

## CHAPTER 8

### BEATING DEPRESSION – FREE AT LAST

(Ages 17-18 – 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

More than the physical disease, the specter of depression continued to haunt me through my first two years of high school. Of course, they were inter-related, at least in my own mind. I realize that some people who have all of their physical capabilities go through extended spells of depression, and others who are disabled seem to handle depression quite well. Indeed, those who seem quite privileged, and the last ones you would expect to be depressed, are often the ones who suffer to the point of taking their own lives (one way or the other). So the loss of one's physical capabilities should not necessarily cause depression over the long term. However, there is no question that if one is susceptible to being depressed, suffering some loss of one's physical abilities can surely trigger it. Having the sure knowledge that you are going to lose all of them over time most surely will.

In looking back on my history of depression, I recall that the major problems occurred during the summers of the odd years (1979, 1981, 1983). I have speculated that it was in an odd year (1971) that my parents first received a definite diagnosis of my disease. Perhaps this started a series of two-year cycles that got worse and worse on each cycle. There were, of course, little skirmishes that lasted a few weeks in between. I do not really consider them, because these are normal for most people. It was the major problems – the extended three-to-four-month periods of it – that were always initiated in the spring and went on through the summer.

What triggered it? Perhaps it was a dis-association with the excitement that most kids feel in getting out of school. They think in terms of a whole summer of fun; I could only think of not having the daily contact with my friends. But in 1983 it began even earlier than that, in early April after coming back from Louisiana during spring break. We left Alabama on Saturday and got back on Wednesday, so we had to cram all the fun into three days. The trip itself tired me out greatly, but on top of that I was a little depressed that my vacation seemed almost over before it got started. Getting back on Wednesday meant that I had four days to kill until going back to school, and it was quite lonely at home after leaving Kevin and my grandparents back in Louisiana. Sitting around watching TV started getting to me, and although I could tell that I was falling into depression, I did nothing about it – just kept watching TV. This led to a major depression that lasted, on and off, for almost six months.

Most people have depression at night and feel relatively better in the morning. In my case I would feel pretty good around 8 PM but sink into problems in the morning. Realizing this, I would try to stay up as long as I could, sometimes staying up until 1 or 2 AM. When school let out my sister got a sleeping bag and she would sleep in my room, so quite often we would stay up late talking, further reinforcing this habit. I was still in the WACS program, which meant that I had to get up fairly early. This led somewhat to exhaustion, and I believe that this made me even more depressed.

Summers in the south are the times that people avoid going outside, especially late June and July. Things start to break a little (or perhaps we get used to it) in August. The heat forces everyone inside to the air conditioners, and the TV. Perhaps seeing people having fun and accomplishing things within it can be depressing to those who are handicapped. All the people are normal for the most part. Sure, there are a few movies and a little mention of the handicapped, but these are the exceptions, and a good part of them are not at all realistic. For example, very few of us are into wheelchair racing, although I am not faulting those who would do a special on it. The point is that when you allow yourself to dwell in front of a TV for extended periods of time, it does not help your depression. You need to be *doing*, not *watching*.

As I matured, and now in retrospect, I can see that my depression was due to a combination of blame and guilt – a lethal combination that produces bitterness. Again, this is not unique with the handicapped; there are many who through a combination of blame and guilt over their careers or family situations (or many other things) end up fighting prolonged bouts of depression. I am not talking about the normal kind that hits everyone and might last about a week or so, or even the kind that hits most of us a few days a month in monthly cycles. No, I am talking about the kind that comes and just will not go away, and I am convinced that the handicapped have a natural built-in trigger for it. It is important that we do not “load the gun” so to speak.

I will not go over it again, but in my case I blamed my family and myself. There seemed to be a trade-off. If I thought evil about them it might give me a temporary satisfaction, a self-justification. However, this was quite short-lived, since the next step of introspection led to a guilty feeling over blaming them for something that was clearly not their faults. So then I would blame God for all of it. Not that that did any good. If an evil God created this world, what hope is there? Nevertheless, I could not contain my pain, and often I afflicted those around me. Perhaps subconsciously I wished them to suffer as well. Perhaps. I cannot say because in my mind there was never a conscious effort to involve or hurt anyone else. However, I realize that it does not have to be conscious to be real.

The formula for pulling out of depression, I believe, was much easier to explain. This is just as important for, if we can figure out how to pull out of it, perhaps we can apply this as a preventative measure. Unlike most kids who resent and possibly dread the oncoming of the school year, it was a time of excitement for me. It was not the class work that I was into, since I was not a straight-A student. No; it was more of the excitement of being back to school with friends, something to do, and someone to share it with. Each year there was something new – new and different people, new teachers, new subjects. There was the matter of *having* to stay busy and not having time to really think about my condition or myself. Then there was the excitement of football. And there was also the brisk cool air, the ability to get out in it – autumn is the most beautiful time of the year in the south, and the excellent weather lasts from mid-September until early December.

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For the past three years I had been slowly developing a friendship with Brad Stephens, who had been diagnosed with *Duchenne* muscular dystrophy (MD), the same type as I had. Brad and his family had moved to Tuscaloosa from North Alabama in the fall of 1980. He was four years younger than I, so his first three years in town were spent at my old stomping grounds of Northing-

ton Elementary. It turned out that Brad, unlike me, was the only member of his family that had MD. Since they did not have any family members that they could turn to for advice (e.g., which wheelchairs were best, etc.), Brad's teacher (who I had when in 5<sup>th</sup> grade) put his parents in touch with mine. So they, along with our teachers, introduced us.

It took us a while to warm up to each other. I did enjoy his company, but I was at a rebellious stage, and so the fact that they were pushing us together did not play well with me at that point. It was not that I was rude to him, at least not that often (I hope), but I feel that he did not notice it since I was the first person that he knew who had MD. So, I could play the role of being somewhat arrogant and get away with it.

We would talk on the phone occasionally, and once or twice his class would visit my school and we would get together then. Soon Brad began riding the same school bus as my friend Doug and they became friends. Now that Brad and I had a mutual friend it wasn't long before all three of us were getting together at each others' houses, visiting and playing video games. Without the teachers putting pressure on me to be friendly, I was much more accommodating to Brad. I am glad that my behavior (perhaps more accurately, attitude) improved so that I could begin to enjoy our friendship as much as he seemed to.

When September of 1983 rolled around, we had to start the school thing all over again entering into the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. This was to be one of the most enjoyable school years that I would have. For the most part it marked the turning point in beating the horrible series of bouts of depression that had plagued me off and on from about that time that I was 12.

What made this school year so much fun was that Brad was now attending Oak Hill. This was special in my eyes since, for the first time I was not the only one at school with MD. To this point the only one that I really knew who suffered from this condition was my cousin Kevin – no one locally had MD. This made me feel somewhat lonely, since the students who had Cerebral Palsy and Spina Bifida all had one or more students to whom they could relate. But I was the only one with MD – the odd man out. Now there was finally someone in my class who was going through the same thing that I was, and who had the same problems that I did. Not that I would wish this on anyone, but given that he was afflicted with a serious disease, it gave both of us considerable relief when we could help each other out on our common problems. Being able to both get help and provide help was a tremendous psychological lift.

A perfect example of this came early in the school year. Beginning with the 1983-84 school year our teacher decided that we would start off each day with a round of exercises. For those of us in wheel chairs, of course, this would be limited to our upper bodies. One of them called for us to hold our arms straight up above our heads and rotate our arms while pointing toward the ceiling. Another called for us to hold our arms at our sides and then raise them until they were even with our shoulders and then to rotate our upper bodies while in this position. If I had been sitting at my desk I could do this by bracing on my arms, and I could also raise my arm up to my neck by bracing myself with the desk. However, there was no way that I could straighten my arms out or get them all the way up pointing toward the ceiling. In addition, we were not at our desks; we were in the center of the room in our wheelchairs, so that made it even more difficult. If I were the only one in

the class who needed a student aid to help me with this, it would have been quite embarrassing. But with Brad there, I could look across the room and see that he had to get help as well. I am sure that I gave him the same type of comfort. While I was still in a minority group, our size had grown significantly.

Now that Brad was one of the “official” students, and I had grown out of my rebellion phase, the stage was set for us to become really close. I had always looked up to my cousin Kevin as one would to an older brother. On the other hand, since I was older I felt that Brad looked up to me the same way and I felt toward him, as he was my younger brother. Brad also had a great sense of humor that made being around him a real joy. Much like with Kevin, Brad laughed a lot at my jokes. Several of the students in our class suffered from learning disabilities, and conversations with them could only go so far. Brad was one of the few students there who I could challenge, and in all likelihood he would return with a comment that was even more challenging.

After the first week of school that year it was getting close to the Labor Day weekend. Everyone who is familiar with MD recognizes this weekend as the time that Jerry Lewis has his telethon. One of the main sponsors of the telethon was Budweiser. For example, they advertise that a certain percentage of their revenues will go to the telethon. The day before the Labor Day weekend, the students who had done well were allowed to bring some money from home and get a coke and drink it in the teachers’ lounge. The teacher went around asking everyone what they preferred, and when she came to Brad and me we told her that instead of having a coke we wanted to have a beer – Budweiser, since they were sponsoring the telethon. She did not buy it, which is just as well, since neither of us intended to be beer drinkers.

The way that the school year began was not indicative of how good it would turn out to be. The main problems early on were the student teachers. I have had many student teachers over the course of years – some friendly, some really helpful to the point that I got attached to them, and others who I would gladly do without. The two that were working this semester seemed to have the idea that if they were going to be effective they would have to be mean. At times they could be friendly, but there were a lot of things that they did that could be construed as mean-spirited – a lot of little items. However, one particular incident typifies their behavior. On occasion it still bothers me today. It started out very innocently. We were in between classes one day early in the semester and the student teachers were decorating one of the classroom bulletin boards and a classmate and I were nearby talking. The subject came around to wrecks that we have had with our wheelchairs. Specifically, we were discussing who was doing the “pushing” when those wrecks occurred. Brad mentioned a situation in which he wrecked when his sister was doing the pushing. That reminded me of a time when I had had a similar minor catastrophe when my sister was pushing me. Suddenly, one of the student teachers asked: “You let your sister push you around the house?”

It struck me as strange, since she asked it in such a way as though I had committed a crime. I responded that I did. I did not have time to elaborate; I did not have her doing it all the time – sometimes I push myself. I did not really think much about it until later that afternoon when I overheard the student teacher talking to one of the assistant coaches, and I got the impression that just because Brad and I allowed our sisters to push us, they thought that we were lazy. I recall only hearing a few words of this, but this was the impression that I got. I talked to the assistant coach

about it, and he did not seem to want to take any stand on this – he was quite non-committal. Not that I came right out and talked about this ... I just hinted around at it, but he did not seem to want to take the bait. And it is understandable that, being an assistant coach, he did not have the full authority for the class in any event.

This was really starting to bother me now. At 17 years old, I had been in a wheelchair for six or seven years, and suddenly they want to call me lazy. For several years now I had had a general understanding with the teachers that they would get someone to push me between classes – to the door of the classroom, and then once I arrived there I would push myself the rest of the way. I was quite proud of the fact that I could still maneuver within the classrooms. Some people with MD lose most of their mobility by age 17, so I did not think that I was doing so badly. Now, it seemed that this policy was being called into question as fostering laziness. I was quite upset about this, but decided not to make a big issue about it.

The only problem was that when I arrived for school the next day the decision had been made mandating that I would not be given further help between classes. On top of that, they watched to be sure that I would not get someone to help me. They claimed that they were just standing there to be sure that I had company, but this was a gross insult to my intelligence. As far as I know this decision had been made without a conference with the other teachers.

This was no minor affront to my emotional stability, as I felt that a major injustice had been done. I could identify with the colonists at the eve of the revolutionary war. My analogy to “no taxation without representation” was that they had not consulted me or the other teachers involved – they just took it upon themselves to make a decision that they were hardly qualified to make. I felt that I was being treated as a small child, seemingly just to satisfy their whims to experiment. I felt trapped, since if I complained I felt that I would end up in the principal’s office or possibly worse – so I kept it to myself.

That evening when I went home I was quite upset and not talking very much. Mom recognized my depressed condition and asked what had happened at school, so I told her. However, I feel that I might not have been totally candid, because somehow she got the idea that the reason that I was not acting normally was just that I was tired since I had to push myself all day. This might have been part of it; but the main reason was that I was just plain mad. However, I must have covered this up. Perhaps I wanted to work through this myself and did not want my mother to over-react. If so, it did not quite work, for she called the teacher and they worked things out to go back to the old system. My only regret that I have now over the whole incident is in my not going to the teacher myself directly to talk about this problem. However, we did not have that close a relationship, and I did not feel comfortable going to her about this problem. In the broad scope of things this was probably not a major incident, and it soon worked itself out. However, at the time it seemed quite traumatic to me.

One day when PE class was over I had to push myself down to the other end of the school building where my regular class was meeting. The coach assumed that someone was going to be pushing me, but my classmates had all left. So, I just decided to tough it out and see if I could still do it. Since I had been well-rested I managed it just fine, and was quite proud of myself for it. I did

not want to do this every day, since it had definitely worn me out. But, doing it once in a while gave me a great deal of satisfaction. The problem was that my teacher came out of her office and saw me. She asked if I had pushed myself, and I told her that I had. She seemed somewhat surprised. I was concerned that she might over-react either by getting upset when I had taken the initiative or to deny me the help of the other students when I really needed it. Again, I should have discussed this with her to be sure. My concerns in this case were not founded, as her experience was adequate to enable her to understand that a balance was necessary.

I should explain at this point the difference between the muscles in MD patients and those in normal people. Continued exercise in normal people produces a building of those muscles that are exercised, especially if there is an incremental increase in the weight or repetitions of the exercise. The process is one of tearing the muscle down and rebuilding it. Each time it is torn down and rebuilt it comes back stronger, more prepared for the task than before. As people age their ability to rebuild muscles like this diminishes. Similarly, in MD patients, this process is completely interrupted. The disease itself tears down the muscles and the rebuilding process does not take place, so that even just with normal use of one's muscles there is a diminishing of capability. When the muscles are stressed through strenuous exercise there is no assurance that they will grow back stronger. This is not to say that exercise cannot help. But at some point when the disease is affecting those muscles being exercised, it might do more harm than good, since the muscles need all the rest that they can get just to survive with their normal functions. In short, MD patients should only exercise under the strict supervision of their doctors. Some types of exercise can help, but exercise within itself is not a remedy for MD.

There were other things about the student teachers that I would prefer not to enumerate, since each one might seem petty. When you put them all together, however, you get the perception that these two student teachers just did not like their students in general. It seemed that they just took every opportunity to be mean-spirited. This was puzzling to me, since they had overtly made the choice to work with the handicapped. If they were going to resent working with handicapped people they were going to be both miserable themselves and the dispensers of misery for their entire working lives. The medical/educational field just does not need this type of attitude. They would do far better working in a slaughter house or something else that fits their inclinations, with all due respect to those who must suffer such nasty jobs.

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The first semester had its redeeming characteristics. We continued with the regular high school courses. We completed the history of Alabama and went on to the history of the United States, which I found to be of particular interest. I discovered that US history was quite a bit more interesting than state history. It was my best subject, and I failed to get an A on only one test.

In the early 1980s the state of Alabama had decided that many of its students were graduating from high school and were having trouble reading and being competitive in college. English and Math skills were particularly deficient. So, it was decided that starting with my class they would administer a statewide test of reading, language and math. Each student would take the test in their junior and senior years and would have four chances to pass it in order to graduate. Beginning in 1981, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher began preparing my friend Sherri and me for that test. In the fall

of 1981 through the spring of 1983 both of these teachers gave us various tests as practice examples for our taking the actual test. Therefore, the teachers would know what we needed to work on most in order to assure that we would ultimately pass the test.

In fall, 1983 it was time to take that first test. The tests were to be given at Central High School, and Sherri and I were to meet the rest of the students there. First we had to go early one morning to hear the lecture given by one of the officials from Montgomery on what the rules were and what was expected of us. Two or three days later, it was time for the tests – there were three, for reading, language and math that were given over three days starting early in the school day. I was somewhat nervous about the test, but did not put a whole lot of pressure on myself because I knew that I would have three more chances. I was not worried about passing the reading test at all – it seemed quite easy. On the next day I was very confident that I had done well on the language test also. However, the math test on the third day was another story. I have never felt good about my math skills, and so I was somewhat nervous about this test.

A week later the results came back from the tests. It was no great surprise to me that while I had passed the reading and language, I had failed the math portion. This was not unexpected, and it served to identify those areas of math where I was having the greatest problems, and I met with the teacher and we concentrated heavily on these areas over the next several months. We had adequate time before the next test.

I realized that if I had been born before November 17<sup>th</sup> I would have started my school year the previous year and would not even have had to take the test. This became a standing joke with my parents as I aggravated them about not having me a month earlier so that I would not have had to take this test.

The first semester of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade was punctuated by a number of negative events; some relatively minor (as discussed above), but others of grave concern. It was about a week before Thanksgiving when Brad came to school not feeling too well. He did not want to eat lunch, but he made it through the day. A couple of days later his condition worsened. They decided to take him to the doctor, and then admitted him to the hospital. We did not know what was happening, and so we were quite nervous over his condition at this time. The doctors felt that he was dehydrated, and they gave him fluids intravenously. As it turned out, the problem was not that he had too little, but too much fluid around his heart. Thus, their treatment made his condition much worse and he began to have problems breathing. For a while there was some question as to whether he would survive or not. Finally, however, they figured out their mistake and were able to adjust his treatment. He had to spend several weeks on oxygen.

This incident caused great concern at school. It was of particular concern to me perhaps because I recalled when they had first taken Coach Bryant to the hospital with chest pains. I remembered how everyone said that he was laughing and joking with the people there and that he was going to be all right. However, very shortly after that he had a massive heart attack and died. For several weeks I went around in a daze fully expecting that when I went home from school I would learn that he had passed away that day. But when he began to improve I was very much encour-

aged, and by the time that we took our annual trip to Louisiana for Christmas, I was fully assured that he would be returning to us in a very short time.

Brad had to stay in the hospital through Christmas. The members of his church pitched in and hired an ambulance so that he could spend a little time at his house and enjoy some of the Christmas festivities at home with his family. Meanwhile, in Louisiana, they were suffering one of the coldest Christmas days that I can ever remember. Because of the weather we decided to return home earlier than usual to check make sure that the water pipes at our house had not frozen up. The first thing that I did when we returned was to call up my friends and check on them, and I also found out more about Brad. I learned that the doctors had put him on a special diet, a mostly sodium-free diet (avoiding salt). Several times when I visited him and we had snacks, it would be salt-free popcorn rather than potato chips. He had to be weighed every day to be sure that he was not retaining fluids. His parents also had to record his intake of fluids. Before they released Brad from the hospital, they trained his parents on methods to weigh him to assure that he was not retaining fluids. I also learned that he was slowly recovering and would return home soon.

Once New Year 1984 was rung in we got ready to go back to school. At the time I did not realize it, but this new year could be described by the classical phrase from the Tale of Two Cities: “it was the best of times; it was the worst of times.”

The year started off great – the second semester of my 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Brad missed the first couple of weeks recovering, but he was able to come half days for about a week. Before we knew it, though, he was back with us, and things were back to normal. My friendship with Brad was brought to somewhat of a standstill because of his illness. I did not have a lot of contact with him at that time because he could not receive visitors. But now that he was back we became very close. We spent a lot of time at each other’s houses. We enjoyed the same type of music and just about everything else. Also joining us in many activities at this time was Jimmy. We had long conversations and played basketball together. It was usually Brad and Jimmy against Steve (another of our classmates) and me. We would go back and forth down the court shooting baskets. Brad and Jimmy were both in wheelchairs as I was. Steve had Cerebral Palsy, but he was able to walk and run some. It was a close enough match to keep it interesting.

Another round of Special Olympics started at about this time. The students at Oak Hill participated in basketball, sometimes playing each other and sometimes playing those from other schools. Our teacher had invited students from another school (similar to Oak Hill, but it served the handicapped students outside Tuscaloosa). They would bring their team over to Oak Hill to play against us. What made this of interest to Brad, Jimmy and me was that they needed some officials for the game. My job was to be the official scorekeeper to let the fans know what the score was. Jimmy was in charge of the clock and he handled it with a stopwatch. Brad was the whistle-person, signaling such things as when time-outs were up and when the game was over. Between us we were responsible for handling these aspects of the officiating.

One time just before the half time the seconds were ticking off, and I had to get Brad’s attention. Jimmy informed me that time had run out but I had to notify Brad twice before he got the message. Then, all of a sudden, all of the players, the coaches and the referee came over to the ta-

bles and asked me if the last shot had counted. They confused me and worried me for a few minutes, because I was too busy getting Brad's attention to notice what had happened on the other end of the court. Then suddenly I remembered that as I turned to get Brad's attention I had seen that the players were only then running down to the other end of the court. I realized that anything that would have happened after that would have occurred after the game was technically over. So I told them with a good conscience that the points did not count. However, as is always the case in a controversial situation, you are only going to be popular with half of the people. Half of them think you are a hero, and the other half hates your guts. The ruling went against our school, so I was out of sorts with our people for a while, but they surely realized that I was not showing favoritism.

My fondest memories were just hanging around with Brad and Jimmy and enjoying having others to relate to. This was something that I had really missed during my intermediate years of special education, and recapturing it at this point was quite gratifying. It was very enjoyable having conversations with those who had similar problems but were on the same intellectual level. Sharing other activities, such as playing and officiating at the basketball games was the icing on the cake. We did other things, such as attending the basketball game between the University of Alabama and LSU. While basketball is not as exciting as football for me, it runs a close second. My father had gotten tickets for several games earlier that year.

On one occasion, I was sitting at the end of the table at Home Economics class with Brad and Jimmy on each side. I had mentioned to them that I was going to the basketball game that night, and I was surprised when Jimmy said that he was going as well. However, Brad was somewhat bothered because he wanted to go along as well. There is a place set aside for wheelchairs behind the basketball goal of the coliseum. I arrived first and soon Jimmy arrived and pulled his chair next to mine. Coach Wilson from Oak Hill was at the game and stopped by to say hello. He could not sit with us, since we were in a special handicap zone. Just before the game started, along came Brad with his cousin – it was more than he could take to be left out. We were both more than overjoyed when we saw him.

One of the first things that Brad decided to do upon arrival at the game (as we all do now and then) was to go off his diet, so he sent his cousin Joe out to get a pizza. It turned out that just about everyone in Tuscaloosa was at the game that night, and at that very moment, here comes Brad's doctor. The wheelchair area is quite conspicuous, and everyone can see who is there. It was nice of him to join us, and we struck a conversation, exchanging niceties and also getting an update on his condition. I could see that Brad was getting a little edgy, not wishing his cousin to come back with a raft of pizza and coke, both of which were off limits for Brad. I was behind the doctor and started making faces at Brad and motioning in the direction that his cousin had left for the concession stands. Just as the doctor seemed to be winding down ("Well, you-all enjoy the game now..."), here comes cousin Joe. The two of them almost ran into each other, but the doctor either did not put two and two together, or was resolved to ignore the episode. That was a great start to a great night. The game went down to the final buzzer and UA won on two crucial free throws. Of course, it was not just the game; it was enjoying it with friends that made it such a special occasion. The game was over ten years ago, but I still have the ticket stubs – it was a night to remember.

I first met Jimmy when I had attended summer school in 1978. There was a teacher's assistant who was helping that summer, and both Jimmy and I vied for her attention. Now, during the spring semester of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, two new student teachers began serving the classroom. However, there was no competition between us at this point, since he tended to talk to one, and I spent most of my time with the other. This semester they were much friendlier than in the fall semester, and I was closely attracted to one of them. She was quite friendly and had an excellent sense of humor. She was originally from New Jersey and I joked with her on how small New Jersey was. She acted like she was irritated with the jokes, but I think she enjoyed it.

With the spring of 1984 came the prospect of the dreadful math test, which was the only one that I had to take at this point. Sherri and not been able to attend school for a while, since her mother was expecting a child and could not bring her. She had missed the test.

Our teacher was busy that day and sent one of the student teachers to accompany us. Fortunately, she sent the one that I particularly liked. The test was just as hard as before, and it took me forever to finish it. When I did finish I could not tell if I had passed or not. After the test we went down to the doorway to wait for my mother to pick us up. I noticed that a van had pulled over to the side and parked half on the sidewalk. It was not our van, so the two of us waited and talked together for 20 minutes or so. I learned quite a bit about her past family history and the like, but then we started wondering if there was not something wrong. It turned out that the van that had been parked was, in fact, the new van that we had just gotten this week. I had not gotten used to the new colors of it to realize that it was Mom, and was still expecting the old van, so at a distance I did not realize that it was she. I was gratified somewhat that I had had additional time to talk with my student teacher, so perhaps subconsciously I did not want to see that van as being ours.

About a month later the test results came back and the teacher came and told me that even though I had done better, I had not passed. I do not know if my facial expression betrayed me, but in my mind I was thinking: "That's it, I don't care, there is no way; I can't do it; just forget it." Then she began to tell me that there was considerable improvement and that if we would work together, I could pass the test. I realized as she was walking away that she was not treating me (as I had expected) like some kind of a kindergarten kid being addressed by Mr. Rogers. She was giving me a pep talk, much like a coach would give to a team that was down at the half time. She was not going to give up on me, and at that point I was determined that I was not going to give up either.

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I had formed a close relationship with the teacher that I had in the 9<sup>th</sup> and part of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade before she had moved on. She definitely left a void, but that was replaced somewhat by our PE teacher, Coach Wilson. He had taken the handicapped students to various Special Olympic events around the state, and we had all grown close to him and looked up to him as a role model. So in the spring of 1984 he asked me if I wanted to join him and the other student to a trip to Huntsville, Alabama to participate in Olympic bowling. I really liked the idea, but I was not sure if I would be able to go. In some cases there were so many students who needed help in getting dressed or getting out of bed that they had to bring a friend or relative to help them out. This was not a good time for that, since my mother had fallen the previous year, and neither she nor my fa-

ther would be available to go. As it turned out, however, only about ten or twelve students were going, and all of them were walking, so Coach Wilson could help me.

Many of the kids from poor families had never even been out of the county. I was amazed when several of them thought that we had left Alabama just going to Huntsville. I had a good friend who went with us (I will call him Peter). We rode the same bus to school everyday, and he helped me a lot by pushing me and helping me change before and after swimming and other things like that. We decided that when we went to Huntsville we would share a room along with another one of his friends, Roy. We got the teacher's aid to ask the coach, and he agreed. We left right after school on a Thursday and went up to Huntsville, which was about a three-hour trip. Once we got there we checked into the hotel. The events were to take place the following day so, we just spent our time that evening at the hotel watching TV and getting ready for the competition in the morning. That night it began snowing, so it felt quite secure to be in the warm hotel room as the wind began to swirl the snow outside of our window.

Around 10 o'clock Roy was taking a shower and Peter was flipping the channels around when he came upon the Jeffersons. He left it there, and I thought that that was good – we would all sit and watch this. But then he went in to the bathroom to take a shower, now that Roy was drying off. About that time to my horror I realized that we were not watching the Jeffersons; we were watching All in the Family, with Archie Bunker, the biggest bigot on TV. And to top it off, this was the episode in which the Jeffersons were moving into the all-white neighborhood. It did not take an inspired prophet to realize that Archie would have some choice words. I began thinking that this was going to get very uncomfortable for all of us, since race had never been an issue in my relationship with these guys before. The fact that they were black was just a non-issue. We were all different, so what if someone's skin color was different from yours? This was the least of our differences, and the least of our problems. The problem was that I could not get up to change the channels and could not reach the controller.

Fortunately, they went to a commercial, as Roy finished drying off and came out.

“This is boring, how about seeing if there are some sports on ...” I pleaded.

Roy found a basketball game, paused for a minute on that, and then started flipping again. By the time he returned to the original channel the scene had changed from the Jeffersons to the Bunkers and there was Archie's fat face with his stupid grin staring at his “meat-head” son-in-law. Roy just flipped right on past it, to my great relief and settled on a movie. “That all right?” he asked.

Oh, yea, yea, that will do just fine.” I said, as I breathed a sigh of relief.

The snow continued to come down hard that night. The heat in the room, on the other hand, was quite high, and they asked me if they could change it. Instead of putting the thermostat down, however, he turned it off completely. In the morning when Coach Wilson came into the room he had a fit thinking that we were trying to get pneumonia. He turned it back on, and since we had an hour before getting up it had a chance to heat things up. The snow did not cause too much of a

problem, although in the south they close schools at the first glimpse of a snowflake. But this did not affect the bowling contest. I had a great time with the other students. We all did quite well and several of us got medals. Getting your picture taken with your medal is a great occasion.

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This year (1984) was also the year that I got serious about my religious beliefs. For as long as I could remember we had attended church. Of course, to a child, attending church is more of a chore than a privilege; and for those years it is really not your religion, it is your parent's religion. But, as you grow older, sooner or later, it is either going to remain your parents' religion or it going to become yours too. This is not something that comes along suddenly (at least not for me) – it was something that developed almost imperceptibly over a long period of time.

As I studied the bible I learned that in order to be pleasing to God it was necessary to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. This belief should cause a person to repent of their sins and be willing to confess this belief before others. The point at which a person has his sins forgiven and is joined to Christ occurs when that person is born again (John 3:5), a process that takes place during baptism (Romans 6:1f; Acts 22:16). In the spring of 1983 Dad had mentioned baptism to me and I gave it serious consideration. But as I mentioned above, I was quite confused about it at that time mainly because I had not given it personal study on my own.

But as 1984 progressed I subjected my parents' religion to evaluation. It was a gradual thing as I challenged one point after another, but could not see any viable alternatives. It is not that I agreed with everything that they believed, but the vast majority of it began to clarify, as I began to understand more and more of the New Testament biblical teaching. It began in the winter when an adjustment was made in the bible class that I was attending. I had been in a class for high-school aged kids, but it was determined that this was not doing me a whole lot of good since I was generally far ahead of the class. As a consequence of this, they put me in with the college kids. I feel that this change was the marked beginning in my spiritual growth. Before I just learned facts (in some cases literally just filling in the blanks); now I was intent upon understanding the reason behind the doctrines.

The teacher of the class was Russ LaGrone, a college student himself, but he knew the bible much better than most young men his age. As he taught he made the bible come alive, and for the first time that I can remember, I really paid attention to what he said. The bible began really making sense to me and not being a string of unrelated teachings.

Years ago, when I was about six a teacher had told me that any type of story that you would ever want – drama, comedy, and tragedy – was all in the bible. I did not put much stock in that. Sure, that was what all of the teachers said to get us interested. But Russ proved that she was right, and that the bible was a very interesting book. I was looking for a different source of reality – the one that I had always looked toward, based on my own feelings and perceptions had failed me. Here, in the bible, was the answer.

Occasionally Russ would preach a sermon, filling in for our regular preacher. His preaching was like his teaching – it was very enjoyable and I got a lot out of it. At this time though, I only

attended church on Sunday mornings. Services were also held on Sunday night and Wednesday night, and Dad attended them; however, it was thought to be too tiring for me as developed as my MD had now become. This was a convenient excuse, and I did not insist because I did not really want to go anyway – I figured that Sunday morning was plenty for me. I will say that when I did not attend it made me feel guilty to some extent. However, my conscience was not developed enough in this regard yet, and so I was able to easily over-rule it. So, I would just play along with the idea that I was too tired to go, and since there was no way for them to know, they just went along with it as well.

After the first 13 weeks of 1984, I found out that my new bible teacher was going to be moved from the Sunday morning to the Wednesday night class. Since I had been learning so much from him, I decided that it would be wise for me to go back and start attending on Wednesday night so that I could take part in his class. Other things were happening as well – I was paying attention to the worship services and determining critically if they were, indeed, based on scriptural teachings. And, I realized that there was scriptural reasoning provided for everything that was being taught and practiced – something that had escaped me to this point. Sure, this had always been stated, but now I was in a position to evaluate whether this was reality or just lip service.

It was not that all of my motivation was purely in the spiritual realm. For the first time, I was developing affection for someone of my own age – in this case the sister of my bible study teacher. However, she was just as shy as I was and we were doing well just to get up enough courage to say “hi” to each other. I never really found out how she felt about me, and without our speaking that much, nothing really came of it.

In the spring of 1984 my parents decided that they would begin attending another church. It was a group that was equally as bible-based as the first. A new group had been meeting across the river in Northport, and they had known many of the people in that group for some time, so they decided to see if this would better fit our family’s spiritual needs. My first reaction was that I did not want to go because I would be leaving my favorite bible study teacher behind (to say nothing of his sister). However, I found out that he would soon be moving to Atlanta, and this made the transition somewhat easier.

The new church had only been there for about a year, but several had come out of our previous congregation, and my parents knew several of the others. The change had a further impact on me to cause me to challenge my former beliefs and to rethink my views. This church had started essentially from nothing but the zeal and knowledge of the few bible believers. It was not the concept of a church that I had always had – that of a group sanctioned by some larger organization. Clearly, this was more like a mom-and-pop independent hamburger shop as opposed to a McDonald’s franchise. Could it work? Could people just gather together with no other means of arriving at a common approach than by sitting down and studying the bible? Well, at this point that was yet to be seen, but there was no doubt that they were fully functional without any assistance from any greater organization. As the years went by and they did their work and expanded the facilities to accommodate their success I was to feel a part of this group just as if I was one of the “founders.” However, at this point it seemed a great experiment, and gave me the realization that my obligation was not to any organization of man, but it was to the God spoken of in the bible.

When April of 1984 came around I felt that I had matured to a point where I was compelled to act on my faith, and I was baptized. The turning point came as I struggled for a week or so with the fact that I was going to have to give up some things, and, as the bible says, I was “counting the cost.” But, I decided that this was one last sign of immaturity, and that I would just put the entire thing from my mind and take it up another day. But then I contemplated the rich young ruler who came to Jesus wanting to know what he lacked. We had been studying this in bible class recently. This man came to Jesus apparently having conformed himself to the law as best he could – Jesus did not argue with him when he stated that he had kept the law from his youth up. But Jesus knew what it was that was his idol, and he told him that if he wanted to be saved he needed to separate himself from it (in this case it required that he sell all that he had, give it to the poor and follow Jesus). The man went away sorrowful because he had great possessions. This was the place (Matt. 19:16f) where Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of heaven, for this man was not willing to give up what he held most dear for eternal life.

It was then that I realized that I would be making the same mistake. Perhaps it was not riches, but it was something that was standing between God and me, and that thing had to be sacrificed. Thus, to my father’s surprise I informed him that I wanted to be baptized into Christ, as it states in Romans 6:3. When I had discussed baptism several months ago with my father, we had decided that when the time was right we would have it done at the Oakhill school in the swimming pool. But this year I felt that this would be a whole lot of trouble. So, we decided that this could be done just as well in our bathtub, which was more than adequate to completely immerse me. We invited several of the people from the church and a preacher that I had known when I was younger, who actually did the baptizing.

It was a very active day, that Saturday (May 5<sup>th</sup>) when all of these people arrived at our house. There is no standard ceremony for baptism, and in the bible they are performed in a wide variety of places, as the situation dictates. I was put in the lift that I use whenever I get into the bathtub. My father operated the lift, but before releasing it to lower me into the water the preacher asked me: “Michael, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?” It took me about a split second as my mind played some tricks on me: “Is that all there is to it? ... why, I could have been baptized a long time ago if that is all there was to it.” Of course, that is not all there was to it ... the ceremony perhaps, but not the dedication of the life to follow. I nodded in agreement, indicating my belief, and he said: “I now baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Dad then let the lift lower me into the water and they pushed my head under just for a second. That was it. No fanfare, no bombs bursting in the air, but I had obeyed my Lord and I was now a member of the body of Christ.

My sister had also been going through the same thought processes that I had, and the very next day she made the decision to be baptized as well. Needless to say, there was great rejoicing in our house on this weekend. We both received a lot of encouragement and I can see in retrospect now the reason that our parents had changed to the local congregation where we worshipped. It was not that there was anything wrong with the group that we left, but there was something much friendlier and encouraging about this smaller, much more tight-knit group. I am not sure what

would have occurred had we stayed at the larger church; but certainly things were working out here to my spiritual betterment, and I feel that the decision that they made was certainly in my interests.

Now that I had obeyed the gospel there were a lot of burdens that were lifted off my shoulders. One, of course, was this battle of depression that I had fought for so long. Before it seemed as though there was no one to go to, and the guilt just piled up. Now I understood that when I had evil thoughts and harbored hatred in my heart, for either God, my family, or my fellow man, I could go to God and ask for forgiveness, and I would have the full assurance of a Savior who had been tempted in all ways like I have been. Now I did not have to worry about my life here and how long it would last, for I had an eternity to look forward to with God. This was not an instant solution to my depression problem, but it led to a major improvement in my general outlook on life. Now I could live and have life fully not worrying about death.

At the new church I made a new friend, Jeff Armstrong, who has rheumatoid arthritis that has afflicted him since the age of 12. He lived with his parents and brothers and sisters in West Virginia where his father was a coal miner. He was the youngest in his family, and his parents were up in years, and his father was about to retire. However, just at that time Jeff was stricken with this crippling form of arthritis. Therefore, it was necessary for his father to continue working to keep from losing his insurance. He told me before that he had begun noticing something was wrong with his father – that he was not acting quite right. It turned out that there was gas in the mines where he had been working, and his suspicions were probably correct. This was not fully revealed, however, until there was a violent and deadly explosion in the mines that killed over 60 miners, including his father. This was quite devastating to my friend and his family. As if this were not enough, less than two years later one of his brothers was killed in a hit-and-run accident. For this reason, his family decided to relocate to Virginia. But, in the meantime, he had suffered so much from his disease that someone had to come to his house to help him on a daily basis.

They told him that there would be a time when they could replace his joints with artificial joints. However, this could not occur until he was fully grown, which would be another 10-15 years that he would have to suffer. (Later on at the age of 23 they did perform this surgery and he was able to tell the difference immediately.) Meanwhile, however, he was baptized into Christ as well, and he began taking an active part in preaching the gospel. Somehow he found his way to Alabama and he had gotten married. He took some courses at the University of Alabama and eventually earned his Bachelors' degree. We both had a lot in common in that we had overcome crippling handicaps without allowing it to bring us down. I attribute his success to his good humor and desire to help others. They had a daughter and I became the godfather.

After becoming a member of the church I began taking an active part in the public worship by reading scripture and leading in prayer. I was not sure how I should go about this or whom I should talk to, but I did my best and it seemed to work out fine. One Sunday night in each month we would dedicate a service to worshipping God in song with additional scripture readings and prayers. It was not more than a month after I had been baptized when they came up and asked my father if I would be willing to read a passage of scripture for that service. Dad thought about it and turned and asked me if I wanted to do it. This was a goal that I had set for myself, and so I accepted. However, this was my first time I had ever read in public like this, and I was quite nervous.

I decided to read from Matthew 5, the beatitudes, which was a familiar passage to me. We had studied this before and all of us had to memorize most of these verses. They flowed right off the tongue, so I had no problem. But this produced overconfidence in me, and the next time that I was asked to read I picked a difficult passage from the Old Testament and there were many words in there which I did not know how to pronounce. I managed to stumble through it, but decided that I would stick to passages that I was familiar with in the future.

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In the meantime school had let out and we started the Summer of 1984, which was between my 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Once again I was going to be spending a lot of my time with the WACS program. I was not keen on going back after the previous summer, since that had been disastrous with the depression and all. WACS might have helped somewhat, but basically it led to extended periods of idle time, which was one of the things that triggered my depression, and I was very fearful that this would happen again this summer.

I did not wish to bring this subject up with my parents, since it had already been arranged. You might have noticed that whenever you do something and it is great, it is never the same when you do it a second time; similarly, when things are really bad, they are never quite as bad as you might anticipate them to be the second time. So it was with the WACS program this summer. In fact, I really enjoyed it, and even though I had a lot of spare time, I did not get into problems of depression.

Perhaps this was because two former student teachers of mine volunteered to work with WACS that year. One of them was the one who had insisted that I push myself all over the school the previous year, and the other one was the really friendly one from New Jersey that I got along with quite well (who I will call Ms. Unger). She continued to help me with my math, since the teacher had given me a large number of problems to do over the summer in order to prepare me to pass my math test on the next go round. The other activities of WACS included the same as before – going to the movies and the mall, and going bowling. Bowling was fun, but I particularly remembered that one time when we played two games back to back that summer every muscle in my body ached. I guess this was indicative of my deteriorating condition, or perhaps I had not used these muscles in a while.

In case you are wondering how I could bowl with no use of my legs and only about half of the use of my arms at this point, here is the explanation. The bowling alley had constructed a ramp for the handicapped that we could roll the ball down. It was a grooved ramp so that the ball could not roll off the sides of it. My job was to aim the ramp and put some spin on the ball so that it would do its job on the pins at the end of the alley. It looked fairly simple, but there was quite a bit of skill required, especially since it was difficult to put a hook on the ball. If you bowl you know what happens when you just roll a straight shot head on down the lane – a good chance for a split. If I did not get a strike on the first shot, then I would have to maneuver the ramp to get a spare. Between that and putting the spin on the ball you can see how my arms would get really worn out quickly, but it was a lot of fun.

Those who attended WACS were mostly in their 30's. I was there mostly as a guest. Most of them had overcome a lot – they had been through many trials with their handicaps and knew what it took to make the best of it and move on. One of the students there had written a book, and he was impressing on me and the other handicapped guest that was there that summer that every handicapped person should write a book. Interesting.

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By the time that July of 1984 came by we had had our cat, Snowball for at least a year, and it was time to celebrate her first birthday. However, we did not know exactly what date that she had arrived, and upon long deliberations and some close consultations with Snowball herself we decided that we would hold the celebration at the very middle of the month inasmuch as this would minimize the error in either direction. So that afternoon around 2 PM Missy and I went outside to the carport where Snowball was taking one of her many naps of the day on top of Missy's car. We woke her up and took her to the corner of the carport to some steps that led to a door to the laundry room (that we never used). One by one, my sister and I presented her with presents for her first birthday. I presented her with some plastic Easter eggs that were left over from my childhood, the kind that you unscrew in the middle. Usually these can come apart to reveal the candy within – in this case I stored some of her favorite cat treats. I opened them and they fell on the steps and she consumed them immediately. Missy presented her with a bird on a rope, which was calculated to drive kitties nuts as they tried to get it off the rope on which it was hanging. Next we gave her part of a can of tuna, a great delicacy to the cat world for her birthday cake. As soon as she finished with her tuna, it was time for pictures. We all put on our hats but when we tried to put one on her, she would have none of it. The best we could do was to hold it just above her head while the pictures were being taken. As long as we did not try to tie it around her neck, she put up with it. Sure, it was silly, but it was a lot of fun.

By this time Brad had fully recovered from his illness, and we spent a lot of time together that summer. We would spend time at the mall when our parents went shopping. Our family did a lot of things together that summer as well. In fact, the summer of 1984 seemed to be a really dreamtime when everything was going well. So well, in fact, that it seemed that I had everything under control and had totally overcome all of my problems.

All good things have to come to an end, and when things are going well one might fear that this cannot go on forever. Our problems started on a Saturday morning in late July, just a few weeks after Snowball's birthday party. I got up and was reading the paper when Dad announced that he was going out for a walk. My sister had gotten up shortly after I did, and she and Mom were washing clothes. When Dad came back he came up behind me. I thought that he was going to pull his trick of hugging me when he was sweaty, and I was prepared to yell him off when I realized that he had something serious to say. He informed me that when he went for a walk he had come upon our cat Snowball who had gotten killed trying to cross the road down by the river. He thought that I was getting ready to cry, since I was very close to the cat and enjoyed playing with her on a regular basis. However, it had not really sunk in. When he told my sister, however, she began to cry and this got through to me. We had looked forward to having another birthday party, which was not to be. Dad brought the cat back onto the back porch, and we saw her one more time before he buried her in the back yard. To our surprise, he even put a wooden cross on the spot where he buried her.

Mom and dad decided that since we had become so fond of the cat that we would go down to the humane society and get another, which we did the very next day. We went to church first, since it was a Sunday. After lunch we got back in the van and went across town to the humane society. There were several cats in the cages there, mostly kittens. We narrowed it down to two, but had a hard time deciding between them. I wanted one that I felt was a little older, while my sister wanted a younger, more active one. I finally gave into her wishes. We soon found out that the humane society charged \$32 for shots and things like that, and we did not have enough money with us, so we had to go all the way back and get it. It was not until we got the new cat home that I realized how close I had been to Snowball, and my emotions got the better of me.

Looking back now, if I had to do it over again, I would have waited a couple of weeks to enable me to get over the previous one. Of course, I got over it and was soon able to enjoy our new cat. Missy and I argued over what to name the cat. She wanted to call it Mischief, and I wanted to call it Calico, since that was the name of the breed. When we took it to the vet they just put down "Kitty Mason" for its name.

In August of 1984 we took our annual visit to Louisiana to visit with my grandparents and cousins. It seemed like a normal trip. The only thing out of the ordinary occurred when my grandmother asked Dad to go over and get my great-grandfather Fontenot out of the nursing home and bring him to the house for a visit, since it would be another four months before we would be back. Soon they were off and they returned with him in about a half an hour. The visit was brief but nice. A couple weeks later after we returned home, Dad got a call from his brother informing us that great-grand-pa Fontenot had passed away in his sleep. I was saddened by the news but glad that I had gotten to see him that one last time. It was well known that he was not happy in the nursing home, and, of course, he was getting up in age, so his death was not unexpected. However, my heart went out to those in my father's family, since for them this was clearly the end of an era. With him went a lot of family history, for he represented some of the last vestiges of the Cajun heritage on my Grandmother's side of the family. He was the last of my relatives that could speak fluently in both French and English.

Another factor that I had to grope with this summer involved my deteriorating condition. As mentioned before, things tend to deteriorate in such small increments, and it is not until some event occurs (such as the purchase of a wheelchair) that the reality sets in. In this case it was the purchase of a hospital bed that brought it home to me. All these years I had been sleeping in a trundle bed – a second bed that could be pulled out under the other bed so that people could stay over. This was a problem for Dad to pick me up, since he could not get his feet under this bed, and I was getting heavier for him to lift me from the bed into the wheelchair. Something different was needed, and they decided to go ahead and get something that would serve the purpose from that point forward. Between our insurance, the MD association, and Medicaid, we could afford to get a hospital-type bed. However, I fought this tooth and nail. I take pride in not viewing myself as handicapped. Purchasing a hospital bed was like putting a sign in my room: **handicapped, HANDICAPPED, HANDICAPPED!**

However, my friend Brad was quite pleased with the transaction, since he already had a hospital bed, and figured that I had just joined the club. My theory was that at 14 he was still enjoying the attention of being handicapped and was not yet grappling with the impossibility of independence that became a reality later on in life when most normal people were leaving the nest. At 18, I was facing this, a very different reality than is faced by a 14 year old. I could do without the attention.

The main thing that I was afraid of was that every time that I would go to bed, there would be that huge hospital bed reminding me that I was handicapped. Or worst yet – that I was living in a hospital or a nursing home. However, there was one thing that I did forget. Since this was my own bedroom in my own house, we would not be putting those boring bedspreads on it. Mom put some pretty bedspreads on it of different colors that brightened up the room and pretty much covered the entire bed. So, except for the railings you could not really tell this bed from most others. After a couple of weeks I got used to it and no longer identified it with my handicap. In fact, in due time I came to appreciate it because of the ability to adjust it for comfort.

The summer had started out quite well, it had gotten even better. But then, there were definitely some setbacks. However, what was most impressive was that these setbacks were not plunging me into the types of prolonged depressions that I had known in the past. I felt that, with the help of God and my new Savior Jesus Christ, I had beaten this, perhaps for good. On the other hand, I realized that there were going to be some hard times to come.