, 2003). When I accepted my father's apology, my anger was still very sensitive that the demand for contrition would have tempted regression to my earlier destructive state. This would have created a forgiveness stalemate because I would have not been able to move past my father's remorse until his act of contrition was sufficient enough. Thus, contrition does not lead to complete forgiveness (Ellison & Krause, 2003).

Why should contrition have to occur if my father's apology was sincere? His sincerity motivated my choice to forgive him unconditionally. Sincere apology and the expression of remorse is a very important factor in the victim's likelihood of forgiving the offender (McCullough, 2000). I think my dad's admittance of his sin was explicit enough that it did not require further proof of sincerity. Sincerity was realized more in

my father's actions, and I respected the fact that he stood before me and admitted that he was wrong. He is my father. Why shouldn't I accept him unconditionally?

Mutual Apology

Apology ensures vulnerability and admits fallibility, but it does not claim that these two things apply to just one side of the relationship (McCullough, 2001). An apology from the offender affects the offender and the victim. Both realize their mistakes, and this creates a mutual vulnerability that is necessary in the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. Apology brings miraculous change to a world that is stubborn and unremorseful, and it is unique because it admits its harm and transcends it at the same time (Hill, 2001). An apology is crucial in understanding the offender and understanding yourself as the victim, but it also motivates an action that is perhaps more difficult to accept: empathy for the offender.

Empathy

The last thing I wanted to think about was my father's pain. His pain did not matter because it came from his own decisions, and I wanted him to live with the consequences for the rest of his life. His choices affected me, and I wanted to remain affected. I never thought about empathizing with his pain because I thought that he did not deserve it. But did my anger invalidate the fact that he actually did experience shame and guilt? No. My anger gave no credibility, when, truthfully, my father suffered greatly under the effects of his own sin. Empathy meant hearing my father's story and not

relying solely on my story. It meant listening to my father's pain and also sharing the pain I experienced in hopes that he would be empathetic towards me. I never thought I would embrace his pain, but I also thought at one point that I would never need a father.

The Problem With Compassion

Growing up, I found a lot of problems with compassion. I understood it in the context of shared fellowship, but not in the context of a broken relationship. I was compassionate towards a good friend at school, but not towards my father. My actions towards my father assumed the desire to prevent compassion. This was the problem: Why should I show compassion to my father, who, through his actions, showed little compassion? Compassion within this context was wrestling with a great deal of pain, but the problem with my perspective was that I thought I was the only one experiencing the pain.

My problem with compassion was rooted in my unchanging perspective. I was so focused on my anger and conforming my dad to what I believed that I forgot to change myself. Compassion begins with me, and the change that can occur in a broken relationship begins with my choice. I can change the views of the offender and myself, or I can hold strong to something weaker (Holmes, Konstam, & Levine, 2003).

Compassion for my father brought forth my imperfection. Who was I to say that I did not have to be empathetic or that I had done nothing wrong? The awareness of our imperfection oftentimes leads us to embrace the pain of others, and it offers a deep intimacy of shared suffering (Hill, 2001). This possible "overlap between one's own identity and the identity of the transgressing relationship partner" can be accomplished through the transgressor's imagined guilt, his imagined desire for restoration, and the

victim's desire to also seek restoration (Fincham, McCullough, & Tsang, 2003). This presents an idea of mutual best interest. Empathy brings out the imperfections of both parties, but the imperfections create a necessary vulnerability for the goal of restoring relationship.

Empathy and Psychology

Empathy is crucial to forgiveness, and although there are many differing models of forgiveness, many of them agree on the issue of empathy and its importance (Day, Macaskill, & Maltby, 2002). McCullough (2001) explains that psychological interventions geared towards forgiveness were heavily dependent on the amount of empathy. In fact, "empathy for the transgressor is the only psychological variable that has, to date, been shown to facilitate forgiveness when induced experimentally" (McCullough, 2001). Some claim that forgiveness is unlikely without empathy, so it is important to understand the degree to which empathy occurs. Betancourt and Blair (1992) state that empathy is based on the victim's perception of the incident and the transgressor's intentions of causing the hurt. Empathy, or the lack thereof, may promote feelings of anger, retaliation, or compassion (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). In the process of forgiveness, it is good to note the empirical and scientific support of empathy. I will also look at empathy from a Christian standpoint.

According to the Empathy-Forgiveness Model, empathy is defined as "a vicarious emotion that is congruent but not necessarily identical to the emotion of the other person" (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). Empathy can be viewed in three different ways: affectively, emotionally, and cognitively. Affective empathy, which is related to the outward expression of emotion, is represented in the main model by Batson's eight-

item empathy scale. The eight items are sympathetic, empathetic, concerned, moved, compassionate, warm, softhearted, and tender (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). A higher degree of affectiveness of these items correlates with a higher degree of empathy.

Emotional empathy is based on the recognition of other's feelings and the attempt to share in that emotion (Day, Macaskill, & Maltby, 2002). It was difficult to acknowledge my father's emotions, but the challenge was sharing his emotion actively. Sure, you can experience the emotion to some extent in your head, but it is completely different to actually share the emotion. Honestly, it is something that I have not completely accomplished, but when I become more vulnerable emotionally, I will experience a greater depth of renewal.

Cognitive empathy plays a strong role in understanding empathy's effectiveness. Reframing—perspective taking, according to the Empathy-Forgiveness Model (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997)—is simply understanding the offender within a different perspective, and it relies on seeking out the reasons for the injury, not on making excuses to support your stubborn view of your offender's actions (Freedman & Knupp, 2003). It allows you to move beyond your pain and seek restoration by disconnecting from your own perspective (Berecz, 2001). I was so sure of my perspective prior to forgiveness that I could only see my father in one light. I saw him as the transgressor and could not see the part of him that suffered as a result of his transgression.

John Berecz (2001) presents a Reframing Model of Forgiveness that has three parts: Rapport, reframing, and reconciliation. Rapport describes empathy as both an

inward and outward experience, but Berezcz believes that it is more of an active process. He calls this active experience of entering into another's emotional disposition "imaginative projection," because you are "imaginatively transposing yourself" into the world of your offender. I feared the active pursuit of my father's emotion because it could have incited a lack of empathy and therefore a recurrence of anger and negative emotion (Berezcz, 2001). I feared that my experience of his emotion would deepen my anger.

Reframing is the second part of the model. Reframing is impossible without rapport because you must first enter his world before you chose to see it in a different perspective. Reframing is moving towards higher understanding by seeing where the offender is coming from, but what about me? Where do I come from? I did hold a great deal of unjustified anger, but I still had a place that I wanted my father to see and understand. I wanted my father to "reframe" me. I wanted him to enter my world so that he could see my hurt. Again, I arrive at the issue of mutuality. My father and I began to enter into each other's worlds, and this brought a mature understanding of pain and the process of dealing with that pain. We reframed, and this made reconciliation possible.

Reframing takes the criminal out of the crime. The goal is to look at your father as more than just an instigator of hurt. He is someone deserving of compassion, but the failure to reframe will view him in an unforgiving lens (Freedman, 2000). You will only see him as what your anger intended him to be—a person forever committed to wrongdoing. The goal of reframing is not to enter his world and affirm what you thought all along; it is to enter his world and change your mind. Enright, Santos, and Al-Mabuk (1989) showed that forgiveness directly correlates with cognitive empathy, but he also

stated that cognition does not automatically affect action. Thus, affective and cognitive empathy are interrelated. You may cognitively choose to enter your father's world, but the change comes from taking action.

Empathy and Christianity

Can true forgiveness occur without empathy? A Christian model of forgiveness does not disassociate the two. In fact, if you look closely at the foundation of Christian beliefs, you will see that forgiveness cannot occur without empathy. So, what role does empathy play in Christian forgiveness? In order to answer this, I looked at the ultimate model of empathy: Jesus Christ. Christ is the model because he cognitively empathized with me as a child of God and actively empathized by bearing my shame and guilt upon the cross. His suffering displayed an empathy so powerful yet so unfamiliar. As I strive to become more familiar with the love of God shown through his son, Jesus, I begin to understand the necessity of empathy and forgiveness in my own life.

Jesus knew his purpose and endured the cross for the sake of saving humanity from the unforgiveness it deserves. Hebrews 12:2-3 says:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The knowledge of and faith in Christ's death should not only motivate me to seek empathy for those who have hurt me, but it should point me to the joy of being in

fellowship with those people and ultimately, the presence of God. Christ was willing to experience that suffering empathy because he knew it would save me, but he also knew that he was going to be with his Father. His death gave me life, even life to pursue a relationship I thought hopeless. At one time, I grew weary and lost heart, but through Christ, I found an empathy that would lead me to the presence of my father.

My father experienced a great deal of pain, and I think that my words and the words of others inflicted a significant amount of punishment upon him. Did he have to deal with that for the rest of his life? Well, maybe from some people, but I was not going to be one of those. He probably had suffered enough prior to my mom's death, but I only wanted to remind him of his weariness. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Paul is speaking to the church of God in Corinth:

“If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you, to some extent—not to put it too severely. The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

The forgiveness of my father keeps him from further sorrow. His earlier sorrow was already enough to bear, and if I had not let go of my resentment, my presence would have increased his sorrow. Why would the anger of a son not cause the father sorrow? I realized that I wanted my presence to be comforting and love-affirming, and I could only find that in the person of Christ. I chose to forgive in the sight of Christ instead of holding onto anger for the sake of sinful desire. Initially, my actions and words implied that I was unaware of Satan's schemes, and he was willing to supply more anger as long as it kept us apart. For too long, I agreed with him, but he was never right. The power of Jesus is always stronger. It enables us to comfort and love those who have sinned against us. If you open your heart to the affects of Christ's empathy, it will change your life.

Awareness of my sin enables me to be more empathetic because it says that I need love just as much as my father does. When I realize my need for a Savior, I can see that my father's need is the same—this relates to the ideas of compassion and reframing explained earlier. In John 8, Jesus enters the temple. The teachers of law and the Pharisees bring an adulterous woman before him, and question Jesus about whether to stone her according to the Law of Moses. They continue to question him, and he responds in verse 7: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." I am not without sin therefore I cannot cast stones at my father. It would be easy to argue and say, "But Jesus, look what he did!" What about all that I have done? There are no "but's" when you choose unconditional love. In seeking and understanding my father's pain, I realized that in many ways, I was more like him than different from him (Hill, 2001). I have to realize that I am very much alike those who hurt me. Denial of this prevents true forgiveness.

Empathy is initiated by sincere apology, and it leads to a greater forgiveness. It is experiencing the shame and guilt of the offender, but it also forms a vulnerability within you, which allows you to share your experience as well. Empathy includes an element of sharing—shared suffering and shared intimacy. When my dad revealed his guilt, I imagined him saying, “Take this burden from me.” I said the same thing, and we lifted our burdens together.

Forgiveness

I have now reached the stage of forgiveness, but remember that the success of forgiveness is dependent on the previous stages of empathy and apology. Although apology and empathy precede forgiveness, forgiveness plays a more crucial role in the actual change of behavior towards the father. Behavior changes because it has to. Forgiveness without a shift in behavior presents itself simply as an idea and not an action. Forgiveness is very prevalent in psychological and religious realms, but it is studied more as an active thing, not merely a concept. The application of forgiveness is key to understanding its effect on your psychological well-being and its necessity in your Christian faith. Christianity without forgiveness would be hopeless. Life without forgiveness would be selfish and stale. In the following section, I will look at the psychological and spiritual components of forgiveness and make important implications of its necessity.

McCullough (2000) describes the constructive change of forgiving as prosocial, and he is careful to distinguish the prosocial change from motivation. The harmful act

that questions the act of forgiveness can be approached with three motivations: avoidance, revenge, and benevolence. Thus, you have two negative motivations and one positive. Obviously, the process of forgiveness desires a positive outcome, so it is safer to label the motivation to seek benevolence as a prosocial change. The terms “prosocial” implies a simultaneous shift from a decreased motivation to seek revenge and an increased motivation to seek restoration (McCullough, 2001). McCullough (2000) offers four prosocial changes: empathy-motivated, accommodation, sacrifice, and forgiving.

Accommodation is simply pursuing constructive change out of a potentially destructive experience. In contrast, I turned potential into actual. I sought destruction through my responses and actions, yet I did not realize that I was promoting greater destruction in the relationship and in myself. The very thing I was constructing was destroying me. Sacrifice is the surrender of your own well-being for the greater well-being of the other. Sacrifice was impossible for me. My anger was for my protection; it was only for my well-being. I already have talked about empathy-motivated change, but I will reiterate the importance of sharing in your offender’s guilt. I look more at forgiving in the remainder of this section.

The four prosocial changes move toward relationship harmony at a cost (McCullough, 2000). The costliness refers to letting go of your resentment and seeking prosocial change more for the welfare of the offender. You are placing his need above yours. What my father needed was the complete opposite of what I needed and what I was willing to give. If his needs didn’t support mine, then I created greater need in opposition to his desires. I needed distance and I needed my own life—a life apart from him. He needed a home, a family, and a son. Our needs were different, but we

eventually realized that we needed to lay down our selfishness and pursue the foundational need: the need for each other. In giving up our individual needs—whether positive or negative—we could seek relationship harmony focused on prosocial change. Initially, I sought to reaffirm my anger, but I eventually recognized that my perceived welfare was also my destruction.

Forgiveness of Self and Others

The forgiveness of others, or extra-punitive forgiveness, looks at the negative consequences of the failure to forgive. There are negative effects on personality and general health scores reflecting men's social inversion and women's social pathology (Day, Macaskill, & Maltby, 2001). Also, there are significant correlates to depression and anxiety. These negative consequences could have very easily invaded my life. I was potentially on the brink of depression. I was moving further and further away from my father—from a crucial source of strength and dependence—and from the fact that I did really need him to facilitate growth in my life. Could the absence of a father positively correlate with depression?

Looking at revenge, the justification of revenge, and holding grudges have also assessed deficits in forgiveness. There are also issues of alienation, cynicism, negative attitude, and passive aggressiveness (Freeman, Grove, Mauger, McBride, McKinney, & Perry, 1992). Enright's process model proves the relationship between forgiveness of others and psychological well-being—especially depression. An increase in forgiveness brings a decrease in depression and anxiety (Freedman & Knupp, 2003). My situation agrees with this strong positive correlation. When I was unforgiving, I was relentlessly

angry and sadly confused. The acceptance of forgiveness changed my reactions and created a new well-being. In a sense, it created a new person.

Forgiveness of self, or intro-punitive forgiveness, looks at success of relationship as dependent on the view of self. It is easy to forgive another and simultaneously place guilt upon yourself, but when you realize you have been unjustified and unforgiving for too long, you need to let it go for their sake and for your sake. Forgiveness of others does not require a personal act of guilt-motivated contrition. Failure to forgive self also is strongly related to depression and anxiety, in addition to distrust and decreased self-esteem (Day, Macaskill, & Maltby, 2001). The forgiveness of self has played a minor role in the process of restoration with my father, but any feelings of personal guilt and regret have served as a reminder of my role in the relationship. Again, it is easy to reach a desired point of forgiveness, but it may seem there also is something lost. I admitted my wrongdoing for the sake of my father's well-being and not for the sake of serving deserved time under my self-inflicted guilt. But on the other hand, when I do place blame upon myself, I am quickly reminded that forgiveness has been offered to me as well. My father's forgiveness canceled my wrongdoing, but it also reminded me that forgiveness must be mutual in order to seek restoration. Just as I forgave my father, so he forgave me. Continued guilt after forgiveness will hinder the ultimate goal of reconciliation.

Because He Forgave

“In Christianity forgiveness [by God] is central to the gospel, and this divine-human interchange then forms the basis for our human-human relationships”(Beck, 1995). Because of the Fall, I fail and experience brokenness in my relationships with

God and with others, therefore the gift of grace is given to me so that I can offer forgiveness to those I love. Unforgiveness prevents sufficient love; forgiveness saves my life. God calls me to forgive, and it is not a calling open to interpretation. It is command to love and forgive as He loves and forgives. It is my choice to forgive, but only because He chose first, and if I do not choose forgiveness in the light of His grace, I will surely fall further into anger and resentment. “Our own choices and responses [of forgiveness] directly involve the spiritual, social, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological aspects of our selves”(Witvliet, 2001). There is an integration of spiritual and psychological importance here. If you know Christ yet refuse to forgive in His sight, you will be affected in all the other areas of your life. The freedom is offered, and it is baffling that I choose not to take it sometimes.

Take my anger for example. My anger was healthy at first, but it quickly became unjustified. It began to beat at my father, and his bruises pleaded for forgiveness. I came to a point when I had to choose two paths—I could be angry or forgiving (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). I didn’t want to forgive because I thought my anger was righteous enough to prevent forgiveness, but Ephesians 4:31-32 tells us to get rid of all anger and bitterness and “be kind compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” The release of anger leads to compassion, so what are you if you hang on to that anger? You are certainly not compassionate to the one who hurt you. You are just wallowing in the consequences of an unforgiving heart—bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, and malice (Beck, 1995). So, the path of anger leads to greater destruction, and the path of forgiveness leads you to the love of the Father. You are the one walking. It is your choice.

The goal of forgiveness is love. Colossians 3:12-14 says:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

I am His child, therefore I am to pursue the things that bring me closer to the ones I love and ultimately to love of Christ, which makes my pursuit possible. Love is the binding virtue yet my anger was the weakest link. It tore the bond apart and left me impatient, hateful, and selfish. Were those the virtues I wanted? No, but the life I was living promised nothing better. It was when I forgave my father that I began to learn how to love him. Sure, the compassion was uncomfortable, but it is better to be uncomfortable in the presence of the Lord than too comfortable in the presence of evil.

When to Forgive

The act, or process, of forgiveness can occur at three different times: at the beginning, during, and at the end (Beck, 1995). Forgiveness at the beginning is a cognitive act more focused on the decision to forgive. The cognitive stage precedes a greater depth of the spiritual and emotional self. The decision to forgive allows you to learn as you walk through the continual process of forgiveness. A significant part of the learning process is applied to a deeper knowledge and awareness of Scripture, and as the

Scripture becomes more alive in your life, you are better able to achieve the desired cognitive, spiritual, and emotional harmony that comes from genuine forgiveness.

Forgiveness during the process is a more complicated process equating greater forgiveness with greater understanding—*epigenetic forgiveness*. Learning new skills is very important to this process because the skills not only apply to the present situation but also to the continuation of forgiveness. The distinction between this and forgiveness at the beginning is that the “during” process focuses on making the decision as you develop a greater understanding and not at the beginning. Matthew 18:21-22 gives a good example of this type of forgiveness. Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother who has sinned against him. He asks, “Up to seven times?” Jesus answers, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times”(Beck, 1995). This learning process applies greatly to my life because there is a certain depth of forgiveness that I have not reached. There is a degree of empathy that I have not fully understood, but the fact that I am learning offers greater hope in the increasing possibilities of forgiveness and in the continued rebuilding of my relationship with my father.

Forgiveness at the end applies to a reorientation towards God that has an impact on your life situations and the decisions you make, especially the choice to forgive. When you see the importance of forgiveness in Scripture, you are able to better understand a mutual woundedness—your father’s wounds and yours. This mutuality then leads you to the act of forgiveness that offers you any capability to forgive others—the death of Jesus on the cross. Beck (1995) claims that forgiveness at the end is most related to the forgiveness initiated by Christ: “God forgives our sin at the end of the wooing process of Jesus Christ who draws all persons to himself.” Christ is drawing you

to himself, and whether you forgive at the beginning, during, or at the end, listen to his words because they bring life. Forgive and discover a joy unfamiliar.

Bad Forgiveness

Your choice to forgive is not dependent on your father's expectation to be forgiven. If you forgive him only because he needed or expected it and not because you desired it, your decision will be insincere. Forgiveness as an obligation built upon what others demand is not forgiveness at all. It is merely something for the moment—a moment that will suffer under the longevity of greater insincerity. John M. Berez (2001) calls this type of forgiveness “fool’s gold, sparkling with promise, but upon closer clinical examination, it lacks the golden qualities of authenticity.” It is easy to cover an unforgiving heart with a sheet of temporary forgiveness, but it will provide no warmth. It provides a thin layer of protection that quickly wears away because of the hidden and relentless tear of your unconscious anger. A “fool’s” heart of forgiveness is colder than a genuine heart of unforgiveness.

“Forgiveness is volitional, not grimly obligatory”(Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998). The word “volitional” means that I am able to willingly choose to forgive. It is not a choice based on obligation, but remember that according to call of God, I am commanded to forgive as He forgave. But does that require that I forgive on impulse? No, it requires that I pursue God and choose to love those that he has already forgiven. I do not think that his command implies obligation. Love out of obligation is dry, just as forgiveness without a genuine heart is dead. Christ chose to die on the cross, and his choice led to my choice to forgive my father. The fact that Christ’s love induced willingness instead of obligation to love my father shows the amazing depth of His heart.

His love was so intentional that it healed my sins and the sins of my father and brought us into renewed relationship. Intentionality does not include obligation.

Time is Not the Healer

Maybe the depth of your anger and unwillingness to forgive assume that the tension between you and your father will disappear in due time. The wound is deep, but it will heal with time, right? A wound opens wider and cuts deeper if it is not tended to. The anger burns brighter and hotter if you do not extinguish it. Time is not an antibiotic, and it is not a fire extinguisher. If you do not pursue forgiveness, you will eventually see that time is the space you occupy to entertain your stubborn justifications. It is a gross contentment that gives verification to your selfish needs of anger and resentment. Time is a great thing if you want to stay the same.

The tricky thing about time and its negative effect on the wound is that you do not always feel the effects. You grow so accustomed to your anger that its effects are more about expectation than prevention. The anger is so prevalent that you cannot see yourself any other way. The unforgiving numbness becomes too familiar. Forgiveness changes your perception and presents a redeeming unfamiliarity. It redefines time and applies it to reconciliation, the process that gives a more positive meaning to time as a healer. Oftentimes, when pain becomes chronic, you are able to ignore it in your mind. Do not ignore this pain because it will destroy your mind, but more importantly, it will destroy your heart.

Changed Behaviors

The Empathy-forgiveness model shows two behaviors following forgiveness: conciliatory and lack of avoidance (McCullough, Rachal, & Worthington, 1997). Conciliatory behavior involves the restoration of trust and a sense of agreement. Agreement—also agreeableness—is a personality trait that includes altruism, empathy, care, and generosity, and it has been shown that people who have a higher inclination to forgive are also inclined to have a high degree of agreeableness (McCullough, 2001). My degree of agreeableness was terribly low prior to forgiveness. Selfishness replaced altruism, empathy could not see beyond my own hurt, I cared only for my well-being, and generosity was extended only to appease moments of intense conflict. My generosity was based upon what I desired; if I did want to argue, I offered generous words of acceptance and agreement. Thus, agreeableness was on my terms. Forgiveness happened, and my attitude changed. I found myself agreeing with the words of my father. I agreed with his desire for restoration and accepted my faults. Agreeableness clears a common ground where both parties can stand and speak their hurts for the goal of restoring trust and love.

The decrease of avoidance behavior was difficult for me because I had grown accustomed to the awkwardness of my father's presence. His embrace was always a place that I felt cold and distant, but suddenly, it was warm and inviting. The warmth was still uncomfortable, but it was a different feeling. Although it was uncomfortable, I still wanted to be there. It was a promising presence that would not allow me to revert to the tendencies of avoidance. The decrease of avoidance behavior was a slow development, but it supported the healthy process of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a learning process—you learn how to be a son again and he learns how to be a father again.

The temptation to entertain the old behaviors can be strong, but you have to remind yourself that your behavior must be strong enough to bring your father back and not strong enough to drive him away. You have to know the difference between those two strengths.

The change of behavior leads to the process of reconciliation. There may be a lack of avoidance, but again, there is still a slight inclination to maintain avoidance because of what you are used to. Part of reconciliation is learning how to be renewed. Renewal can be painful, but you have to take that step towards the desired relationship. Although reconciliation is not a part of the Empathy-forgiveness Model, it is essential in showing the continuation of forgiveness. Remember, forgiveness is active.

A Specific Change

I have not mentioned my stepmother up to this point, but I will briefly describe my relationship with her in light of changed behaviors. It is important to mention this relationship because she is a part of the family—a part of the rebuilding process. Primarily, the relationship with my father is the main focus, but as he pursues me, so also he pursues his wife. His love for her motivates a renewed respect from me for the woman that she is in the household. I was able to forgive her because I was able to forgive my father. In other words, forgiveness of my father extended beyond him and affected a relationship that seemingly was nonexistent prior to my willingness to change. My anger was powerfully subtle in her presence, and I am sure that she felt the weight of it daily. I avoided her, seeking silence in conversation and distance within the home. She was and is a part of the home, and a home cannot be rebuilt unless every broken

relationship is mended. It would be easy to continue avoiding her, but my father loves her. Because I love my father, I will strive to love her.

When I was angry, my stepmother and I rarely talked. I avoided her questions with stale responses and remained steadfast on my side as she agreed with my father's desires. She was a part of the opposition, therefore my anger also was aimed at her. We never argued, but the silence between us was troubling. My father wanted us to get along, but I did not even desire a relationship with *him*. My anger invaded every area of the home and left no one untouched. She hated my anger, and I didn't want to change.

Ironically, the change happened when I realized that I hated my anger. I grew tired of disagreement and avoidance. I could barely breathe in that house. The suffocating thickness of the air lingered for years, and I no longer could hold my breath. I opened the door, letting the fresh air pour in, and this allowed everyone to breathe again—I didn't see that they also were holding their breath. We were all waiting on something different. My father and stepmother wanted restoration, and I wanted the opposite. It would be easy to say that my stepmother did not play a huge role in my process of forgiveness, but that assumption would invalidate her desire to know me. She hated that my anger hindered our relationship, and my experience of forgiveness gave me a renewed heart for her.

The forgiveness of my father immediately brought the forgiveness of my stepmother. I erased the line between us, and we did not have to take sides anymore. The decrease of avoidance behavior towards my stepmother has also been a slow development, but I am willing to be patient in pursuing this new relationship. It is better to be patient in a relationship than impatient in my anger. I no longer feel obligated to

talk or sit with her, and I do not sense that she is still waiting on me to be different. Sure, it is more comfortable to remain silent, but what does silence accomplish when two people are trying to understand each other? Most importantly, we have reached an agreement. We both agree that, in order for restoration to occur, we must thankfully accept the awkward changes that forgiveness has brought forth and pursue the relationship with unyielding grace.

Reconciliation

The relationship does not automatically change when you say, “I forgive you.” Forgiveness is certainly a huge step, but if an unwillingness to seek greater restoration overwhelms the initial act of forgiveness, the purpose of and desire for relationship is misplaced. Forgiveness is not the final choice; you have to continue to choose your father above your angry tendencies. You have to actively pursue a renewed intention of love and respect for your father. Know that the restoration does not lie solely on your shoulders. Your father must be willing to carry it with you. Just as you lift your burdens together, so you walk together even if the path is winding and unfamiliar. Every path leads somewhere, and the path of reconciliation leads to a view that will captivate you.

Forgiveness is a choice that you make, and it is not dependent on the place or response of the other person. Reconciliation involves you and your father, and it is this mutuality that restores trust (Everett & Worthington, 1998). It also reveals your father’s yearning to know you, his son, and this longing rises from an act of acceptance and repentance (North, 1998). His repentance enables beautiful restoration, and my

acceptance gives me strong and willing hands to rebuild a home. A man must find his constructive strength first in his weakness. Is a man truly a man if he cannot confess his weakness? My dad and I were tired of building our false strength; we were tired of our selfish manhood. The process of reconciliation reveals the intention of forgiveness--to take the broken fragments and find out how to piece them together to create something mightier. It is paradoxical that the foundation of our strength is weakness, but we could never be strong without vulnerability. Let your father build with you. Let him love you.

Reconciliation cannot occur without forgiveness (Yandell, 1998). Can you build a house without the nails? Can you write a sentence without first studying the meanings of the words? Can you seek restoration without first pursuing forgiveness? The forgiveness process makes you aware of the relationship you truly desire, but you cannot cheat restoration by skipping its initiating component. Forgiveness implies humility, and if you skip forgiveness, you will arrogantly lead a self-centered relationship.

Reconciliation is not a selfish desire; it is mutual and vulnerable.

The best question to ask would be, "Can reconciliation occur without Christ?" According to 2 Corinthians 5:18, it cannot: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." The message of reconciliation is grace. God revealed his mercy and favor through his one and only son, Jesus, to ensure me of my deliverance from sin. This ministry is the foundation of my life, and the grace that I show through forgiveness of others is a reflection of God's forgiveness and promise to give life (See also Romans 5:10-11). I cannot categorize the imitation of Christ. His sacrifice commands application in every area of my life. Do not

think that forgiveness is enough. God forgives you, but he also pursues you ferociously. Forgive as He forgives. Pursue as he pursues.

Reckless pursuit ensures vulnerability. In the forgiveness section, I talked about the beneficial costliness of relationship harmony (McCullough, 2000). Prosocial forgiveness incites vulnerability to not only seek the love of my father but to invite the love of my father. Harmony comes when two people are living in peaceful understanding. Sure, we still argue, but it is within a redeemed construct. Argument was once without purpose, but now it strives for understanding and resolution. Argument often arises from misunderstanding, and now, I am in a place to learn from it and not encourage it. Harmony comes at a cost, but what you receive is priceless.

Forgiveness is not just an “abandonment of resentment”(Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998). It is the initiation of renewed love. The act of forgiveness is not stagnant, although it would probably be more comfortable that way. This ease of contentment is explained:

“It seems to us that the abandonment of resentment may be more easily accomplished by trying to ignore the offender than by offering moral love to him or her. We say this because offering moral love demands much of the forgiver, whereas ‘writing off’ the offender asks less; thus the latter may be more easily embraced, especially by an angry person”(Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998).

Forgiveness challenges you to love better. The activeness of forgiveness, or reconciliation, is proved in the pursuit of love. The process of forgiveness is tough, but

the reconciliatory act of love is even harder because it is so new and unfamiliar. Is it better to love valiantly or to love indifferently? God's gift of reconciliation offers me the freedom to give and receive love. Out of this freedom comes redemption—and redemption does not promote contentment. Forgiveness is not fulfilled by itself. The fruit of forgiveness is seen in the action that follows. Forgiveness does not maintain relationship; it deepens it.

What do you need to surrender in order for greater love to prevail? I ask this question to enlighten the truth that you need to receive your father's love just as much as you need to give your love. Surrendering is not so much a matter of loving as it is a matter of being loved. You have needs, and some of them require a terrifying vulnerability. I have needs, but there are times when I do not know how to respond to my father's affection because of its threatening unfamiliarity. What is so threatening about being loved again? The affection wants you to know it is real, and when imagination motivates the hopelessness of the broken relationship, the realness is hard to embrace. It almost seems too real, but know that this realness is beautifully overwhelming. Allow your father to draw you close. Allow him to correct and discipline you, for those are roles that reconciliation has renewed. You cannot restore the relationship if you choose to live the same way. Contentment prevents vulnerability—a vulnerability that teaches you that it is okay to be loved again. Let go of your contented definition of love and invite your father to love you again.

In Continuation

The story doesn't end here. I am still learning how to love, and I am still learning

how to be loved. The process of restoration will never end unless I become content with where I am in the relationship. Contentment should never be a goal of relationship because it implies limited growth. Growth is a slow and potentially arduous process, but it always ensures positive progress. The pain of a broken relationship far exceeds the pain of growth, and I have the ability to choose between these pains. I made a choice to relinquish my anger, and I pursued restoration even when I did not know what the process looked like or how to do it. The unknown direction guaranteed growth, and after a couple years of healthy struggle, I have found a way. The direction is inviting, but the path is endless.

Remember that the relationship depends on a mutual pursuit. My father did initially create the distance between us, but that does not mean that the process of restoration falls entirely on his shoulders. Reconciliation involves two people, and without the determination of those two people, joyless contentment will occur. I have to pursue my father every day, and I have to hold fast to the promise of forgiveness—that I will have a new father. There is something beautiful about renewal. A father can repent and desire a son, and a son can forgive and desire a father. A son can repent and surrender his anger, and a father can forget that his son's anger was ever there. Renewal brings two broken people together and proves that the power of restoration is far more consuming than the power of unforgiveness.

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