



University of Tennessee, Knoxville

## TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange

---

Senior Thesis Projects, 1993-2002

College Scholars

---

2000

### Better is One Day: Reflections on the Death of a Brother

Daniel Miles

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_interstp2](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp2)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Miles, Daniel, "Better is One Day: Reflections on the Death of a Brother" (2000). *Senior Thesis Projects, 1993-2002*.

[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_interstp2/50](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp2/50)

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the College Scholars at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Thesis Projects, 1993-2002 by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

**Better Is One Day:  
Reflections on the Death of a Brother**

**Daniel Miles**

**Dr. Lee Humphreys, Advisor**

**Dr. Thomas Broadhead, Honors Director**

**Spring 2000**

## Introduction

ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ.

---- Socrates, Plato's *Apology*

When I read over this work I keep coming across three words: “remember”, “change”, and “love”. These seem to be the primary themes of this paper and of my life as well. Everything I do, every word I write, somehow deals with one of these three subjects. Whether remembering something for class or dealing with a change in my routine or experiencing the love of a girlfriend, my life is dominated by these three things: memory, change, and love.

They are what ultimately make up the human condition, I think. In a sense, it is our way of organizing time. We remember what is past, we deal with change in the present. And love, love is for the future, our way of actualizing divinity in this world in order to prepare us for change and ensure that memories will someday be useful and worth holding on to. I have written this paper to you, Andrew, and I have somewhat inadvertently focused on these three themes because they sum up my experience with you.

I am not certain why it has taken me so long to reach this point. I have written plenty about you, but for some reason the thought of writing *to* you has made me fearful. Perhaps I am afraid to include you in my storytelling; without you, I can make up the details that I forget and provide the reader with what I might expect your perspective to be. But that's not fair to anyone, and especially not you.

So perhaps I'm writing all this to you so that you will understand exactly how I feel and where I am right now. Our lives together are made up of a specific sequence of events frozen in time, but how our lives are looked back upon and remembered is constantly changing. Our stories are inexplicably linked, and my telling of your story is your telling of my story. As your story changes in my eyes, so do I change.

I really don't know where to begin, or how to start explaining why I am suddenly motivated to write to you this way. The one thing that I think distinguishes humans from other animals is that we do have an inherent desire to tell stories. Perhaps we wish to teach others through the relating of our own experiences. Or maybe we just find it entertaining. But human beings are storytelling creatures, passing down our myths, legends, and fairy tales since time began.

I don't claim to call any part of our story a myth or legend or fairy tale. I do, however, find myself wanting to tell it. And I mean something more and deeper than merely talking about it; talking about it is something I got over years ago. I learned the hard way that you have to look carefully for people you can talk to about that kind of thing. When I first started college, I very badly needed to talk about you, about your life and death, and I was likely to unload on anybody I could trap. I had a little difficulty making friends at first because I was so wont to begin blabbering about what had happened to you and what I was feeling. One girl sat trapped in a booth at the cafeteria for nearly half an hour, staring at me with a mixture of concern and horror as I methodically described the pain and loss I had experienced that year.

I got over the need to talk about it. That's a part of the grieving process, and I've moved on. Now I'm ready to tell it. The difference is that when I talked about it, I was doing it for me. In telling it, I do this for you.

Some people think I have a need to memorialize you in this work. That's partly true; this is a tangible way in which I can remember you. It's also a way that I can share your memory with others. But this is more than memorializing or sharing; it's a way that I can make sense out of your death, to tie together all the loose ends and create a sense of spiritual closure. There's nothing that needs to be said between us, but at the same time I feel that there is much that still could be said between us. I want to share with you what your illness was like for me, how I lived the last year of your life and the years since. I want you to understand how I feel about your death and I want you to help me come to a conclusion about its meaning. Because I'm very afraid that it has no meaning.

This work is also part of the grieving process. I'm still grieving, and I'd be fooling myself if I said that I'd completely gotten over your death. I know you know what it's like to grieve, but I wish you could experience this grief the way I do. I know it would be selfish for me to rant about how it feels to be separated from you; you were suddenly separated from me, and our parents, and all your friends, and from everything you knew and took to be real. No living human being could fathom what that's like, and I don't pretend to understand either. But in a sense, you got to start all over. Wherever you are now, I'll bet it's better than here, and I'm sure it's so immensely different, devoid of time and space and suffering that the losses you experienced were dwarfed by the sheer newness of it all. For me, life continued, only it was incomplete. The sun still rises and sets and time still passes and there are still taxes and Super Bowls and people still get up in the morning and go to school and work in an effort to better a life that is constantly passing away. When you died, nothing changed in how the world turned. That's what made it so difficult for those of us who loved you; nothing changed for anyone except us. It's such a lonely feeling, to grieve over something no one else knows about.

And it's not an overwhelming kind of thing, either, like jumping into a cold swimming pool. It's instead like slowly and agonizingly trying to wade in and accustom oneself to how it feels. When you died, I had been preparing myself for your absence for so long, and in a sense was almost looking forward to it, because you were ready to go, and we were ready to let go. And so then when you died, we were ready to live without you. And then during the first week of college, I went to a poster sale they have at the beginning of every semester and I saw a poster that is exactly like the one that hangs in Agent Mulder's office on *The X-Files*, and I thought, "Andrew would love that." And I wanted to buy it for you, because I knew you'd be impressed, and we could talk about where you could hang it so you'd be like Mulder. Only it suddenly washed over me that you didn't have anything in your room now and I couldn't buy it for you. See, one day I miss one thing about you and then the next day I miss something new that I hadn't missed before. Each day reveals something new that I've lost through your death, and so slowly and agonizingly, I slip into the life that is cold and void of your presence.

It's really tough to know where to begin. There's so much I want to tell you about and so much I need to work out. Perhaps I should start with your illness, or perhaps I should start with what I've been thinking about since you died. But I've already decided not to start with those, even though they may be the best starting points. I'm going to start with our childhood together. I know you were there, and I know that

was a part of your life unmarred by the cancer. Perhaps you don't see the necessity to talk about that, but I do. I have come to the realization that our childhood together shaped who we both became as young adults and who I am still becoming, and I want to spend some time with you sharing about how we grew up and what events were the most important to us as children.

Mom likes to ask me if I had a good childhood. It's the counselor thing, you know. I tell her I did. I'd tell her that even if I didn't.

## Remember

*...Praising what is lost  
Makes the remembrance dear.*

----- Shakespeare,  
*All's Well That Ends Well*

I don't know how much of your childhood you remember, or if you even care to remember it, but I remember my first memory of you. You couldn't have been more than a year old. Mom and Dad kept you in this little bassinet-type cradle; it hung from an arch, and I think it may have been one of those mechanical rockers. Well, I was standing over you trying to play with you, I think. Truth is, I don't recall what I was doing, but it made you cry. And Mom and Dad got really angry with me. I didn't have any hostile intentions, I know that for sure, but I would imagine that Mom, being a counselor, knew the typical jealousy a child can have for the newborn sibling and was afraid that maybe I was acting out that jealousy in some form of torment. Anyway, that's my earliest memory of you.

After that, they all kind of run together. I remember us at the zoo and I remember how we used to take walks around the block with Mom and Dad and they would pretend that the fire hydrants in the neighborhood were McDonald's restaurants and we would stop and order french fries. Or how we would go down to the duck pond and climb up on the mossy fence damp with sweat and attempt to coax the ducks towards us with ridiculous clucks and calls. I remember us having fights but I also remember us playing together a lot.

It's strange, the relationship between brothers. I know people who hate their brothers and people who never speak to their brothers. Seems to me all brothers should be close friends, because that's the way it was for me, and I can't imagine anyone being anything different. But of course, I've never had an older brother, so I can't relate to that. I just had you.

See, being a big brother is a duty. It's almost as if nature has appointed you babysitter. I was the pioneer in our family, the trail-blazer for child-rearing and growing up. Do you remember how old you were when Mom and Dad let you go to the mall alone? I was much younger than when I got to go to the mall alone. Do you remember how old you were when Mom and Dad let you watch your first R-rated movie? Not much longer after I did. I was the trial run, the test subject. Mom and Dad would try it out on me first, and when it worked, they applied it to you. I think that's just how parenting goes; you learn with the first child when it's all still new.

But more than being the prototype for childhood, being an older brother to a younger brother is a unique position because the older brother stands as an example of what the younger brother should be. Yes, that's a little ridiculous and not a little arrogant. But that is the sense that an older brother gets, especially when he realizes that he is just a test drive. Then there appears an urgency, a need for immediate influence in order to prove to the parents that they did okay on the oldest and there isn't much

amendment needed on the younger brother. If you got in trouble, that reflected poorly on me, because it means that not only did Mom and Dad not learn the lesson right the first time, but I must not have learned it either.

And then there's the sense that the firstborn is just entitled to more and therefore reigns supreme over the younger siblings. There was certainly more of that early on, and it reappeared a lot as we grew older. I was always very threatened by the stories of brothers in the Bible. Cain and Abel: what happened? The younger brother pleased God more, driving the older brother to murder. Joseph and his brothers? Joseph, the youngest, was the favorite and his evil brothers sold him into slavery. Jacob and Esau? See, even Jacob gets his name put first when people refer to that story. The parable of the prodigal? The prodigal son squanders his inheritance on women and wine and gets a feast, but the older son who was faithful and devoted to the father got nothing. I always took comfort in knowing that Jesus was the firstborn in His family.

The pressure is on the firstborn. When the oldest sibling messes up, everyone notices. Sure Cain was jealous of Abel. Who brought the first offering? Cain. Why didn't God like his offering? We don't know. I'll bet that Cain thought Abel was trying to one-up him. That would piss me off, too; and did anytime you tried it. And you did it, too; you always had more girls than I did. That drove me crazy. You got more attention from your teachers; that drove me to seek more attention in class. Or take Joseph or Jacob: in both cases a parent favored them over their siblings. That is the ultimate fear of an older sibling. I don't think younger siblings experience that fear like the oldest does. Perhaps it goes back to that original jealousy and displacement that comes with the birth of a newborn sibling which threatens to disrupt the attention and place which the oldest has held in the family all his life. It could just be that sense of being superior by birth order; if a parent favors your younger sibling more, then birth order superiority is a sham.

Anyway, I felt the pressure as the firstborn, and that pressure leads to what I call the Big Brother Syndrome. Worse than any parental control, the Big Brother Syndrome manifests itself amongst people who act out authority they didn't earn, make decisions for people they are not responsible for, and seldom accept the blame when these decisions and authority result in something disastrous. When the object of the Big Brother Syndrome does well, the sufferer takes credit; when the object fails, the sufferer admonishes. In some instances the sufferer feels a sort of failure; this is a separate type of Big Brother Syndrome known as the Moral Big Brother Syndrome. I suffered from a pretty severe case of Moral Big Brother Syndrome.

Perhaps the first time I really felt a sense of responsibility over you was on our first day in day care. Mother Goose Day Care Center, a portal to hell. My memories of that part of our lives are tainted with a strange mixture of naivete and bitter contempt. I'll never forget what a strange juxtaposition it made to watch dear old Mother Goose herself mingle with the other day care workers. Mother Goose (whose real name I don't think we ever knew), the kind old grandmotherly woman who wandered about the building throwing her arms around any child she happened to meet. And the other workers, who always went by Miss and then their first name. Some of them I remember very vividly; others have faded with time. I remember Miss Lisa pretty well; she stood out. Tall, slender, pretty, and kind. Everyone loved Miss Lisa.

Unfortunately for us, Miss Lisa watched over the toddlers. We were left with Miss Michelle. Miss Michelle was a large, boisterous, ill-tempered and overbearing

woman who did not like to be crossed. I'm not sure if her foul disposition was inherited or simply a by-product of the bratty children she was forced to supervise, but she was no fun for any of us to be around. She yelled, she punished, she stomped on any attitude that got in her way. Who knows how many wills were broken by this woman. She very nearly broke mine, for I was sure at one point that she had broken yours.

If it was not the first day we had been to Mother Goose, then it was the second or third day. Mom would drop us off very early in the morning and we would wait until someone drove us to school. I was in third grade then, and that would have put you in kindergarten. You got out earlier than I did, and they would pick you up from school and bring you back to the day care. A few hours later, I got out of school, and they would likewise bus me back to the day care where we would wait for Mom to come pick us up. In the mornings, some kids brought breakfast and were allowed to eat it in the kitchen area. Mom had given us oatmeal. I remember that she gave us oatmeal as a special treat, but I never much liked oatmeal. I don't think you did either, but we ate it when Mom served it because we knew she did it out of love. That morning she had dropped us off at Mother Goose with two packets of instant oatmeal, which Mother Goose had assured Mom would be no problem for the workers to fix for us.

The workers, however, were not overly excited to have to fix us hot oatmeal. They were more used to breakfast pastries or, at the worst, cereal, and they did not enjoy mixing and warming the oatmeal for us. Miss Michelle was working in the kitchen that morning, and I believe she told us never to bring oatmeal again.

We sat at the table with our steaming oatmeal and tried to disappear. The other kids at the table were all younger than we were. We also didn't know any of them, and the rude treatment we had received over Mom's oatmeal had already darkened our day. I tried to eat it although I wasn't at all hungry; I was afraid of what would happen if we didn't eat the oatmeal which Miss Michelle and her colleagues had so painstakingly prepared for us. But you didn't even try to eat it. Instead you simply sat there, hands folded in your lap and your head bowed, staring into the hot bowl as the steam licked your face.

I think I said something to you, probably trying to encourage you to eat it lest our lack of appetites be interpreted as subversive rebellion. But you never responded to me; you only sat still and quiet. I ate my oatmeal.

I'm not sure how long you sat there like that, but after a little while you vomited in your bowl. And you did it so calmly; you didn't heave or gag, you just bent closer to your bowl and spit up, and I don't think any of the other children at the table even noticed. You didn't look up at me, you didn't say a word. You just kept staring into your bowl.

I got up to find someone, perhaps because I wanted to get you medicine or keep you from going to school. The nearest adult was Miss Michelle; I ran up to her to explain your situation.

"Why aren't you in your seat?" she demanded before a word had left my tongue. "You're not supposed to get out of your seat. If you're done with your breakfast, raise your hand."

"My brother just threw up," I told her.

She looked over at our table. Your back was turned towards us and you still hadn't moved. "Where?" she asked, moving across the room to the table.



“He threw up in his bowl,” I said.

Miss Michelle didn’t believe me. “I don’t see anything,” she declared, peering into your bowl. “Looks like oatmeal to me.”

Maybe you remember this; probably you don’t. She could not be convinced. The more I tried to assure her that there was indeed vomit in your bowl, the angrier she got at me for trying to lie to her. It wasn’t until you threw up again, this time violently and all over the table, that Miss Michelle believed me.

I don’t know what happened to you then. She ran to get some towels and called someone else to come take you to the washroom and then the bell rang for us to board our buses for school. I didn’t see you again until that afternoon when I got back. You never spoke about it, either; I didn’t know if you had gone to school or not or if you had gotten sick again later. But I remember feeling a distinct responsibility towards you that morning, perhaps because I was older or perhaps because I was simply feeling better than you were. But it was from then on that I felt obligated to you, and the symptoms of Moral Big Brother Syndrome began to show.

I think you felt them at times. I think you got tired of being watched over and guarded by your older brother. And you acted this out by tattling on me all the time. There was a phase – I know you know what I’m talking about – where I couldn’t look at you crooked without you running to Mom to tell her what I was doing. And it was more than just letting her know what I had done: you wanted me to be punished for it! Very often you would become upset when Mom told you to forget about whatever it was I had done. And so then you came running back to me, watching me like a vulture, waiting for me to slip up and call you names so you would have enough evidence to convict me.

But other than that we got along, don’t you think? I mean, after we got used to the dangers of Mother Goose, we stuck together. And we played together, too, remember? I would have Ryan over and you would have Jamey over and we’d run around the yard with waterguns, playing that incredibly complex game of cloak-and-dagger that we had concocted. Or we would get all of our G.I. Joe toys together and take turns picking pieces for our armies, and then we would conquer the entire upstairs hallway for a war that no one would ever lose.

It seems like we were best friends until I went to middle school. I know that’s when everything changed. I couldn’t have known it then – and I doubt you would have been able to put your finger on it either – but that was when we separated and started growing apart. Not that we alienated each other or stopped being friends, but I know that that first year when I was in sixth grade was particularly rough on you. And I don’t think anyone really noticed.

For three years we’d been at the same school, and we’d been going to the same day care, and we’d been leaving in the mornings and returning in the afternoons at the same time. We were together a lot, even though we were three years apart in school. And then when I went to the middle school, that all changed: we were at different schools, I got home earlier than you did, and we stopped going to Mother Goose. As terrible as the day care was, I think it served to bond us together, and with that no longer a threat we had no daily crises with which to depend on each other. You were forced to face South Side Elementary all by yourself, and you had to ride the bus home from school all by yourself. But worst of all, I developed a whole bag of chips on my shoulder.

You see, being in the sixth grade was a huge deal for me. It was at a new school, and it was the big public school that all the middle schoolers in the city went to. At South Side, you went to school with the same people every year. At Liberty Bell Middle School you were with different people in every class; people you'd never seen before. And you had different teachers for every class, and often had to walk across campus to get to your classrooms. Just the fact that we were on a "campus" was exciting and new and made us feel grown-up and mature. It was a brand new environment, unlike anything we'd been in before, and it was so much like high school – at least it was in our eyes at the time – that we couldn't help but feel old and adult. Elementary school was for children, and we had left that behind. It didn't matter that we had just come from there, that in fact we were far more like elementary school kids than we were high school kids. We felt big. We walked through big halls with big lockers and we moved from classroom to classroom, spending our days with five or six different teachers and passing hundreds of different people in the course of one day. We took classes like shop, band, choir, computer tech, and art and we moved between four different buildings depending on which class it was. We were growing up and moving on. I am tempted to think of Paul's description of spiritual growth in 1 Corinthians 13: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." We felt as if we were finally putting childish ways behind us and growing to face the world as adults.

But you know this; you yourself were a sixth grader at Liberty Bell Middle School once and you no doubt remember these feelings. And you certainly know how false and pretentious they were; you better than anyone else now. Today, Mom works in one of the old middle school buildings. Liberty Bell doesn't exist anymore; it has since been assimilated by Science Hill High School. Eighth and ninth grades are on what used to be Liberty Bell's campus and Mom's office is in one of those buildings. I went to see her office for the first time on a Friday afternoon and as I walked through the halls that I had not stood in since I was in eighth grade I was struck with how small it all looked. The lockers, thin as street lights, would not have held some of the textbooks my college classes required. The sinks outside of the bathrooms looked thin and worn like buckets, and I had trouble imagining that they had once been – and to current students, probably still were – places to socialize and gossip. The ceiling seemed low and the doorframes hunched and the people who passed me in the hall were half my size. A group of kids passed, their pants baggy and sagging, their ears pierced, ambling through the hall with an attitude of arrogance and machismo. "Man, fuck that," one of them muttered to the other. "No way I'm gonna put up with that shit. I'll beat the hell outta that motherfucker." And I nearly laughed out loud. How comical that these children strolled through that building and acted big and talked foul as if they were adults and not to be trifled with; these four-foot midgets who tried to own the hall as they passed.

As I moved further down the hall to where Mom's office is, a girl was walking towards me. Suddenly she said, "Are you Mrs. Miles' son?" I stopped and turned to her; she was very cute with her hair spilling over her shoulders and her teeth sparkling in a smile. Her dress was sharp and short and she carried herself with dignity and confidence. And suddenly, as if the walls of that building were having an hallucinogenic effect on me, I felt small and awkward again, and my heart began racing and I felt my face flush hotly because this beautiful, popular girl was speaking to me and I didn't know what to

say. It was only a moment, but in that moment I was so self-conscious that I couldn't speak, and I felt my self-esteem vanish and my self-assurance disappear. It was only a moment, and then I snapped out of it, realizing that this girl, too, was tiny and young. And this time I did laugh out loud, covering it up by saying, "Yes, I am; does she talk about me?" But I was laughing because it was silly that a little girl who knew nothing of the world other than how she looks and who she talks to would intimidate anyone. And when I got to Mom's office and sat down, I was amazed to remember how it had been for me as a sixth grader, walking through the halls with the poise and pretension of one who is old and wise. To think that it was all a poor reflection as in a mirror and that I was a long way off from seeing reality face to face. Even now I only know in part, and how silly we must look, we who think we know fully, especially since we are fully known.

And so I don't excuse my actions or my attitudes during that fall when I was a sixth grader. But that is how it was, and I know you understand. But nobody understood at the time, not even Mom I don't think, and this made things very strange. Perhaps you remember what it was like, how it felt to suddenly be displaced and estranged. I know it was hard for you; I knew at the time things were hard for you, I just didn't know why. But you must have gotten into more trouble in that one month than you did the rest of your life. You remember that month – the month that Ryan moved in with us.

It was just one of those things that happens every now and then: Ryan's little brother Chris became suddenly very ill, contracting the *E. coli* bacteria. He was one of those kids that got put in the news at the time when the Jack-In-the-Box burger chain was under a lot of fire. I don't know if he caught the bacteria from a hamburger or not, but I do remember him being very sick. His parents took him to Vanderbilt for treatment and they were gone for a month; they asked us if we could keep Ryan. I certainly had no problem with that; Ryan was my best friend.

I think it's also important to understand how my relationship with Ryan changed with the entrance into middle school. Ryan and I had been friends since birth, but we had never gone to school together. Other than church activities, we didn't see each other if it wasn't a weekend. We didn't share any friends except for maybe one or two at church, and it was hard to make friends at church at that age because you only saw each other once or twice a week and always in a controlled environment. I'm convinced that Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, RA's and GA's, and any other church function for kids does more to make children dislike each other. The other kids don't go to your school, they don't know you, and in the hour or so that you're stuck together listening to Bible stories and coloring pictures of Moses or Jesus you manage to be bothered by some kid next to you stealing all the crayons you want to color with. The only reason Ryan and I stayed friends all throughout elementary school is that...well, I really don't know. We just did. Maybe we were the only kids who didn't bother each other. Maybe it was because we'd known each other since we were born. But when we entered middle school, things changed.

We still weren't in many classes together. We had band together, I think, and that was it. Band was not a class conducive to socializing; if you weren't playing your instrument at the time, someone else was, and it was difficult to talk over the other instruments without being detected. And Ryan played percussion while I played french horn, so we were never within earshot of each other anyway. But the mere fact that we were in the same school for the first time in our lives was enormously exciting; I might

pass him in the halls or see him at lunch. Sometimes we would get to hang out together during “positive reinforcement,” a Pavlovian catch-phrase that was used in place of “recess.” We would hang out on a bench on the “plaza” and watch the girls go by, commenting on how good they looked in their clothes that were covering (or in some cases not covering) their developing breasts and buttocks.

That was the other significant factor in the radical shift of my relationships at that time: girls were no longer considered untouchables. We were still convinced that girls had cooties; but we were no longer convinced that cooties were bad, and many of us guys were starting to embark on that personal journey in search of discovering cooties, also known as puberty. And so guys suddenly discovered a subject they could bond over: girls. Moreover, this was a subject that sparked more debate or heated agreement than any other subject with maybe the exception of sports, and by that point in our lives sports was old news (although guys again turn to sports once girls have become old news). And so Ryan and I began to seriously develop a friendship that had remained neighborly and amiable for some time but never struck any kind of depth. And this was largely due to the combination of our close proximity and our interest in girls.

You remember Cheryl? She’s married now to some guy I went to high school with. I know you remember her, she lived in the cul-de-sac behind the big yellow house across the street from us. Mrs. Whitson lived there then, and she never minded our cutting through her yard to get to the cul-de-sac where all the neighborhood kids would meet and ride bikes. And the other yard we had to cut through was Cheryl’s. Do you remember how that started, when we first cut through to Cheryl’s yard? It was the summer before I went to middle school, I think, and you and I were shooting basketball in the driveway and I looked across the street and saw them in their yard behind Mrs. Whitson’s house. Cheryl and her sister, Jenny, had some friends over and they were playing in the yard. And for some reason a devilish plan came to me and I convinced you to join in. We loaded our water guns – we didn’t have Supersoakers then, but these were as big as they got – and we crept over to their yard, using Mrs. Whitson’s house as cover. I think we went down to the backside of Cheryl’s house; no one ever played in their backyard since it was small and without grass, and so we surprised them from behind, ambushing them as they played in the front yard. They screamed a lot, the kind of giggly, laughing screaming that girls do when they are surprised and yet simultaneously delighted. Me, I would have been pissed, but they didn’t seem to mind. Perhaps it was the attention or perhaps it was just cold water on a hot day, but it seemed as fun for them as it was for us.

And Mom and Dad were furious. It wasn’t because we’d left the yard, they told us, but because we left the yard without informing them. I caught most of the heat for it; it had been my idea and you were always adept at pointing out that you were a hapless bystander sucked into the whirlwind of the moment. But that was what opened the door to that cul-de-sac, an invitation if you will to join the group of kids who played there. We spent many an afternoon in that cul-de-sac, riding bikes, playing kick-the-can, or just sitting around and talking about the things that kids talk about.

Ryan was immediately included in our gatherings once he moved in with me, and since we had started middle school, Ryan knew Cheryl because she was in band with us. There’s an enormous amount of speculation behind why he developed a crush on her; I think most of it was about him being around people he’d never been around. For a guy

just discovering his hormonal impulses, middle school was a magnificent and treacherous place to be: we were suddenly among hundreds of girls from all over the city, dressed in all sorts of clothing, involved in all kinds of different activities, with all manners of speech and gait and interests and habits. I think Cheryl was one of these girls to Ryan, something new and different, and being around her after school only made her that much more appealing. To me, she was just another girl on the block.

But I was excited that Ryan liked her. It made me feel even more needed, like a matchmaker. My bond with Ryan grew even tighter as he talked about how much he liked Cheryl and I told him about her and how we'd played together over the summer. This peculiar form of relationship is fueled fastest in middle school before jealousy and competition really take over in a man's heart; we couldn't have been closer as we talked about Cheryl and how to make her like Ryan.

I know I've rambled a little, and perhaps told you things you already know. But I need for you to acknowledge and understand what was going on between Ryan and me because I want you to see that we did not ever mean to push you away. At least I certainly never meant to. I can look back on things now and see how you would have felt ignored or displaced, but that never occurred to me then. I was absorbed in my own world, and I felt as if I was leaving my childhood behind. Maybe I consciously categorized you with my childhood, but probably not. I was too intent on growing up.

So as we tried to grow up, Ryan and I set our sights on Cheryl. As it turned out, she was an easy target; it didn't take much for her to admit she liked Ryan and before we knew it, they were a couple. But that only made things worse for you as Ryan and I and Cheryl became more wrapped up in our little sixth grade conspiracies.

Okay, you know the story I'm going to tell now. You helped me tell it maybe a hundred times, so I know you know it, but I'm going to tell you again just so you can hear it in the context of the greater story. It was a Saturday night, and Mom and Dad were having a Sunday School party downstairs. This was very important to them for some reason; I think maybe they were the teachers of that class and were trying to throw a big get-together bash in order to boost and solidify attendance. Anyhow, they had specifically instructed us to stay out of their way. You know how Mom and Dad are different; Mom made it sound like a party, telling us we would have pizza and ice cream and could rent movies and video games and have the whole upstairs to ourselves. Dad made it sound like a stint in solitary, and made it very clear that if we had to disturb them, it better be because someone was in need of medical attention.

We listened to Mom of course, and we had our own little party upstairs. We played Nintendo games and I remember that was also the time when Vanilla Ice had his big hit "Ice Ice Baby" and they had discontinued the single, not only to encourage album sales, but because the B-side happened to be the next single the company wanted to release. Ryan was one of those lucky people who had bought the single before it was taken off the shelves. We must have played those two songs a million times, over and over again, flipping the tape in the player every seven minutes while we played Castlevania and Mario on the Nintendo. Things were going well.

But Ryan and I eventually tired of the video games (although we wouldn't tire of Vanilla Ice for another month or two) and decided it was time to have a serious discussion about Cheryl.

I don't remember whether or not Ryan and Cheryl had confessed their interest in each other by that point. I don't guess it really matters. Whatever their status was then, we didn't want you to know about it.

And so we left you, retreating into my room and closing the door. You were not pleased.

I don't remember exactly what you did to let your displeasure be made known. Banged on the door and threatened to tell Mom and Dad. In fact, it seems to me that maybe you did go downstairs and try to tell on me, but you were only sent back upstairs with a firm reprimand not to bother anyone. And after an amount of protesting, you gave up and went to your room and closed the door.

Whatever Ryan and I discussed, it really didn't have that much importance. And it didn't take long, either, I don't think. Our intention was never to leave you by yourself; we didn't plan on taking very long, and we had full intention of coming back to you once our issues had been aired. But by that time you were understandably angry and hurt, and you had sequestered yourself in your room. We tried to get you to come out; I at least did feel a little bad for shutting you out. But you wouldn't budge, and so we gave up.

Bedtime came; Ryan and I brushed our teeth and changed into our pajamas. You were still in your room, so I knocked and told you to get ready for bed. Wordlessly you came out of your room and went straight to the bathroom. Ryan and I got in bed. Remember how my room was right across from the bathroom, and the bunk beds were turned so that you faced the bathroom door when you were lying in bed? Well, when you came out of the bathroom with your hand behind your back, we could see right away that something was up.

Maybe it was the look on your face. You were never one for impish mischief, but it may have been the fact that you had a grin on your face and you were supposed to be angry with us. Or it could have just been the simple fact that you had your hand behind your back. Nothing betrays the presence of something in one's hand more than the attempt to hide it. I can remember watching you inch your way along the wall across from my room with your playful smirk, and I felt almost relieved that you were no longer angry with us. I wasn't sorry for anything I had done, but I was sorry that you had felt neglected and I didn't want you to have to go to bed angry with us. But as relieved as I felt, I also knew you were not about to let anything go as you ridiculously tried to dodge my questions.

"What do you have behind your back?" I asked. I wasn't sure what it could be; I knew it had to be something from the bathroom because I had seen you enter it empty-handed. I wasn't really afraid you would do anything; you were never good at getting into trouble. But I was on the bottom bunk and in what seemed to me the most immediate danger of whatever prank you were about to pull.

"Nothing," you answered, and it seemed to me that you were having a hard time fighting back the laughter.

"Right," I said. "Then why is your hand behind your back?"

You just shrugged and stood still.

"Do you have a water gun or something?" I asked. It was the most plausible explanation I could think of. I was totally baffled as to what you might possibly have found in the bathroom that could be used to threaten or torment someone. "Or is it a squirt bottle?" I asked.

“Nope.” You were nearly giggling.

“Well what is it?”

You know what it was; for the rest of our lives together we would joke and kid each other about what you had carried out of the bathroom that night. It took you a few years before you were able to laugh about it, but it became a staple of storytelling in our family from that night onward. Ryan tells it, too. Even since your death, I’ve told it a few dozen times. It’s hilarious, not only because of what happened and what you did, but because it was almost clever. I would never have thought to use such an item as an instrument of torture, and I can’t help but give you a certain amount of credit for creativity and resourcefulness.

Who knows how many years prior to that event that stuff had sat in the cabinet. Sometime while we were both elementary school students – perhaps you were not even that old – there had been a lice scare at school. Mom immediately bought some medicated shampoo and thoroughly scrubbed our heads. And then the shampoo was tossed into the cabinet under the sink and forgotten. Forgotten until you uncovered it that night, remembering how terrible and foul it was. It had been oily and putrid and had reeked of medicine and ointment when we had first used it; there was no telling how disgusting it had become after sitting in a cabinet for years. So you decided to use it to taunt me.

I cannot help smiling when I think of you locked in that bathroom, rummaging through the cabinets searching for something that could be used as a weapon. What else had you considered? Other lotions or cleansers? Dirty towels? Enema bulbs? But nothing compared to the greasy, slimy filth that lay dormant in that bottle of lice shampoo. I can almost picture the birth of that grin, stealing over your face like the sunrise as your eyes alighted on that puke-green bottle hidden in the corner of that cabinet.

You were proud of your choice of weapon as well. When you finally decided to reveal your dastardly plan, you whipped your hand out from behind you shouting, “It’s lice shampoo!” And in order to be completely prepared, you had removed the cap. You hadn’t thought of everything, though: your plan did not include a rigorous diagnostic check of the dynamics of physics and projectile motion. You apparently did not understand that a liquid would not remain in an open container if the container were slung at a high velocity where the open end was on the outside of the centrifugal force. Shampoo flew all over the walls in thick oily clumps.

It took only a moment for you to realize that your plan had not only failed but backfired. Surveying your handiwork strewn upon the white walls of the hallway, your eyes widened in horror and your legs gave out as you slumped against the wall and sank to the carpet. Tears sprung out around your eyes, and I remember you saying clearly and matter-of-factly, “I’m busted.”

And I made sure that you were. I hopped out of bed and ran downstairs in my pajamas. Dad met me with an angry glare, and when I told him he needed to come upstairs without explaining why, I could almost feel the irritation. I ran back upstairs and jumped into bed, eagerly awaiting the fireworks display about to ensue.

When Dad made it upstairs and saw the walls, I knew he was stunned. His jaw dropped and his eyes were wide. You were still huddled on the floor sobbing, and as soon as you saw Dad you said, “I know. I’m grounded.”

It took Dad about as long as it had taken you to fully ascertain the damage done. Dad became so suddenly furious, that words came pouring out of his mouth like thunder. Halfway through his first sentence he remembered that there was a Sunday School party going on downstairs, and his instincts served as instant censors, producing an exclamation that sounded thus: “**WHAT IN THE <sup>hell</sup> HAPPENED UP HERE?**”

This made you cry harder while Ryan and I laughed harder, and before you had a chance to explain, Dad yelled, “Get in your bed!” You went running to your room with Dad close behind you. We heard you jump in bed as Dad cried out, “What do you think you’re doing? We’re having a Sunday School party downstairs and you’re up here slinging shampoo all over the walls! Get up! Get out of bed! Get back out there and clean up that mess!”

And so we heard your sobs follow you into the hallway and back to the wall that was covered by shampoo that was running down to the carpet, and somehow, despite your bawling, you managed to convey to Dad that you didn’t know what to clean it with.

Which made Dad so angry that I think he lost all capacity for words.

I don’t remember much about how it ended. I only have this tableau framed in my mind of you crumpled up on the floor, scrubbing the wall and carpet with a wet rag, weeping and sobbing so hard that your body shook. And the whole time Ryan and I were biting our lips to keep from laughing.

It was funny. You didn’t see the humor in it for a long time. I can vividly recall how angry you would become with me when I started to tell that story to other people. For years you felt that I was making fun of you by telling that story. And I was, partially. But I was also a little jealous when I told that story; no one could tell a story like that about me. I never did anything silly and absurd like that. Remember how Mom would tell stories about when you were a child? I especially like the one where she tried to get you to tell her what you were getting her for her birthday, and when you refused to divulge your secrets, Mom suggested you tell your teddy bear, which you promptly did. You were the kind of child who had stories. I never was. The only story Mom ever told on me was the story of how I threw up beet baby-food in the car when I was almost a year old. And she always told that for the effect of exasperation and not humor.

And so now, looking back over the past, it is easy to laugh at how things were with you when I was in sixth grade. It is easy to make light and poke fun at the many silly things you did, like when you poured cologne on your pants. It’s funny now, and even during your lifetime you realized how funny it was. But I still want to apologize for those times; I know they weren’t easy for you.

That was when we drifted apart for a while. Ryan moved out eventually and things around the house seemed to settle down. But the dynamics between us were still changing; I was making friends at school with brand new people, people I’d never seen before and didn’t see outside of school. This was my first experience with what all adolescents discover is a slight advantage over their families: the ability to talk about and do things with friends that the family never sees. And I’m sure I used that as powerfully as I could, talking about my friends proudly and boastfully because I knew them and you didn’t.

But of course, you were doing the same thing. It was a little different, because most of your friends were kids you’d gone to school with all your life. But I didn’t know them. And when Mom would let us each invite a friend over for a day, I think it



sometimes developed into a competition of whose friend would be more exciting and who would have more fun. And of course, I always fancied that I won.

Sixth grade continued like that for me. By the time Christmas rolled around and came and went, we had both settled into things better. Sixth grade is a strange time for everyone, so I don't pretend to have reached a point of emotional well-being and stability at any time that year. But I think you did, even though the two of us never really found common ground that year.

When seventh grade came around things started to even out. You had made your group of friends at school and I had started to make mine. I also joined the youth group at church and found a core group of peers there, most quite older than I. Although this was in many ways a positive influence in my life, it also made me feel that much more superior. I had friends who were in high school. Your friends were all still kids. How could I not feel older than you?

Those years that I was in the youth group without you were good years. I don't mean to suggest that I liked being away from you. Actually, that is what I mean. I enjoyed being away from you. I enjoyed being older than you, doing "bigger" things, being involved in activities that were more grown-up than yours. It wasn't that I didn't want to be around you, it was just that I was proud to be older and fancied myself more mature. And in all likelihood, I *was* more mature, although no more than any seventh grader would be compared to a fourth grader. For those first three years in the youth group, I felt like a king. I was involved in every activity that a youth could be involved in at our church: youth choir, handbells, puppets. I went to lock-ins and retreats and trips to Putt-Putt and the movies. And I hung out with people who were in high school and drove cars.

And perhaps I took so much pride in these connections because I was a nobody at school. That is not something you would be familiar with. You might be quick to deny it, but you were always popular in school. You might argue that you lost your popularity your freshman year, but that was only because you were sick. And I think you were still just as popular. You remember how many people came to your fifteenth birthday party? People always loved you, girls especially. It used to make me jealous, especially when I was in tenth grade and you were in seventh and you had just joined the church youth group. Suddenly I had to share the limelight, and I wasn't sure I was fit to occupy my half. Yes, I'm sure this sounds silly to you. But that is how it felt.

You see, you always had some kind of charm. I can't describe it, really. I could sit here and talk about all the annoying aspects of your personality – and I may be one of the only people in existence today who can do that; there's a certain advantage to dying young: people suddenly canonize you. But I can list some shortcomings, such as your need to tattle on me, or your fussiness when it came to doing chores. Or I could talk about your obsessive-compulsive tendencies about keeping clean and how you would have to find a bathroom in the mall in order to wash your hands after sneezing. I could talk about your constant dissatisfaction with material things and how you could never be happy with what you had, although I'm not sure that was due to a desire for further possessions, but rather a simple distaste for them altogether. I can think of moments when you were at your ugliest.

But no one else saw those except for me and Mom and Dad. To everyone else you exuded some kind of attractive charm. You always had friends, and you often had

friends that you didn't want; friends who would attach themselves to you like leeches, sucking on your generosity and care. Simply put, you were a good friend. And people knew that and sought you out. Your third grade year was probably the worst, but your sixth grade year comes in a close second. Because as you started middle school, a transition I've already discussed, you ran into problems different from mine. When I was in sixth grade, most of my trauma and stress resulted in trying to make and keep the few friends I could. Your trauma and stress resulted in trying to be a good friend to everyone. You were so popular that it hurt you to see some of your friends being mean to others of your friends. And since you had so many friends, you saw this a lot.

Perhaps this predicament is not how you saw it while you were there. But Mom and I talked about it then. You had that problem the rest of your life, I think, but it was perhaps its worst in sixth grade because you didn't have the youth group yet. You were extremely popular, which is every unpopular kid's dream. But it bothered you to watch the other popular kids, to see them mistreat others and lord themselves over others as superior. Cliques bothered you more than anything, and you were a member of almost every one.

I guess it was seventh grade for you – tenth grade for me – that our relationship underwent another significant change. You joined the youth group at church and, much to my dismay, fit in wonderfully. As I said earlier, I was enjoying my time away from you and Mom and Dad, making good friends apart from my family for the first time. But when you arrived, that all changed. It was like two separate existences coming together in some terrible collision; my friends from church were there...but so were you.

When you joined, I tried to convince myself that it wouldn't affect me that much. After all, there were still three years between us; the difference between seventh and tenth grade is pretty substantial. You would have your seventh grade buddies and I would still be able to keep all my buddies and there wouldn't have to be an unsightly amount of intersection between our two groups. You could have your friends and I would have mine.

But the youth group wasn't big enough for both of us to exist separately. Or maybe you were just too big. You were involved in everything I was: youth choir, puppets, drama, and every other extracurricular activity the church offered for youth. Every time we went to Putt-Putt or the movies or had a lock-in or retreat, you were there. Every Sunday or Wednesday night, you were there. Every fund-raiser or mission trip, you were there. And even worse, you made friends out of all my friends!

This was all pretty shocking for me. I felt as if you had invaded that part of my life that I had specifically constructed to remain separate from you. Like a wife coming to her husband's poker games or a mother following her child around a birthday party, you were always right behind me, stealing attention away from my friends. I had a hard time with this.

I don't remember us fighting about it much. Maybe I just don't remember it, or maybe we never did fight. I know we didn't fight in front of other people; I was smart enough then to know better than to make a scene: that would have spoiled my reputation in a hurry. Most likely I just kept it inside, smiling with brotherly affection while my exasperation bubbled over under the surface. And when I finally came to accept your presence in the youth group – I actually came to enjoy it – it was probably due to my own

personal resolutions more than it was to any mediation between the two of us. After all, it was my problem to start with.

When I did become comfortable with your involvement, I remember feeling much closer to you than I had before. I think it was simply the instant connection that we had with that group I had formed around myself to serve as a separation from the family. Suddenly, it was no longer me vs. the family, but you and me vs. Mom and Dad. Not to imply conflict or friction, but you and I were separate from our parents and we had become our own people. Once you worked your way into my little world, you belonged and because you were my brother, it felt as if you should have belonged there all along.

Does that make sense? Probably not. And I know there was still tension between us even after I got used to your being around. It's just that once things settled down with you there, I suddenly felt as if we shared something that no one else did. I don't think there were other siblings in the youth group at the time that were as involved as we were; Shelley and Libby had sisters who were seniors, but we didn't see them much. And more than that, we shared something that Mom and Dad didn't share with us. We had something special.

I guess I could illustrate this with a story. It was spring break of that year, and the puppet team went on a mission trip to Myrtle Beach. Remember how Gene, our youth minister, was always taking trips to Myrtle Beach because that's where he grew up? Since you died, I've been to Myrtle Beach maybe three times just chaperoning youth trips. Anyway, that's where we went, and it was the first time for you. We stayed in this little cottage a block from the ocean and the boys and the girls each got their own little flat that had two bedrooms, a kitchenette and a bathroom. As well as those two flats, our group also had a meeting room with a TV and board games where we could plan/practice/hang out. Well, one night something incredibly strange happened, the kind of thing that only happens on soap operas and in youth groups.

We were lounging around in our flat – you, me, Davy, and Brian. Gene had already gone to sleep, I think. It was probably close to one in the morning, and we were on our way to getting into bed when there was a knock on our door. All the girls were outside, and they were pissed. There were more of them than there were of us; Shelley and Emily were in the front of the group, louder and angrier than we'd ever seen them. I think Libby and Beth and Lindsay were there, and maybe one of the McConnell sisters. And Laura was there, the youngest of the bunch, trailing along behind them.

Their state was a strange mixture of furious and giddy, something that probably only occurs after midnight and in an estrogen-rich environment, and they were simultaneously joking and laughing with each other while they stared ruthlessly at us and said, "We need to have a team meeting. Right. Now."

We were totally baffled; but the girls seemed so insistent and indignant about something, that we knew we couldn't say no. Even Gene, who had been awakened by the commotion, was up and moving, putting on shoes and rubbing his eyes. On our way to our meeting room, Gene exchanged looks with Teresa, the girls' chaperone. Gene should have known better; Teresa was the silent inspiration behind this shenanigan.

When we got to the meeting room, we all sat down: guys on one side of the room, girls on the other. The girls were still joking around with one another and it was hard to remember that they were mad about something. One of the girls grabbed a pewter lizard off a shelf and declared, "You can only talk if you have the lizard!" Once we had all

gotten settled, one of the girls – Emily or Shelley, I think – took the lizard and began to explain what was going on.

“We decided to call this meeting in order to clear up some things before they got worse on this trip. We’ve heard that certain things are being said about us behind our backs, and we would like to get these remarks cleared up and in the open.” And systematically, each girl took turns with the lizard to explain what had been said about her and how it made her feel. Emily, Shelley, and Lindsay had the most to complain about for some reason; I don’t think Beth or Libby had many complaints, and you know if there was a McConnell there, she didn’t say anything. And Laura sat in a corner with her mouth shut and her eyes on the floor.

The dynamics of a church youth group are the most unique and capricious forces in all the world. You have adolescents who are all trying to come to grips with terrible adolescent things like puberty and peer pressure. On top of that, they are confined to a church setting, and this is an atmosphere that provides a peculiar flavor to adolescence as each individual begins to learn – hopefully – what it means to be a member of a church community as well as what it means to live as a Christian. And because a youth group is a tightly-knit group...well, you know what I’m getting at. I would love to see the letters Paul could have written to the youth groups at Ephesus and Colossae, and I’m sure he could have provided some choice words for our youth group at Central Baptist in Johnson City. Because within each youth group exists any number of distinct personalities: even the McConnell sisters with their shy unassuming presence had distinct personalities that contributed to the dynamics of our group.

I cannot speak on every dynamic that was in force that night. I don’t know how Brian and Davy felt towards each of the individuals there, and I’m not totally sure how you felt. But I know how I felt, and I can remember how we talked about it afterward. None of us could determine which one of us had said these things, but were somehow convinced that we had indeed said them in some form or fashion that was misconstrued by the girls as deliberately derogatory statements. And so we talked together long after the meeting had concluded trying to decide what it was we had said that the girls had mistaken for put-downs, insults, and personal jabs.

As it turned out, we really hadn’t said anything; Laura was jealous of the attention we were giving the other girls and made up all the accusations about the things we had said. When she had finally made the girls so angry that they wanted to come over and confront us, she tried to stop them, but Teresa encouraged the girls to face the problem head on. And thus the strange interactions between youth group members.

That’s the kind of story I can tell people without them ever really knowing what was going on. I can describe my point of view, and I can describe what I thought your point of view would have been – or Shelley’s or Emily’s or Laura’s – but what I can’t do is make someone else understand the experience, and by understand the experience, I mean actually experience it. If we all had a reunion – you and I, Davy, Brian, Shelley, Emily, Lindsay, Laura, Beth, Libby, Gene, and anyone else who was there – we could all sit around and reconstruct the situation as best we could remember. I’m sure there would be just as many disagreements over the reconstruction of the event as there were during the event; but even if we could all agree on what exactly happened, there would be no way for us to make another person who was not there truly internalize the experience we had that night. The only way you can share an experience with someone is if you

actually live it together in real time. Reconstructions, reminiscences, and recollections will never convey experience in a fashion that is true to the actual participation of the event.

And we shared that together. We had both been there in that room together undergoing the same scrutiny and puzzlement. And Mom and Dad, despite our retelling of the event, will never share that with us. They weren't there, they weren't a part of our group, and they did not participate in the dynamics of our friendships.

That's what we shared, and whether or not you felt it at the time – I'm not certain that I did – it was and is special. A common experience is always the closest and tightest of bonds.

Although we continued to share that common experience until you got sick, I know that the dynamic between us changed when Shelley and I started dating. I wish I knew what it was like to have a sibling date another person. You had plenty of girlfriends in the sense of buddies who happened to be girls, but you never really dated in the sense of a continued romantic relationship. And I hate that for you; it's a wonderful experience, and certainly one of God's most precious gifts. But I cannot imagine what it must have been like for you to watch my world slowly shift focus to one particular individual, an individual who also happened to be one of your good friends.

I'm sure I could equate it to situations when two of my close friends have dated each other; there are probably a lot of the same emotions involved. But I know it's different with a sibling, especially an older sibling. I guess it all ties back to BBS: it seems to me that you would have been looking up to me more than I would be to any of my friends. Did you watch me fall in love and look forward to a day when you would do the same? Shelley once told me about a conversation she had had with you where you told her about what you were looking for in a relationship and how you looked forward to being able to treat someone with special love and care. Did I influence that at all? Did you watch me court Shelley and swell with pride as the two of us grew closer? Did you root for me during that time that Shelley and I broke up and I tried to get her back? Did you side with me when Shelley and I had a fight?

I'd like to think that the answer to all these questions is yes, but that's the Big Brother in me coming out. Truth is I don't really know the answers to those questions because we never talked about it. My life just started gravitating towards Shelley and more and more away from you.

I don't think you ever got discouraged over this; our relationship was still close, and your friendship with Shelley didn't suffer. But it would be a lie for me to say that I didn't drift away from you a little when Shelley and I started dating. Every other relationship I had at that time started drifting. That's just part of what happens when you have a girlfriend; your other friendships take second place.

My relationship with Shelley is not something I regret, although if I had it to do all over again, I might do some things differently. Then again, I might not. It's easy for us to look back on the past and pinpoint all the parts of our lives that we wish we could change. But I doubt it would be so simple were I given the opportunity to live it again. And since I *won't* be given that opportunity and no one will ever be able to go back and do something all over again, it's easy for us to go ahead and say we would do it different: it's a safe call, because we'll never have to prove it. So I don't know if I'd do anything

different if I had it over again. But I do wish there were some things that had been different.

Mainly, I wish I had been more aware of my other friendships. My junior year, I pretty much only had one friend, and that was Shelley. Towards the end of my senior year I think I started realizing that there were more relationships to be engaged in; that probably had something to do with you. But during my junior year, my life revolved around Shelley. Remember all the fights with Mom and Dad over it? Shelley thought they didn't like her – and I can understand how she would have thought that, given the way I represented my conflicts with them to her – but in reality it had nothing to do with Shelley. Mom and Dad would have reacted just the same to any other girl in all the world. It wasn't who I was dating, but how I was dating her.

When someone starts dating, everyone else just assumes that they will be seeing less of that person. This is probably a correct assumption, as that is what happens in most cases, but no one ever stops to think about it. Oh, he's got a girlfriend now; we won't ever see him around anymore. Oh, she's dating that guy, she won't have time for us. And no one gives it a second thought. Why haven't we seen so-and-so? Oh, he's dating that girl, remember? Oh, yeah, that's right. Everyone – including whoever happens to be involved in the relationship – simply assumes that part of dating or having a boy/girlfriend is trimming down your relationships with others.

That's just not true. At least it shouldn't be. Granted, if you're boy/girlfriend happens to also be your best friend – which is most desirable – then you will confide in that person more than others. But this does not mean that you start cutting off your other relationships, turning away from friends. It's a dangerous trap, because the deeper in love you fall with somebody, the more time you want to spend with them; and the more time you spend with one person, the less time you have to spend with others. People see this, and they shrug and sigh and say, well, that's just the way things are, I guess.

But they shouldn't be. That's certainly how it was with me and Shelley, and that's nobody's fault but mine. It's easy for someone in a relationship to place the blame on the other person – “I can't go out tonight, fellas; I promised my girlfriend I'd go see this movie” – but that's ridiculous. Nobody can make you do something you don't want to do. Anyone with a boy/girlfriend can still hang out and do stuff with their other friends. But when I was dating Shelley, I didn't recognize this fact, and I wasn't really concerned with it anyhow. I was so crazy about Shelley, she was the only friend I felt I needed.

And that's what drove Mom and Dad crazy. I know it bothered them – Mom especially – that I was becoming so engrossed with Shelley that other parts of my life took a significantly lesser part, not least of all the part of my life that included them. I think a lot of Mom's grievance with the relationship was a sense of personal slight towards her and the family. Even after you and I were in the youth group together, the four of us still did stuff as a family. That stopped when I started dating Shelley. I don't know if Mom and Dad blamed Shelley or blamed me; I think intellectually they blamed me, but deep within their hearts, some of that resentment was projected onto Shelley. I'm not justifying or excusing their behavior: watching your children become autonomous and separate themselves from the family is a part of raising them, and they should have taken it a little more in stride. But I do understand their point of view now, and I wish that I could have been more understanding. It was never Shelley's fault; I could have

adjusted the relationship at any moment to be more inclusive of the other people in my life.

There's not a whole lot I remember about my junior year except that I enjoyed it very much. I dated Shelley pretty much the whole year – October onward – and all my classes were either really easy or really good. I think that's the year I had English with Shelley and Jim, and that's also the first year I was president of the drama team. We did *Arsenic and Old Lace* that year, and even though I was shafted with two bit parts, I still had some fun with the other players. That was also the year I had the most trouble with Mom and Dad. Okay, mostly Mom. Dad knows which battles not to get involved with, and I think he did his best to back Mom up only when he felt she absolutely needed it. There wasn't much love between me and Mom that year, but as I said, that was a year I enjoyed very much, so it must not have bothered me. I also had my first job working at Gourmet & Co., the coffee/specialty shop across town. Not my favorite job ever, but I enjoyed the people I worked with.

The summer after that year seems like a blur. I went on so many youth trips that they all kind of run together. I separate my youth experiences into two parts: before you joined the youth group and after you joined the youth group. Everything within the two parts runs together; I don't remember exactly what all we did that summer. I think we went to Myrtle Beach again to do beach ministry; you were there, and we stayed in a big group resort that I had been to during the Before-You period. Shelley and Lindsay had a huge falling-out that week and the group that stayed next to us was really loud and rude. That's all I remember.

And then at the end of the summer the youth group took an overnight trip to Cincinnati to visit King's Island Amusement Park. You didn't go for some reason; a friend's birthday party or something. But I'll never forget the story I heard when I got back from that trip.

The day I left you confessed to Mom and Dad that you had been having trouble with occasional double vision. Every now and then your sight would double up for a little while, you said. So Mom called her brother, Dr. Jo Sweet. He said that that type of symptom might indicate a brain tumor, and so that night you rushed to Knoxville so he could run an MRI. They didn't find anything abnormal, and so you came back home and made an appointment with an ophthalmologist. It was a scary ordeal, and everyone we knew in Johnson City had been praying for you that entire trip. I didn't find out about any of it until I got back, and I felt very much out of the loop.

School started; it was my senior year, and your first year at the high school. It was certainly a big year for everyone. Your vision didn't get any better. The ophthalmologist said your eyes were fine, but they were having "mobility" problems, so you were referred to a neurologist. More tests were run, and you were diagnosed with ocular myasthenia gravis, a condition that weakens the muscles in the eyes, preventing them from turning the eyeball. You were given medication for it, and Mom did a lot of research on the disease, looking for encouragement for those who lived with this incurable condition.

But you kept getting worse. Your eyesight was almost always double, and you complained about a tingling feeling in your right arm, leg, and face. Your speech became slurred, and you were having trouble walking. I remember one day after school walking down to Mom's office. I met you in the hall coming to get me, and you had to walk with

your arm propped against the wall. I made a joke about you being worn out from a hard day of school. "It's not funny," you said. "I'm really having trouble."

I remember a conversation with Mom. I think we had just had a fight, and Mom and I had had so many fights over the past year that they were nearly routine for us. Once we had reached a settlement (and you know how long that could take) Mom sat down next to me – we were in the yellow bedroom and it was late afternoon, the sun was setting and the room seemed to be filled with dust and shadows despite its glow – and she said, "Andrew's getting worse."

"But he's taking medicine for it, right?" I asked.

"Yes, but it isn't doing any good. They've tripled the dosage and his vision hasn't gotten any better. And he's losing the feeling in the right side of his body."

"Could that be a side effect?"

"The doctors don't think so."

Mom knows how to deal with people emotionally, and I think she sometimes used her abilities unfairly when it came to fights. It was unfair of her to hit for my emotions just after this fight, but I don't think she did it to shame me or weaken my defenses. I think she genuinely wanted me to realize that there were more important things going on than whatever it was we had fought about. That's all she said; she got up then and left the room, leaving me there in the shadows of dusk and the stillness of a room no one ever used and I didn't feel like moving.

It was a few weeks later when another MRI and an EMG were scheduled. The neurologist was visibly shaken at your digression, and ordered that your braces be removed in case they had clouded the picture from the first MRI. Again, I remember Mom calling me out of class one day – trigonometry – to tell me that she was taking you to the orthodontist to have your braces off for another MRI. That's all she said, but I knew what it meant. After that class dismissed and I was walking to lunch, Shelley asked me, "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know," I said. "Andrew's getting his braces off because they think it clouded the last MRI, and he's going to get another one."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means they think he has a brain tumor." And that's the moment when I knew things were not going to be okay. What I felt was more than just dread or concern; I was certain that things were suddenly too serious for a good prognosis. Whatever it was, Shelley saw it; I distinctly remember her taking my hand as we walked to lunch.

Friday afternoon you went in for your tests. It was during fourth period, and Mom kept calling the office to update them on everything. And every time she called, one of the other guidance counselors came to pull me out of class and tell me what was going on.

It was a cooking class. Frugal Gourmet, it was called. And on Friday afternoon in a high school cooking class, nothing is going on. I think Mr. Kelly came to talk to me first: "Your parents are waiting with Andrew right now for the test results. Do you want to come and wait in the office?" I said no.

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Coapstick came and pulled me aside. "The tests have revealed some type of growth on Andrew's brain stem – they're calling it a 'blister.' That's all they've said. Do you want to come to the office and wait? You don't have to stay in class." I told her I was fine.



Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Stoner came and took me into an empty office. "Your Mom called again. The doctors have decided that it is a brain tumor. They've recommended a neurosurgeon in New York for surgery, but they won't know anything until Monday. They'll send Andrew's test results to him to see if he'll operate. He's the best in the world; if anyone can fix it, he can. Your parents are on their way home with Andrew. You're welcome to leave now and meet them; you won't have to sign out since it's only twenty minutes until the bell.

"Please let us know if there's anything we can do."

It was probably that last part that made me want to leave. I went and gathered my books and left with Mrs. Stoner. None of the other students said anything to me.

I don't remember anything about that weekend. I don't even remember how terrible it was to sit around and wait for Monday to come so we could hear from the neurosurgeon in New York, although I know it was excruciating because it would have had to have been. I don't remember what we did, I don't remember how I felt, I don't remember what you or Mom or Dad said or did. I do remember the next week getting word back from the neurosurgeon telling us that an operation would not be beneficial.

So you were then taken to the pediatric neuro-oncology ward at Duke Medical Center. You started radiation treatment that Thursday.

On October 11, 1995, Mom started a journal.

"This will begin my chronicle of this nightmare called a pontine glioma...Emotionally, George, Daniel, Andrew and I are very aware of God's presence through the prayers and support of friends. The outpouring of love and prayer has been overwhelming. I do not know how one would face this without God. I have not felt anger or 'why me?' I only feel a profound sadness and helplessness. Andrew has always been an absolute joy in my life. He is a wonderful, wonderful child. He has George's intelligence and my sensitivity. I cannot grasp why the world should lose such a wonderful person. My virtually constant prayer is for a complete healing."

## Missing You

*L'absence est à l'amour ce qu'est au feu le vent;  
Il éteint le petit, il allume le grand.*

----- Comte de Bussy-Rabutin,  
*Maximes d'Amour*

You can only really miss someone you look forward to seeing again.

I know that sounds redundant and obvious, but if you examine the statement a little closer it makes more sense. In order to look forward to seeing someone again, it must strike one as likely that you will see that person again. No one looks forward to seeing people when he knows he never will; therefore, no one misses someone when he knows he will never see that person again.

When we miss people, we never stop to examine why or how we miss that person. We simply think that we wish that person were with us, that we could see that person and talk to that person, perhaps feel the touch of his hands or the glow of his smile. But implied in every case of missing someone is the underlying expectation that we will see that person again.

There are friends in my life who've come and gone and I don't miss them. They were good friends, and I don't regret a single second that I gave to them. But I do not expect that I will see them ever again, and so I don't miss them. Some of them moved away, others stayed behind when I moved away. But the distances of time and space have removed us from each other, and I do not anticipate ever seeing them again. Perhaps I did at one time; now I have grown accustomed to the idea that I never will.

Why is it that we cease to miss people once we realize we will never see them again? Some people may disagree; some people may argue that you do miss people even when you know you will never see them again. They will say that one can still wish to see that person even if he is really gone for good and never coming back. They may tell me that they think of that person every day and that they may even talk to that person or compose letters in their head for that person.

But I would say that wanting someone around is not missing him, but rather missing *who that person was*. If one were to ask why we miss someone, we could think of hundreds of reasons: he made me laugh, he was kind, he made me feel safe, he made me feel loved, he meant much to me. But we don't miss that person; if we never expect to see that person again, we do not miss him because deep inside we know it would be futile and useless. So instead we miss who he was, because we hope that somewhere we will see those characteristics again in some new friend or companion. I have teachers of whom I am very fond: teachers who were encouraging and challenging and affirming, teachers who made learning an adventure. I don't miss those teachers, but I do miss those qualities. And when I find another teacher like that, I am reminded of those teachers in the past who exhibited all those qualities.

You see, we don't miss something when we have it. Perhaps I might say that I miss my grandfather because he used to tell stories and he was always kind and warm.

But if I miss the qualities of kindness and warmth and storytelling, it is only because I am looking for those qualities. Once I find someone with those qualities – another teacher, or a mentor, or perhaps another grandparent – I no longer miss those qualities. My grandfather may still be in my mind and certainly in my memory. But I won't miss him.

Some people may have trouble accepting this idea. Some people may even argue that they miss those qualities the most when they are in the presence of them. But that is only because the presence of those things reminds them how much they've really missed them before.

All of this holds true about how much I miss you. Every now and then I meet someone who is compassionate and caring, equally giving and sharing of his or her time and efforts, reaching out to anyone who calls. That's when I realize how much I miss those qualities in you. Sometimes I am reminded of funny things you did, like when you tripped going up the stairs at church in front of dozens of people and hollered, "Safe!" That was witty and sharp, and I miss that kind of humor. I miss being able to talk with people openly and candidly about things like sexuality or spirituality. Every now and then I find people I can talk with like that – Mom and Dad both are like that now – and it reminds me of how we used to do that. One doesn't miss things one doesn't know about. The only reason I miss those qualities when they aren't around is because I've been around them before and I know how much they mean to me. You introduced me to them, and I miss them.

So why is it that we miss people? Why is it any different when we know we will see those people again? Do we not still miss their characteristics and attributes? Certainly. But we do miss people not just for who they were, but for what they mean to us.

When someone we love is away from us, we miss him. We want him to come back to see us or we want to go back and see him. Why? Because of the way that person made us feel. Anyone can remember the first time he or she was homesick. Is it the house that you miss? Your room and your toys and your bed and your blanket? No. No, ultimately what you miss are the people that make those things special: your parents, your siblings, your friends. The people who give meaning to your life through their love, care, compassion, and commitment: these are the people you miss. They are the measure by which you grade your life.

I still miss my parents. I've been away at college for four years now; long enough that I don't consider it "being away" anymore. Since then the house I grew up in has been sold, the toys I played with have been thrown away, and the friends I grew up with have all moved away. I don't miss those things anymore; although they were a significant part of my life and shaped me as I grew and matured, they are no longer significant in who I am at this moment. They are gone, and I do not consider them when I reflect upon my life now. My parents live in a different town in a different house with different furniture and different pets. My home is now is not where I grew up, but I still miss my parents. I miss them because they are still a part of my life, people who define who I am and who I want to be. I measure myself against them, compare my life with theirs, decide which parts of them I will cherish and which parts I will want to leave behind. And this is what makes us miss people: wanting to be in the presence of everything that they are made of, good or bad. Their entire *being* is what we miss – that essence that makes them George or Ann. For Dad, it's both his wit and his temper. For

Mom, it's both her compassion and her insecurity. I want to be in the midst of all these things, because that is what makes them who they are and that is how I interact with them, engaging with them in experiences that are both pleasurable and deplorable, exciting and mundane. My relationship with them is constantly changing, and it is the nature of this dynamic relationship that I love and miss in their absence.

That is the essence of missing someone: the relationship. We cannot miss him when the relationship is gone. If we do not have a relationship, we do not look forward to seeing that person again, but only the few characteristics that we nostalgically took away from that relationship. To miss someone is to miss the relationship, that experience of interaction between two people that leaves both of them changed. When I miss you, I miss the relationship between us.

It's that interaction between the two of us that I miss. I cannot miss that interaction without missing you; without you there would be no interaction and hence no relationship. I miss our relationship for missing you. Your wit and humor – well, that was certainly an interaction at times. Sometimes it was an interaction that we each were equally engaged in. Sometimes I just laughed at you, and your wit had nothing to do with it. Other times we would have these incredibly deep discussions; do you remember? I remember how we would talk about sex, the kind of discussion you get between two people who know absolutely nothing about the subject but still manage to spend hours discussing it. I remember times when we discussed our other relationships, with mutual friends and such. I would talk to you about my girlfriend or we would talk about girls in general. Sometimes we talked about God and who we thought God really was; I think that maybe I miss this part the most.

Another thing that I miss is the interactions we had together with other people. I can't tell you how amazing it was sometimes to just watch you interact with other people. You always had such a deep connection with others and I found it quite impressive that a boy of your age could so rapidly build the rapport that you built with people. I miss your charm around others, especially girls. I miss your concern for others and your desire to include others. I miss the way that people flocked to you. I miss the fact that I can't tell you these things right now or explain to you how much I learned from you.

Perhaps one of the things that I miss absolutely the most about the way you interacted with others was the way you interacted with our parents. Mom and Dad and I still laugh over some of the stories we have about you. Remember when Dad took one of your french fries? You pitched a fit, and Dad said, "Get a life! It's one french fry!" Or the time they asked you to take out the garbage and you threw up in the garage carrying it to the trash cans. You managed to dump that chore on me from then on. Remember how much fun the four of us had? Even when you were sick, there were still good times. Remember how you got that muffin stuck in your throat in front of Rev. Crocker? The three of us still laugh about these things. I miss you for who you were and for who you were around others. You were the same person around me or Mom and Dad or our friends from church.

It's strange when you miss someone for so long. We as humans refuse to miss people we know we will never see again; if the relationship is gone, then we focus only on those aspects and characteristics that we miss because somewhere deep within us we know it is futile to miss the relationship that no longer exists. Because of this, we tend to stop missing someone if we miss him for too long; it's as if that relationship dies slowly

within us, fading away and numbing us to the joys that used to exist in the relationship. When you miss someone for so long you almost feel as if you've forgotten that person until something reminds you of him. A song or phrase or a scent is all it takes, and suddenly you miss him more than the day you were first separated. That's how it is with you. Some days I live my life as if I had never had a brother, and then I'll hear a song on the radio that you used to like and I am overcome with a sort of homesickness, even though I may be home when I hear it. Or maybe I'll run into one of our old friends who will say something we used to say or make a joke that we used to make, and suddenly I am no longer engaged in talking with this old friend, but rather engulfed by your absence. Mom and Dad still talk to me about you, and it is often difficult to be around them and not miss you, although they, like I do, sometimes forget about you too.

When you've been separated from someone for so long, the rest of the world begins to seep in and fill those empty spaces that person left. It's like using an empty soda bottle to store your water in. You think about the water only until you get one sip that tastes a little too sweet, and suddenly all you can think about is what used to be in the bottle before.

If you miss someone long enough and badly enough, you start looking for other things to fill those spaces. Some people turn to drugs or alcohol; others find escape in reading, writing, or other artistic endeavors. Some people just turn themselves inside out, shutting off the outside world and withdrawing completely into their own personal construction of memories and pain that somehow keep the wound fresh while providing the illusion of solace. Suddenly it is the grief itself that takes the place of that loved one, and leaving the grief behind is just as hard as it was to leave that person behind.

I wasn't sure how to fill those spaces. I'm not fully sure I've filled them. But it's too painful to leave them open; like a hollow socket that burns dry and cold in the harsh wind, the pain of living with an empty hole in your life is too intense to ignore. And so we search for new loved ones to fill the void, demanding they meet expectations they cannot comprehend and perform duties completely unwarranted. We become so needy when we miss someone for so long. And I was no different.

I had just started college. I had no one to turn to. I made new friends, I established my circles of acquaintances. But it takes time to rebuild, and that hollow place didn't heal.

I feel so sorry for God sometimes. I know it must be exasperating to watch your creation that you love so fiercely and give so much for stumble around in the dark searching everywhere for comfort except for the one place they know they can find it. How God must hurt to watch us hurt and to watch us hurt apart from God's presence. And I'm sure it pained God to watch me struggle to find comfort that first year of college, or even that last year of high school as I prepared for you and me to be separated.

I'm not completely sure how I ended up before God during my search; whether I just stumbled upon God or whether God drew me near, I don't know. But during that need to find a substitute for you I found something that has no substitute; indeed, something in which everything else is only serving as a substitute.

I know you know what that's like. I know that nothing I tell you about God's wonderful peace would be anything you weren't already aware of. I could talk all day about the incredible solace and joy of God's presence, sounding like every second-rate pop theologian, and it would not enlighten you a single bit. So I won't bore you. Let it

suffice to say that I found that place, that source of life and love and friendship that is the starting point for every relationship ever engaged in. And when you tap into the source of the river, you no longer yearn so much for the dried-up riverbeds that streak the landscape.

But you, you know this: you are at the source, perhaps you are now part of that source. Do you miss me? Do you see how my life is different now without you? Do you know the pain and grief that we have felt because of your death? Do you look down on us and see our lives and our struggles and our constant and futile striving to make sense of this life and to organize things into a neat and tidy package, some sort of linear narrative of cause-and-effect? And do you laugh at us, or do you ache to watch those you cared so much about spend so much time focusing on something that probably amounts to such insignificance? Or maybe it isn't insignificant; maybe we're on the right track somewhere. Maybe you miss us, too.

It's been some time since you died, and I started missing you six months before that. But for some reason, our relationship – our interactive experiences of joy and pain and love and anger and jealousy and pride and hope – still seems real. It is impossible for us to miss someone we know we will never see again, because our expectations of the continuity of the relationship are gone.

I still miss you, Andrew.

## Change

*But were there ever any  
Writhed not of passèd joy:  
To know the change and feel it  
When there is none to heal it  
Nor numbed sense to steel it  
Was never said in rhyme.*

----- John Keats,  
'In drear nighted December'

It's difficult for me to remember these things, and it's especially difficult for me to remember how they were for you, since most of my perception of your experiences came from hearing you or Mom talk about it. But I know that that's when my world started changing. That weekend that the three of you went to Duke was our high school homecoming. I went to the game with all my friends, but I only stayed for ten minutes. The house was empty, and I hated being away from it. I left the game and went home to that dark and cold house, and I sat in the recliner downstairs in the den and listened to the grandmother clock in the living room tick, occasionally winding up to chime the hour. It was this peculiar sense of loneliness I felt; alone, and yet without any desire to seek out companionship. I didn't want to be with my friends, I didn't want to be with my girlfriend, because they didn't know what it felt like to be where I was, wherever that may have been. Maybe I was lonely for you and Mom and Dad. Maybe I was lonely for God or for some reassurance of purpose and meaning.

That Saturday you came home to an enormous birthday party. Nearly a hundred people stormed our house that day to wish you a happy birthday, and it was raining, so everyone was inside. I just wanted to vanish. You were always such a social person, and I just hated people. Especially that many people, all in my house. It was quite a contrast to the loneliness I had felt the night before, and I'm sure it was a contrast to the loneliness you felt on your birthday, that Tuesday at the Ronald McDonald House in Durham without any friends. I can't imagine a birthday so filled with loneliness and anguish and fear and disappointment. On my fifteenth birthday, I went down to the Highway Patrol Office to apply for my driver's permit. For your fifteenth birthday, you and Mom were in Durham undergoing radiation therapy and staying in a house full of dying children. It was your last birthday.

Two weeks later, I had Friday off from school, and Dad and I drove over on Thursday to spend the weekend with you and Mom. We all stayed in the little room in the Ronald McDonald House. I know that was a blessing for you and Mom, but it made my skin crawl. Perhaps it was the house itself, filled with disease and sadness. Maybe it was the room, small and cramped for four people. Maybe it was just seeing you so sick, and I connected all those surroundings with your illness. I remember us sitting on your bed, you showing me the CDs you'd gotten for your birthday that you really liked. I

don't remember what any of them were, but they ended up in my possession in less than a year.

That Friday I went with you to your radiation treatment. They strapped you down onto a huge slab and then covered your face with a mesh mask to keep your head from slipping. Systematically, a large arm rotated around your head and fired large doses of radiation. I can't describe how scary that was, watching you tied down and helpless, having your head soaked in a power that is typically considered dangerous and unhealthy. The room was so big and the equipment loomed over you. And the enormity of the treatments, of the hospital, of the credentials flashed by all the doctors and technicians seemed silly in comparison with the tiny tumor pressing against your brain. All those big machines and big men in their white coats and glasses using big words weren't big enough.

And so for the next few weeks – you were in Durham for a total of eight – you lived by that schedule: radiation therapy every weekday at 8:30 and 3:00, home on Friday, back on Sunday. I can only imagine what that was like for you, and all I have are the accounts from your journal and Mom's. I know it was a constant struggle, and you could both be either up or down in a matter of minutes. But you each kept each other going, I think, and that's what made it worthwhile for Mom. Throughout her journal she kept writing about how wonderful a child you were and how special it was to be with you. I hope she feels that way about me.

How did you keep it up? How could you live in an environment filled with decay and death and still manage to find joy somewhere? In your journal, you wrote one day, "I think I've been uplifted by God maybe without my even knowing it. Cool."

If God did anything for me, I sure as hell didn't know about it.

During that time that you were in Durham, life seemed to slow around me. There wasn't anyone at home during the day when I got done with school – I had quit my job at Gourmet & Co. Dad came home around six, but it always seemed like we were doing separate things. I studied, I went to church, I went out with Shelley. I know we ate dinner together a lot, and we probably watched TV some too. But I don't think we talked much. It wasn't an awkward absence of communication; we just didn't talk. Dad was always the kind of person to just keep moving, never looking behind or fretting about what was ahead. He always dealt with the reality of the present, fixing problems as they came up. I think it tore him up that he couldn't fix this one, and moreover that he wasn't with you and Mom. Mom told me a story once about when the three of you went to Durham for something. You had a bag of jelly beans, your favorite candy, and when you got to the Ronald McDonald House and you were getting up to get out of the van, you dropped your bag and spilled jelly beans all over the car. You were upset, not just for losing your jelly beans, but because it was another reminder of your loss of mobility and control. Mom helped you out of the car and took you inside, and while you were checking in, Dad stayed in the car. On his hands and knees he picked up every single jelly bean, wiping them off individually and putting them back in the bag. Mom laughed when she told me that story ("Typical of Dad, isn't it?"), but it nearly broke my heart to picture Dad hunched over between the seats of our mini-van picking up tiny jelly beans and brushing them off. It seems ridiculous, but that's who Dad is: someone who solves problems, even when the solution seems far-fetched or absurd. Picking up those jelly beans was all he could do.



Despite any conflicts I had had with my parents in the past over going out with Shelley, my curfew nearly vanished during those weeks you were in Durham. I would go over to Shelley's house on weekdays and stay as long as I wanted. Maybe Dad just didn't care, or maybe he didn't feel like fighting with me. Maybe he realized that I was hurting too and needed my own escape from it. Or maybe it was simply the understanding that I was growing up, that life was more important than picking over silly things like what time I came home. I never came home very late anyway.

Dad and I never talked much about your illness; I don't think we really talked much about it until well after I was in college. But as I said, it wasn't a dysfunctional silence. Dad grieved in his way and I in mine. I only hope that there wasn't something I should have done, that he never needed me there. Because I wasn't there; I submerged myself in whatever was necessary to separate me from the calamity I felt at home.

One day when Dad came home I told him I was going over to Shelley's. "Have you eaten?" he asked.

"No, I'm going to eat over there."

"Okay. What time are you going to be home?"

"I don't know, what time do you want me home?"

"It doesn't matter, I was just curious."

I started to go upstairs to put on my shoes. Dad followed me up the stairs. "Have you done your homework?"

"Yeah, I didn't have much today."

He followed me into my room, and I didn't even notice him until I turned around. There he was, standing behind me, stiff and straight with his arms impotently at his side. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks," I said impatiently. I just wanted to get out of there, to escape like I was so used to doing. Dad probably didn't really care about helping me; in his own way he was probably asking me for help. I sensed it, too, and it embarrassed me. Maybe I was ashamed to see my Dad in his weakness; ashamed because I felt weak, too, and I didn't want to share that.

I became much more involved with Shelley. Emotionally, I think I attached myself to her more than I already was. Heaven knows how much trauma I put her through, just needing someone to turn to as an outlet for my grief. I also became more involved in my studies; that year I made straight A's for the first time since fifth grade.

Thanksgiving came that year, and you had just finished radiation. We were all excited that you were done, and you did seem to have improved a little. Christmas followed shortly; Grandfather died on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. It was the first funeral you or I had been to. For me it was a preview of what was to come. Many friends of the family passed through, and they all saw you, sick and unsteady. I remember that you did well, but the holidays took their toll on you. You spent most of the days sleeping, you had trouble keeping food down, and you were generally too weak to move around much. I can remember Dad's sister Sally weeping at the dinner table as you ran to the bathroom to vomit.

After Christmas we went back to Duke. They upped your steroid intake, which increased your strength and stamina tremendously; it was like you were a different person, and the effect was so dramatic it was difficult not to think that you were on your way to healing. Then came the chemotherapy.

I can remember that visit when they prepped you for the chemotherapy. You had an infusaport surgically installed in your chest for the treatments. They simply stuck the medicine into your port, which transported the medicine directly into your bloodstream. Then came the four hour conference on the effects and side-effects of chemotherapy. While you, Mom, and Dad met with the doctors, I waited outside in the hall. I had a book with me, *All Quiet On the Western Front*. The lights were sickeningly harsh; the pages of my book seemed dirty and gray in the severe light and it hurt my eyes to turn away from them. Passing me in that hall were nurses and doctors and every now and then a family with a very sick child. It was painful to look away from my book, but I was unable to make my eyes move over the page. Anytime someone walked by, I would watch them go, giving my eyes a respite from the austere shades of white and gray that surrounded me. Some of the nurses would smile at me; it was a neutral smile, the kind of smile you get in the mall when you happen to look at a stranger at precisely the same moment she looks at you as you pass her. When a family went by they only stared straight ahead.

At one point a woman came in and sat across from me. She was black, and I remember that the dark tone of her skin made my eyes feel good. It was relaxing to watch her at first. She had on a worn sweater; it was dark, too, and her faded blue jeans were tight and ragged around the cuffs. She had her son with her, a little boy about three years old. He was wonderfully cute, and they offered welcome relief to the grating surroundings. He ran around some, playing as three-year-olds are apt to play by themselves; his mother watched him a little warily, reprimanding him when he got underfoot of some nurse passing by.

And suddenly he collapsed in a chair. His playing ceased and he was instantaneously sluggish and lethargic. The transformation was so abrupt it was alarming. He made his way to his mother, crawling along the chairs, and reached up to her. She picked him up and held him in her lap, and almost immediately he fell asleep.

Seeing that the show was probably over, I resumed reading, or at least staring at the page. And then I heard the mother's sobs, lightly at first so that I didn't even notice until I heard her snuffle. The boy was wrapped so tightly in her arms that he was nearly invisible, and once one distinguished his body it seemed so inert as to betray lifelessness. The mother rocked back and forth, her tears flowing steadily over her cheeks and onto her son's head. I tried to pretend I didn't hear, but her sobs grew louder and louder, and her son began to stir. He looked up at her, lazy fear in his eyes, and spoke in the language three-year-olds use with their mothers. "It's okay, baby, go back to sleep," the mother said through her tears, cutting her sobs short and smiling. The boy crawled back into her arms, and the woman's face scrunched up in agony, her eyes tightly clenched shut and her wet cheeks drawn up away from her lips. I wanted to move and sit next to her, to put my arm around her and tell her I knew how she felt, but I had no idea how she felt. She didn't have a ring on her finger and from the look of her old clothes, she probably didn't have much money either.

One of the nurses came up to her and asked her if everything was all right. The mother wiped her face and nodded silently, suddenly ashamed of her emotional display. "I know it's hard," the nurse said.

Sure she knows it's hard, I thought. She sees this day in and day out. How can she not know it's hard? But does she ever feel it? Does she ever feel that ache inside?

Does she ever drop into that sickening pit of despair, that sheer realization that there is no fixing things, that the only roads ahead are filled with pain and anguish? Sure she knows it's hard, intellectually, but how could she feel it? She would have to feel hard, being around dying children every day. What a difference it is, that gulf between understanding the facts of a situation and actually living the situation! Unless she has watched a cruel and terrible evil slowly take away the life of her child, she doesn't know – within her heart of hearts know fully – how hard it really is. Perhaps that nurse did watch her child die, or her sibling or her lover. But whether or not a loss had ever been personally internalized for her, she had forgotten it because the words came out flat and stilted, as if she were talking about the difficulty of algebra or changing the oil in one's car.

No one was happy when you were finished with your conference. We went out to eat, an Italian restaurant with gimmicky tablecloths that you can write on with crayons. Next to your plate you wrote "Just go ahead and shoot me."

"Oooh, are we having a bad day?" the waiter said when he brought our drinks.

School started. You began taking classes with a tutor as well as IV chemotherapy. It snowed a lot that first week of school, and we ended up getting a few snow days. Life seemed to settle into a warped sense of homeostasis. Between your classes and treatments, it seemed that things were beginning to form a routine, however trying it was. You spent a lot of time in and out of the hospital those first few months, getting your blood counts and treatments. Once or twice you had to go in for a platelet transfusion.

I can't imagine what it must have been like for you, to go to high school as someone who is sick and unhealthy. You couldn't move around in the halls, you couldn't read very well. And all about you students were moving back and forth between classes, completely unaware that there was any other way for someone to be other than healthy and alive. I remember your constant dread of drama class, always afraid of what the assignment would be and how it would highlight your physical disabilities.

I don't remember much about that first part of the semester, the time before spring break. I got a job at Tri-Cities Opticians, making lenses for glasses. I worked every day after school until five-thirty or six, and I wasn't around much. Part of the reason I got a new job was because I missed the money, but the biggest reason was escape. Mom regulated my visits with Shelley more when she got back from Duke. She didn't use any authoritarian rule like she did before you were sick. Instead, she used a much more potent power: guilt. She was always visibly upset when I asked to go out with Shelley, but she never said no. So I eventually quit asking and just told her where and when I was going. She clearly thought I was being irresponsible and disrespectful; in her journal she called me "an absentee family member." You tell me, Andrew; was I? Is that what you thought, too? Was I being disrespectful to you and Mom and Dad? Was I a bad brother?

I'm not going to try to defend myself other than saying that I needed the escape. Perhaps you can understand; I'm sure you would have escaped if you had been able. But I was the only one who was really able. Dad escaped some every day when he went to work. Perhaps his thirty-minute commute to and from work provided him just enough escape to be able to come home and deal with the sickness that had invaded our lives. Of course, you couldn't escape it, and neither could Mom, although I'll bet Mom wouldn't have wanted to even had she been able.

Anyway, Mom knew how to make guilt work. It wasn't so much that she made you feel guilty for things you shouldn't feel guilty of; more accurately she was incredibly adept at pointing out the guilt you already felt, or else uncovering the guilt you should have felt. I am not trying to paint Mom as a manipulative and conniving person; you and I both know more than anyone that she was loving, compassionate, considerate, giving, and never had anything but our best interests in mind. Her adept use of guilt was not, I think, a conscious decision to control us and press us into submission. Instead I think it was one way for her to ensure that we were indeed learning a sense of morality. It was often painful, and very usually annoying as hell, but it worked to teach us when and how we were doing things wrong.

Mom never failed to point out my guilt for not being around while you were sick, and especially when you came home for chemo. It was such a chore for me to come see you at the hospital; it took away from my schedule and it was the most uncomfortable place I had ever been. I was starting to feel distanced from you. If there were anyone to blame, it would be me, although I'm not sure that was a situation that deserved blame. You had been gone to Durham all the previous semester, and after you got home you were either at school or the hospital. I was either at work, school, or with Shelley.

It was terribly difficult for me to become more involved with the family when you came back home. So much of your existence – and Mom's as well – revolved around your treatments. Blood counts, platelet transfusions, chemotherapy treatments through the IV, not to mention steroids you were taking or the treatments you had on your eyes. It seemed that the only way I could be a part of the family was to be a part of your treatments. How could I do that? Certainly Mom and Dad weren't about to let me administer these treatments, or leave me to take you to the hospital. Nor would I have wanted to. I was a senior in high school, preparing to graduate and move off to college to start my life in a brand new direction. Did I want to stay home and be around you, the constant reminder that death is ever-present and unyielding? No, I didn't. Blame me if you will, but I will admit that I hated being around you when you were undergoing some type of treatment, and that was seemingly all the time.

And more than ever, Mom was increasingly disturbed by my "absenteeism." My withdrawal from the family had bothered her enough when you were well; once you were sick, it disturbed her even more. She was constantly reprimanding me for not being around the house more, warning me that I would regret it once things were over.

Did this bother you? I'd understand if it did. But what could I do? I was not ready to face up to my own mortality just then. I was unable to spend real quality time with you; I couldn't be with you without the presence of some doctor or medicine or treatment. Or Mom. I didn't want to be around Mom much, either, because she reminded me of my guilt and that was just as unbearable as you reminding me of my mortality. I'm sorry if you felt neglected, and I'm sorry if you felt like I was forgetting you. Is that why you were so adamant in your last days about not forgetting you? Did you feel as if I already had?

After spring break, you returned to school in a wheelchair. To me, this was nothing short of an extreme act of bravery. To face up to all those classmates, to the people in the halls, to the teachers and peers in a wheelchair. Mom recounts that first day in one of her e-mails. She described wheeling you into your first period class. The entire room fell suddenly silent as everyone's conversations froze, their heads turning to watch

you. Mom wheeled you to the front of the class with everyone's eyes on you, and with your back to the class you whispered to Mom, "I think I'm going to cry." And Mom had no choice but to leave you alone in that room.

By the end of the day, though, you were back in good spirits. Many of your other classmates were very encouraging towards you, and provided you with plenty of jokes: "Don't drink and drive in the halls!" "Hey, man, we could put a spoiler on the back of that thing so it would look cool when you pop wheelies!" I don't think people did that just to make you feel better; I think they were trying to pay you back for all the good-hearted teasing you'd given them.

Soon after that, you went back to Durham for an evaluation of the chemotherapy. They found that although the tumor had not increased in size, it had increased in mass, something they referred to as "internal growth." The chemotherapy protocol you had been taking was deemed ineffectual and two options were presented to you.

The first was a protocol called VP16. An oral medication that was much weaker than what you had been taking, this drug might have possibly stabilized the tumor for six to twelve months, but would not have been likely to reduce its size or density. It would have bought you time, and it would have been easy for you to take.

The second option was a drug called carboplatin. Not only would it significantly lower your blood counts, possibly requiring several platelet transfusions per week, it would be incredibly aggressive on your entire body. That meant your *entire* body. Nothing would be left unscathed; the carboplatin was the most aggressive and harsh treatment available.

You came home after that visit to Durham, and the four of us sat in the den – you and Mom and Dad on the sofa and I in the recliner – while you faced the most difficult decision anyone would ever have to face: you decided what to do with your life. When most people decide what to do with their lives, this is what they decide: jobs, schools, occupations, marriage partners. No, for you, it was none of these things. When you decided what to do with your life, you decided in essence when you wanted to die.

The doctors had told Mom and Dad in October that ninety percent of patients with a pontine glioma tumor die within a year. You were six months along. They told you that night what the doctors had told them six months ago. You knew how bad your chances were. And you were faced with this option: 1.) quit the chemotherapy, take a pain killer, and have fun until you died, or 2.) take an extremely abrasive form of chemotherapy in the hopes that you might still fight the tumor and get a little better.

How could a fifteen-year-old be expected to make such a decision? Could anyone really face up to that? We all knew your death was nearing, that indeed the odds were so against us that hope was simply an ideal, a distant concept that provided an impersonal warmth when people squeezed our shoulders and confided to us that they were still praying for a healing. Hope was something I no longer felt any relief from, and if Mom or Dad had any hope, it had nothing to do with your health. We knew we were beaten, that it was over.

But you didn't. At least you wouldn't accept it. It's funny, looking back; Mom and Dad assured you that it was indeed your decision. They would not make the call for you, and I'm sure that was simultaneously liberating and damning. You asked them what they would do if it were them, and Mom told you she would quit while Dad told you he would fight it. But how can you decide? When does life become too much of a burden?

It always does; the will to live must be overcome by the death wish eventually. But what must the body and mind and soul endure before giving in? How long can we “rail against the dying of the light” before we tire and give up? Eventually, we must go gently, for there is really no other way.

Your will to live had not tired out, I guess. I’m sure mine would have by then, but I don’t know. Mom thought hers would have. But you picked the carboplatin. I can remember your sobs as you laid in Mom’s lap; they were short and jerky, catching in your throat. Your eyes were clenched shut, but they did not tear. Your chest heaved outward and your throat rattled with a frightening honk and I thought to myself, “He can’t even cry like a human being anymore. He can’t even cry like a human being.”

You went back to Duke to start the new protocol. You had decided that if it were too painful you would quit, change your protocol, but you went back to Durham, looking death in the face. You were a trooper, as Mom would say, a tough cookie. You didn’t give up when it seems to me any fifteen-year-old – and so many adults – would have been happy to quit.

In your journal you wrote on March 28, the night you made that decision:

“I made the hardest decision I’ve ever made in my entire life today. I’m starting a new chemo and with the prospect of change if it’s too bad. I’m pretty much just waiting to die now. I’ve gotta do it with a smile.”

What kind of smile were you facing death with? You weren’t waiting to die, you were fighting it. What kind of smile did death see painted across your face? It wasn’t cheerful, but it certainly wasn’t resigned. To me it would have been the smile of a boxer, picking himself up in the ninth round, face bloodied and bruised with a look of insanity in the eyes. You remind me of Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*, being battered by George Kennedy, never landing a single punch but never failing to get back up. You never failed to get back up. I’m sure your smile was defiant and rebellious. I’ll bet when death looked at you that smile said, “I can take it and I’m not giving up without every ounce of fight left in me.”

As April moved on, I remember things around the house becoming much more dismal. The treatment was indeed tearing you apart, depleting your blood count and platelet count, as well as giving you an anal fissure. Two or three times a day you were required to take sitz baths in order to treat the fissure, sitting in bowls of medicine. I can’t imagine how irritating and painful that must have been, but I never heard you complain. Of course, I was around as little as possible, but Mom doesn’t really have any memories of you complaining, although she does have memories of your bad moods.

We’re all entitled to bad moods, and you more than anyone should have been entitled to bad moods. But boy, your bad moods were really foul – they always had been. I can remember one specific event very vividly. It was during the time that Ryan was living with us. You’re probably rolling your eyes in anticipation of the story about to come, but I’ll tell it anyway. We were all sitting at the kitchen table doing our homework. You and Mom had already had some scuffles that afternoon, although I’m sure I don’t know what over. But you were in a foul mood to begin with. Mom wasn’t roses and sunshine either, so the atmosphere was already rife with strife, so to speak.

Anyhow, there we were, you, Ryan, and I at the kitchen table working on homework while Mom moved about the kitchen preparing supper. You must have come

across some math problem that you were unable to solve. You got frustrated and broke your pencil. "You owe me fifty cents," Mom said.

It seems silly in retrospect that Mom would pick a fight over a pencil. But first of all, it wasn't just over the pencil, and secondly, you were the one who picked the fight. It might not appear that way, but Mom had been dealing with you all afternoon. Sometimes your moods were too much for her, and this time she felt you were taking it too far. And your attitude is what eventually picked the fight.

"What for?" you demanded.

"For that pencil," she answered.

"It's my pencil," you insisted.

"But I gave it to you."

"Yes, well, you gave it to me, and it's mine, and I can do whatever I want with it."

"But I didn't give it to you to break, I gave it to you to write with."

And on it went. You poor fool, you were in third grade! How could you possibly have hoped to win an argument with Mom? She was invincible when it came to fights. Part of it may have been due to the Master's degree in counseling; I'm sure another part may have had something to do with her secret weapon of guilt previously mentioned. It could have just been the age and experience. Whatever her edge, Mom was untouchable. We knew this, but amazingly never failed to try to best her at a game we were doomed to lose.

I'm not exactly sure where the argument went from there; I think pretty much it was about Mom trying to point out your bad attitude. Nobody likes it when people point out their bad attitudes; not nine-year-olds or forty-year-olds. You fought tooth and nail to defend yourself, but that only made things worse. We were terribly equipped to argue against Mom. "When?" we'd demand. "When have I ever...?" We just set ourselves up.

You tried that defense and just buried yourself further and further, like the rabbit in that story about the tar baby. It's a strange concept, conjuring up echoes of the Taoist idea of *wu-wei* or non-action: the harder you work at something, the harder you find yourself being pushed away. That's exactly what happened then; it took me a long time – perhaps until after you died – to realize that the only way to win a fight is to not fight.

But you fought, and oh how you lost. It must have been near an hour that you and Mom battled back and forth, you failing to absolve yourself – indeed, only damning yourself further – and Mom simply hoping she could get a handle on things. And bless Mom; I'm sure she realized that things were way past the point of getting a handle on them. The entire time, Ryan and I just sat at the table trying not to laugh.

Eventually, the pressure got to be too much for you, and you decided to drop back and punt, playing the martyr. This was a smarter strategy than you had been trying, but it's still not a great one. "Fine!" you yelled. "I'm an awful person!" You took your Velcro wallet out of your pocket and held it out to Ryan. "Here!" you shrieked, sobbing and wailing, "take this! I don't deserve it!" It wasn't the wallet you were referring to, but rather the eighty-something dollars inside it that were the result of your recent birthday. Ryan of course didn't take it and only bit his lip harder. You ran around the table to me. "Here, I don't deserve this!" Naturally I took it.

Mom knew things were beyond the point of any repair; I think by this time she was trying to send you to your room to cool down. But you weren't finished with the emotional *hari kiri*: you ran and plopped down in the recliner and began to furiously rock back and forth screaming, "Nobody likes me! Nobody likes me!" Mom gave up and went back to cooking; Ryan and I didn't give up trying not to laugh.

Then Dad came home. Poor Dad was in a good mood when he walked in the door; he came strolling through the den and said, "Hello, family!"

"Welcome to the Twilight Zone!" you screeched.

Indeed. Being around you when you were in your terrible moods could indeed seem like the Twilight Zone. I remember plenty of instances when you put on a scene like this one. And you seemed to do it in cycles, too; that month that Ryan lived with us was one of the worst. I also remember sixth and seventh grades for you were pretty awful. As I've already discussed, you had a difficult time reconciling the exclusivity that some of your old friends began to exhibit at school. Perhaps that was what made you such a person of integrity: your bad moods weren't based on whims or impulses, but instead stemmed from serious disruption in your life. We all have bad moods, but most of yours came during genuinely bad days.

Your days of sickness were no different. I wasn't around for a whole lot of them, but Mom can testify to the foul moods you could dip into. And most of them were the result of frustration. Frustration with yourself, frustration with others. You got frustrated when you couldn't do a math problem or find the answer in the book. You got frustrated when people didn't act the way they should have. You got frustrated when you found yourself losing control over your arms and legs. You got frustrated with the doctors who would poke and prod at you without doing anything to make you better. You got frustrated and you got upset, and you got to be very unpleasant to be around.

I'm not criticizing you, Andrew, I'm really not. I'm not trying to make you out to be a moody or snappy person. Who wouldn't be frustrated to see the world through double vision all the time? Who wouldn't be frustrated to lose the ability to write and walk? Who wouldn't be frustrated to have to face a world that is unforgiving towards those who are handicapped? Who wouldn't be frustrated by facing death at the age of fifteen, with so many possibilities for the future still left unrealized? No one; we'd all be frustrated. You deserved your bad moods.

It's interesting to look back on everything; I think your bad moods really seemed to dwindle as you got worse. Mom has told me, and her journal tells the same, about how bad some of the days at the Ronald McDonald House were. But when you came home, and as the chemotherapy progressed, your moods seemed to level out. Was it because you were no longer frustrated, because you had begun to accept things? Or was it because you were running out of energy to fight? If it had been me, I would have been out of energy. Maybe it all had to do with the acceptance of death. Maybe things aren't so frustrating when you know you're going to die.

It was May when things began to collapse. You were very sick, dealing with the anal fissure and a complete lack of any infection-fighting cells. You had to have both blood and platelet transfusions and continued treatment for the fissure, and things got so bad that Mom and Dad had to learn to administer IV antibiotics at home. How surreal it must be to take a crash course in medicine administration for your dying son.



At about that same time, things started really heating up for me as well. School was coming to a close, and I was preparing to graduate. I was also having a very hard time with Shelley. That last week of April and the first week of May was one long continuous fight between her and me. I have no recollection at all what the fight was actually over; I do, however, remember what it was about. It was about us breaking up. Of course, that never really came up during our arguments and discussions, but I knew that was the real issue, and I'm sure she could feel it, too. You see, things were so completely different by that point that the relationship wasn't possible. I don't know who I was at that time, but I was not who I had been my junior year, or even the first half of my senior year. I was totally different, and Shelley and I were no longer on the same page. This wasn't her fault and it wasn't my fault; that's just how things worked out. I regret that sometimes; I wish life weren't so arbitrary. I wish you hadn't gotten a brain tumor. I wish a lot of things. I do wish things hadn't changed so drastically between Shelley and me; perhaps things wouldn't have ended so painfully. But everything in my life at that time was painful.

It was also around this time that an MRI discovered the tumor had shrunk to half its original size. You were again faced with a momentous decision: do you keep up with the carboplatin? It seems to me that this decision must have been even harder than the decision to do the carboplatin; after all that pain and sickness you were suddenly faced with the decision to persevere, and the evidence was in your favor. How must it feel to face such indescribable pain but yet be told – nay, actually shown – that it is doing some good? What an utterly torturous position to be in! How could someone face such a crossroad without shuddering beneath its weight and magnitude? Such an existential crisis should not have to be faced by a fifteen-year-old, but you faced it head-on. Again, it seems to me that you flashed that wicked smile at death, crying, “Come on! Dish it out! I'm not going gently!” So you started round two of the carboplatin, knowing and anticipating the pain and discomfort ahead.

I can remember that specific point in your treatment; how excited everyone got that the tumor was finally going away. I remember Mom sitting at the dinner table saying, “For the first time in a year, I finally feel joy again.” I don't think it was really joy she was feeling but instead a renewed sense of hope. Whatever it was, it would pass soon.

School came to an end; I graduated. I remember it feeling very anti-climactic; all the fuss over baccalaureate and the commencement ceremony seemed annoying. I was ready to simply be done with it all. It wasn't so much that I was looking forward to college; I wasn't. Maybe two weeks later Mom and I went to Knoxville for my two-day orientation, and I despised every second of it. It wasn't that I was looking forward to the summer, either, because that wasn't it; what did I have to look forward to other than more time to kill? You wrote late in your journal that your prime objective was to sleep; mine was to kill time. Killing time had become my passion. The time I spent at work or the time I spent with Shelley or the time I spent at school or the time I spent in the drama team: it was all time to kill. I worked so I could escape; it was a couple of hours per day that I could be somewhere else. I went out with Shelley so I could escape; I hid behind the mask of passion and what I thought was love, and even after the passion and love didn't exist, it gave me a chance to be with someone who cared. I went to school so I could escape; I studied and read and wrote and aced every test because it distracted me,

and every footstep in the school hallways and every breath breathed with a desk pressed against my chest were all done in the name of making the time vanish. I stayed involved in the drama team because that was the last form of escape available; the production that year was *The Crucible*, and I had the part of Judge Danforth which dominated the second act. If I wasn't at work or in school or with Shelley, I was at play practice. I didn't do any of those things because I cared about them; I cared about my grades and the jobs I did at work and the performance in the play, and I did care about Shelley. But the reason I kept all those things up was because it killed time. It kept me from facing you.

Looking back, I don't think that what I did was wise. A valid ego defense, perhaps, but not wise. There no longer remained any meaning in anything except killing time. I was a junkie for purposelessness; addicted to distraction for the sake of distraction, I wandered from task to task in order to keep myself occupied. What was I going to do during the summer? What could I find to keep me busy? I wouldn't have school and I wouldn't have the play; I'd only have a few hours of work each day and the constant fight to win time with Shelley away from time with the family. And I was beginning to lose interest in winning that fight.

You came to my graduation; I'm sure it meant nothing to you. It meant nothing to me. I had a party afterwards; my friends came over and we watched movies and popped popcorn and played games. Just another distraction. I'm sure you came home and went to sleep. And I think I had my birthday at the same time; I don't really remember. I guess it would have been my eighteenth.

The first few days of the summer were awkwardly exciting; I picked up a few more hours at work. I was able to completely decide my schedule there, getting in at ten in the morning and leaving around three. It gave me time to sleep in and also allowed for me to eat lunch away from home. In the afternoons I would perhaps come home or go to Shelley's. When I was home, I found myself becoming harder pressed to remove myself from the family.

I guess it was the last week of June that I worked at church during Vacation Bible School. All my life it seems, I've been involved in Bible School at Central Baptist in some form or another. As soon as I was too old to enroll I started helping, from seventh grade to twelfth grade. In fact, I even helped after I was in college. That summer was no different. I also remember that the three of you went back to Duke that week. Your renal clearance test was that week and you were also having an MRI and a PET. You returned to the Ronald McDonald House again to find that of all the children who had been there in the fall, you were the only one still alive. One of the children, a little Russian girl named Dasha, had gone to radiation with you. She had died in the Ronald McDonald House only two weeks before.

The test results showed that the tumor was growing again. There was no other treatment available. Dad called me that night and told me that the three of you were coming home, that the only treatments left to take were painkillers.

The next day at church I showed up as I had all week. I was in a class full of five-year-olds, and they were quickly wearing thin. Someone, I don't remember who, stopped me in the hall to ask if I'd heard anything from Duke. I told them that the tumor was growing, that there was nothing left to do. And I remember her answer: "We'll continue to pray for a miracle healing."

How I wanted to scream, to shout, “You fool! There will be no miracle! God is not going to make Andrew better, God is not going to give us that miracle! He is going to die, so stop wasting your breath and bothering God over something that is never going to happen!” It infuriated me for her to tell me that she would keep praying for a “miracle healing.” Why do miracles always have to involve physical healing? Did they really think God was going to miraculously heal your tumor? Was your life not a strong enough witness and testimony to the power of grace that God would have to completely heal you only when it was obvious you were going to die? Why must everyone hold fast to the physical restoration of the body now when we all know we must die? Couldn’t you just pray that God would help us grieve? If God was going to give us a miracle, then God would give us a miraculous sense of acceptance and peace in the face of an utterly meaningless and pointless loss. If there were going to be any miracle, then it would involve us keeping our faith even though we no longer felt any reason to hold on to it. Your health was gone, but so was our hope; and the restoration of hope is a far more beautiful miracle than the recovery of health.

It was a quick and rapidly descending spiral from then on. The Make a Wish Foundation became more involved with us; they had already solicited requests for your wish, but once they found out you might not live more than a month, they sped up the arrangements. Your wish was for us to stay at the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, North Carolina. You had been there once with a friend and you had wanted to go with your family for years. So the four of us went. They treated us like royalty; they fed us their incredible buffet brunch and the chefs personally introduced themselves to you in order to assure you that if there was anything you wanted that was not on the buffet then they would fix it for you. Every department, from the publicity office to housekeeping, brought us a gift, from books to candy to sweatshirts. But you were too far gone to really enjoy it. You couldn’t get around anywhere without the wheelchair, and you slept most of the day. When we did get out we simply rolled you around the inn and out onto the patio overlooking the mountains.

Hospice got involved with us when we got home. They brought literature on the dying process and a grief counselor came once a week to talk to all four of us. I thought that was pretty pointless. She asked me questions like, “Are you angry with Andrew for taking attention away from your senior year?” Yeah, that would have been a wonderful way for me to channel my anger, by getting angry with you. Like it was your fault and you had purposely developed a brain tumor in order to steal my thunder. I started trying to be around the house more, but you didn’t really seem to be interested. Mom was really struggling trying to take care of you; her back and arms were sore and strained from lifting and carrying you between your bed and the bathroom. She asked me to carry you to the bathroom one day and you wouldn’t let me. That made me so angry, although I think I understood. Why would you have wanted me to carry you to bathroom, pull your pants off, and seat you on the toilet, waiting outside the bathroom for you to finish so I could pull your pants back up and carry you back? I was never around; I was no better than a stranger. And I naturally felt that you were just pushing me away, which angered me so much. It was such a sacrifice for me to even be in the house, and I was doing that in order to spend time with you and Mom. And you didn’t even want me around. As far as I was concerned with that, I would have just as soon been somewhere else.

So I picked up another time-killing project; I joined the orchestra at the local community theater in Bristol to play guitar for the musical *Tommy*. Remember how you had been in their production of *Damn Yankees* with Suzy that one summer two years earlier? I worked with some of the same people you had worked with. *Tommy* also happened to be a favorite musical of both of ours; I was hoping that you would survive to hear me play in it. I still juggled time at work and time with Shelley, who was always so good to provide me an escape whenever I needed it. I had the music book, and so I practiced it at home when I was there.

Although you didn't want me to help you around, I do still remember some fond times during that last month of your life. I remember once the three of us – you, Mom, and I – were around the kitchen table eating lunch. You said, "I wish I'd hurry up and die." Through tears, Mom asked, "Why?" And you said, "Because in Heaven I'll be able to use the bathroom on my own." You never seemed to lose your sense of humor, even after the tumor started affecting your ability to articulate and reason.

As the days passed and the time grew near, I think I came to realize how important relationships really were. Although my feelings for Shelley were different, I still regarded our relationship highly, and continued to do so even after we broke up. I also began to understand how important my relationships with other people were. My friends, my co-workers, and especially my family. I tried to be home more, although it was difficult since I had become so involved in outside things. I can remember how Shelley had planned a trip for us to go to the Knoxville Zoo one Saturday at the end of July; I think she was very wary of the fall coming and the two of us going to separate colleges. I'm sure she felt the end near, and I think she was trying to hang on. As July moved on, you got worse and worse, becoming completely bedridden. Hospice brought us a mechanical lift to take you from your bed to the bathroom, but it was too difficult to operate and you were eventually given a bedpan. You only ate what Mom fed you, and that was very little. Mom had gotten in the habit of sleeping downstairs next to your bed; she awoke one night to hear you whispering, "Help me." In the morning, you couldn't remember needing anything.

Near the end of the last week of July, you slipped into a constant state of semi-consciousness. When you weren't asleep, you were unable to respond. You could not move anything but your left hand and only make noises in your throat. When you needed something, you grunted, and Mom or Dad would take your left hand and guess what it was you needed, waiting for you to squeeze your hand in affirmation. You ran a consistent fever and your breathing was labored.

It was that Saturday that Shelley and I were to go to the zoo. I felt that I had been around enough; it didn't bother me to leave for a day because I thought I had done my penance. It also didn't seem to make much difference to me whether I was around or not; you slept all but maybe an hour a day and no one let me do anything to help out. But Mom used the guilt again, and this time I know she did it with complete knowledge and forethought. "I don't want you to ever regret this, Daniel," she said to me. "I wish you wouldn't go. You won't ever be able to go back and fix this." She was right; I met Shelley on the porch of our house to tell her that I wasn't going anywhere.

"I'm sorry, but I can't go," I told her. "I need to stay here. Andrew's pretty bad and I better not go anywhere." She was very understanding; she kissed me and left.

I don't remember anything else about that day. Funny, isn't it? All I remember is telling Shelley that I wasn't going to the zoo with her. Mom wrote in an e-mail that the four of us spent the day together in the den; you slept all day, and I guess the three of us read or watched TV.

That night you actually waved to me as I went to bed. I don't remember that, either, but Mom wrote about it in an e-mail. We skipped church the next day – Mom and Dad hadn't been to church in months – and spent more time in the den. That evening was my first practice for *Tommy*; I had to be in Bristol for three hours practicing with the pit orchestra. I left after lunch. Mom had known about that practice; I'm sure that's why she had been so adamant I not go to Knoxville with Shelley the day before. After lunch I packed up my guitars and sat by you on your bed to tell you goodbye before I left. I took your left hand, the hand you could still use, in mine and said, "Sorry my hand is wet. I just went to the bathroom, and I peed on it." It's amazing; except for your eyes, that hand was the only part of your body you could move, and once I'd said that you jerked that hand away so fast it startled me. Your humor was with you until the very end. I told you I was leaving to practice with the orchestra; I knew you thought it was cool that I'd be playing in that musical. I also knew you wouldn't get to hear me in it. I said goodbye and told you I'd be back around supper to see you again. Those were the last words I ever said to you.

Mom and Dad gave me their pager in case you died while I was gone. The theater in Bristol was a good half-hour drive from our house, so I was gone for four hours. It was strange going to that rehearsal. There I was with a bunch of strangers running through music we had never played together before. And all the while I was waiting for my brother to die, wondering what life would bring tomorrow or the next day. I kept checking the pager to make sure it was set to vibrate, in case it went off while we were playing a song.

The rehearsal went fine; I packed my guitars back into the car and started the ride home. I remember being in a pretty good mood; I was excited about the show, and I was eager to keep practicing since it had sounded so good together on our first rehearsal. On the way into town I decided to stop by and see Shelley. I was there for maybe ten minutes, just letting her know that I missed her and was sorry we hadn't been able to go to the zoo.

In the car on my way from Shelley's house to our house, the pager buzzed. I was on State of Franklin Road, just past the Wal-Mart. I sped up, going eighty and nearly running two red lights. I got caught at the light at the intersection at West Market where the Taco Bell and Krystal are. The pager went off again. When I got home, Mom and Dad came out to meet me at my car. They were both weeping.

## Forgetting You

*And we forget because we must  
And not because we will.*

----- Matthew Arnold,  
'Absence'

It was so important to you that I not forget you. I can remember many times in those last months before your death when you told me, "Please don't ever forget me." Did you know then how hard that would be?

I have lived so many days without you that it sometimes feels like I never had a brother. Days will come and go and I will not once think about you. It's amazing to me to acknowledge that fact; right after you died, I felt like I couldn't concentrate on anything but you. You and your death. But now it seems like that was a previous life, a part of me that is finished and sealed away, a completed project that has served its purpose and is no longer useful. It takes concerted effort to remember things we did together, times that we played and fought. Because the first thing I think of when I think about you is the fact that you are gone.

And that makes me think about the cancer. It's so much easier to remember the injections and the treatments than it is to remember basketball games and birthday parties. It's so much easier to remember your anguish over watching your hair fall out than it is to remember your struggle with Mom and Dad to let your hair grow long. It is so much easier to remember you with your eyes crossed and your voice cracked and your hands crooked and your body frail and wrapped in bedsheets than it is to remember how vibrant and youthful and energetic you once had been. It seems that somewhere deep in my mind I can almost remember a time when you were overweight, and then you suddenly went on such a health kick that you lost twenty-five pounds in weeks. I can almost remember when you were first diagnosed with vitiligo, and we watched in reservation as your skin grew splotchy and white in patches while you just shrugged.

And your birthmark. That's hard to remember; that was a long time ago. You had that bald spot on the top of your head, and you had surgery to make it smaller. But I don't think of these things first; I have to force myself to think back. Instead of your childhood bald spot, I see your whole bald head and the hairlines around your ears where the radiation killed the follicles. I have no idea what your voice sounded like before the tumor made your throat scratchy and dry. I guess I have it on tape somewhere, but it would only sound foreign and unfamiliar.

How could you know that it would be so difficult for me to remember who you were? I know I rolled my eyes at you every time you said those words. "Please don't ever forget me."

"Right, like I'm going to forget my own brother."

But I have, and I hate myself for it.

I know it's not really my fault. At least I don't think it's really my fault. It's a "normal" reaction, or at least a typical one. Other people I talk to who have lost loved

ones express the same concerns and feelings. Memories fade, and the more they fade the more precious they get. I can look at a picture of the two of us together some where, and it doesn't feel like either you or me. I have pictures of the two of us that I cannot remember, either us being there or anyone taking that picture. You see, I've lived so many days without a brother that my mind has become short-sighted enough to apply that to the rest of my life.

It's the same way with other things I guess, like when you've had a friend so long it seems you've known him all your life. I'm sure it's like that in marriages, couples can't possibly imagine what their life was like without their spouse. However I just can't seem to get over the absurdity of it: I know you existed and I know you were my brother, yet my mind ignores these facts and interprets the world as if both of them were untrue.

Perhaps this is one of the distinguishing factors of the human race: we are constantly defeating biology. I don't mean overcoming the natural world by predicting the weather, curing diseases, or water-proofing our furniture. I mean that we as humans are constantly acting in direct opposition with our natural biological tendencies. And what's more, this is what God wants us to do. It has been widely argued that men are biologically wired with a rampant libido in order to ensure the survival of our race; the more females we mate with, the more likely our genes will be passed on and the species shall survive. But God specifically tells us this is not how we are meant to act. God has ordained sex to be an activity shared with our spouse in the sanctity of marriage. It is also widely recognized that adrenaline responses in our glands trigger a "fight-or-flight" reaction when we are faced with danger. But we are not supposed to attack one another and we are not supposed to run from conflict, either. Granted, this may not apply to some situations (it would be very advantageous for one to flee the collapse of a building or to fight against a raging animal). But when dealing with other people, we are instructed to love one another and to confront one another when conflict infiltrates our lives. Therefore, when someone insults us or provokes us, God wants us to overcome the instinct to fight back. And when conflict arises that requires resolution, it is necessary that we refrain from fleeing and work to achieve a settlement.

But we humans also fight biology in dysfunctional ways. For instance, self-preservation is a biological instinct no one would argue against. So why do people smoke? Why do people drink and drive? Why do people suddenly stop eating even though every inch of their physical body is screaming for sustenance? Why do people purposely engage in stupid and dangerous activities? Shouldn't the drive for self-preservation prevent people from making such poor decisions? In situations like this, I feel like God just watches us with amazement. "Yes," God may think, "I did give them some biological impulses I meant for them to overcome, but must they take it so far? Must they act so contrary to the way I built them that they end up destroying themselves? The smartest animal still seems stupid in comparison with the achievements and accomplishments of the human race, but animals don't run around eating poisonous foods and ramming their heads into trees for the fun of it." So why do we? When God wants us to overcome biology – such as turning the other cheek in a fight, remaining in a faithful monogamous relationship, and rising above the petty struggle to assert ourselves as alpha males or whatever – we fail. But when it comes to the biological drives to do that which is sensible and prudent – such as refraining from activities that would harm us – we decide to sidestep biology.

You know why I think humans do this? Because we're so damn proud of our minds. *Reason*. What a monstrous concept! I believe that that is what the verse in Genesis refers to when telling us we are created in the image of God. We have reason! We are rational beings! So why do tend to act so irrationally sometimes? Because we've learned to rationalize. What a deadly combination: animal instincts and rationality. Humans have learned to rationalize their stupid behavior in the same way that they let their animal instincts run over their reason. I'll stop eating because I need to lose weight; I'll beat up this guy who talked trash about me so I can assert my dominance. We are so enamored with ourselves that nothing we do seems to be unreasonable whereas everything anyone else does is.

What does this have to do with forgetting you? Well, let me bring my discussion back to that point. We as humans have such highly developed minds and they are nearly impossible for us to understand. Imagine! We cannot understand part of what makes us who we are! Just as we have not explored parts of our oceans and mountains, we have not even begun to understand what makes our minds work. And every one of us has one! Whether we spend our time thinking about the nature of the universe or about what we're going to wear tomorrow, the simplest human uses reason and thought more than any animal. Our minds are so vast and complicated that we cannot comprehend them.

And then come emotions. What are they? Do animals feel them? If so, then does that prove that they are only biological tools to impel us to actions that are evolutionarily beneficial? Do we fall in love merely to ensure the propagation of the species? Do we get angry merely as a function of self-preservation and dominance? How do emotions interact with our mind?

I know it seems like I'm way off topic, but I'm not, so stick with me because this will all get back to forgetting about you. Our mind and our emotions are so complex and so complicated that we will probably never understand them. Plato felt that the soul is eternal, and that reason and emotion are parts of the soul. The Christian view seems to hold to this idea, although the Bible never assures us that our souls are in and of themselves eternal. So if our minds and our emotions are a part of our souls, which are not merely biological entities but part of our spiritual identities, then they are certainly special and unique to the human race. Moreover, they are what make us spiritual beings: we are to love God with all our heart and soul and mind. Our emotions, our reason, and our thoughts should all be focused on love for God.

How can we focus on something so big? Is it possible for us to really focus our beings on the majesty of the Lord? King David wrote, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand." The darkness is light to the Lord, and there is no place that we may hide from the Lord's hand. Is it possible for us to focus on such mighty things? If the mind of God is vaster than all the sand, greater than any stretches of the earth and heavens, is it possible for humans, weak and puny, to concentrate completely on the Lord?

It must be, because God has told us to do so.

Our minds, our souls, our hearts – as feeble as they may seem – do indeed possess the capacity to be totally centered on the Lord God. In order to do this, they must be complex and intricate creations. We cannot understand ourselves apart from



understanding God, because it is through the tuning and focusing of our spiritual faculties – our emotions and thoughts and reason – that we reach God and thus discover ourselves.

So why do I have such trouble remembering you? Because the mind is so elaborate. Again, humans are so adept at dodging biology, and my difficulty in remembering you is a prime example. I perceived your death; my eyes watched your life deteriorate and recorded the sight of your lifeless body being lowered into the ground. Likewise, my eyes (and ears and nose and fingers) perceived your existence for fifteen years prior to your death. But despite these solid perceptions, my mind chooses now to experience the world as if I had never perceived these things.

Why does my mind act so contrary to what I know is real? Why do I live so many days without once thinking of you? I know you existed, I know you were a part of my life – indeed, that you still are. Yet my day-to-day life is aloof to this knowledge, separate and cold as if everything I know about you were something I read in a textbook. And if my mind acts so contrary to what I know I have perceived, how can it be possible to focus it on that which I have not perceived?

The Lord is magnificent and awesome. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, and so much so in regards to our soul and mind. Why does my mind close off the memory of you? I think that a part of it has to. Were I to live in the constant memory of your death, I would be so overcome with pain and grief that I would be rendered completely ineffective. Were I to live in the constant memory of your life, I could not move forward without reaching your death, for that is what life on this earth leads to. I am unable to think long about my own life without eventually coming to grips with my own death; that is why so many people live unexamined lives, despite the apparent uselessness of such an existence.

So what does my mind focus on? What is so important that I must forget my own brother in order to make room for it? School? Work? Meetings and dates and people and places and things? Sometimes. But I think mostly it is because my mind needs room to think about God.

I don't mean to sound like I spend all my time pondering the mysteries of the Almighty. I don't. If only I did, then perhaps none of this would be necessary, this attempted reflection and imposed narrative upon your life and death. If I could sit and completely attune my entire being on meditation and deliberation of the kingdom of God...

Paul writes about this at the end of his letter to the Philipians. Paul doesn't sit well with me. Everything he says completely amazes me, either because it strikes me as wise and insightful or brash and arrogant. I cannot find another character in the Bible who seems more self-contradictory or extreme. Even Christ Himself doesn't impress me as being so radically fanatical. When I read his letters, I am sure that Paul is so overcome with zeal and religious fervor that he is not thinking about what he is saying before it's said; every time I read the verse in James that says, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless," I think of Paul. I don't think Paul's religion was worthless, I think rather that it was sincere and passionate, but I do think Paul talks too much, commands too much, and brags too much.

But at the end of Philipians I get a much different picture of Paul. His letters all seem to follow a pattern: greetings, praise and encouragement (buttering up the readers, I

think); the meat of the letter (usually reprimanding the readers for doing something wrong); and then final exhortations. When I read Paul's letters, I feel like skimming over the final chapter. If a friend of mine wrote me a letter calling me out on all the sins I'd committed, I wouldn't be too concerned with the stuff at the end of the letter that said, "Keep praying, don't be lazy, remember me, I wrote this with my own hand." I'd be too pissed off to worry about all that final exhorting, and I'm sure I would skip through the last paragraphs in agitation and anger. And so I usually read Paul's letters like that. But I don't with Philipians.

First of all, Paul didn't write the Philipians to call them out on anything, but rather just to encourage them. There's nothing more revitalizing than a note with no other purpose but to tell you that you're being prayed for and thought of. That's what Paul was doing, cheering the Philipian church to keep shining as stars and pressing on to win the prize. But for me, it's his final exhortations that make the letter worth reading:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the peace of God will be with you."

Paul wrote these words while in prison. Rejoice! Always! The Lord is near. And the most abrasive man in the New Testament – and perhaps the whole Bible – says to let your gentleness be evident to everyone.

Normally, that's when I would furrow my brows and snort in derision because it seems a bit like a double standard for Paul to tell others to be gentle. But Paul almost pulls it off, reminding the reader that there is no need to be anxious for the Lord is near and will provide peace "which transcends all understanding." Again, if it transcends all understanding, then can we really attune ourselves to it? Paul says yes, explaining that the Lord's peace "will guard your hearts and minds." Once again, Scripture illustrates the spiritual significance of our mind and soul. Paul must have been attuned to the heart of God.

What's more, Paul knew himself, and he knew himself because he knew God. What more explicit instruction could one want? Truth, nobleness, rightness, purity, loveliness, admirability, excellence, and praiseworthiness. These are the paths to the heart of God. If it is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy, God is there. I imagine that Paul spent a lot of time in jail cells meditating on these qualities, letting his mind wander through the halls of the Lord's palace. And Paul knew this was the way to God, the correct path to holy attunement. For he tells the reader to emulate anything that he, Paul, does.

Again, what a braggart! To go around and tell people that he is holy enough to copy, that anything he does should be set as an example! I would never do that!

But how I wish I could. I wish I could point people to my life and say, "See? This is how to find God! This is how to act and how to pray and how to live in order to focus your minds on God's perfect will! This is how to be what God wants you to be!"

But I can't, because I don't live that way and I don't pray that way and I haven't focused on God's perfect will. But Paul did, and he was confident enough to tell others. That kind of confidence – especially from someone so determined to share the gospel with others – comes only from justification. And, as Paul tells us in Romans, justification leads to glorification. Our understanding of Paul comes only from the book of Acts and his letters. I'm sure that Paul was much less abrasive in person; I'll bet he was gentle and I'll bet that he spent the majority of his time contemplating the riches of God's kingdom.

Oh, that I could live my life in the thoughts of our Lord! If I could synchronize my heart with the heart of God and live in the center of the Lord's insurmountable peace! What an incredible goal to strive for! And how much energy and focus it would take! How could anyone perform such a task in this world that is constantly pressing in on us from all sides with pressures to conform and achieve and please and succeed? How could anyone devote his heart to God in this world that is temporal and materialistic and forces us to be the same? Wouldn't one have to shuffle off all those things? Wouldn't one need to be free of the burdens and obligations of this world in order to devote the entire being towards the presence of God?

Wouldn't the mind need to be free of distractions?

My inability to remember you, to recall the painful past, is what psychologists refer to as an ego-defense mechanism. According to most psychologists and beginning with Freud, the ego, or self, needs to be protected at almost any cost in order for us to continue functioning. Subconsciously, our minds will pull tricks on us in order to protect the ego from damage. Emotions may be rerouted or displaced, motives may become hidden or unclear, personalities may be canceled out by activities not normally engaged in. Most likely, we do not even realize that there is anything different going on, because if we realized that these occurrences are trying to protect our ego, we would have to face the fact that our ego needs protecting for some reason.

Repression is one of the most common forms of ego-defense. Ideas, thoughts, and memories are prevented from surfacing in one's consciousness in order to spare the individual from harm and discomfort. My inability to remember things about you is probably a direct result of repression of those memories, sparing myself the pain in order to assure continued functioning.

The twist here is that ego-defense mechanisms tend to act against painful memories, traits, or behaviors that we are directly responsible for. The "ego" itself is a term used to describe a reflected self-image, and not just the relationship of our mind and soul. Repression as an ego-defense may serve to bury an individual's recollection of his own stupid or unacceptable behavior, not something that he is not responsible for. When talking about the ego, we talk about one's self-concept, and an ego-defense is meant to protect one's self-concept. So why would I need an ego-defense to protect myself against something I had no control over?

Because your death does affect my self-image. I, too, will die some day. This is hard for my ego to accept.

But could I also not argue that my mind represses these memories because it needs room for higher tasks, such as focusing on God? Maybe. But that's not the case. If I were consumed with the task of being surrounded by the mind of God, then not only would I not think of the past, but I would not think about my not thinking of the past. Would I need to write this if I were completely attuned to the Lord? I don't think so.

So what is the point of all this? Why the discussions on spiritual enlightenment and ego-defense? Because I think you were saying more than anyone realized when you told me not to forget about you. Whether or not you knew what you were saying, I may never know. Perhaps you just wanted some personal assurance that you would always have some meaning to me in order to assuage your own ego before it died. Or perhaps you knew the importance of facing one's own mortality and past.

You see, in begging me to remember you – as you did both before and during your illness – I am forced to confront a number of issues. First of all, I must discover myself as mortal and finite. I will not live forever, nor will I be able to change the world. This is difficult for anyone to accept, but it is a hard cold fact. My ego is uncomfortable with this knowledge, but it is true nonetheless.

However, there is more involved than simply an egotistic rejection of my inevitable mortality. Søren Kierkegaard described the Christian's realization of despair as the inability to be or the desire to not be oneself. This is the "sickness unto death," something only Christians can really be fearful of. It is a battle within the soul at every moment and is composed of not being able to will oneself to be what one truly is. Or, "the torment of despair is precisely the inability to die."<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard died before Freud broke ground in psychotherapy, but I'm sure he would have agreed with Freud's ideas of ego-defense: in being unable to die, one wishes that he could be apart and separate from himself and thus traps himself in an unconscious despair.

Kierkegaard believed that it was a long and difficult process to escaping this despair. It is first necessary for one to become conscious of one's own despair, then to become passionate and defiant against it. This leads to a "leap" into an ethical sphere of existence, and finally a religious sphere in which one falls away from one's old self and into a new, actualized self that we were meant to become. This process of actualizing one's true self is indeed the process of becoming like Christ and attaining a state of attunement with the mind of God. (If you are in a Heaven like we sometimes imagine in which everyone is wandering about, find Kierkegaard and talk to him. He's a true pathological nut, but you're bound to learn something.)

In remembering you, in realizing my mortality, I discover my ego's inability to die and thus become conscious of my despair. It is at this point that I can begin the process of becoming that which I truly am: a child of God.

Did you know this when you told me to remember you? Did you know how integral it would be to finding myself in the identity of God? Could you have realized the necessity of consciously acknowledging my own despair in order to actualize my true calling? Those the Lord called were justified; in this lies the justification. I must be constantly striving upwards, reaching towards Heaven in the hopes of discovering that completely religious sphere of existence, making that leap of faith that will separate me from that old self and bring forth a new and total self in the peace of God. It surpasses all understanding, but it does not surpass achievement.

I wish it were easier for me to remember you. I wish I had done better. But not just because I want to discover my true self; I wish I had done better simply because I promised you I would. What kind of brother am I, forgetting who you were and how you lived? I'm sorry I haven't done a better job; I apologize to you and I apologize to God and I apologize to myself. It's not easy, but I haven't tried hard enough.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1849, p. 48.

I will try harder, that I can assure you. This work itself is my attempt to try harder to remember you and to begin my journey through despair and into faith. I wish you were here to help and share in this journey, but at least I have your memory to support me. I will do my best to remember you by meditating on what is true, noble, and excellent, and somewhere along the line, maybe I'll discover myself in the midst of God.

## Love

*To fear love is to fear life, and those who  
fear life are already three parts dead.*

----- Bertrand Russell,  
*Marriage and Morals*

Date: Sun, 28 Jul 1996 20:40:28 -0600 (CST)  
From: MILESA@TEN-NASH.K12.TN.US  
To: [astover@aol.com](mailto:astover@aol.com), [mworley@valley.nando.net](mailto:mworley@valley.nando.net), [dcycle@aol.com](mailto:dcycle@aol.com),  
[jsweet@aol.com](mailto:jsweet@aol.com), [nancyw@ac.MsState.edu](mailto:nancyw@ac.MsState.edu), [miles@aol.com](mailto:miles@aol.com),  
[mmiles@aol.com](mailto:mmiles@aol.com), [cmprice@sunset.olemiss.edu](mailto:cmprice@sunset.olemiss.edu), [Priced@unc.edu](mailto:Priced@unc.edu),  
[rowlett@mounet.com](mailto:rowlett@mounet.com), [cnscaol.com](mailto:cnscaol.com), [csweet@cncadm.edu](mailto:csweet@cncadm.edu),  
[ssweet9@aol.com](mailto:ssweet9@aol.com), [brosser@sdata.com](mailto:brosser@sdata.com), [rtabor@bus.auburn.edu](mailto:rtabor@bus.auburn.edu),  
[odom-k@worldnet.att.net](mailto:odom-k@worldnet.att.net)  
Subject: One more angel

Heaven is rejoicing with the addition of Andrew David Miles. He left this world at 5:30 PM today, Sunday, July 28. George and I were with him every step of the way and two Hospice nurses arrived shortly before his death. It was not as peaceful as I had hoped but he is at peace now and he is indeed soaring with eagles and running without growing weary. The three of us were with him all weekend and fortunately Daniel was away at the time of death. Our hearts are heavy but we know he is with my father and our Lord.

We have scheduled the memorial service for Thursday evening. It will be at Central Baptist Church of Johnson City at 7 PM, August 1. Graveside will be at Monte Vista Friday at 10 AM. We will receive friends after the service Thursday evening. We have asked that in lieu of flowers donations be made to the Ronald McDonald House of Johnson City or Durham.

Each of you helped us walk this horrendous journey. Your love and support enabled us to continue on...one day at a time. We will be taking it one day at a time for many weeks (years?). From the bottom of our hearts we thank you. And we love you all.

Ann, George, Daniel

It's strange how, when you are numb, you are numb to the fact that you are numb. I remember that night you died more vividly than any other part of your sickness. No sooner had they taken away your body than the house filled with people. All the families from church who had been diligent in keeping up with us and supporting us dropped in; it was like we were having some sort of party only there was no food or music and no one's spirits were up. I just wanted everyone to go away. It made me angry for everyone to come over and demand our time and attention only hours after you had just died. I knew they wanted to comfort us, to be with us in our time of pain and desperation, but I wanted them to leave us alone. I just wanted to be left alone.

It was late when everyone finally left; probably after midnight. I couldn't sleep, so I went downstairs where your bed had been only that afternoon, and I finished a movie I had rented, *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*. It was the final scene, where Clint Eastwood, Eli Wallach, and Lee Van Cleef all face each other down in the graveyard. It was peculiar, watching that movie in the state of mind I was in. Here they were, three anti-heroes, all vying for sacks of gold. You knew two of them had to die, but you didn't know who it would be. It couldn't be Eastwood, but Wallach had grown on you by then. But you figured Van Cleef would get the drop on one of them. And of course, being the quintessential spaghetti western, the movie takes an entire five minutes to establish the three characters standing in a triangle with their hands poised over their guns, eyeing each other nervously. As I watched and the music built and the camera flashed between shots of quivering quick-draw hands and shifty squinted eyes, I felt no impatience or anticipation. I recognized the technique of directing; I'd recognized it earlier. These movies (Sergio Leone directed this and three or four of the other most famous ones) were famous for the deliberation and passivity, almost as if you were watching a dream or an underwater sequence. Every move is slow and calculated, from the aim of a pistol to the strike of a match. It adds to the tension, builds the sense of urgency. Yet, despite my recognition of this style of directing, I was immune to that feeling of immediacy. Rather, I was able to watch and enjoy without any need to know what would happen. It was almost as if I had seen it before, only I hadn't and I didn't know how it would turn out. It's not that I didn't care how the movie ended, because I did, but I was in no hurry to find out and I knew that I would soon enough. So I simply enjoyed the directing and music, appreciating the suspense it was meant to build.

Mom and Dad came down at some point; they couldn't sleep either. I think maybe they caught the very end of the movie, where Eastwood ties the rope around Wallach's neck and hangs it from a tree.

"Why's he doing that?" Mom asked.

"He wants to get a head start so he won't double-cross him," I answered.

"But why is he going to hang him?"

"He's not going to hang, he's going to shoot him free when he's got a head start."

"I don't understand that."

"You'd have to see the whole movie, Mom."

We talked about what we wanted to do until we were sleepy; we didn't talk a whole lot about you. We decided to watch another movie; a Hitchcock movie. Dad went and pulled out *Rebecca* and we watched it until four in the morning. It was good, and again I was able to enjoy it without any sense of immediacy or urgency. Hitchcock's

films are as good at that as any of Leone's films, but I still didn't seem to be wrapped up in the suspense like Hitchcock had probably intended. Instead, I simply appreciated the movie for what it was: a good movie.

We went to bed after the movie; I slept a long time. I'm sure I didn't go to work that day, but I went back on Tuesday. Of course everyone poured their sympathy over me, and nearly made me go home. But I wanted to stay; I still needed the escape. Preparations were being made for the funeral on Thursday; it was put off so long because the youth group was on a trip and they got back on Wednesday. Mom had already made most of the arrangements; she had bought your grave plot and casket. Your funeral was planned, too; you had taken care of that. What a mixed blessing it must be to plan your own funeral.

That funeral was a strange and difficult day. All the family came into town, and many of them stayed at our house. I don't remember who stayed with us, but Mom's mother did. And of course, she was out of it. But then again, we were all out of it. Before the service, some members of the church decided to serve all of us dinner; we met in the fellowship hall at the church for our meal. I remember that everyone except for me, Mom, Dad, and Mom's mother went a little early. I don't know why we waited, but after everyone was gone I went to change into my suit. And the pants didn't fit anymore. I remember standing in my room unable to zip up my pants and thinking, I'm not even going to be able to get dressed for my brother's funeral. I went downstairs where Mom and Dad and Grandmother were all dressed and waiting and confessed that I no longer fit into the pants of my one and only suit. We all began to panic; we had to be at the church in twenty minutes. That is, we all began to panic except Grandmother. "Just buy him a new pair," she said.

"We can't, Mother," Mom said.

"Why not?" Grandmother demanded. "Just buy him another pair that match the suit."

"We have to be at the church in twenty minutes," Dad snapped. Grandmother shut up, puffing up with indignation, and we all turned away from her trying to keep ourselves mildly composed. We went upstairs, and Dad and I rummaged through his closet. We eventually found a navy coat that fit me; I put on khakis and a white shirt. We made it to church on time, but we were all frayed and disoriented.

The service was magnificent. You had arranged for the men's ensemble to sing "Victory In Jesus," and Mike Williams got so choked up that he couldn't sing his solo. It was amazing how hard I wept through that service; I had long since forgotten how. My well of tears had dried up early on, but I cried so hard through that whole service, and Grandmother, who was sitting next to me, took my hand in hers, bony and shaky, and she cried a little, too.

Gene, our youth minister, gave the eulogy, and that was the only part of the service I didn't weep through. It was beautiful: poignant and funny. It remembered who you were faithfully with humor and sweetness. You picked the right guy for that role.

After the service we stood outside in the welcoming corridor of the church for nearly three hours as people moved through and offered their condolences. I don't remember much of it; I remember a lot of people I didn't know coming through, and Mom and Dad would have to say, "Daniel, do you remember..." and I would pretend I did and shake their hands. Some people came through that none of us knew. Some kids



with their parents said, "I had a class with Andrew, and his courage meant a lot to me." Ms. Swor, the eighth grade English teacher we both had came to visit. Her hair was blonde and she looked five years younger than I had remembered her and I didn't recognize her at first. Of course, everyone in the youth group was there: Shelley, Beth, Davy, Ryan, Laura, the McConnell sisters, Libby, Matt. My best friend Jim was there. That's about all I remember, but the guest book listed about seven hundred people.

Were you there? Did you see your funeral? Did you know there were seven hundred people there? Seven hundred people came to your funeral to celebrate your life. I don't even know seven hundred people, but you managed to touch as many with who you were. Did you see who was there? Did you hear the beautiful tribute Gene gave you or the wonderful music or the bitter weeping of those who loved you? It was truly a magnificent service, and I wish I could remember more of it.

The graveside service was the next morning; there were only about fifty people there. Jim came, and I think Shelley came. The drummer from the punk band I had just joined came, and that meant a lot to me, although I don't think he had ever met you. Ron McConnell, one of the ministers at the church, gave the eulogy there at your request. It was good, too; I don't remember it much either, but I do remember that he passed out tiny pebbles to each of the family members to represent some part of you that we treasured and missed. I still have mine; I know exactly where it is. It's been with me to a lot of places, and I've lost it a number of times.

I lost it the first time near the end of that summer. I carried it around with me in my pocket, and one day discovered that it was no longer there. I was disappointed, but it was just a rock. And then one day I spotted it laying in the driveway while I was walking to my car.

I lost it again when I was in Jamaica. I had put it with my money and then one day when I was packing away some clothes I noticed that it was not where I had left it. This was nine months after you'd died; I was sad to have lost it again. But it turned up under my bed the next day.

The last time I lost it was the worst. It was my sophomore year of college. I was still in the habit of carrying it around in my pocket, and I carried it with me one Tuesday night to Bearden Middle School. I was part of a ministry program called Yoke that met in middle schools and ministered to the students there; it is much like Young Life, only for middle school. I remember that my best friend and roommate Gordon came with me that night to visit and help out; we played a lot of games and sang songs and had a good time. After the kids left we planned the next week's meeting and went home. It was raining hard, and it was good to get back to our apartment. I got to my room and began emptying my pockets and discovered that your rock wasn't there.

I began to panic, and Gordon asked me what was wrong. I tried explaining it to him, but I was a little too stricken to make myself clear. We checked the apartment and backtracked to my car. I looked under the seats in my car and decided I had to go back to the school and look. Gordon came with me. The doors to the school were locked and I couldn't get in; I banged on the door at ten-thirty that night while Gordon knelt in the pouring rain out in the parking lot looking around where my car had been parked.

I didn't sleep at all that night. I was going to go back at six-thirty the next morning, hoping I might find it before any kids or janitors would have a chance to sweep

it up. But I knew my chances of finding it were slim; we met in the cafeteria, and if the rock was at the school it was somewhere in that huge room.

I got there at 6:45 the next morning. The doors were unlocked, and there were about three kids sitting at tables and talking quietly. I walked around the area where we had met with the kids, searching the floor with my eyes. I knew it was probably useless; the room was so big and there were tables and chairs everywhere.

And then suddenly something very strange happened. I think it was a vision from God; that sounds strange, but it was so sudden and clear that it seems doubtful to me that it could have been just my subconscious recalling information. I suddenly saw myself the night before, jumping up and down as I cheered the kids on during a game, and then feeling something hit my shoe and skid across the floor. I stopped and looked across the room; it had bounced out of my pocket while I was jumping, and I had accidentally kicked it across the floor. I ran to where I had seen myself kick it, and there it was sitting by a trash can. I scooped it up and my tears began to fall, and I walked out to my car thanking and praising God for showing me where it was. Since then I don't carry it in my pocket but instead in a safer place.

Perhaps it seems silly to be so protective of a rock. After all, that is all that it is: a rock. It has absolutely no significance other than what I assign it. But for a number of years I needed that rock to feel close to you. I think a lot of it had to do with the feeling of guilt I carried about my absence during your sickness. Some of it, I'm sure, was about my grief and the process of coming to terms with your death. I haven't even held that rock in my hands for maybe a year; if I went to where I put it right now and discovered that it wasn't there, I wouldn't be torn over it. But for a while, holding on to that rock was my way of holding on to you.

I don't remember much of how the summer went after you died. I stayed in the production of *Tommy*. The director knew and remembered you from your part in *Damn Yankees* two years before; he spoke to me and offered condolences, telling me that you had been a delight to work with. And I know he was sincere. We practiced for a week and then came the week of performances. I started college three days after the last performance.

Looking back on that transition from high school to college is such a strange and foreign experience, as if I'm watching someone else or hearing about it second-hand. I left home and started all over, without friends and without a brother. Shelley and I broke up about six weeks into that first semester; the thrill of the new life I had been given made me want, perhaps even need, to cut ties to everything I had known before. I was a different person and not the boy that Shelley had fallen in love with. It was hard for both of us, but I think we both had known it was coming. I made new friends, I dated new girls (but not many), I made myself a different routine. But it was almost a year before I felt at home.

My life now seems strangely disconnected from that last year of your life and from my entire life spent with you. There doesn't seem to be much overlap between those two times; other than my grief and my emotional discoveries, it seems that who I was in high school and who I became in college were two completely separate entities, sharing no common traits. That is why it is so important for me to go back, to revisit these painful times and uncover where it was that I began to become who I am.

Perhaps it would serve best for me to continue to focus on that summer you died. For one, that is when I began to understand the true importance of relationships. As I've said earlier, Shelley and I began drifting apart in April. The closer to death you grew, the further from life I felt. I know this sounds slightly ironic since I was constantly trying to escape and avoid the mortality you were constantly reminding us about, but as much as I ran it was impossible to completely avoid it. The more mortal I felt, the less important it seemed to me to be a good boyfriend to Shelley. I don't begin to claim that that was good or right or fair, but that's the way it was. How could I feel sympathy for her crying over a fight she had with her sister when I watched you crying over the slow loss of your own life? I hurt so much for you and for our family that there was no room left within me to hurt for other people. Grief is a purely self-centered emotion.

But the true irony is this: the more I began to turn from Shelley, the more I realized I had nowhere else to turn. One and a half years I had committed to this person, and in so doing I had turned away from every other friend I had. There was no one left to confide in.

This is not as completely true as it sounds. I did still have friends, and I still had some really good friends. Jim stuck with me throughout and he never failed to be there when I needed him. I also had some really faithful friends in the youth group, and all of them offered support and encouragement. But people can support you and be there for you without being connected to you. I think there was still some connection with Jim (even today I think there's still a connection), but for the most part I had no emotional kinship left; I had given it all to Shelley.

I know I talked about this some earlier, and this is the point in my life where it all became clear. I had put all of my eggs in this one basket, and suddenly I was left with nothing else. That's nobody's fault but mine, and I don't pretend to blame anyone else. But it's a startling realization for someone to discover that he alone is responsible for cutting himself off from others.

It was pretty much too late to rebuild all my old connections, and I was too emotionally enmeshed with Shelley to undo the tangled web that bound me to her, so I let everything lay as it was. But inside, I knew where I had gone wrong, and I promised myself never to let that happen again. I was never thrilled about going to college, but I was looking forward to the fresh start it would offer.

It's also important for me to communicate how my relationship with God changed over that year. I haven't talked about that much so far, but that's really the central theme of this work. Who we are is determined by how we relate to whatever it is we worship. So now is really where I start to tell you about my journey.

It's difficult to know where to begin here. You know what my upbringing was like, and you know about what most Baptists would refer to as my "testimony." It's not that exciting; we were both raised in the church, I "accepted Christ as my personal savior" when I was seven or eight. I guess I was bright enough to realize that there had to be more to church than just going on Sundays and Wednesdays and so I went to the pastor to find out. When he told me about Jesus, and about "making a profession of faith," I figured that was probably the smartest thing to do, and so I did. I was baptized and I remember after the service some old woman came up to me and said, "Even if you become the president of the United States, this is the most important decision you'll ever

make.” And that struck me as strange, because I didn’t feel like I had really made any decisions.

You see, being brought up in the Baptist tradition is such a unique experience. Baptist doctrine states that as a Baptist, you have the right to interpret the Bible as you understand it; that no one can relate to God for you and that your salvation is a matter that only you can understand. In other words, it’s all between you and the Lord. So why is it that Baptist tradition is so contrary to that? Is it absolutely necessary that I be baptized? Do I have to pray a specific prayer in order to be saved? Why is there so much emphasis placed on the jargon: “testimony,” “personal savior,” “profession of faith”? Being brought up Baptist doesn’t really make you a Baptist, I’ve decided, just as being raised in a barn doesn’t make you a cow. You only act like one and perhaps make yourself look like one, but who you are inside is a different matter.

I didn’t become a true Baptist until after you died. Until then I just took what was fed me, living off of “my mother’s religion.” You saw me; I knew how to talk the talk and I knew how to walk the walk, even. But inside was a different scene: I was as legalistic and restricted as a Pharisee.

Sounds like a serious cliché, I know. But there’s no better way to describe it. You know when I had my drink of alcohol? Except for communion once at St. John’s, it was only a few months before I turned twenty-one. I’m still a virgin, and I’m so rigidly dedicated to keeping my virginity that I imagine it will be very awkward when I get married and I realize that it is okay to have sex. I didn’t tell dirty jokes in front of others, I didn’t curse around people I didn’t know, I never condoned or accepted people’s discussions about their drunken weekends or about their sex lives or even the foul language they used. Truth is, I looked down on people like that. I don’t think I ever pulled off a real holier-than-thou attitude complex, but I certainly considered myself of higher moral standards.

It had nothing to do with how close to God I was. I’m sure you understand this; the closer to God you are, the less concerned you are with other people and the more concerned you are with your own interaction with God. And the more concerned you are with your personal interactions with God, the less you think of yourself. This is certainly not where I was. No, for me, sanctity rested in my ability to live like a Christian is supposed to. And I think I did that really well, outwardly anyway. I was proud of that.

I guess I started thinking about these things – I mean really thinking about them, juggling them, challenging what I had been spoon-fed from years and years of Sunday School – around the time that Shelley and I got really serious, my junior year. And strangely enough, it all had to do with sex.

All my life I’ve been taught that sex before marriage is wrong. Often, that message gets distorted into sex itself is wrong. As a youth, the idea of having sex, while physically attractive and pleasing, somehow struck me as morally reprehensible, something that bad people do. Besides, every form of sexual attraction I had ever felt was towards someone it would be unreasonable to expect to act out such desires with, and so it was easy to consider sex morally avoidable because it was an unrealistic compulsion.

But that changed once Shelley and I became seriously involved. It’s funny, when I first start dating someone, I don’t want to think of them sexually. I still feel somewhat separate and independent from them, and I don’t want to dishonor them by thinking about

them in a sexual fashion. But as the relationship progresses and I get closer to them, we begin to share of each other in a more intimate fashion, and in doing so we become aware of each other's sexual emotions. Then, not only do I not feel bad to think of them sexually, but they are the only person I think of that way.

Shelley and I were both committed to being chaste until marriage, so actually having sex was never really a consideration. But as attracted as we were to each other, it was a desire, at least for me. And no longer did it seem unreasonable to act that desire out; I was in love with her and she was in love with me. Sex seemed natural.

But of course, we had committed ourselves to chastity. Why? Well, for me it was because that was simply what I had been taught. Sex before marriage is wrong, end of discussion. But when you are so attracted to someone and so in love with them, you no longer feel like sex is wrong; instead it feels like the natural progression of your intense emotional affection for them. And so, as I became more serious with Shelley, I began to have to face up to my commitment to chastity.

What is so wrong about having sex outside of marriage? Sure, everyone in the Bible seems to have something to say about it, from Paul to Jesus on up to the Lord God Almighty. But why? Is it really that important? Does it really matter that I stay so faithful to a biblical directive that seemingly no one else finds important? After all, it was God who made us sexual creatures; if anyone is to blame for how I felt towards sexuality, it should really be God. So why the big deal?

And suddenly, "because the church said it was wrong" wasn't a strong enough answer. To some, "because God said it was wrong" might be a strong enough answer; ideally it should be. But usually it's not, and suddenly I found myself trying to answer some tough questions about sexuality. Why was it wrong?

Well, there were obvious reasons that were clearly evident in my peer group. First and foremost, nothing can ruin a teenager's life like an unwanted pregnancy. Imagining myself the father of a newborn baby at the age of sixteen was nearly enough to wilt any sexual passion. But of course, that's what birth control is for. Secondly, the loudest argument against sex was disease. AIDS is such a potentially scary thing in today's society, and I learned about every other STD in health class. Again, an incredibly frightening thing to think about at any age. But, again, there's birth control. And even for those diseases that birth control doesn't fight against, like AIDS, there's the virginity argument. For example, with Shelley (and indeed, any other girl I've ever dated) I would not have been at risk of contracting any diseases because she was a virgin, too. So disease, while a scary and effective weapon against promiscuous sex, did not seem to offer any really convincing reasons to abstain.

So if I could still have sex without fear of disease and relatively without fear of pregnancy, then why abstain? Here's where it got tricky. I did a lot of researching through the Bible, and it's funny what I discovered. First of all, very seldom does Scripture ever explicitly describe why something is wrong. Sometimes we don't need an explicit explanation, as in the case of murder or robbery; we just know why those are wrong. But the Bible never explicitly explains what makes sex so wrong. In fact, it's nearly the opposite: the Bible is very positive towards sex, especially in the Song of Songs.

But I did learn something very important about the Bible that would be fundamental in shaping my approach to being Baptist. What the Bible doesn't teach

specifically, it teaches with stories. How it must have pained Jesus to tell parables that went over His disciples' heads. After all, that was the most efficient way of teaching people to internalize divine truth; not only did it provide a tangible illustration, but it forced people to think about their values and convictions. All those who have ears, let them hear. I began to get my answers through stories.

Remember David and Bathsheba? Perhaps David could have stayed out of trouble had he used a condom, but all the same here was a terrible situation. David, whom God refers to as "a man after my own heart," used his power to persuade a woman to satisfy his lust. That in and of itself seems horrible enough; perhaps David was an incredibly desirable man, but I'm sure Bathsheba wasn't thrilled to cheat on her husband. But when the king says jump, I guess you take your clothes off. And then things went all to hell when she got pregnant. You know the story.

That's a pretty extreme example; again, I could use birth control and I wouldn't be sleeping with any married women. But what about Solomon and all his wives? Here was a guy who had it perfect: he had hundreds of women to choose from, and no one had a problem with that. Even though God had forbidden polygamy and had forbidden interracial marriages with pagan nations, God never really speaks out against Solomon. But what happens to Solomon? He gets weak, and his heart turns from God. That's when God gets angry, and declares to Solomon that there's going to be trouble with his adversaries. The story doesn't seem to be directly about sex, but it is; Solomon loved women so much that he let them take over his life and he lost focus on the one thing that gave him meaning. Ironical that the wisest man in history – having wisdom granted from the hand of God – would still allow himself to slip into such a devastating trap!

Sex is a powerful tool. Remember Delilah? Samson let a woman get the best of him. May not seem totally about sex, but if sex had not been involved then there would not have been a problem. Or do you know the story of Sisera, king of Canaan, and Jael? Jael lures Sisera into her tent and then drives a tent peg through his head. No overt sex in that story, either, but you know it's there. Sex is a powerful tool, and men often fall victim to its snare.

Sex leads to trouble faster than you can blink. You know about Judah and Tamar? Judah thinks he's sleeping with a prostitute, and it ends up being his own daughter! Jacob had two wives, and had children by both wives and their maidservants. The jealousy between those two wives, who were also sisters, was a terrible and miserable thing, creating strife and bitterness in that family. And then there's Ishmael, born of Abraham and his wife's maidservant. That didn't sit too well with Abraham's wife, even though she was the one who encouraged Abraham to sleep with their maidservant! Sex is trouble.

It wasn't long before I began to see the practical wisdom in abstinence. Pregnancy and disease almost seem trivial next to the emotional pain and distress sex is capable of. What if I had slept with Shelley, or any other girl I'd dated? How would that affect who I am now, what every subsequent relationship would be like, how my marriage would be? And more romantically, how wonderful would it be to be able to tell my wife I had waited all my life for the promise of her and for her to tell me the same? Sex is dangerous; that's what makes it so wonderful. The only way to keep it safe is to keep it inside of marriage, and not only is that safest, but also the most sacred and wonderful outlet.

All of this I came to conclude on my own. It wasn't the church's True Love Waits campaigning that convinced me; it wasn't my health classes or my parents or even my discussions with Shelley about why we were waiting. I eventually became convinced to abstain from sex until marriage because I came to the conclusion on my own, after much Bible study, prayer, and personal reflection. I'm still a virgin, and I'm still waiting until I get married, and it has absolutely nothing to do with what the church says about sex, but rather what God has helped me to discover on my own. That's when my journey began. I know it sounds a little strange, to suggest that sex is what made me become a Baptist. But that personal journey of discovery set the stage for what would happen to me when you got sick.

It's hard to explain what it feels like to watch every foundation you are standing on crumble before your eyes. To feel yourself collapsing, to find that there is really nothing left to stand on, to be emptied and hollowed out; this is what it felt like those first few months of your illness. As is the case with most things in my life, I can't look over those days and weeks and months and pick the moment when my will was crushed; I can't pinpoint any defining moments or instances when my spirit was finally defeated. Nothing really ever works like that. Instead life slowly wears you away, peeling away layer after layer of hard-lacquered defenses until one day you wake up and realize that you've been defenseless for weeks and your vulnerability is starting to ache. It's never instant and always gradual, and the only defining moments are those in which you realize how far things have progressed.

That fall when you were sick I had a lot of time to sit around and think. I was home alone a lot of the time, and this was before I became so addicted to killing time. And during all that pondering I eventually noticed how everything I had been standing on had collapsed. After all, what on earth could protect you from a brain tumor? Not friends, not grades, not being good, not going to church. Not even "being saved," having "Jesus as your personal savior" could protect you from a brain tumor. Nothing could.

So really, what was the point? That's where I was then. Everyone I knew kept asking one of those typical tragedy questions: Why Andrew? But I was asking a different question altogether: Why not me? There wasn't anything you did to develop a brain tumor that I hadn't done; why did it pick you? Was it something random and arbitrary? If so, then how long is it before it gets me? Or was it something deliberate and orchestrated? If so, then by whom and for what reason? Nothing made sense anymore.

I never got angry with God. I know that's something that a lot of people do, and part of me understands why, but that never struck me as something that would do any good. In the few instances in the Bible where a human changes God's mind (appears to, anyway) it has nothing to do with anger. Getting angry with God wasn't going to solve anything, and it certainly wasn't going to make me feel any better. If I had any real friends left, it was God, and getting angry was not the answer. But I didn't go running into God's open arms. In fact, I didn't really find God anywhere.

It's not that I wasn't looking; I was. Obviously I wasn't looking in the right places, because Christ has said, "Seek and ye shall find." But it took a lot of seeking before I found anything.

It's really difficult for me to systematically describe the journey I made through that wasteland of doubt and despair. I wasn't angry with God, and I never really doubted God's existence, but I sure had trouble with a lot of the things I had been taught about

God. I prayed harder than I'd ever prayed before, but I felt further from God than I'd ever felt before. I read the Bible more than I'd ever read before (mostly Job), but I felt less connected with the church than ever before. It was such a strange experience, to feel so cut off from everything I'd ever been attached to.

It's like those movies, where you see some country girl step off the bus in Los Angeles, looking for Hollywood because she wants to be a movie star. That's what it felt like, being left completely alone in a huge and unfriendly landscape looking for something golden with a nearly unachievable goal in mind. I was completely on my own and without direction.

I guess a good place to start would be my feeling towards who God is and how God interacts with us. All my life I had been raised to believe that God is an all-powerful and completely loving God. I was raised to believe that God is actively involved in a Christian's life, participating daily with each person in the struggles of this world. I was raised to believe that God always answers prayers and that if you are faithful and you pray enough, you will get what you pray for. And when you got sick and I got dropped off in that barren and hostile landscape of questioning, I began questioning all these beliefs.

First of all, I saw problems with God's alleged omnipotence and omnibenevolence when I watched you get sick. If God were truly all-powerful, then God would have the power to heal you. And if God were truly all-loving, then God would want to heal you. So why weren't you being healed? Either God was not powerful enough to heal you, or God didn't love us enough. Either prospect was extremely frightening. If God is not all-powerful, then what hope do we have? Why place our faith and trust in a deity that can't heal, that isn't strong enough to fight evil? But I would almost rather take away God's power before taking away God's love. If God is not all-loving, if God is not all-good, then truly what hope is there? An all-powerful deity who picks and chooses who shall be saved and who shall be damned, deciding when to use power based on limited love...this is more frightening than any prospect I've ever considered. The pit of despair may as well swallow me whole, I do not want to be ruled over by a God who does not act out of love. I do not deserve to be loved, I do not deserve any holy affection and concern, but if God is picky about who is saved, then what hope does anyone have? We're all damned for all time.

During these ruminations, I was very well aware of what the Bible said. But my confidence in the Bible was shaken as well. After all, how many people did Jesus heal in the Scriptures? Jesus healed anyone who happened to be in His way. If someone came up to Jesus wanting nothing other than physical healing and a meal, Jesus gave it to them. Jesus never refused His healing and power, even before it was time for Him to proclaim His deity. He was apparently so overwhelmed with love for others that He hurt to see them hurt and He healed them. So why didn't He heal you? If Jesus healed people who "loved" Him only for His healing power and miracles, why didn't He heal someone who loved Him for His love and grace and divinity? You loved God for who God was, not for any purported power. So why were you exempt from healing?

Likewise, I knew all those verses describing God's power. My favorite was Phillipians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." I couldn't heal you, though; I had a hard enough time healing myself. Was it because Christ didn't strengthen me? Besides, what does "all things" mean any way? Does it truly mean all



things, or just all things that God would approve of? And how the hell am I supposed to know what God approves of? Apparently, God didn't approve of your healing.

And that's where I started having problems with prayer. I can remember nights lying in bed, shaking with sobs, my pillow damp with tears, praying so earnestly for your healing. It was the most intense praying I ever did, and I remember lying under the covers hot with sweat, my throat aching from silent prayer and weeping. Did God hear that? Did God hear my prayers and ignore them? Or was I not praying right? Was I not praying hard enough?

That year Teresa McCurry was my Sunday School teacher; you remember how wacky her theology was. Well, one Sunday she actually taught a lesson on some book she read. The book's premise was this: if we pray hard enough to take an illness away from someone, God will actually allow us to suffer that illness instead of the other person. She actually taught a lesson in our Sunday School class that if we wanted to badly enough, we could take sickness away from somebody and suffer it ourselves. She actually taught that bullshit in Sunday School! Like some Pentecostal faith-healing revival, she told us (and by "us" I know she meant me, for who else in that class had loved ones suffering from terminal illness) that if we loved someone enough to be sick in their place, God would let us. Or, basically, she was saying, "Daniel, if you loved Andrew that much, you could have the brain tumor and spare Andrew." Words could not convey how angry that made me. What kind of a fool was she? Did she honestly think that Mom or Dad did not take the tumor away from you because they were not willing to suffer and die in your place? Our parents would have taken your place in a heartbeat. I honestly can't say that I would have; I'm sorry, but I don't want to make claims I wouldn't back up. I know it's another one of those claims I could make without having to fear being called out on. But I want to be honest with you; I don't know that I would have taken your place. Of course, I don't think you would have let me had I wanted and been able to. But perhaps that is why I was so angry with what Teresa was saying; was she really implying I didn't love you enough? Because if that's how much I was required to love you, then *maybe I really didn't love you enough*. And that's what scared me more than anything.

And so then I began to doubt the power of love. This was the most precarious situation I was ever in; when one loses faith in the power of love, then all hope is lost forever. Faith in the power of love is faith in the power of Christ; nothing enacted upon Calvary's cross could ever be valid without the power of love. And thus, in doubting the power of love, I began to resolve the ancient conflict of God's apparent lack of either omnipotence or omnibenevolence.

It started with my lack of love. Maybe I didn't love you like I was supposed to. After all, you were my own brother; shouldn't I have been willing to take your place? Especially since I was your older brother; what happened to that Moral Big Brother Syndrome I had talked about earlier? Didn't I feel any special obligation towards you anymore, or did that only exist when my own reputation was at stake? Why wasn't I willing to take your place? Was it because I knew I couldn't anyway? Was it because I felt I was no longer so close to you, and did I have the tumor to blame? Or maybe it was just unreasonable to expect me to die in your place. After all, there are plenty of stories in the Bible about brothers, but the only man who ever died in someone else's place was Jesus Christ. But then again, Jesus said: "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay

down his life for his friends.” Was that not the love Christ has called us to display? And if not for my own brother, then for whom?

Then I began to question other people’s love for me. Shelley and I had fights; I began to think that she didn’t really love me, that she only enjoyed being around me because I made her feel special and important. I began to think that my parents didn’t love me, not because they chose not to, but because they were too busy with you to love me. I questioned the love of my friends, the love of other church members, the love of teachers and co-workers. Why did people profess to care about me? What did they get out of it? It’s amazing how every single relationship has some sort of give-and-take dimension to it. Sure, church members expressed their love, but it often seemed obligatory and forced. People would bring food over to the house or send cards or telephone or stop us in the halls, and I never doubted their sincerity, but so often could I detect the uneasiness and discomfort they felt and that compelled me to think that they were expressing concern simply out of obligation. Teachers expressed their love for students, but again, it seemed like a love that served their sense of purpose, making them feel as if they really were contributing to some higher cause. Friends seemed to love me, but you know what the atmosphere of adolescent relationships is really like: people need to feel needed, and if one could find that in me then why not let me feel loved? Everywhere I turned, I saw ulterior motives behind the loves in my life. Is no love genuine? Can we not love one another without any strings attached?

The Greek language has four different words for love: *storge* (στοργη), *eros* (ερος), *philia* (φιλεω), and *agape* (αγαπη). *Eros* is of course the word used to describe erotic and passionate love, whereas *storge* refers to familial care and obligation, as a child respects its parents or a slave respects its master. *Philia* is the most common term for love in Greek and refers to an affectionate regard one has for close friends or a spouse. When I searched all of my friendships, I began to come up short on *philia* and saw much more *storge*. It seemed to me that every relationship held this familial respect, a near obligation for care. William Barclay describes *storge* as being not only what family members felt towards one another, but what subjects would feel towards a ruler.<sup>1</sup> It was obligation, a kind of accountability towards one another that came through some kind of involuntary connection. This is what I saw everywhere I turned.

It is the last word, *agape*, that sums up the true meaning of love. It is not used much in classical Greek, but is by far the most-used term for love in the New Testament (*storge* and *eros* are not used once). *Philia* is a warm and affectionate love; it is the genuine care and concern of another person because you feel a specific way about that person; *philia* comes without obligation, but is a more or less reactionary response to the positive emotional outpouring one feels towards that person. *Agape* refers to a love that is not bubbly and affectionate but is deliberate and orchestrated. It is not a reaction to any particular emotional experience; in fact, it is much deeper than emotions alone. It is a philosophy, a creed, a mental contract that intends to extend a type of care to all people. As Barclay puts it, “no matter what a man is like, God seeks nothing but his highest good.”<sup>2</sup> *Agape* seeks to envelope all people, be they beloved family or dreaded enemies. It is truly a love without strings attached.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William. *New Testament Words*. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1964, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, p. 21.

However, it would not be completely correct to suggest that *agape* is a love that does not involve obligation. Indeed, it does. It involves our obligation to God for the salvation and deliverance we have been offered. Barclay cites examples in classical Greek where *agape* was used to describe the regard one holds to a benefactor or protector. God is our benefactor, and we are obliged to extend to God our regard and love. Likewise, that obligation compels us to reach out to all people, seeking their highest good at all times, regardless of who they are to us.

As I investigated my relationships, doubting the power of love in discovering the obligation I felt in every interaction I had, I began to ponder what exactly was missing. Why did it bother me that there seemed to be so much obligation in my relationships? Even when it seemed that *philia* was very evident, such as with Shelley or with my parents, why did it bother me that there seemed to be such obligation? If that was how things were, why was I so upset? In other words, what was it I knew I was missing?

It was that *agape*; open, unsolicited, innocent, and giving love. It was the love that would lay down its life. Did I have that love? I didn't find it within me, but I knew it was missing. Moreover, I knew there was only one place I could find it.

And that's what eventually brought me to God. I don't want to make it sound like I made a complete one-eighty turn away from and back to God; as I've said, I never doubted the existence of God and I never got angry with God. Perhaps I had never really found God until I began to search for *agape*. But that was where I found it: in the hands of God.

So where could I find this love? I asked myself. Or, to back up even further, what was missing? I was pained to find that I couldn't have a single relationship that didn't have some sort of obligation attached. Was it possible for me to have a relationship simply for the sake of relating? And more than that, could I find it within myself to give to another person without any expectations, asking nothing in return?

I tried. There was a girl in my English class named Jennifer. It was her senior year, too, but it was her first year at Science Hill. Her father was with the Army I think, and so she had moved around a lot. She was very quiet, and I had given her a tour of the campus at the beginning of the year at Mom's request. She didn't seem to have many friends; how could you, being transplanted into a senior class composed of students who had been together nearly all their lives? Not that she was completely friendless; she was pretty and sweet enough to make friends. But she always seemed so quiet, and I simply felt that I could reach out to her and include her in my group. There wasn't anything in it for me; I had enough friends and no one would think I was trying to date her since I already had a girlfriend. She just seemed like a nice person, and I wanted to see if I could start from the bottom and start a friendship that had no taste of obligation. I invited her to do stuff with our group, I spoke to her in class and when I saw her in the halls. It seems like I even gave her a ride home from school once or twice. I even tried to set her up with Jim, only to find out she already had a boyfriend.

Anyway, the lesson I learned was this: it's not difficult to start a friendship that is obligation-free. In fact, most friendships start out like that. I didn't ask Shelley out because I felt having a girlfriend would make me socially adept; I asked her out because I liked her and I was attracted to her and I wanted to be her friend. My friendship with Jim had been the same way. In the seventh grade we had our classes together, and we joked

around and hung out. I had friends then; it wasn't like I needed to have another friend to make myself feel important. I liked Jim because he was fun and I wanted to be his friend.

And that, dear brother, is where the trick lies. I wanted to be their friend. It wasn't about what I would get out of a relationship with them; it wasn't about what kind of obligations I could suck them into. The difference is between wanting to be someone's friend and wanting someone to be your friend. If you go into a friendship because you want to be a friend, that's where true love grows. Sure, as the friendship develops, so does the appearance of obligations. But that appearance is due only to the mutual benefits each of you brings to the relationship. When you come to love someone, you care and give to that person. Of course there seems to be some type of obligation; you're both so used to giving to one another. However, if you start a friendship because you are eager to have that person as a friend – not because you are seeking to be their friend – that's when there are ulterior motives, and those motives start with you and why you want for that person to be your friend.

I didn't really ever get to be close friends with Jennifer; I wasn't trying to be her best buddy. But in making a new friend, I realized where the secret of friendship lies. It's in the giving, the constant giving. It's easy to cite things that make friendships so special, using big and important concepts such as sacrifice and generosity. But it's the little things that hold those concepts in place. Having them over to your house, giving them a ride home, asking them how their day has been, telling them they're cool. Par for the course in a friendship, I know, but that's ultimately what the relationship builds on.

So I discovered that *agape* love is not as hard to find as I once thought. I also distinguished it from *philia* and *storge*; these terms are not mutually exclusive. I can feel affectionate towards someone and still give without obligation; I can feel an obligated respect for someone and still give above and beyond. And here, at this point in the logic, is where I really discovered my guilt over not being around for you. I was obligated to you; you are my brother, you are family, and I had an obligatory responsibility toward you just as I had felt ever since those first developments of Big Brother Syndrome. But I never chose to go beyond that, at least not while you were sick, and offer of myself beyond the obligation. Instead I ducked out of the house, escaping as much as possible. Unfortunately, none of this became clear to me until the summer, and by that time things had progressed so far that there wasn't much I could do to repair the distance between us.

Andrew, I don't mean to sound like I think we weren't friends while you were sick. I don't mean to make myself sound guilt-ridden and forlorn because I was a bad brother. I do think I could've done more, but I think that we were always close and that even after you got sick and I tried to flee from the home, I think there was still a love between us that surpassed *storge* or even *philia*. I think there was always *agape* between us, even if only lurking in the shadows behind us. Even though we had our moments, I think we always stood by each other no matter the cost. And, I think that had I been certain I could take the tumor away from you and suffer it instead, we might have ended up fighting over who would get to keep it.

Discovering this love of giving is what brought me into the arms of God.

I don't want this to start out making me sound like some kind of philanthropic charity-worker. Unfortunately, I really can't claim that title. My discovery of giving wasn't so monumental that I was compelled to give away all my earthly possessions to the poor or raise lots of money for charity or dedicate my life to serving the sick. These

are all extremely noble vocations, and I have nothing but the deepest respect for those who feel led to do those things. But my discovery did not register on such a grand scale. Instead, it was the giving of little things that comprised my discovery. The little things in life, those things that everyone has but few notice when they are given and taken.

A kind word. A pat on the back. A hug. A smile. A laugh. A few moments of time taken to express gratitude. An ear that is willing to listen, a heart that is ready to share. Sympathy, concern, understanding, consideration, regard, honor, devotion, and love: these things cannot be bought or stolen, they cannot be earned or taken; they can only be given. These things are the essence of true gifts; they are true and perfect gifts because there is no other way in which one may attain them. They must be voluntarily given up in order for them to be received.

And we know where every good and perfect gift comes from. That is where I found God. In the giving. God is indeed a God of small things; that wink from a friendly store clerk, that pat on the arm from a teacher, that appreciative laugh from a friend. These things are holy and divine, for they are borne from within the belly of all things wonderful. We cannot create love from within ourselves; it is something we learn. We learn it from our parents and friends, who learned it from their parents and friends, but ultimately we – friends, lovers, teachers, students, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, co-workers, associates, by-standers, passers-by, *people* – we learned it from God. There is no other source. It is an infinite regression model: we can go back an infinite number of generations tracing the origins of love, but there is no way we cannot find ourselves back at the feet of God. Even before Christ taught us what the greatest love was, God was there, loving all of Creation. The Old Testament is certainly a chronicle of God's chosen people, the Israelites, and how much love God had for them. But there is evidence that God loved those who had not been chosen; the story of Jonah is a perfect example. God is love, and was love even before Christ made it manifest upon the cross. Everyone, from Mother Teresa to Martin Luther King, Jr. to St. Augustine to Adam and Eve learned love from God.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word is God and the Word is love. And love is giving, because that is the only thing that cannot be forced. That is our freedom, our divinely appointed freedom as humans: the freedom to withhold or to give. We may never be free to vote, to educate ourselves, to choose our own paths, to decide our fates, to avoid the conflicts of tyranny and oppression, but we will always possess the freedom to give. Giving comes from within us and, further, from those parts of God within us. Even those people who do not know who Jesus Christ is or do not recognize Him for who He is, even those people cannot love without giving that part of themselves which is God-blessed. God has given us the perfect gift of giving, and we now have the choice to give or to withhold. Even if we withhold – even withhold the ultimate and essential gift, that of our lives to Christ – we are still God-blessed.

How can the existence of God even be a question? The existence of God is easily proven by the existence of love. *That* is where the burden of proof lies for those of us who believe. It's never an issue of how to prove that God is real, that the Bible is true, that Jesus was who He said He was. The issue is with the existence of love. Is there really love? Does *agape* exist, is there such a thing as love without strings attached? If so, then God suddenly becomes so visible, so tangible, so real that the idea of questioning God's existence becomes absurd and obsolete: a non-issue or a wasted question, like

worrying about how many angels could fit on the head of a pin or whether or not God is strong enough to create a rock so heavy that it would be impossible even for God to lift. The real doubt is not in the existence of God, but in the existence of *love*; that is what people today are concerned with. And that, that is not an easy question. That is what philosophy and theology struggle to confront: does love – real *agape* love – truly exist?

I found that it does. It exists in the giving; it is probably fallacious to pretend that love and giving are separate. We give because we love; those who give to us give because they love us. And could we doubt the love God has for us? Each day is a gift given by God that we could never earn or take. You are aware of this, I know, for each day was certainly a precious treasure for you. Likewise, is it not impossible to ignore the gifts that God gave us even during your illness? You were afflicted with a brain tumor, yet your personality and consciousness were never impaired. Who you were, your very being, was an everyday gift to us from God. The time we spent together was a gift from God. The friends we had who gave to us out of love and sympathy, they were gifts from God. The joys and hopes, the laughter and affection, the good times and happy memories: these were all gifts from God, just as were the pains and sorrows, the tears and struggles, the bad times and the tragic remembrances. Everything we experience is magnified by our recognition of God's love for us. All that talk in the Bible about our joy in suffering used to make my stomach turn while you were sick. James and Peter and Paul could all kiss my ass, there's no joy in true suffering. But once I discovered this love, this gift-giving, this God-blessedness, I realized how true it was. There is joy in suffering, because we know God loves us. Suffering may or may not come from God; that's not an issue I want to discuss right here and now. But whether or not it comes from God, it is a chance for us to recognize what God has given us. Joy only comes in true suffering, just as it only comes through true love. Every good and perfect gift comes from God, and what better way to discover the purity of God's love than through the foil of trials and suffering?

Perhaps this all seems jumbled and disjointed, but I would imagine that to you it does not. For what seems very clear to me must have been fully revealed to you; what is only reflected dimly in the mirror for me, you see face to face. All my words and my rambling thoughts are merely my attempt to express what has become so powerfully evident to me, but to you it must seem like a fundamental truth for the basis of existence. And so I'm sure you can read through the jumbled thoughts and murky ideas and see what it is I'm saying because that is where you live right now, in the center of that God-blessedness, in the midst of love. It feels apparent to me; it all seems indisputable and sound to me, for I can feel it within my heart and head and soul, that little kernel of God-blessedness that is the Word made flesh. I only wish I could express it in such a way as to make it seem just as solid and manifest on paper. But then it wouldn't be so mysterious and awesome, for what makes it mysterious and awesome is our very personal interactions with that incredible *agape* love which God has graciously given to us. And so I merely reside in taking comfort in knowing that you understand completely what I'm talking about.

Again, it would be silly for me to try to put my finger on the exact moment or day that this became clear to me. Some of it hasn't become clear until just now as I've written it down. But as my senior year began to come to an end, these were the sentiments – if that is even an adequate description – that were running through my head.

Graduating high school meant nothing to me; it was just one of those necessary steps to growing up. College, the future; all of that stood away from me as if in some distant and hazy dream that seemed simultaneously inevitable and pointless. What mattered most were the relationships in my life and how I was living love in them – and by love, you know I mean real love, *agape* love. My relationships with my friends, with Shelley, with you and with Mom and Dad all began to take on a more important role. In fact, they became the only role in my life. After all, what else matters? Everything we do outside of our relationships is simply a step to furthering relationships. That was all that mattered then, and it's all that matters now.

I wish I had been in the position to begin enacting love in all my relationships immediately. But that's not the way it works. As I said earlier, when a relationship builds on something, you become so enmeshed in it that it is difficult to distinguish its characteristics. I was unable to locate *agape* at first because it seemed that everything in any of my relationships was done with some reciprocal expectation in mind. My relationships weren't built on *agape*, and they were so far developed that it would take so much redefinition to implement that. But certainly, that was no reason to stop trying.

For some of my relationships, it worked. Most notably, my relationship with Mom and Dad. I can't remember the last time I fought with them. It must have been back when you were ill; we haven't fought since then. Disagreed, yes, perhaps hurt each other's feelings from time to time. But my relationship with them now is so strong and special, I can't imagine not being close to one's parents. Because in a way, they're not really parents anymore; their job as parents is pretty much finished. Now they are friends but closer than other friendships. There's no way to quantify or measure the amount of love the three of us share; but then again, you know that, because they shared it with you, too.

As far as my relationships with my friends went, it was hard to do anything different. After all, I left them shortly, and I don't keep up with many of them anymore. I do still keep in touch with a few of them, but I see those few very little and for only short amounts of time so that it is nearly impossible to just slide *agape* into our few interactions and it not seem strangely forced somehow. And as far as my relationship with Shelley went, well, I thought I was doing the right thing by breaking up with her. I felt so close to her – she was my best friend – that I thought romance was holding our friendship back. I didn't feel romantic, but I wanted our friendship to continue growing. This is what I thought *agape* would do when implemented into our relationship. But again, our relationship was built on something different, something that was no longer there, and there was no way we could simply start treating it like something it wasn't. I wish it had worked out, but, as a friend once said, everything is as it should be.

I'd like to think that I was able to implement some of that love into our relationship before you died. I know I wasn't around, and I know you know that it wasn't because I didn't love you. I only hope that you knew it then and that you forgave me for my inability to be around you. I tried in the end, I really did, but you were so sick and our relationship was so different. I wanted to help out around you, but you were too used to Mom and Mom was too used to me not being there. Perhaps, however, I am able to love you today, to still love and honor you through your memory and by learning some of these lessons. It would be very strange indeed to see who I would be today were you still alive. I was given a second chance when I started college; I had new friends and new

relationships, and I was given the chance to start building them all from the bottom up with *agape*. I'm sure I didn't succeed with all of them, but my relationships today are much more rich and full and rewarding than anything I ever knew in high school. Part of that is just being older, I know, but more of it is due to the maturity that comes with suffering. Again, I consider it pure joy, especially when I think of all these life lessons learned and the spiritual growth those sufferings have blessed me with.

And I would give them all away if it brought you back. But I can't make that trade, so there's no use dwelling on it. I love you, Andrew, and I still love you for what you've shown and taught me. Thank you for allowing God to use you – perhaps even take you away from us – in order to show me the pathway to light. I don't want to canonize your memory or elevate you to the standing of some saintly prophet; I only mean to humbly acknowledge your courageous role in the advancement of the Kingdom. You deserved glory and honor, and you forfeited it in order to do your part. Thank you for what you've done for me, for encouraging me to move forward. Thank you for pointing me to God.



## Postscript

*No matter what...it is with God. He is gracious  
and merciful. His way is in love, through which  
we all are. It is truly – a love supreme – .*

----- John Coltrane,  
“A Love Supreme” liner notes

But the greatest of these is love.

When you died you left me everything. That was a rather tangible salve for the sudden loss of my brother: being able to sort out an entire room of possessions and picking and choosing which ones I wanted not only provided me with a task that kept my mind occupied but also reminded me that you loved me. It was also a way to remember you, going through your things and picking out those items that I wanted because they were a part of you that I wanted to remember.

I kept some of your CDs, the ones that I liked, and traded in the rest. I kept your Broadway poster of *Tommy* because I felt a connection there: we both enjoyed the music and I had played in the orchestra at Bristol Theatre. I didn't, however, keep your poster of *Damn Yankees*. I kept one or two of your baseball caps, the ones that fit me. The rest we gave away to friends. I kept your comic books and collector's cards. I got rid of your Reggie White posters. I went through your wardrobe and picked out all the clothes that would fit me. I still wear that green plaid button-up you had; it's faded and ragged, but I love it. You also had a hunter green t-shirt, and I wear it still. I have your winter coat, and that is the best coat I've ever worn.

When I moved into the dorm at college, I took most of your things that I had kept. I hung the *Tommy* poster up and brought up your CDs. I left the comic books at home, but my wardrobe at college included all of those things I had taken from your closet. When winter came, your coat was the only one I wore; I don't think my winter coat ever came out of the closet. Yours was a better color, it was warmer, and it fit me better. It also reminded me of you.

It also had lots of pockets. Big pockets and little pockets, pockets on the side and pockets on the front, pockets outside and pockets inside. There were pockets everywhere, and I always had a place for my keys or my gloves or my wallet or anything else that needed carrying. In fact, I would sometimes discover new pockets trying to find a place for something. One day, on my way to class, I discovered a small pocket on the inside left breast. There was something already in it.

I pulled out a folded piece of notebook paper, and on it was your scrawled handwriting. You had written:

I am not who you think.

A sad story, a disabled physique.  
This isn't me, I am not weak.

A fragment of a poem, a cry for recognition, a window into your anguish, that piece of paper sent cold shivers over my back. Six months after your death, you were speaking to me. There I was, wearing a part of your life, and from inside came this message, this revelation, this clue to who you were. "I am not who you think." Who did I think you were? Why weren't you that person?

Four years after your death, you still speak to me. It's that language of love, that way of talking by giving. You're there in everything I do; your story is so interwoven with mine, I can no longer love apart from my love for you. My love for you has brought me into a love for God, a love so supreme and rich and full that nothing could ever compare or contrast or withstand it. Everyone learns the love of God from another person; that's how God reaches us. Baptists have a wonderful saying: "You may be the only Bible some people ever read." We are all vessels that God pours God's self into; we have all been crafted by the Potter for that very reason. It is basic and fundamental, and whether we have been made for a specific use, God intends to pour love into us. Like pouring wine from bottle to carafe to glass, God uses us to pour divine love from one person to the next.

You were the primary vessel God used to pour love into me. It was indirect and a little obscure; more noticeably and concretely, I've learned about love from my parents and my current girlfriend. But as far as comprehension and awareness are concerned, you are responsible. This paper shows some of the pathways I've taken to arrive at my conclusions on love, and you were the map, your death the vehicle that carried me to God. How can I love without loving you? How can I love you without loving God?

Love is the root of all things blessed and divine. Joy, peace, goodness, faithfulness; against such things there is no law. Love is the gateway and the key, the source and the goal. It is who God is, and who we are called to be. Love forgives and love rejoices; love never defends itself and always celebrates. Love is higher than man, higher than the angels, equal only to God. Love is the fuel of the Spirit, the currency of the Kingdom of God, the ultimate project of all who enroll in Christ's perfection. Love can be seen only through the eyes of the heart, but it can be given to all.

Love is the motivation for the faithful: those who wandered in caves and mountains, those who were flogged and stoned, those who were tortured and imprisoned, those whose weaknesses were made into strengths, who conquered kingdoms and doled out justice and shut the lions' mouths and put out the fires of fury. Love fuels the faithful, the faithful of whom the world is not worthy.

When I feel peace steal over me – that peace that surpasses my comprehension and covers over the chaos and noise with pure light – it is because of Love. When I am overcome with joy – that joy that evokes raucous praises in the midst of miserable silence – it is because of Love. When kindness and generosity seize me, it is because of Love. When I am patient it is because of Love, when I endure it is because of Love. When I am lifted up like an eagle, soaring above the weak and weary and defeated, it is because of Love.

The world continues to turn. The sun still rises and sets and time still passes and there are still taxes and Super Bowls and people still get up in the morning and go to school and work. I watch this passively, immune to the sense of immediacy that the rest of the world seems to feel. It's almost as if I've seen everything before, only I haven't and I don't know how it will turn out. But there is no immediacy other than that which

makes it possible to appreciate this life: Love. Love is the only immediacy, the only real urgency, the only serious emergency. Love will save us.

You are not what I thought you were, Andrew; how could I know where you would take me? Beyond the sadness, beyond your crippled body and disease, beyond the cancer of this terrible world, lies the power of Love that will crush every infirmity and make our weaknesses into strengths. Blessed be the Lord; Love will save us, even as it has saved me!