

A
GRIEF
UN-
VEILED

~FIFTEEN YEARS LATER~

A GRIEF UN- VEILED

ONE FATHER'S JOURNEY
THROUGH THE DEATH OF A CHILD

~FIFTEEN YEARS LATER~

Gregory Floyd
Foreword by Thomas Howard



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To Maureen,

strength like a rock
laughter like a mountain stream
love like a garden somewhere in Eden

and to our children

Gregory
Thérèse
David
Rose
Susanna
Nicole
Catherine
and
Maria

without whom the world would be such a grayer,
dimmer place.

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FOREWORD

I have never met Gregory and Maureen Floyd. And yet I consider them to be among my most cherished friends. We have spoken on the phone many times, and exchanged letters. I have listened (with unabashedly flowing tears) to Gregory's tape of songs which he wrote not long ago.

About what? And whence this odd friendship? Ah: there is the key.

It is all about the sudden death of their little boy John-Paul, struck by a car in front of their house in a quiet cul-de-sac, and killed instantly. His brother David was with him and was also hit, but survived.

All of us, I think, and especially us parents, would place the death of one of our children at the top of the list of unimaginable horrors. War, famine, betrayal, estrangement, death—these are all there on that list. But there is something about the poignance, the grotesque irony, and the clashing contradiction that swirl about the death of a small child, especially an angelic child, which John-Paul happens to have been—there is something about this that complicates and intensifies and batters at our grief in a unique way.

Gregory Floyd, in the book you are about to read, has charted, with remorseless candor, immense courage, and acute notation of every nuance, the progress (if that is the word) of

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the grief that overwhelmed him in the days, weeks, months, and now years, that followed John-Paul's death. I say overwhelmed *him*: Maureen is very, very much at the center of the picture. But Gregory confesses over and over that he, the father and man, cannot quite enter wholly into the fathomless mystery that marks the grief of a mother. This couple knows, if anyone ever has, what it means to be one heart and one flesh in the holy sacrament of marriage. And yet death, that great Enemy, has among his cruel tactics, the power to drive a wedge even here, so that there is a dread sense in which each must bear his own grief, even in the midst of bearing one another's burden.

The following record is a very rich one. Gregory Floyd is a man who knows God, like Job or John the Baptist. Hence, there is nothing saccharine or tawdry here (it is so easy to gild death with sentimentalism), nor any pyrotechnics. It is a straightforward and unsparing record—unsparing of the reader as well as of the writer, I might add. Nothing is swept under the rug. No platitudes are brought into play to ameliorate things. The boy is dead. An outrage has torn at the fabric of the universe. An obscenity (yes—an obscenity) has stained Creation. Mere palliatives and placebos won't do. We go down into the valley of the shadow of death with this family—nay, we might even say to Hell, following the Pioneer of our Faith as he descends on Holy Saturday to the extremity of the mystery.

There is an interesting note that strides like a motif all the way through this account. It is this: No matter how high-flown or deep-probing Gregory's reflections and cries of agony are, and no matter what spiritual immensities are invoked, we are never, for a single page, removed from the the immediate, tangible, physical reality of John-Paul's death. There is no threshold between the spiritual and the physical here. The one bespeaks the other. This is because Gregory is a sacramentalist,

A Grief Unveiled

and hence is utterly at home in those precincts where the eye of faith sees the eternal in the temporal. We never leave that little boy, eventually buried in his coffin, for two minutes. There is an incomprehensible disjuncture, of course, between the simultaneous facts of John-Paul's body in the cold earth and his being safely home with Jesus and His Blessed Mother—even in the "lap" of the Father, we are told more than once. But this is not a contradiction. The disjuncture stretches our faith and toughens it, getting us ready for that great Consummation of all things when we will see how everything fits.

The reader will find himself pricked by the needle-sharp perspicacity of Gregory's insights, and also of his probing and doubts. He (the reader, that is) will find himself drawn into somber reflections about the mysteries of God—of God as loving Father (then why did he let this happen?), and as Sovereign (then why did he let this happen?). He will find himself challenged by reflections on Scripture that penetrate far beyond the cavalier reading we are likely to give Scripture when all is going brightly for us. And dreams—lots of dreams. What about dreams in the life of a Christian? It becomes clear that more than a few of them come from a Source infinitely higher than anything poor Sigmund Freud ever fancied.

And what about "healing"? How fast should it occur? Are there temptations to dawdle, or to hold on to one's grief as a sort of cockade in one's hat, giving one special status? How does one orchestrate one's own broken heart while still having to be fully father to a houseful of surviving children, and husband to a grieving mother?

The prose in this book is often positively gnomic (a nice, ancient word suggesting compact, incisive, "repeatable" lines). For example: "There is a difference between early grief and later

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grief. Early grief is acute; later grief is more diffuse. Early grief smacks, stings, punches; later grief is more gentle. Early grief is a stalker; later grief is a companion. Early grief is crags and crevices; later grief is furrows softened by the passage of time.”

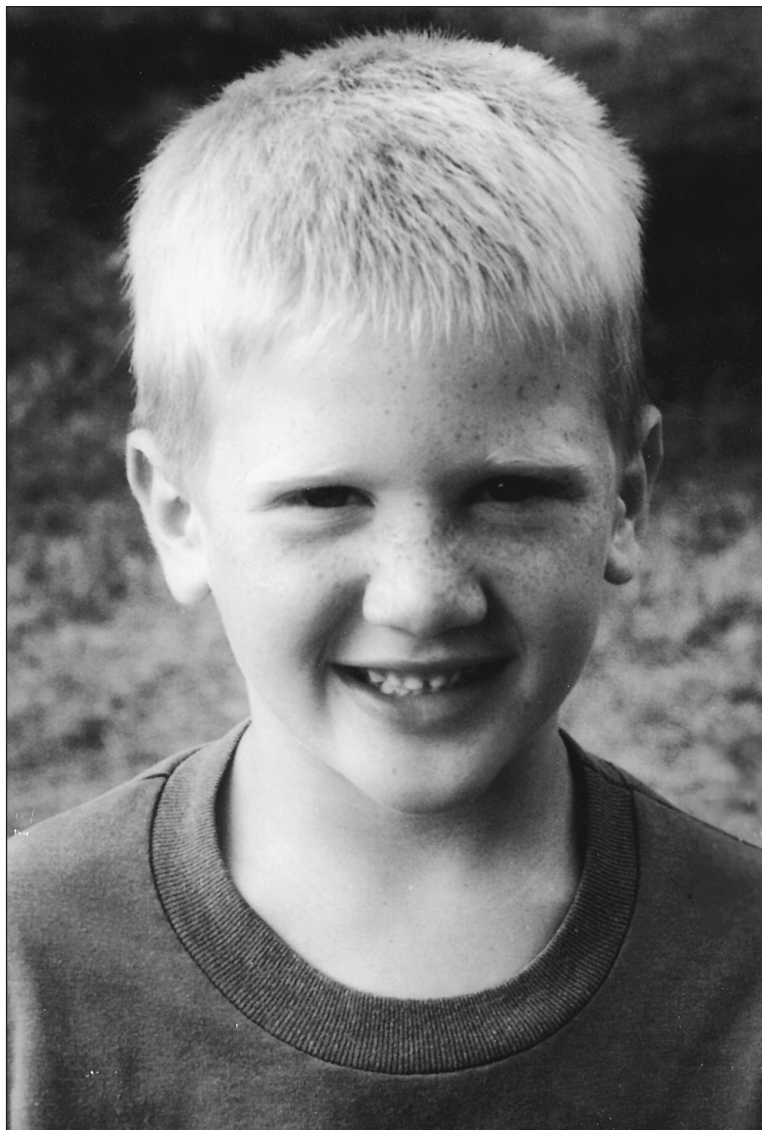
One more thing: the songs. Here we find lyrics wrung from the depths of a bereaved father’s heart—songs of sorrow, of love, of wistfulness, but then of hope and even—yes—joy. I have had the privilege of hearing these evocative lyrics sung when I set aside one Sunday afternoon to listen to Gregory’s album, *Angel in Disguise*. When it was finished, I rang Gregory to tell him how much it had meant to me. But he had to interpret my sobs, for I could not speak.

Read this book, and be drawn along the Way of the Cross.

*Thomas Howard
Manchester, MA*

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I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation
to Mrs. Eleanor Benson,
who first took my handwritten notes on yellow legal pads
and brought order out of chaos;
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whose honesty, integrity, compassion, humor,
and consummate editorial skill helped bring this book to fruition.



John-Paul Floyd
October 19, 1988–April 25, 1995

A
GRIEF
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Your Cross

The everlasting God has in His wisdom foreseen from eternity the cross
that he now presents to you as a gift from His inmost heart.
This cross he now sends you he has considered with his all-knowing eyes,
understood with His divine mind, tested with His wise justice,
warmed with loving arms and weighed with His own hands to see that
it be not one inch too large and not one ounce too heavy for you.
He has blessed it with His holy name, anointed it with His grace,
perfumed it with His consolation, taken one last glance at you and your courage,
and then sent it to you from heaven,
a special greeting from God to you,
an alms of the all-merciful love of God.

—*St. Francis de Sales*

Blessed is the man
Who walks in your favor
Who loves all your words
And hides them
like treasure.
In the darkest place
Of his desperate heart,
They are a light
A strong, sure light.

—*Fernando Ortega and John Andrew Schreiner,*
from Lord of Eternity

ONE

Changed Forever in an Instant

The weekend had been marvelous. A retreat for Christian men focused on some of the critical issues of masculinity in contemporary society: being a son, fatherhood, sexuality, male passivity, forgiveness, prayer, and union with God. It was a weekend of healing and grace, as we looked to Jesus Christ as the model of masculinity as well as its Creator, Savior, and Lord. We prayed and talked together as Christian men about the things we desperately need to talk about but rarely do.

The weekend had been bracing, deep, with a tremendous spirit of openness. God had been on the move, to restore and reconcile. It was a privilege to be part of the team, to watch the truth of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit to change men's hearts. It also had meant, however, that I had spent another weekend away from my wife, Maureen, and our children, and I decided to take the following Monday off from work.

It was April 24, 1995, and the children were on Easter break from school. There were seven of them, ranging in age from ten down to six weeks: Gregory, Thérèse, David, John-Paul, Rose, Susanna, and Nicole, our newborn. They are high-spirited, usually happy, and sometimes overwhelming in sheer energy and numbers. That very morning Maureen was feeling exhausted. At 10:30 in the morning I walked into the kitchen, and she said to

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me, "I can't take this anymore. Everyone's screaming, everyone's at me. Everyone has needs at the same time. . . ."

"Come on," I said, "let's put the kids in the car, buy some sandwiches, and go for a picnic." Even though she did not want to, Maureen acquiesced. We piled in the car, picked up the sandwiches, and took off for the park.

The day was bright and breezy. We sat around the picnic table talking, laughing, and eating. Everyone took turns catching Susanna, who was almost two and who kept running away from the table. After lunch we played freeze tag on the jungle gym. Maureen was relaxed again and the strain had left her face. These are the shining points in time that make the strains and sacrifices of having a large family worth the effort, because the joy is multiplied by every laughing, smiling face, by the grace of every supple limb in motion. It was one of those rare, perfect moments.

As nap time drew near, we headed home. Maureen put Rose and Susanna down and asked me to take the baby, Nicole. We went to the family room and I laid down on the couch with her. Gregory was out with friends. Thérèse was drawing. John-Paul and David were in the basement playing with their "guys": all the little GI Joes, space cadets, Power Rangers, and other creatures that boys play with.

Nicole was awake, so I took her into the kitchen. Our house has a strange feature: The kitchen is in the front, looking out onto the street. It is a quiet, dead-end street with only 13 houses. Lots of children live on it, and the neighbors know to drive slowly and be on the lookout when they reach the middle of the block. At 3:20 the doorbell rang. I was annoyed because whoever it was kept pressing the bell, and I had warned the children not to ring the bell during nap time. I thought I was going downstairs to correct someone. I was wrong.

A Grief Unveiled

In a voice hysterical with fear, a handsome young man yelled, "Oh my God, come quickly, I think I just hit your kids!" I ran upstairs to give the baby to Thérèse who had heard something and was starting to get upset. "No!" I said sternly. "That is not going to help. You take Nicole and sit right there." I flew down the stairs and ran outside. There in the middle of the street was a stopped car. Further down the road on our front lawn, lay our two boys, David and John-Paul. The young man was beside himself.

I ran inside and called 911 and told them our address, "two boys hit," and so forth. Then I ran upstairs and yelled to Maureen, "Honey, get up. The boys have been hit!" I flew back outside. David was crying and moaning. His head was bloody but he was making sounds. By this time Maureen was running out the door.

"Go to David," I said. I ran back to John-Paul. His lips were turning blue. "Johnny, please," I begged, "come on, little boy." I had my hand on his chest underneath his shirt. I could feel his heart beating, but he was not breathing. By this time several neighbors had appeared. One knelt down next to me. "Is he breathing?" he asked. "I can't feel anything." I had my face next to his, straining to feel his breath against mine. No breath. "Should I give him mouth-to-mouth?" I asked. "Yes, try it."

So there, kneeling on the front lawn, I gave John-Paul mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. His chest would fill up with my breath, expand and contract, expand and contract. "Come on, Johnny. . . . That's a good boy, Johnny. . . . Please, Johnny. . . . You can do it, little boy." I could say nothing else, over and over again.

The rescue squad arrived in two trucks, with two teams. One started working on David, the other on John-Paul. I looked over at Maureen. Never have I seen such a look of horror and love combined as I saw on her face.

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There was a lot of commotion as the rescue squad, the police, and the medical intensive care unit did their respective jobs and tried to figure out where to take the boys. I was so intensely focused on them that many things I heard did not register completely, except for two: What needs to be done here? What's the best thing for the boys?

Confusion reigned. We heard "helicopter." We heard "Robert Wood Johnson Hospital." We heard "Overlook Hospital." We heard "Pennsylvania." We heard "Newark Trauma Center." Then we heard the boys were going to two different hospitals. "Wait a minute," I said. "Let's just make sure the boys go to the same hospital. We don't need to add a commute on top of everything else." But that was not to be.

All the while they were working on John-Paul. I had stopped giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and they were giving him oxygen. They brought a stretcher, and we carefully lifted him onto it and placed him in the ambulance. I told Maureen that we were going to Overlook Hospital and that she and David were going to University Hospital in Newark, a distance of about fifteen miles. Somewhere in the midst of all this I asked our neighbor Janet to take the rest of the children. Janet had been talking with Johnny only a half hour earlier.

As I took off, my last picture was of Maureen cradling David's wounded body, grief and shock etched into her features. We still were not sure where we were going. The medical intensive care unit folks were saying "New Brunswick." I said, "Overlook on Route 78 is faster." So with police escort we headed for Overlook. I was tying the stretcher to the bed with strips of cloth so it would not move. I rode in the ambulance at the feet of my son, saying, "Come on, little boy, come on, Johnny, you can do it," and in my heart saying, "Oh God, please. . . ."

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We pulled up to the emergency room and took the stretcher through the doors. A team of doctors and nurses was waiting for us. There was a chief of operations, who was giving orders and directing traffic, as well as other doctors and nurses. They cut off Johnny's clothes, and I watched as they made an incision in his groin and stuck a long tube into him. A nurse was telling me what was going on. I could not take my eyes off him. One doctor held a mask over his face and kept pumping oxygen. After the initial investigation, they took him for a CAT scan. As I waited outside the room, family and friends began to arrive.

The long watch had begun. At some point later in the afternoon, after the initial diagnosis, a doctor came into the room where we were sitting. I said to him, "Doctor, these are my friends. It would be most helpful if you'd tell us exactly how things are with John-Paul."

He said, "The situation is very serious. You have a very sick little boy. Only time will tell. The next twenty-four hours are critical." "Is he not breathing on his own?" I asked. "No, he's not," he replied. "Is he in a coma?" "Yes."

Coma. The word is dark, sinister, and foreboding. It hit me in the gut. It was at once monstrous and amorphous, like an arching shadow sucking the light out of my mind. My son is not conscious, I think to myself. My son cannot breathe. My son is lying on a stretcher with a machine moving his chest up and down. He cannot think or feel or speak and the device that measures his brain activity registers no movement.

I called the emergency room in Newark to find Maureen and check on David. When she came to the phone I asked, "Are your parents there?" "Yes." "Go get them." I wanted them standing near her. "How's David?" I asked when she returned. "It looks like he is going to be okay. Bruises and lacerations, but nothing is broken."

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“How’s Johnny?” “Honey, Johnny’s in a coma. He’s not breathing on his own. He’s a very sick little boy and the doctor said the next twenty-four hours are critical. I think you’d better come up here.”

I was with Johnny all night long, back and forth from our room to his. Someone had brought the baby to Maureen and we kept her with us. A few times during the night I tried to lie down and rest. Rest was futile. Maureen and I looked at each other. “What’s going to happen to our little boy?” she asked.

I could not rest. I could hardly talk and sometimes I wondered that I could breathe. I found myself looking for other, deeper breaths because of the pressure I felt on my chest. Then the ground would shift and I would begin to feel some of the weight of what was happening. But it was not possible to take it all in.

At that moment I was straddling two realities. I was in shock, and my bodily mechanisms were shielding my mind from taking in more of the unbearable than it could handle. I was hoping that this would not be what it looked like. At the same time I was intensely present to what was going on—so present that all I could see was the beautiful face of my son, his freckles, his hair, his lips, the feel of his skin as I kissed him and whispered in his ear, “Come on, Johnny, you can do it, come on, little boy, wake up.” I was aware of the whirl of machinery, the different colored lights, the doctors and nurses. But there was a shield around us. It was made of everything that is fatherly. It was made of love and afforded us complete privacy so I could keep talking to him as though the strength of my love could wake him from the ominous sleep that had engulfed him.

I focused on him, touching him, kissing him, talking gently in his ear—anything to try to communicate that I was there and that I loved him and that he was surrounded by love.

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His chest moved rhythmically up and down and his color was normal though his bruises were starting to appear and his broken leg was being wired by a doctor. But the eyes: I pressed open his eyelids. Light did not affect them and touch did not affect them. I looked into them and they registered nothing. They were there but they were not there. They were vacant, and in the pit of my soul I knew he was not going to make it. This boy of mine was not going to wake up. This child was going to die.

As morning came and light filtered into the room, my father-in-law and I drove to Newark to get David. His grandmother had stayed with him overnight. He was extremely timid and was walking like a ninety-year-old man. The nurse said he was fine. In fact, she had to move his limbs to show him that nothing was broken. She said he was afraid that he might hurt himself and that his body was full of tension from the accident. I walked with him and helped him into the car. We drove home to get the other children. The first question everyone had was, "How's Johnny? Is he all right?" I said to them one by one, "Let's get everybody together and then I'll tell you all at once."

Finally we were all together: Gregory, Thérèse, David, Rose, and Susanna. Maureen and the baby were at the hospital. I took a deep breath and said a quick prayer before telling the children, "Johnny is very sick." I let that sink in for a few moments. "I'm going to take you all to the hospital with me so you can see him and touch him and talk to him."

We got in two cars and drove off. When we arrived, the children were hungry, so I bought them some milkshakes. Then we went upstairs to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. The hallway was lined with family and friends quietly praying, quietly waiting, hoping against hope. The children greeted

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their mother and the baby, and then we sat together in the room where Maureen and I had spent the night.

“Children, I need to tell you a few things. Johnny is very sick and he’s probably going to die.” They started crying. “It’s okay to cry. You can cry as much as you like because it’s a very sad time. It’s a very sad time for Mommy and Daddy, too. I want to tell you what Johnny’s going to look like. First, he’s lying on a bed. He’s covered with a sheet, just like at home. He looks like he’s asleep, and he has a lot of wires attached to him. The wires don’t hurt him. They help the doctors and the nurses to know how he’s doing and whether he needs anything. And Johnny’s not in any pain, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

Someone took the baby and we walked down the hallway—Maureen, I, and the children. When we were in the room, I said, “Now get around the bed where you can see him and touch him.” We all got as near to John-Paul as we could. Our four-year-old, Rose, was sitting on the bed near his feet, and the others were standing around their brother. The whole family was crying except for Rose, who did not fully understand everything that was happening. The nurses were crying. The priest was crying. I said, “Let’s each take a turn and talk to Johnny and tell him anything we’d like.” “Johnny, you’re such a good brother.” “Johnny, please don’t die.” “I love you so much, Johnny.” Over and over they kept saying the same things, weeping and tenderly touching his arms, his legs, his face. Maureen and I knew we needed to let this moment linger as long as needed, suspended between heaven and earth. At a certain point I said, “Children, let’s pray now. This is our last family prayer time with Johnny. Let’s sing whatever he’d like to sing.” So we sang “Shine, Jesus, Shine” and a few of his other favorites. Toward the end, Gregory said, “I think we should tell

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John-Paul we're sorry and ask his forgiveness for anything we ever said or did to him that wasn't loving." We each asked his forgiveness. It was a moment of profound grace, coming from his ten-year-old brother. Then I said to them, "Why don't you say anything else you'd like to say to Johnny and give him a kiss good-bye." Each of the children walked over to his head and bent down and spoke quietly in his ear and kissed him good-bye. We left the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit and walked back to our room. Somebody took the children home, and Maureen and I maintained the remainder of our bedside vigil.

At about 3:00 P.M. a doctor and a nurse came to talk to us. The doctor began with some preliminary remarks about the fact that there was no easy way to say what he was about to say. He told us that John-Paul was brain dead and then explained what that meant, so as to assure us that he was really and truly dead. He then moved the conversation in the direction of the nurse, Cecilia, who was the organ transplant coordinator. Cecilia explained organ donation and asked us if we would like to donate any of John-Paul's organs or tissue. We said yes, and she then explained the procedure of "harvesting" the organs. She also mentioned the possibility of coming back to hold him once the harvesting had taken place. She said the surgery would start around 10:00 P.M. and be completed by 3:00 A.M. When she had finished, the doctor said, "I know no good can come of this for John-Paul, but at least some good can come of this for someone else." "Doctor," I said quietly, "I have to disagree with you. We're a Christian family and we believe that great good can come of this. We believe that our son is in heaven and that we're going to see him again." Then I said, "Can we go say good-bye?" Gesturing toward our family and friends, I said, "This is our family, and we'd like them to come, too." We walked back up the hallway into Johnny's room. There must

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have been twenty of us. We prayed quietly for a few minutes. Maureen and I stood there at his bed, barely taking in the enormity of what had just happened to us in one twenty-four-hour period. I invited everyone to say something to Johnny, to pray to him, and to kiss him good-bye. Then we left. We went home to see the children and to prepare for our final chance to hold him, which would be at 3:00 A.M.

As it turned out, John-Paul had been dead on our front lawn, his brain stem snapped by the impact of the car. And in that instant, our lives had changed forever.

TWO

Ascending Calvary

As we arrived home, people started coming to the door. “Maryann and I are bringing dinner tonight.” “Nancy’s bringing dinner tomorrow.” “Give me your laundry.” “I’ll take your ironing.” My parents came over to do whatever we needed and to spend the night so we could go back to the hospital.

In the midst of shock, suddenly a host of details needed immediate attention. A funeral on Friday meant a wake Wednesday night and Thursday. It was then Tuesday afternoon. Somebody called the funeral home and arranged for me to pick out a casket. Dad said, “I’ll go with you.” Here we were, twenty-eight hours after the accident, driving to the funeral home to arrange for a funeral and pick out a casket.

Pick out a casket. For my son. I could not even take in the words as I said them. I said to my father, “I can’t believe we’re doing this.” We met with a young woman who helped us with the details. Coffins, from \$600 to \$10,000 . . . wood . . . metal . . . with satin . . . with brass. They even come airtight, so the elements will not affect their contents. I said to her, “I want the simplest, plainest, most modest one you have. He’s not going to be in there forever.” Fortunately, they had an unadorned white box for a child. In the only moment of comic relief we had I asked her, “Why would someone spend \$10,000 on a box that’s going in the ground?” “They’re nuts,” she replied.

Ascending Calvary

As we arrived home my brothers began to show up. Every time I looked at Mark he was on the verge of tears. Justin was calling friends in England, Ireland, and throughout the United States and Canada. Brendan was on his way from San Francisco. Rick would be over soon. Friends started calling from all over as the news spread. Mom was running interference on the telephone. Annie, our dear friend from Mexico, came over to take care of the children for the week. Somewhere in the back of my mind I realized I was experiencing the Body of Christ at work.

We had to go to bed. Maureen was nursing Nicole and needed to rest to have enough milk for the baby. We both wanted to close our eyes and wish away this horror. I said to Maureen, "I feel like I'm an actor in someone else's drama." That was what it felt like. I could not believe that this was happening to us. We were going through motions that had no relationship to our normal life. Maureen said, "I keep hoping I'm going to wake up from this and find it was a bad dream." We both hoped to awaken, sweating and gasping for air, shards of terror clinging to our minds, until we realized that we were not asleep and this was no mere nightmare.

When Cecilia had mentioned to us that we could come back to hold Johnny after the harvesting of his organs, I had said, "We'd like that." I turned to Maureen and said, "You know I have to do this." She agreed. One of the hardest things for her was that from the time of the accident she had never been able to hold Johnny. He had gone from the ambulance to the hospital and had been wired up, in traction, and lying on the bed, unconscious. Every motherly instinct in her craved to hold him and comfort him, to take away the pain, to do anything to make it better. But she could not. To hold him one last time was a need eclipsed only by desire.

A Grief Unveiled

At 3:30 A.M. the phone rang. Cecilia said, "The operation is done. The organs are harvested. You can come now if you wish." "We'll be there in twenty minutes. By the way," I said, wanting to protect Maureen from any further trauma, "what should we expect when we see him?" "He'll be covered with a sheet and he'll have bandages over his eyes. And he'll be cold."

Silently and quickly we dressed, combed our hair, brushed our teeth. Silently we got in the car and drove to the emergency room. Cecilia met us there with two other nurses. We walked down the hallway holding hands, through a set of hospital double doors, into a large, empty room. We walked to the end of that room and into a smaller room. There, lying on a bed, eyes covered with bandages, was our beloved little boy. Small. Blond. Freckled. Cold. Dead. Immediately we reached out to touch, to embrace. There was nothing to do but weep. "Oh Johnny, Johnny, Johnny. We love you so much." I kissed his forehead. I brushed that impossible blond hair with my hand. Maureen reached for his lips and moved her hands up and down arms and legs so full of life a few short hours ago. We touched his torso but not too closely for fear of moving a bandage. The moment was excruciating, yet sacred. It was our personal Calvary. We were participating in the crucifixion. Only it was we who were being crucified. "Would you like to hold him?" one of the nurses asked. "Yes, let's give him to his mother." Maureen sat down and three of us picked him up and laid him in her arms. And there they were. Mother and son. Mary and Jesus. Maureen and John-Paul.

Some moments are so sacred that one dare not clothe them in anything but silence. I watched as Maureen held her dead child in her arms, and listened as she drew her child to her breast and touched his face with hers. "John-Paul, it was such a privilege to be your mother. It was such a privilege to carry

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you in my womb. I labored to give birth to you and when you were born I nursed you and fed you and loved you. It was such a privilege to watch you grow up. You were such a good boy, Johnny, and I love you so much, and we can't wait to see you again. Oh, Johnny, I'm so sorry this happened to you. I'm so sorry. Pray for us, Johnny." There she was, touching him, kissing him, stroking him.

Never was a poem written, a painting painted, a song sung that could touch that moment. Time stood still for this maternal lament coming from the deepest recesses of her mother's heart, broken, shattered, uncomprehending, yet filled with faith and love so strong that it knocked the very darkness clear across the room. Rocking her son in her arms as she had done a thousand times before.

It was my turn. "I can lift him," I said to the nurses, "I can lift him." How many times had I lifted him. Forty-eight hours ago I was throwing him up in the air at the pool. Yesterday at lunch we were playing freeze tag at the park. I can lift him. Every morning he had come into our bedroom and laid down on top of me. Every night he wanted to play "get on the floor and catch me." Every day at Mass with a perfectly unconscious elegance he would take my arm and drape it across his chest and hold his hand in mine. I can lift him.

So I picked him up—all fifty-eight pounds of him—and sat down and drew him to myself. And I wailed. My boy is dead. I wept and wept. I touched him and held him and talked to him. There was something urgent about wanting to hold in death this flesh I loved so much in life. There were no words to describe the pain. It was unimaginable, inconceivable, untouchable. I had always thought that the death of a child was the greatest cross a parent could be asked to bear. And here we were, staggering under its weight.

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Yet, beneath the darkness that surrounded us, there it was: one glowing ember. Not yet near enough to give warmth; not yet bright enough to give light. But real. A reminder. And it spoke, saying, “I will carry you.”

THREE

The Many Ways of Saying Good-bye

I am sitting at the cemetery with my brother-in-law J.J. We have an appointment to pick out a burial plot. J.J. is coming unglued. So am I. There was something in me, some latent power, that was almost hysterically opposed to the moment when I would put my son in a box, close the lid, put the box in the ground, and throw dirt on top of it. I was not showing it. But I felt like a tiger in a cage. I said to J.J., "I don't want to do this. What am I doing here looking at a burial plot for a six-year-old? I don't want to put him in a box, and I don't want to bury him in the ground." I felt a complete and total revulsion that was as much physiological as it was mental.

We made the necessary arrangements with the cemetery director, and I went home to help Maureen find clothes for Johnny to wear at the wake. We were in the closet, picking out slacks and shoes, tie and blazer. Maureen ironed a shirt for Johnny to wear. An actor in someone else's drama. Mothers do not spend their Wednesday mornings ironing shirts for their children to wear in caskets. J.J. came back. We forgot the socks and underwear. How would we know? We never dressed a corpse before.

Friends and family: They moved in and out with food, laundry, things the children would need to wear. They moved quietly and spoke quietly. They were part of the drama. They,

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too, were in disbelief. Words? Words were few because there were no words to say. It was as simple as that. But I will never forget their eyes: eyes that met mine and told me that I was not alone and that my family was not alone. Eyes that told me they felt our pain. Nor will I forget the embraces that offered a moment's respite, a place to lay some of the weight, the comfort that words could not give. In that moment, no words could help. So we talked about what needed to happen next.

J.J. is both friend and family. We met twenty years ago at a church service. He walked in, handsome as a movie star, wearing a brown leather jacket and a long scarf. He looked so good that I wondered what he was doing there. But when he sat down next to a young Down's syndrome boy and started playing with him, I knew there was something different about him: some wellspring, some mystery. J.J. was beginning a relationship with God after confronting much pain and brokenness in his own life. He was bright, talkative, and outgoing, a superb athlete and a particularly talented soccer player. There was, however, always something more to J.J.: something hidden, vulnerable, some unexpressed longing for a place to rest his soul.

We had both recently graduated from college. As we came to know each other we forged an extraordinarily deep friendship. I used to kid him, "You know, J.J., we would have become friends even if we had met years ago. You would have gone out with all your jock friends and talked about girls or sports, and I would have gone out with my arty, intellectual friends and talked about the symbolism of Bergman's latest movie. But at the end of the night we would have gone out together and had a better time with each other than we'd had with anybody else."

J.J. and I ended up moving to London together a year later to do evangelistic work. I still occasionally kid him about the

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fact that I never had to forgive or ask forgiveness of one individual so many times in one year. I am sure he could say the same. But as our trust of one another grew, we could tell one another about the things in our lives that did not work so well, or did not work at all. God's healing and strength came to us through each other. Twenty years later, I do not think there is anything important that we do not know about each other.

Two years after we moved to London, J.J. returned to New Jersey to marry Maureen's sister, Nancy. J.J. is now a very successful financial consultant in his mid-forties, the father of nine, a bit more stout, and his hair is thinning by degrees. As for our friendship, we can nearly look at each other and figure out what is going on. And we can get right down to business if something needs talking out.

When Johnny died, J.J. called his secretary and said, "Cancel my appointments for the rest of the week." He came with bagels in the morning. He came to hug the children and Maureen. He went to the bank and then handed me money, saying, "Here, you'll have expenses." He stood in the driveway and wept. Somehow, he had room in his heart for the endless pain in mine. J.J. was there with me like a sentinel at his post.

The shock numbed me enough to let me keep moving on to the next thing to be done. But it was regularly sliced open by a pain that made me want to scream. No, no, no, I wanted to scream from the deepest place within me. No, no, no, I wanted to scream all the way from heaven to hell. No. I wanted to protest unto death that this had happened. This is my son! I wanted to beat on God's breast like a deranged prize-fighter, but I was pounding less in anger than in pain, because I hurt too much to be angry. I was standing in the hallway greeting people and at the same time felt as though I was falling off a cliff. Then a voice or a touch would call me back. My daughter

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Susanna was tugging at me. I must be there for her, I tell myself, but it was really she who was saving me.

Decisions mount. The casket—open or closed? We decided on an open casket so that everyone could see Johnny. Some thought this was a bad idea, that it would disturb people and traumatize the children. People unconsciously project their fear of death onto others. I thought just the opposite: It would be much worse for the children never to have seen Johnny again. Seeing him would bring the reality home. They needed to see the dead body to realize he was really dead and did not just disappear. It would take the terror away from death on the level of the imagination. It ought to; the reality is difficult enough. Say what you will about wanting to remember him full of life, happy, running around: we wanted as many last glances as we could get.

Others wondered if children should come to the wake. We said yes. It's closure. It's real. He's really dead. It's sad but not scary. It could be more scary to be left with only one's imagination, to wonder what happened, or how he looked. It would be different if he had been radically disfigured; Johnny's face was virtually untouched by the accident.

On the evening of the first wake we arrived at the funeral home a half hour early to spend time alone with Johnny. Then the doors opened. People kept coming and coming. Most we knew; some we did not. Some simply burst into tears. In a strange twist we found ourselves trying to comfort them. Others were close friends: We looked at each other and they were seared with our pain. There was nothing they could say except, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I encouraged the children to come close to Johnny, to touch him and talk to him. His skin was cold.

I think many people saw their child in the coffin and could not believe this had actually happened. I knew how they felt.

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I could not believe this had happened. An actor in someone else's drama. This happens to other families, tragic or heroic families. But not to us. We have never claimed those categories for ourselves.

It was exhausting to greet everyone. We had their grief to contend with as well as our own. And yet the outpouring of love was at the same time energizing. Scripture says that faith makes its power felt through love. There was a profound faith expressed all around us in countless gestures of love.

The funeral was the day after the second wake. The Christian community we belong to, the People of Hope, was taking care of the reception. School was canceled so the children could come to the funeral. The school choir would be singing. It was a hard day to think about. I knew I had to let it come and to keep yielding to facts that were no less awful for being true. The man who hit the boys came with his family to the wake. People were reaching out to him. I asked him to sit with us at the funeral. We had told him we forgave him. He was in deep pain. I cannot imagine his pain.

Finally we were able to go to bed. I woke up during the night, weeping. I did not wake up and then start weeping. I simply woke up with tears streaming down my face and sobs caught in my chest. Maureen heard me and woke up. How many times could we say, "Is this really happening? This can't be happening. This can't be happening. Is our son really dead?" Maureen placed her hand on my head and prayed, "Lord, give Gregory patience until he sees John-Paul again." It would prove to be the single most helpful prayer of all: patience, until I see you again, dear sweet boy.

After a fitful few hours, Maureen and I got up. We prayed with each other for the grace to surrender this day to the Lord. It was quiet in the house. We fed the children and dressed

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them. Then we drove to the funeral home for a last, private, family visit.

Johnny's casket had things in it, little things that his friends had made: things with crayons and bright ribbons, cards and drawings on paper plates and colored paper; things that will go into the earth with him until the resurrection of the dead. Little prayers, and little secrets. One or two that said, "Please don't open." And I did not. I wanted to, but I did not. I will wait until the end of the world to know what those little secrets were.

It was time to end. Time for the children to whisper into his ear one last wish, one last word of love. Time for one last glance, one last touch, one last kiss. Time we never could have imagined or conceived. They kissed him. We kissed him. We were ushered into another room while they closed the casket and placed it in the hearse.

And so the good-byes. The kisses, the touches, the ribbons, the tears. The quiet words. The time alone with him. The uncomprehending glances. The shirt ironed, the hair stroked. The deep things spoken in his ear. The crowd and the children, the silence and the music. The many ways of saying good-bye.