

# A Force of Will

*The Reshaping of Faith in a Year of Grief*

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## Preface

Fifteen miles. This is the part of the Boston Marathon where things get quiet. The crowds dwindle in this less residential area, as spectators jump on the train to catch a ride to the finish line. On the course itself, the population of runners seems to decrease too, as masses of sweaty bodies give way to solitary figures and loosely organized groups trying to share the work of pushing against the headwind. We talk less as our eyes settle into a middle distance stare and we try not to think this menacing thought: *eleven miles to go*. Of course, if our muscles made noises, this would be where the volume increased. We'd hear squawks and complaints and foreboding protests. But we can't, or won't pay attention. At least not yet.

My presence here—the chance to run, and to indulge in months of obsessive preparation and training—is a gift from my wife. A kind respite from eighteen months of speculation and assessment of our respective reproductive systems as we dig ever deeper to learn why we are unable to become pregnant. A break from round after round of stressful and invasive infertility treatment. A chance to pull back and reconsider whether our desire to be parents is overwhelming our better judgment; whether we might best lay down our hopes and dreams and embrace our current life of just the two of us. It is, in spite of all appearances, an escape.

And it certainly is a distraction, on a massive scale. Twenty thousand runners have come here from all over the world after earning a spot by running another marathon fast enough to qualify for this one. So when we walked through the convention center to pick up our race information, our coveted T-shirt, and the number that we've pinned to our chest, it was with a fair bit of pride. We've *earned this*, by some combination of the sweat of our brow and the strength of our character and force of luck. We've weaved our way through injuries, inhospitable weather, dark mornings, snowy streets, wet shoes, withering training runs, family obligations, piles of pasta, uncooperative schedules, and our own doubts.

We've traveled to this great city and watched as billboards, street signs, and bus placards rolled by our vision, paying homage to our presence here. We've eaten one last meal, mouthed our way through one final bedtime bagel, and tried our best to sleep. In the morning, we've awakened with special gravity, checked our gear one last time, and walked to Boston Common, where an endless line of yellow school buses wait to take us on the one-way trip to Hopkinton, twenty six miles away. We've ridden the bus, felt the adrenaline coursing through it, and stolen glances at those seated around us while quietly wondering about their story, their journey, their intended

and actual outcome today. Most of all, we've tried to ignore the very plain fact that this forty-minute bus ride means that we have a very, very long way to run this afternoon.

The place where we runners muster to while away the hours before we head to the starting line is dubbed "Athletes' Village." A large tent city assembled on the grounds of a high school, it is a place to find some distraction by socializing, napping, reading, or waiting in the Port-O-Jon line to relieve your nervous and overly hydrated bladder. The first time I came here, the energy and excitement was too much, and so I retreated to the tree line at the edge of the property, where I sat down with a book, leaned against an oak, and tried to pretend that I was somewhere else. Several days later, when the rash on my lower back kept getting worse, I realized that I had also leaned against some poison ivy.

But this year, I rode the bus with a couple of friends, and met a couple more in Hopkinton. They are training partners from my home in Washington, DC who had met up on many pre-dawn winter mornings to push and pull each other through our longer workouts. Now, we sat on the grass in the spring sun, talked about how hot it was, and did our best to adjust our goals accordingly.

Then, at 11:30, we made the slow walk to the starting line, nervously joking as we passed through this quiet residential neighborhood toward the circus atmosphere of the starting area. Once there, we were segregated into corrals based on our qualifying times, where we waited even more. Gathered inside these fences, no one says much, and no one looks into anyone's eye. We just nod absently at each other and allow whatever peculiarities seem necessary. There will be some pacing, some jogging in place, some stretching, and some staring off into space. Some folks will be wearing tattered rags that must be considered lucky, and others will be decked out in crisp clothes bearing the emblem of this very race. In this mass of peculiar and desperate humanity, things like squatting in the street to relieve oneself are absolutely acceptable: we runners are a fierce and strange tribe.

I pace around in aimless, irregular circles, feeling a heavy weight on my shoulders and a lightness in my steps, and my mind pulses with the last song I heard on the bus, BT's aptly titled "Knowledge of Self," and its lyric, "ready to go, ready to go, let my energy flow . . ."

What follows is familiar to anyone who has participated in a marathon. First, there is the warbled singing of the national anthem, followed by a smattering of applause from the less distracted runners, followed by the steady press of bodies pushing forward in their respective corrals. Then there is some indecipherable announcement on a badly tuned PA system, and then the sound of a gun firing. Feet shuffle, and then stride, then break into a familiar pace as the roar of the crowd draws us down Highway 135.

The emotional rush that pushes any runner through the first ten miles of a marathon is multiplied in Boston by the crowd of one hundred thousand spectators as well as the general drop in elevation as the course winds its way through Ashland and Framingham. There are ups and downs, to be sure, but

the overwhelming sense is that one is being *pulled along* by both emotion and gravity. With proper training and pacing, the first ten miles can pass under one's feet almost effortlessly, leaving the euphoric runner feeling as though no energy has been expended and thinking, "wow, I might be having the best race of my life."

You're not, of course. Sometimes slowly, sometimes suddenly, but always and inevitably, this emotional phase gives way to a physical one somewhere after ten miles. Keeping the pace now requires some intentional effort, and we begin to be more diligent about grabbing an extra Gatorade from the yellow-jacketed volunteers staffing the water stations, and gulping down the bits of food that we have carried with us. Over and against our months of self-propagandizing, we're beginning to realize that this will be a long and difficult journey. Still, by leaning forward slightly and applying a little more physical force to the task, the pace can be maintained and worries about the finish can be pushed back.

But one's physicality must find some limit, too. Our bodies have only so much to give, and somewhere around fifteen miles, our limitations can no longer be ignored. Muscles begin to knot into cramps—some in expected places like thighs and calves, but even more ominously in spots like arms and shoulders and necks. The fatigue is almost tangible as our energy reserves dwindle. Our legs seem leaden and our feet feel flat, devoid of any bounce. Our bodies are shutting down, in large ways and small. And so, though starved for oxygen, we call on our brains to push us through. After physicality fades, our mental faculties take over, doing their best to tune out this chorus of doubt and negativity and to limit our mental purview to but one section, one mile, one hill at a time.

In Boston, a mile-long, winding menace named "Heartbreak Hill" gets all the notoriety, but I find an earlier incline to be the greater mental challenge. Cruising down from the village of Wellesley and the deafening screams of the historic all-women's university there, runners cross an exposed highway overpass before the course joins with Route 16 and heads up the less-famous "Hospital Hill." The first extended incline—and dark harbinger of many more to come—it stretches up past Newton-Wellesley Hospital, where some of the staff will have moved stretchers out to the curb as if to tempt runners to *give up, lay down, come inside*. Indeed, at a point in the race where quitting seems sensible and where death can seem preferable to life, passing by this place can be intimidating. The increasingly addled brain and withering body seem, in that moment, to easily qualify one for admission. And after all, a hospital admission might be the only way to save face with the family and friends who are watching your progress on the race website, and waiting to hear about the race. *Just give up*, the trees whisper, *and stop this madness*. But then rationality grabs the wheel again, and drives one up and over this incline, and toward the rest of the ominous hills of Newton waiting behind it. Until the great Heartbreak is finally crested five miles later and things change again.

Cruising down the backside of Heartbreak Hill, one can feel energized and exultant. The worst of the hills are behind, the great city of Boston opens to view, and an invigorating cool breeze blows off the harbor. Most importantly, the psychologically imposing twenty-mile mark has been crossed. But even as the runners descend the backside of the monster, hope can dwindle. For there are still *five miles* to go, with no apparent resources left to meet the task. At this point in the race, spectators still shout, but the emotional receptors of the runners are closed. By force of habit, runners attempt to lengthen their stride as they move down the hill, only to find that their legs don't stretch, not any more. Desperate, they try to engage their dwindling mental faculties to muster a plan of action, but find that a dense fog has settled over the brain. As the road stretches out before you, it can feel as if you are running through a long tunnel while the sides are slowly, inexorably closing in.

This, then, is what the Boston Marathon is all about. This is where we come to the end of ourselves; where volition alone moves us forward. This is the realm of *will*.

Nothing matters now. There is nothing you can eat, nothing that will help you. Go ahead and drop any snacks that you've carried, for they will only slow you down now. It is too late to profitably drink anything, and besides, infinitesimally altering one's stride now to reach out at a water stop would invite massive leg cramps. Not that a knot in your leg would change anything; if you are cramping now—and everyone is—there's no point in stopping to stretch or walk. If your leg seizes up and you stumble to keep from landing on your chin, then you'll just stagger in a palsied display until you stutter-step into a jog again. Your body seems torn between utter exhaustion and mysterious determination, and your brain seems detached as you notice your breath passing back and forth across your lips, as if propelled by some outside force. Where spectators once celebrated and shouted at the runners *en masse*, they now seem driven by some unspoken personal obligation to help. They look into the empty stares of individual runners and implore, "keep going—you can make it!," though everyone—runners and spectators alike—wonder if this is true.

Here and now, if you are moving, it is because you are being driven by your will. And *this* is why I am here, I remember. This is why I keep running, keep training, keep testing myself in these completely arbitrary courses of 26.2 miles. This is why I keep doing this thing that I don't actually enjoy. For here, I am stripped down to my true self. Here, I am a body, and I am a soul, and I am nothing more. I am, all at once, a hollow shell, and the fullest expression of my glorious humanity—the *imago dei*. My many layers of pretense and defense are gone now. A lifetime of education and socialization falls away, and I am just me. My simplest self, my soul, my naked will.

One year and one month later, I will be feeling all of this again when I rest my hand on the tiny hospital bed of my three-pound son. I will watch him struggle to breathe, watch his tragically undersized heart beat on the

bedside monitor, sense his struggle and feel the powerful volition that moves him ever forward. I will look at him, and I will feel my own heart move toward his, and I will speak these words:

“Yes. We’ll name you *Will*.”

# 1

## Seeing the Course Ahead

### **Journey**

We are, all of us, on a journey through this world, and into the one that we hope waits beyond it. What we'd like, most of us, is a linear path to follow. One with distinct forks in the trail where we could make binary choices to do "right" or "wrong," or at the very least, to pick between "better" and "worse." And, as long as we're dreaming, perhaps it could be a temperate path protected from sun and wind, and somehow sheltered from the rain. Oh, and with some nice pavement to keep our feet clean, and with minimal changes in elevation, thank you very much.

But when we're honest with ourselves, we sense that we are instead hiking through a challenging landscape of mixed terrain. Sometimes, we press our way through thick brush, or ascend steep rocky paths, or shuffle our feet through hot sand, or weather rainstorms on exposed fields of granite, or hunch our shoulders against the cold. This reality is quite unlike our childhood imaginations of what life would be like, and the unhelpful fantasies that are driven into our brains by mainstream and religious media. No, this thing we call "life" is hard work.

Yet as difficult as it is, the journey is not without reward. Even as we complain about the hardships along the way, we are frequently stopped short by gorgeous vistas and have our breath stolen by moments of rapture. Times when we forget for a moment just how far we've come, and just how far we still have to go. Times when we're filled with joy, and wonder for a second if it is, after all, worth all of the trouble and hardship. Though comprised of both agony and ecstasy, most of the time, this journey consists in our simply putting one foot in front of the other.

We walk because we feel we must, moved ahead by some mandate deep inside us. We walk, though the path—in spite of our earnest wishes to the contrary—is not clear. The Bible that many of us carry turned out to be something other than a step-by-step tour guide with a map for our life in the back. We have a compass, too, though its needle wobbles such that we trust it only for gross approximations of direction. And besides, without an orientation to the landscape, a compass is only so helpful. So we squint, trying to discern a faint ribbon of a trail extending before us until we begin to wonder if we're only imagining it. So we look back to see if we've somehow gotten off track, and see a similarly confusing landscape. In our weariness,

we realize that we couldn't go back if we tried. We can only hope that our effort and intention will count for something, and that we are moving in a good direction.

And yet move, we must. Once we've made our choices, we can only look back and wonder if we've done the right thing; if we've been true to ourselves and Whomever we hope is watching over us. And when our choices are made for us—as when my son's heart suddenly stopped—we find ourselves walking in a tumultuous world of flashbacks, memories, celebrations, and doubts. The world of color around us shifts to sepia as the bounce leaves our step and we shuffle forward like walking dead. Indeed, even when we stop and sit down, the landscape continues to come at us in a disorienting mix of fact and imagination, of certainty and doubt. Moving forward requires pulling the levers of our emotional, physical, mental, and volitional resources to see which one will propel us forward on a given day.

From where I sit, typing on a computer just two months after his death, the memories rush at me in a scattered jumble. Some of them are dark caves of doubt, and others are happy recollections of love. Some of them are new and unexpected, while others have become as familiar as the view out the living room window. So that is what follows: the chaotic and nonlinear recollections of a father who has lost his son, who hopes that he hasn't completely lost his way, and who is trying to make sense of it all. I present these thoughts in the same random, non-chronological stream in which they flow through my brain.

## **Palliative Faith**

The intricate surgery that my son experienced at three days of life was called *palliative*—a repair that is designed to work well enough, and for long enough, to get the patient to the next point in his or her treatment. Palliative repairs are those that come in a series—one repair builds on the one before it, and aims to enable the surgery that will follow it. Which seems unsatisfying—one might wonder why the surgeons can't just get everything right the first time?—until one recalls the rate of growth in a newborn. Simple things like stitches and scars would heal and grow with the body's structures, of course, but the more necessary artificial implements would not be so simple. If the surgeons attached a Gore-Tex shunt to his walnut-sized heart, for example, they would install an intentionally oversized piece that wouldn't actually work well until Will grew to a size proportional to the repair. Then, for a matter of days or weeks, the repair would work at optimal efficiency, in fact encouraging the very growth that would make it less effective later on, until it was finally so inefficient that it would need to be replaced.

So our son's heart would need at least three major cardiac surgeries, not including any additional unforeseen repairs or any less-invasive cardiac catheterizations. Interspersed with these repairs, we would schedule facial surgeries with a plastic surgeon to repair his cleft lip and palate—a closure of

the palate first, then a repair to his upper lip, then final adjustments to both as well as to his nose and surrounding facial structures. So amid the more important palliative Cardiac surgeries, our son would also have palliative plastic surgeries, which were likewise prioritized to bring functionality to his facial features before addressing the more cosmetic concerns. In the totality of his treatment, the general plan was to address his problems from largest (i.e., most life-threatening) to smallest.

As difficult as it was to do so, we learned to focus on the current procedure and not be overwhelmed with the whole regimen of two years of surgeries and hospital stays and home care to come. We learned to stave off the guilt of putting him through so much in the short term by noting that his life was threatened by his incapacities. We learned to ignore the waves of guilt related to the subsequent pain and interventions to come by focusing on the long-range good that we hoped would come. We learned to let “good enough” be just that, and to be as content as we could be in the moment.

Though many might disagree, I think that our faith is palliative, too. Faith needs to work well enough to get us further along, and we are allowed to make adjustments as we go along the journey of life. I know that many would suggest that the elements of faith can be mastered—that through proper doctrine or creeds or spiritual laws or comprehensive education, we can arrive at a place of confidence and surety which will allow us clear sailing through the travails of this life and into the next. Maybe I’m just making excuses for failing to master such a faith and for not finding the confidence therein, but I’ve found that my faith changes as my life moves forward.

The faith that worked for me when I was seven, nestled into an upholstered easy chair with an illustrated Living Bible on a Sunday afternoon, was palliative. I sat there, reflecting on what I’d heard in Sunday school that day, and decided that I should ask Jesus to come into my heart so that I wouldn’t have to be afraid of death. It was a beautiful moment, and one that I treasure. But I’m glad that my faith has changed since then.

There was the faith that carried me through my teenage years—a deterministic understanding that if something happened, God must have willed it. I struggled during those years to understand how the world worked, then, entertaining long and extensive internal debates about whether I should pray for success on my many fishing trips, or whether it was fair for me to thank God for my avoidance of an auto accident, when that seemed unkind to the person who was actually in the wrecked car. Looking back, I think I was developing a faith that God embraced, and accepted at face value, even as I struggled toward greater engagement with God and life and the realities all around me, and as I began to develop a view of the world that didn’t put me at the very center. This faith was palliative, preparing me for the growth to come.

There was a faith that sustained me in college as I took nightly walks during cold Chicago winters to beg God for a girlfriend who would become a wife. Staring up at the stars, I offered my confident assertions that I would be

a great husband, arguing that reason and justice required that I be given a wife. This faith was shaped when the answers to the prayers came and I found myself as a new husband to a beautiful and wonderful wife, yet with a fresh and painful awareness of my own brokenness and inability to love her as I had imagined I would.

This growing faith was tweaked and challenged through several years as a pastor, tested as we joined with some friends to start a church on which we eventually performed a kind of organizational euthanasia and were left feeling orphaned and alone, bereft of community. This faith was stretched during a ten-year journey through infertility, moving uncertainly up the ladder of increasingly invasive treatments, until we felt the mixture of absolute joy and panic that comes with the news that you're pregnant . . . with twins!

It was faith that pulled us through the harrowing experience of trying to thwart a miscarriage, of sitting in the worrisome place of a six-month stretch of bed-rest. It was faith that sat with us in the silence of those initial ultrasounds when the room was just very, very quiet and the doctors and technicians were visibly nervous, shuttling into and out of the room with forced smiles. It was faith that gave us hope as we plunged headlong into the world of Intensive Care and surgery and life support and constant monitoring. And today, it is faith that tries to make sense of a life that is all at once painfully absent the life of a precious firstborn son, but also full of the life of his engaging and completely healthy twin sister.

All of which isn't to say that faith is completely individuated, or that it is so subjective as to be meaningless. Just as we entrusted our son to one of the very best cardiac surgeons in the world, we ought to build our faith with the best ideas and the most sensible and sensitive components. But it seems to me a grave mistake to think that these pieces will be permanent, or foundational, or that they will allow us to somehow soar above the harrowing realities of life and death. Just as the surgery that saved my son's life was developed through successes and failures of many other patients just like him, so my faith is built on the necessarily limited viewpoints of my religious teachers (professors, parents, friends, and others) and—God willing—will be reworked and refined by those who come after me. When our very lives are shaken, we may doubt the most basic of convictions, and shift the pieces around in our matrix of belief until we find some stability.

Our faith ought not be a faith that chooses belief over practice, and it shouldn't be selfish or self-interested; it ought to be a faith that works for us, yes, but one that benefits those around us even more than ourselves, and that leads us to the ultimate end to which we're called—a greater capacity to love. If it looks inward, it ought to do so such that it can give outward in ever increasing measure.

Like a writer's drafts, or a backpacker's tent, or a scientist's hypothesis, a gardener's weeding, or a parent's relationship with a child, our present faith only needs to work for its appointed time, and should in fact be flexible and temporary and transitory. We shape it as best we can, and then let it be

shaped by God, and ourselves, and our community. Maybe faith is only and ever palliative, intended to start us on a journey of eternal collaboration with our Maker. We exert a lifetime of effort at growing and developing our best understanding of God and the world, and at living the kind of lives that tune us in to the music of the Creator and that fulfill God's hopes and dreams for the world. And we trust that God is ahead of us, and all around us, leading us and loving us and preparing us for what is next.

## Control

A few days after the funeral, we had a pediatrician's appointment for our daughter Ella. It felt strange to do something so mundane in the wake of something so titanic, but it seemed somehow important, too. My wife and I talked about it for a couple of minutes before we decided that we'd keep the appointment, mostly because it seemed comforting to maintain some sort of routine. On our way home, we stopped to get new tires on the car, which was even less important. I made passing mention of this tiny errand on my little blog, which was apparently more than a little disconcerting for our friends who read it.

Truth be told, I only heard third-hand that folks were surprised, but my fertile mind imagined some withering questions. Questions which I was asking myself, too. How could we think about such trivial matters right now? How could we occupy our minds with these banalities? Tires? Really?

Well, it seems heartless, I confess. But I ask you, what should we have done? What do you do when your whole life has fallen apart? Your brain is firing fast, but your heart is weary. And so you crave something normal, something familiar, something ordinary. Errands like this make the world seem less hostile. Participating as consumers helps to give hope that life may indeed go on. Finding a taste of normalcy helps to quell the panic that life will never be the same again.

But even more, this kind of project delivers you from the real enemy: home. Why would we want to go home? Why would we want to sit in the silence, to be trapped inside those walls of memory, to feel the foolishness of our former hope, to recall our old happiness? Why would we want to relive the celebrations we'd had, and revisit the doubts we'd harbored but pushed back? Why would we want to sit in that suddenly torturous space when we could be anywhere else?

So without saying so exactly, we tacitly agreed that we'd stop off in a familiar and favorite part of town to leave the car for the couple of hours that it would take to install, balance, and align the tires. Oh, and maybe we could go ahead and do the oil change, ahead of schedule. All of which would mean a few hours in which we could sit and eat and walk and window shop. Time to do nothing, sure. But more than that, it was time to *not* do something: go home.

On a deeper and perhaps more practical level, I would submit that getting new tires is a way to infinitesimally approach an always elusive goal.

One that suddenly seemed impossibly distant: control. When something so basic and bedrock as *life* becomes uncertain, it is only natural to search for something solid. It is but a tiny variable in the risky game of life that we all play every day, but it is an inarguable variable nonetheless: new tires mean better grip, which brings more safety, which tips a tiny bit of control our way. We still have a million things to worry about, but we can worry a little less that our car will leave the road. If we get new tires, we are a little less likely to suffer another tragedy. We've trusted fate, we've trusted the odds, we've trusted medicine, and we've trusted God. And we've lost. We've lost everything, or so it seems. So maybe we can trust in the security we can buy. Maybe we can provide a little control for ourselves.

## **Coffeemaker**

A couple of days before the funeral, I was sitting at the kitchen table, keyboard clattering away as I tried to write myself to clarity about some imponderable idea, tried to come to some acceptance of some unavoidable reality, tried to anesthetize myself against some overwhelming pain.

My dear father-in-law walked in with a smile on his face and a package under his arm. He and my mother-in-law had just returned from Target, she with some adorable clothes for her granddaughter, and he with a state-of-the-art coffeemaker, which he promptly displayed to me. It had adjustable heat and brew strength, that great feature where you can brew and pour simultaneously, a timer with a cool digital/analog clock face, as well as a nice gold filter basket. Best of all, it brewed twelve cups at a crack. Thus the perfect tool to jump-start all of the assembled family and friends each morning.

I was startled by this act of generosity, and grateful as always for a new toy. And yet I was shocked as I heard my mouth form these words: "Thanks Dad. That's perfect. And when you go back home after the funeral, you can just take it with you."

Owing to his generous spirit, he wasn't offended by my apparent ungratefulness, but hesitated for just a second before he went on with his day. Still, the next day I forced myself to apologize for my rudeness, though I was at a loss to explain it. "I have no idea why I said that! I'm so sorry. We'll be happy to use that every day."

But the truth is, it is still sitting in the back of a closet.

I think what I was longing for on that confusing morning was to turn back the clock. I was looking for a small, containable, familiar life. I wanted to go back to using our undersized, weathered stainless steel French press and its familiar routine of heating water, grinding beans, combining the two, stirring the slurry, filling the rest of the pot, putting the lid on, waiting three minutes, and pouring exactly two full cups of coffee—one for me, and one for my wife.

What I didn't want—what I couldn't handle—was a life that was any larger than that. I didn't want any family to be around us. I didn't want

houseguests. I didn't want to extend myself in any gesture of hospitality. I wanted to go back to my smaller life of four people—two adults, and two tiny children. That smaller life that had been contained by these four walls and its withering 24-hour schedule. If this life had been full to the brim of feedings and medications and baths and tests and interventions and surgeries and home visits and terrifying uncertainty, at least it was familiar and approachable and possible. At least it offered some hope at the end of the day. But this new life that I was kicking back against was utterly unfamiliar, dark, and seemingly without hope. It was a life, but it was a life without Will. That old life was a mirage, if it ever really existed. It was gone from my grasp, impossible to reclaim.

I just wanted my old cup of coffee.

## 2

# Finding a Pace

### Heaven

It's hard to say why books that depict heaven as a garden where children run and play all day, never skinning a knee or feeling sad, and who excitedly wait for a reunion with their mother and father, or *Precious Moments* figurines depicting a baby napping on a cloud ("Safe in the Arms of Jesus"), give me the willies.

Why do these expressions bother me? Why are they so offensive to me? Am I just too cynical, or contrary? Why can't I find comfort in these popular views of heaven?

I don't want to insult the nice people who have given these gifts to me. They sincerely intend to encourage me and give us hope and help to heal our broken hearts, and they have done exactly that. They sincerely believe that Jesus cares for little children, and they are surely right.

Still, here is where I stumble over these expressions: these notions presume a static, simplistic view of people and of time. They cement our lost loved ones into fixed roles of how they relate to *me*.

My dearly departed grandfather is exactly that: my father's father. But he was also a brother, a parent, and a friend. Moreover, he was a son, a grandson, and a great-grandson. So whom, or what, is he now? How old is he in heaven? Which of these many relationships is paramount? Does he have any say over his identity, or is it a democracy—do his more numerous grandchildren get to decide that he will be, say, seventy-four years of age, semi-retired, cheerfully mowing the lawns of all of our childhood homes, surreptitiously sharing his coffee and Fig Newtons with us, and mischievously making a loud *PFFFT!!* sound directly behind us when we'd light firecrackers or engage in some other some similarly nerve-wracking project?

Or should he be a rambunctious brother, staging contests to lift the front end of a Model T or shooting .22 caliber bullets into a Salina, Kansas phone book to see if they penetrated all the way through? Should he be a robust young man with his hair slicked back, yet secretly scared to death of dying, and so making a momentous decision to trust Jesus as his personal Savior? Should he be a handsome, proud, protective bridegroom eagerly anticipating his wedding night? Should he be a father and tenant farmer, demanding that his three young children "get to work!" and yet famously forgiving his pre-

teen son for flipping the family truck into a ditch? Or maybe I'm just selfishly forcing him into categories of "family." After all, he was a faithful churchman, a devoted friend, and a venerated member of the local community.

After I spoke at his funeral, his close friend came up to commend and amend my eulogy, and I realized that there was a whole part of my grandfather's life that—like a small child learning that his parents talk to each other after the kids go to bed—I had completely missed. The man who was my Grandfather was a faithful, wholehearted, utterly sincere friend. Which didn't surprise me, of course—it was perfectly congruent with my understanding of him. But the relational lines around my grandfather seemed novel, unfamiliar. Though I knew he had friends, and had in fact talked to this one many times before, I must have thought that these friendships were somehow inconsequential; tertiary, even. Yet here I was, talking with a frail old man who was mourning the loss of a dear friend. "What you said is true," he said as he shook my hand, "Ivar (and here I recoiled slightly as I remembered that my Grandfather had a name other than "Grandpa") was exactly the same person in the corn field on Saturday as he was in church on Sunday."

So who is my son, now? Can I even construct the sentence that way? Does he belong to me, or I to him? Or are we instead fellow travelers, each belonging to God? In my yearning to hold him, to kiss him, to buy him cool shoes and watch him learn to walk, to take him fishing, to teach him to pee in the bushes on a hiking trip, or play with him in the surf, am I only holding him back? Hasn't he gone on ahead of me in his journey toward the mountain Kingdom? In my constant thinking of him as *my baby boy*, aren't I doing both of us a disservice—torturing myself, and forgetting that he was many things to many people, and is right now his own person, quite independent of me?

From whence comes this persistent assumption that in the life hereafter, we will resume these relational connections? Isn't it possible that our existence will have greater gravity and purpose than a reunion of family, a recollection of past times, a rehashing of old stories, an eternal reward for services rendered? If the story of God is one of an invitation to people into God's ongoing re-creation and redemption of the world, shouldn't we assume that our lives in eternity will be similarly creative and adventurous, rather than an endless lounging on the far side of a pearly finish line? Why, when those in the Bible who are given visions of the hereafter are forced to resort to almost exclusively metaphorical language (streets of gold, mansions with many rooms, jewel-encrusted buildings) do we who have not been so enlightened think that we will be able to even imagine what that life might be like?

Why do we assume that we will have familiar, recognizable bodies? In the film "The Matrix," Neo plugs his brain into a computer-generated world, and instantly assumes what his mentor describes as a "residual self-image"—his own perception of himself. At first, he appears as a nervous and unkempt

computer hacker in a T-shirt and black canvas jacket. But as his training continues and his confidence grows, his hair gets slicked back, his darting eyes disappear behind dark sunglasses, his jacket turns to leather and lengthens to the floor, and his stance changes from *uncertain* to *supremely confident*. So, which me will I be? Do I have any say over it at all? Will my family or friends determine it, or will God decide? And on what basis? Or are all of these questions misguided?

My sneaking suspicion is that our souls somehow stand apart from such concerns of identity and relationship. Our obsession with riches and rest and comfortable relationships has more to do with our cultural context than with a Biblical notion of “heaven.” Now, inasmuch as “relationship” is such a powerful theme of the Story of God—Genesis 1 begins with the Creator in relationship and yearning for more relationship (“let *us* make humanity in *our* image to resemble *us* . . .,” CEB, emphasis mine)—I’m sure that the ever-after will be anything but individualistic. And the value God places on our bodies—Genesis, again: God creates human bodies, and pronounces them “good”—would suggest that eternity will not be some completely ethereal experience of disembodied souls floating around.

But in my longing and love for my son, I pray that my imagination of what eternal life (his, and mine) might look like is not stunted. I want to release my mental, physical, and spiritual imaginings of him and allow him to lead me into a greater life in God.

## **Split Personality**

What do we do when we’re done with what we need to do? Sometime between the funeral and the completion of our grief, we’ll need to—for financial or practical reasons—get back to our regular life. After a few days or weeks of empty space, the void becomes overwhelming, and we want to make some effort to get back to some semblance of “normal.” Yet in moving forward, and in my reengagement with life, I hope I’m not being duplicitous. I hope I’m not projecting some false image of myself, or pretending that I’m more adjusted and “normal” than I really am. I hope I’m just trying to feed my better self, to foster a more normal relationship with the world around me.

So I tentatively enter back into the life of my primary community, a small church full of religious refugees. A month or so after *The Night*, I find myself sitting in front of our small Sunday-morning assemblage leading a discussion about prayer. Trying to help our overly analytical group get past its intellectual objections and actually get to gut-level and engage with prayer. To stop *talking about* prayer and actually *participate in* prayer. But we’ve got questions, you see. Good questions: “why does God ask us to pray, if God already knows everything? Why should we repeat ourselves, since God has perfect hearing and a perfect memory? Is prayer meant to just change us, such that our entreaties to the Almighty are illusory?”

As I sit on my stool at the front of the room, my main objective is to listen, identify with the person speaking, and empathize. Which I tend to do fairly well, largely because I recognize that this conversation is genuine—people have lots of baggage, for lots of reasons. “Reactivity” is what we sometimes call this effect of our past imposing itself into our present. We’ve been subjected to prayer power-plays by overeager pastors, survived seasons of unanswered prayer, felt nagging doubts that linger for years, seen our substantial prayers ignored while our friends trip into all kinds of blessings, and found general frustration with the process of prayer. And we are all in various stages of engagement with doing something about our bad pasts; with cutting ourselves free from the entanglements of our history. So I listen to these people whom I love, and feel for them, and identify with everyone’s objections and concerns.

Then I sum up, conclude our discussion time, step off my stool, and sit down as we move toward a time of Eucharist. And just as my physical viewpoint shifts, so does my mental perspective. From here, I feel a little blood rush back into my chest and remember my own pain, disappointment, frustration, anger. Unfortunately, it gets directed back against my friends, as I give an imaginary and sarcastic speech to them:

“You think you have intellectual difficulty with prayer? Do you wonder how it works? Wow, that must be **so** difficult! Have you ever prayed that your child would be healed in utero? Have you ever prayed until you can’t anymore, or maybe you come to a place where your very thoughts and desires are themselves prayer—where you’ve either given up on prayer entirely or entered into it so deeply that actually forming words or thoughts is irrelevant? Have you ever asked God for answers about how best to care for your child and heard mostly silence? Have you ever sat by his bed day after day, unable to even pray for his needs, because you know that God knows them anyway, and doesn’t seem too interested in helping? Or felt the heartbreaking agony of having prayers for healing answered by an even longer list of physical maladies? Have you ever prayed that your son would come off a ventilator, and gotten your answer in a paralyzed diaphragm? Have you ever stood in the hallway, praying that your son’s heart starts again, only to see the doctor approach you without actually looking you in the eye? Have you ever washed his clothes for the last time, deeply disappointed that they’ve lost their distinctive odor and just smell like all of the other dirty laundry? Have you ever given a huge box of his diapers away, or taken his crib apart and put it into the closet because you couldn’t stand to look at it anymore? Have you ever bought a tiny casket in a rush of preparation before a rapidly approaching funeral, and wondered if you should pray or curse when it isn’t delivered on time?”

I listen to myself rant at my loving friends, and I wonder if I’m pretending—afraid that I’m a sham who is feigning composure. My hope is that the listening, giving, leading *me* sitting on the stool is a more real version of me—the me I used to be, and the me I’ll become again, someday. I feel like I’m trying to get “back” to something, and I find my way to the

neighborhood, only someone has switched all of the street signs, and there's a parking lot where my house used to be. What do I do in the meantime, and what if I can't ever get back? How can I help them, and myself, to get to where we all want to go?

So I gather up my two selves, wipe my eyes, stand, and walk forward to partake of Eucharist.

## **Eulogy**

One of the great sadnesses and deep regrets of this week is that more of you couldn't have known my son. His life had many limitations that prevented him from spending lots of time with many people. Moreover, his parents had limitations that kept us to ourselves. Between medical appointments, in-home care, therapies, feedings, meetings, and naps, it was hard for many of you to get to know him, or even meet him. For better and worse, Stacy and I knew him better than anyone. For this, I am both deeply regretful and oddly impenitent. So today, I wanted to tell you about William Addison Stavlund.

First, you need to know that he was stinky. Between his heavy workload, his high metabolism, his constant sweating, his persistent eye infection, his regular reflux, his many meds, those wretched liquid vitamins with iron, and his distaste for baths, he was usually pretty gamey. But I loved that stinky boy. No matter how short or noisy the night, I'd always take him out of his bed in the morning, feel his clammy clothes, and nuzzle my face to his shoulder. Even when I'd gag a little at the stench, I'd still say, "mmmm . . . oh, I love my stinky boy!"

And he was stubborn. If he was unhappy, he'd let you know. His cardiologist told us to never feed him or stress him for more than twenty to thirty minutes, but she forgot to tell him. He'd scream and cry for twice that long if he felt like it. If you held him up to try to get him to stand up, his legs would go completely floppy. But if you tried to change or feed him, he might kick you the whole time. To give him a bottle was to try to hit a moving target, as he twisted and turned his head in frequent non-cooperation. And if you did get the nipple into his mouth, he could clamp down on it so hard that you couldn't pull it out.

And he was beautiful. His little sister might have been bigger, but he was graced with some gorgeous features. His eyelashes were long and luscious, and his downy hair would shine red, brown, or blonde, depending on the light. Oh, and those eyes. The deepest blue, they would draw you in and make you forget absolutely everything. They were such a spectacle that otherwise responsible nurses and techs would be sorely tempted to wake him up, or at least to stick their face in front of his to steal that gaze. So persistent was this problem that one of the Cardiac ICU nurses finally threw a sheet over his crib to make a tent, and put up a "Do Not Disturb" sign. Which everyone promptly ignored.

He was determined. With Will, everything was an effort, yet he would tirelessly chip away at the mountain in front of him. If he ran into something

that was overwhelming, he would pause to catch his breath and then just keep pushing ahead. I've run the Boston Marathon twice, but I've never seen anyone work so hard. At times, it was honestly hard to watch. Day and night, hour by hour, minute by minute. Against impossible impediments: half of a heart, a partially paralyzed diaphragm, a shrinking aorta, a cleft lip and palate, low birth weight, digestive problems, and oral aversions, he pushed and pushed and pushed. He was the very strongest person I've ever known.

He was full of hope. His life stood as a beacon of hope, and an example of what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. When our hope flagged, he defied our expectations. When tests and X-rays and reports were ominous, he cruised ahead. When we worried, he paid no attention. He fooled us all. He was strong when he was supposed to be weak, and—in the end—he was weak when we thought he would be strong.

And he was wise. I know I shouldn't say this about a baby, but I can't help it. To look into his eyes was to be lost in a bottomless pool. It seemed that you could see into his soul. Or perhaps he saw into your soul. Either way, the journey was revealing and a little disconcerting. I would constantly wonder if there was much, much more that he knew, and we eagerly awaited the day when he could share that with us. He was a tiny baby, yes, but he was also a real person, flesh, soul, and spirit.

Now he's gone, and we're angry and empty and lost.

I wonder;

Maybe this searing pain is what it feels like to be touched by love.

Maybe this searing pain is what it feels like to be touched by God.

Maybe we've seen and watched and touched something that will change us.

Many years ago, a friend prayed and prophesied that my wife would have a daughter and a son, and that the boy would bring God's Kingdom. That he would, in some small way, usher in this realm where—as Jesus described—God's will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. Six years later, we held Ella and Will, and we began to see the truth of this. He drew goodness and grace out of us, and others. We hoped that he would continue to do so as a marathoner, who completes a very long and arduous course. Today, we are greatly grieved to realize that he was instead a relay runner, who has passed the baton to us who gather here today. We who knew him from near and far touched, tasted, and felt the Kingdom which Jesus spoke of and lived in. It is left to us to carry that baton; to live full of love, and without reserve, and to stay strong until the end, as God gives us strength.

Goodbye, William Addison Stavlund. We will love you and remember you. We thank you, and we thank God for you. Amen, and amen.

## 3

# Catching My Breath

### **Clothes Horse**

I'm just going to go ahead and say it: I'm kind of a clothes horse. I treasure my clothes, whether they be fancy or functional.

Even now, when I close my eyes, I can still see my first pair of jeans. Well, the first ones I got that weren't Sears Toughskins, anyway. Moved to compassion by my awkward entry into a new school in the 8th grade, my mother took me to Lindale Mall in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where I strode haltingly into a bright store called "The Buckle" and tried to act like that woman with me wasn't my mom, but just someone I knew. There, my eyes riveted on them: they were jeans that weren't blue, but were bleached almost white. They were not stacked on a shelf, segregated according to size—oh no!—they were clipped to a hanger on a circular rack. My hands stroked the soft fabric and found their way to a plasticized tag stitched onto the watch pocket. White letters laid over the red background read: "Unionbay: Wears Like a Pig's Nose." This seemed like a stirring and powerful metaphor, but one that was a tad agrarian for designer jeans. Even as I wondered about such a juxtaposition, I realized that my new modus—cool—would require a kind of imperviousness to such trivialities. I waited as my mother paid for the pants, then stepped out of the store and into my new life.

When I was attending college near Chicago, my friends and I would regularly pile into a car to visit the many thrift stores in the city. Village Thrift was the most impressive: stuffy and hot no matter the season, it often reeked of body odor and pungent food, but could be counted on to deliver the most amazing and affordable treasures. My buddies and I would bust through the door with the urgent awareness that, though best of friends, we were now competing with one another for the best and cheapest prizes. Looking back, I see that we tended to segregate according to course of study: Business and Marketing people would speed-walk to check on suits, white oxford shirts, and dress shoes. Finding anything of quality in this section was a bit unsettling, as we would imagine that only death would separate a man from a pristine pair of wing tips or a \$500 suit. But no matter: at five bucks apiece, my econ-minded friends were buying now, and asking questions later.

Information Technology majors would scroll through the khaki pants and polos, and students of the hard sciences would search through the T-shirts and jeans. Most disturbingly, one of my friends would fearlessly

venture over to buy any boxer shorts that would fit him. This was anathema to even otherwise hardcore thrifters (and especially anyone who had taken Microbiology), but he was confident that a good washing would render them harmless. He was an English major, I think, but he went to law school and went on to become a successful attorney. He currently represents a major appliance manufacturer, and so I suspect that his expectations of laundry equipment are much more reasonable now.

But Bible students like me were countercultural and unconcerned with such social conventions. We flew through the flannel shirts, looking for something to wear over our old T-shirts. We knew how to efficiently assess hundreds in a matter of minutes: push and pull an empty gap into the long rack, then flip through each shirt. Hearing the *shik, shik, shik*, of the sliding hangers was slightly hypnotic, so you had to concentrate to pick out any label or pattern that might interest you. Then, a quick check for holes and missing buttons, and the keepers would get flung across your shoulder. At 40 or 90 cents apiece, we could throw a sizeable pile of flannel shirts on the counter and get most of a ten back. So yes, I must have been quite a sight as I weathered those Chicago winters: I simply added another shirt for every 5-degree drop, until the lapels stacked up and made it hard to turn my head. I was like Joseph in my multicolored coat of many collars.

Even now, with a longsuffering wife to thwart my bad fashion impulses and push back my embarrassing nostalgia, I've got a nice little harem of clothes. My collection is small, but it is precious to me. When I stand in front of it, I think about how I'm feeling that day, and what I'll do, and who I'll see, and I pick something that will present my true self to the world.

For the first two months of Will's life, we would go to the hospital. Every single day. To see him, of course, and to spend time with his twin sister and whichever family members might be with us or whichever friends might be stopping by. But also to interact with the nurses, talk with the techs, and meet with the doctors. So my expression of myself was always tempered. I wanted people to know the real me, but I also wanted to let them know that I was upright and respectable. Casual, maybe, but sober about the work ahead of us. I knew I didn't want to get caught conferring with a world-class cardiologist about some grave condition while she glanced at my frayed collar.

On one memorable day, I forgot to pack a spare, and my dear Ella decorated the front of my shirt with feces. One of the nurses kindly grabbed me an extra T-shirt out of the stash intended for vagrant parents, and I spent the rest of the day hoping that I wouldn't meet anyone new, lest they think that I was the kind of person who would wear a wrinkly white T-shirt with garish printing on it to my child's bedside.

When we went back to the hospital for some diagnostic evaluation, I put together a kit of clothes for a couple of days; a blend of comfort and fashion that would allow me to sleep on couches and still look decent. On that day, I wore a short-sleeved black button-down shirt and plain jeans and black leather shoes with round toes, and carried a backpack with some other shirts

and pants and underwear and socks. At the last minute, I remembered that I needed to have something to wear overnight. This is not a huge segment of my wardrobe, as I mysteriously associate pajamas with the constraints of childhood. Fortunately, after suffering through too many Christmas mornings with me shuffling around in bare feet and the clothes I wore the night before, my dear in-laws have made regular gifts of pajamas and slippers. Hint taken.

So on that dark night, that Black Tuesday, I found myself pacing the halls in my flannel pajama bottoms and a gray t-shirt bearing the logo of my brother's carpentry business. . Even in the chaos of those moments, I felt proud to wear my family name at a time like this. I thought about my father and grandfather and great-grandfather who had worried over their own sons. I didn't feel quite so alone. Looking down as I moved and muttered to myself, trying not to cry or scream or pass out, I noticed something else. On my feet were my very favorite shoes: weathered and worn brown flip-flop sandals that had carried me to beaches in Mexico and Costa Rica, had eased the burning of my soles as I hobbled to the car after two separate marathons, as well as moved me through supermarkets and box stores in suburban Virginia. This seemed right, and familiar: shoes that had lived my life with me, and were accordingly weathered. But the whole package—T-shirt, flannel pajama pants, and broken-down sandals—seemed a little embarrassing when I would look up at the throng of people who were pretending not to stare at me.

I came to myself a bit after everyone left the bedside. I picked up his body and held him close. I remembered that my wife was on her way in, and that people would be coming, and besides, it just isn't right at a time like this to wear a t-shirt and flannel pants and flip-flops. So I set him down, tugged the curtain closed, and changed back into the clothes I had been wearing just a couple of hours before. I was glad to be able to put on a black shirt; to show by my exterior what I felt in my interior.

In the days that followed, I kept reaching for more black shirts, until I felt myself gravitating to the discount men's clothing store up the hill from our house. By then, my brother-in-law was with us, and he accompanied me on what must have looked like a mission of madness. I was a little self-conscious of my sudden consumerism, yet at some visceral level I needed more black T-shirts, and I needed new black shoes. Tim helped me pick out the new shoes. He suggested a pair with squarer toes, and I liked them immediately. In my mind, I thought that I was looking for something newer, fresher, more worthy of the occasion of the memorial service at our home. But I would later think about my dis-inclination to wear my normal black shoes, and would realize that it was more than propriety or fashion. It was that they were the shoes I wore **that night** as I gave my wife the unspeakable news. It wasn't that I was rejecting their worn edges and round toe; I was simply refusing to walk in those shoes again.

On that first trip for black t-shirts and black shoes, I tried on a few black dress shirts, too. I was half-heartedly looking for one to wear to the funeral, and not having much success. Finally, after searching through a dozen, I

found one that was nice, but just a little bit more expensive than I thought it should be: it was twenty-five bucks instead of twenty. So I shrugged it off. Several days later, pushing back panic, I was in the store again, brother-in-law at my side, looking for that same shirt. Unfortunately, that same shirt was gone.

I tried to be calm, to act as if I didn't really mind. Like I was just as happy to wear my black suit and black tie with black shoes and a white shirt. The same thing I've worn to every other funeral I've attended. But I wasn't, and didn't have any more time to do anything about it. I wouldn't be able to present my most honest self, clad entirely in black, to those gathered at the funeral.

I still needed to buy handkerchiefs for the funeral, plus some black socks and black boxer shorts. We stood in line at the register, making small talk and watching the guy in front of us, who was buying a suit by peeling several hundred-dollar bills off of a huge stack. As we left the store and I drove Tim to the Metro, I woke up to reality: it was a Saturday night, and his friends had been cooking most of the day in anticipation of a low-key get-together with him as honored guest. Only my silly shirt boondoggle had made him miss most of it. Chagrined, I apologized for keeping him from his friends and his food. I told him how embarrassed I was to waste his time looking for nonexistent shirts. About how silly I felt to have him see me like this, dependent and adrift all at the same time. But he understood that this wasn't about clothes, not at all.

No, he said. *These are the things that matter.*

## Community

It is surely passé to say that *people wear masks*. It is a tired caricature, and one which is so obviously true as to be senseless. Moreover, such a broad-brush critique is silly, for this phenomenon is in fact commendable. After all, where would we be without personas? What would the world look like if each of us shared everything about ourselves to every person we ever met? The economics alone would be staggering—we'd be spending almost unlimited time vomiting up our entire personal histories and all of our dark secrets to people at the gas station, on the commuter train, and in the checkout line. Who needs that? What would be the benefit? How would we get anything done?

The other extreme, however, is not any better. It is one that we know all too well: fragmented lives lived in the midst of disjointed relationships. In 21st-century North American culture, most people live in a kind of self-imposed solitary confinement. Many of us live in families, yes, but we aspire to house them in large buildings parceled out into many rooms which sit on sizeable pieces of land. We have personal computers, personal music players, personal meals, and enough televisions that we don't need to compromise on which show we'd like to see. We can become so isolated in our little worlds that we may only be visible to our neighbors when we're behind the wheel of

our vehicles, hurrying off to make more money to pay for it all. And for those of us in more urban environments, things aren't much different: we may live in smaller spaces, and in closer proximity to one another, but this seems to only increase the psychic space we put between ourselves and our neighbors. Go to a coffee shop, and you'll see three strangers sharing a table, laptops open and nary a word spoken between them. Walk down a city street, and you'll be lucky if one person returns your gaze. Say "hello," or wave, and you'll likely be stared at as the freak that you are.

These observations are not meant as critique—not exactly. Psychic space is a good thing, a healthy thing, a normalizing force for good. It's a fair compromise for us, creatures with limited social energy. And yet, when our lives are full of pain, we often feel utterly alone. Which is quite ironic, since most of the people we see are in pain as well. If not right now, then in the recent past. If not in the recent past, then in the near future. We are alone, and we are not alone, trapped on parallel lines that we fear will never converge.

When our son was first diagnosed *in utero* and my faith was stretched and my hope was eroded, I reflected on this experience of pain, and this feeling of alienation, in a poem.

### **Caught in the Middle**

searching for emotion  
that eludes me  
but somehow  
sneaks up behind with a tap on the shoulder  
torrents of inopportunity

it is just below the surface  
somehow  
deep and overwhelming  
I could drown in it, I know  
yet it is silent and still  
at least for now

prone to sadness and self-pity  
I've been much more worked up  
over a lot less  
so this is eerie  
eerily calm.

I want to be angry,  
sad, disappointed,  
forlorn, depressed  
but I'm just  
. . . nothing

I walk slowly through the store,  
wondering why everyone is staring at me

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

until I realize  
I'm on my fourth lap  
of the produce section  
and haven't touched anything

I'm the one who is looking at them  
taking in their faces  
looking into their eyes  
in the way that people  
don't

Looking for something  
some sign of recognition or pain  
some signal that they feel something  
that they know something  
that they have come through suffering intact  
that I'm not alone

the empty  
is inside of me  
waiting for the other shoe  
to drop  
so that I can explode

but I don't want to explode  
or even simmer  
I want to walk smoothly  
through the fire  
and come out on the other side  
“though he slay me, yet will I trust him”

stuck inside my head  
analytical about emotion  
chasing the tail of the dog  
that might soon turn on me

Moving in the artificial light  
of an ongoing day  
the hands of the clock  
turn late into the night  
but they do not beckon me

I sleep lightly  
and wake up to another day  
not sleepy or rested  
not anxious or invigorated

just moving through the landscape  
of people whose lives continue on  
surely they have sadness  
heartbreak, tragedy

Everyone takes their turn at this  
don't they?  
everyone goes through their fire  
everyone wonders wearily

If it is our collective story  
then we never tell it  
never reveal it  
never

All of us have felt utterly alone, haven't we? Some have suffered more than others, but we've all come to a place where we doubt that we can go on. We've all wondered if there is, after all, any force of love and logic that is behind everything (some of us have decided that there isn't, and I don't blame them one bit). We may not have all had the courage to act on our feelings, but haven't we all thought that the end of our lives wouldn't be so bad, after all? Or at least admitted that the end would be easier than continuing to plod along the path?

We've all felt this, or we all feel this, but we don't acknowledge it. We keep our pain to ourselves. We keep our struggles private and pretend that things aren't so bad, after all.

Ironically, this seems to be especially true in many communities of faith, where the high value placed on noble ideas like “faith” and “hope” and “higher power” and “redemption” can work to quell voices to the contrary, and can lead to the denial of the basic human condition. Like eavesdropping on one side of a telephone conversation, or reading every other page of a book, we learn only half of the story. Surely, things like faith, hope, love and salvation are good. They are, in my view, the answers we long for, and which we desperately need. But the answers are not enough—we need *the questions*. For what is salvation without alienation? What is redemption without loss? What is hope without despair? What is love without betrayal? If we pretend that those who experience despair, betrayal, alienation and pain are only those *outside* our communities of faith, then we deprive ourselves of honestly facing our own brokenness, and connecting with one another and with God. We pretend that we have risen above the heartbreaks and ambiguities that are a part of the human condition.

Recently, a few of us in our church got together over the course of several Sunday evenings to tell the story of our lives. To try to find the plotline of our experiences: the dreams and aspirations that we suspect God is trying to enact through our lives. It was a wonderful, hope-filled time of connection. And yet, as we circled around the living room, we heard person after person talk about difficulty, disappointment, and depression. About how significant chapters of their stories were times when they felt utterly *alone*. And yet—in this room of honesty, and with the benefit of hindsight—we all realized that we were not alone. We may have been isolated, but we weren't alone. And it cannot be the case that we who had felt such alienation just happened to assemble in this living room for these gatherings. Surely,

the people who were the participants in our stories—our friends, family, co-workers, and community members—had been suffering, too. But somehow, they didn't, or wouldn't, know about our struggles. And we didn't, or wouldn't, know about theirs. We set ourselves on parallel tracks and moved ahead, utterly alone in our community of pain. Alone, and not alone.

It is tempting, when we experience this false sense of isolation, to plunge ahead, ignoring social constructs and personal boundaries. We taste the comforts of real community, and we crave even more. Often, we're tempted to force something to happen, in spite of ourselves and the people with whom we'd like to connect.

Even in the midst of our difficulties, my wife and I have chafed at these limitations of social convention. We long to extend our true selves to our neighbors, to our friends, and even to the nameless people we encounter. But how to change things? Too often, we reach out to others in clumsy and desperate ways, our own worst enemies. We blurt things out, or unkindly inflict our pain and despair on others. On a couple of occasions, we've even opened up to cab drivers during rides to the airport. After offering a greeting and throwing our circus-sized menagerie of bags into the trunk, we'll set to the serious work of strapping the car seat into the middle of the back seat and belting ourselves in. Once underway, when the cab driver has commented on the cuteness of the baby and cheerfully inquired about other children we might have, one of us will unabashedly lay it all out: "well, our daughter had a twin, but he died recently." It is a kind of hopeful, if admittedly brutal, test of social conventions: we wonder if this fellow human will accept our honesty, and perhaps reciprocate about some loss or deficit or brokenness in their life. So far, we're batting .500: we've gotten one subdued and shocked acknowledgement, and one long-winded sales pitch for a life-insurance pyramid scheme. I'm not sure if that is a sign of hope or hopelessness, but I'm pretty sure we've been blacklisted by our cab company.

So how do we get connected? How can we move from parallel motion to face-to-face sharing? How do we cross the threshold of humanity and just be honest? How can we leave our lives of isolation to find community?

Well, I don't know, exactly. It is dangerous work, to be sure. Say too much, or say it too soon, and your potential partner in pain will recoil in shock. If you are too honest, they will run away, or, worse yet, they will stay to set up camp in an attempt to bandage over your painful parts with platitudes too unbearable to repeat here. But try and fail a few times, and work hard to find the right person, and you will see the face of God. You will see eyes bordered by tears looking back at you, a wordless message that says, "I feel your pain, and I share it with you." And then they will open themselves up to you, too, because they will know that you understand.