

## CHAPTER 9

### HANDLING REAL LOSS

(Ages 18-19 – 12<sup>th</sup> Grade)

September of 1984 finally rolled around and I started my last year of high school. The school year started back and I enjoyed spending more time with Brad, since we had not seen each other very often that summer. However, my friend Jimmy was having back surgery at that time so we missed him. To help improve his condition (Spina Bifida), he would be studying at home. At the same time, I was looking forward to spending the entire year with Brad, since he had been out quite a bit of the time last year.

I was somewhat concerned as I entered the year, having exhausted all of the history courses, which were usually guaranteed A's for me. I began wondering if there was another class that I could make an A in without too much effort, so that I could spend more time with those that gave me difficulty. Fortunately a course in US government came to my rescue. The rules and the constitution were so closely related to history that they tended to merge somewhat.

It was in my senior year that I began to enjoy the development of my writing skills. While I did not enjoy spelling or grammar, I did like to write and to put my thoughts down on paper. The teacher decided that we would put out a school newspaper, and I got to be editor. Of course, it was not a big deal; I was the only one who volunteered for it. But it was something that I could take pride in, and I really enjoyed it. The teacher generally assigned what stories we were to cover, but there were a few times when the stories did not totally fit together and I was required to create something that would complete the pages. This was challenging and fun, despite the fact that it put considerable pressure on me.

The fall of 1984 was an election year between the challenger, Walter Mondale, and the incumbent, Ronald Reagan, who was to become my favorite president. Since I was born late in the year, I had not quite turned 18 on Election Day and could not yet vote in this election. It was fun ribbing my parents about their laxity in this regard. The voting thing, along with having to take tests in order to get my diploma (which the older kids did not have to take), were constant sources of my needling them.

Ronald Reagan paid a visit to the city of Tuscaloosa that year. Each classroom in my school was given two tickets to hear President Reagan's speech at the University coliseum. Of course, the odds were not very high that I would get a ticket, and since it was not possible to get out of school without it being approved, I did not get to go. However, our teacher made up for it by calling off classes and bringing a TV out to the cafeteria so that we could all hear the speech. On top of that, she asked the students to give an appraisal of what they thought of the speech. I guess this was supposed to justify it academically, but for me this was all part of the fun. The English teacher also had us write a paper as to how we thought religion was affecting the election, which was also quite enjoyable to me. So, even though I did not get to vote, I felt that I was taking part in the process.

Outside of my school life, I had begun to get over Snowball and get used to our new cat. Unfortunately, our new cat was soon to wander off as had Snowball, and it met with a similar, but perhaps worse, fate. For, while Snowball had been killed instantly, our new cat was only injured and was able to make its way back to our house in an injured condition. It came into the carport where Mom encountered it, and she had the unfortunate experience of having to watch it die. Missy and I were at school, so Mom also had to inform us, and Dad had to go through the burial routine. Snowball had been with us about 18 months, this cat had only lasted 4 months. I had not gotten as attached to the new cat as I had Snowball. However, what came hardest about it was the thought that this might be our last attempt at having a cat, or any pet for that matter. Dad was quite frustrated with the prospect; as he put it: “We have been through two dogs and two cats; you can’t say we didn’t try.”

Later in the fall of 1984 our church was able to afford its first full-time preacher, Curtis Pope, who arrived in October. He was a young fellow who had not been preaching for long. He had three children. The majority of the preachers that we had had were in their 50s, and this was the first time that a preacher had matched my age so closely – even though there was still about an 11-year age difference. I was to grow quite close to this man, since we had a lot in common. There was, of course, our common interest in the bible and living up to God’s will for us. However, Curtis also loved history as I did and this led to many long extended conversations.

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A few years before, Oak Hill had started their own Boy Scout group. The troop was housed in two classrooms – ours and one other. We formed two platoons – one from each classroom. I was a platoon leader in my classroom. We were really the first group that was to go through scouting in this troop, and many of us were just then acquiring our merit badges. The first badge was the easiest – swimming. The troop leader went on the word of our coach as to whether we had the necessary swimming proficiency, and I believe that we all got the badge. The next one we went after was first aid, and this required a lot more work. We had to go over all of the rules, and in order to earn this badge we would have to pass a test. At the same time that we were going over this in Boy Scouts, our teacher had decided (independently) to cover some first aid with us. There was one subject in which they did not agree – nose bleeds. The “Boy Scout” method at the time was to tip your head forward, while our teacher’s book taught that we should tilt it backward. Not that it really mattered; perhaps there is no official nosebleed policy. All we had to do was to remember who had said what when test time came around and it all worked out fine. Only problem is, if I get a bloody nose, I am still not sure what I should do; perhaps I will tilt it forward for a few minutes and then tip it backward and continue to alternate until it either stops or else I bleed to death.

There was one other badge that we obtained on a voluntary basis – citizenship. It required at least ten reports on a variety of subjects that I can no longer remember. I had decided that I would go for this, since this was down my alley. After about a month, I put together all of the required reports and was able to land this badge.

The arrival of October 1984 marked my next attempt at the math test. This was my third time to attempt this test. I was not that nervous toward it. Perhaps I should have been, since if I did not pass this one, I would only have one more chance. Although I was not very nervous, neither

was I very confident. Sherri was in the same boat that I was, having just two more chances to pass, and her feelings about it were about the same as mine. A student teacher that we had kept giving us pep talks over and over about feeling confident when you go in, etc. The day before the test this student teacher wrote letters to us and instructed us not to open the envelopes until just before we were to enter the test room. The next day Mom drove me to the test site, and before getting out of the van I opened the letter. It was quite short: "Think – I WILL PASS." When I got out of the van Sherri was waiting for me as well as the teacher from Oak Hill.

We entered the test room, and the test booklets were on the tables. She handed out the answer form as well as two scratch sheets, and the standard two number 2 pencils. She went through all of the rules and regulations and then gave us the go ahead to start. I decided this time that I was not going to take any chances or make any assumptions. Even if the calculation was  $2 \times 2$ , I was going to write it out on the scratch paper and work it though as carefully as possible. Anything to improve my chances of getting the answer right. The problem was that the two pages of scratch paper were just not enough. Most of the students finished before I did, and the lady in charge allowed them to leave and dismissed the other proctors for lunch. Finally she got tired of waiting, and my teacher from Oak Hill volunteered to stay with me while I finished the test. She noticed that I was getting low on scratch paper, and she did not have any herself. So, she went over to the bulletin board and selected something that looked old and unimportant and ripped it down so that I could use the back of it. This was a great help to me. I did not know if I had passed the test or not. It was a long test and it wore me out, and I really hoped that I would not have to take it again.

A few weeks later I was in the cafeteria eating lunch with Sherri and some of the others when we noticed another teacher (who I will call Mrs. Sears) come out of her classroom and begin talking to our teacher. Our teacher informed us that Mrs. Sears was thinking about teaching first aid in her classroom like we had already done. She wanted us to tell her what we had learned so that she could determine whether she wanted to teach it. I thought that this was quite strange – why was Mrs. Sears trusting two students on this? Well, we decided to go along with it, and after lunch we went over to her classroom where she began asking us a lot of questions about the first aid course. After about 30 minutes of this, she told us she had all that she needed, and she helped us back to our classroom. As we entered our classroom everyone yelled: "SURPRISE!" and the classroom was all decorated for a party. Sherri's mother and mine were both there. The celebration was over our passing the math test and becoming the first two handicapped students in Alabama to pass all three of these new tests in order to get our high school diplomas. It was at that point that I recalled the "I WILL PASS" note that our student teacher had given me. While I am not sure that it did the trick, there is no question that it added to the confidence that I had accumulated by way of study.

As the party was going on and everyone was having a good time, the student teacher came to me and whispered that Brad was feeling kind of down. He was happy and pleased that I had passed the test, but sad that at the end of the school year I would be graduating. In his mind, I would be leaving him behind. I went over and assured him that I would be making regular visits to the school after I graduated, and that we would be in close touch. This seemed to cheer him up quite a bit and we were all able to enjoy the rest of the party. It was definitely the highpoint of the year. In the future whenever I would regret that I could not continue my education, I always

thought back to the test that I had to take to pass math, and I realized that if I wanted to accomplish something that I could. It gave me a sense of confidence, and I am glad that I did not give up on it.

I got more confidence from this than from the Alabama football team this year, since 1984 was their first losing year in almost 30 years. When football season comes around most people start predicting how many games Alabama will win. After the first couple games we were predicting how many games they would lose. They beat the obviously inferior teams and had lost some close ones, so

by the time they got to the two-week break before the Auburn game, the Iron Bowl, they had a record of 4 and 6. Auburn was 9 and 3. Not that great for Auburn, but they still had a solid team. It looked like Auburn would wipe Alabama out big time, and I was trying to convince myself not to get caught up in this foolishness as I had throughout the season. It was about this time that Brad made a bold prediction that Alabama would win this game. I could not believe what I was hearing, since Brad had been fairly accurate in his prediction at the beginning of the season when he stated that they would only win three games. So, it was not like he was one of these Alabama radicals who believe it is the manifest destiny of Alabama to win every game regardless. Doug and I teased Brad unmercifully about his prediction. There was a song at the time called "State of Shock," and I told Brad that he would be singing that song once that game was over.

Those who follow college football know that the Auburn/Alabama game is arguably the most pronounced rivalry in the nation. Perhaps this is because the state of Alabama has always had something to prove, and football is one way that they chose to prove it. This coupled with having two major competitive teams within this average size but relatively poor state, led to everyone within the state taking sides as late summer rolled around. Regardless of who you were or what your background was, you were either Auburn or Alabama, and you would have to live with this choice for the rest of the year. This year something was happening that was beyond the control of the teams themselves. Even though Florida had won the SEC title, they were on probation and were ineligible for post-season play. This set up Auburn to go to the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans if they won the Iron Bowl. However, if the unthinkable were to happen and they lost, they would have to settle for the Liberty Bowl in the somewhat cooler city of Memphis.

The game, played on December first was televised Nationally. However, as the game was being played I decided to just give it up ahead of time and not aggravate myself. So, I watched a movie on another channel while dabbling in a book at the same time. A couple hours after the game started Brad called and told me it looked like he was going to be right in his prediction. So I immediately I turned on the game and Alabama was leading 17 to 7 as the clock ticked down 5, 4, ... I was ready to celebrate whether I had watched it or not. But then I saw that this was just the third quarter. It was not over yet.

I started flipping back and forth trying to finish watching the movie at the same time I observed the action. As the movie finished up I flipped back to see Auburn score on a 70-yard touch-down run. At that point I was glad that I saw the end of the movie. However, it looked like, as is the case with most Auburn/Alabama games, it was going to go down to the wire. Auburn went for two and made it. I knew that if I continued watching they were bound to disappoint me, so I just turned the TV set off. That would be that, and I got down to reading my book in earnest. However,

the phone rang about ten minutes later and Brad said: “What do you think now?” ‘Bama had held them off for the rest of the game and the final score was 17-15 Alabama. Of course, I had mixed emotions – jubilation at ‘Bama having won, but disappointment over getting needled by Brad and not having seen the whole game myself. I turned the TV back on and joined in the celebration to the point the Brad thought that I had a house full of people. It took a while, but now Alabama fans had something to yell about. I know that for some, nothing was sweeter than to have a losing year and then beat a clearly superior team in the Iron Bowl. I know that this is true because it has happened both ways, and I have heard people state this first hand from both sides.

I am not sure that my refusal to watch the game was a sign of maturing or immaturity. I was trying to prove to myself that it did not matter, but if it did not matter, why not watch the game? Why not enjoy the show win or lose? This would be the mature position. Granted, you will enjoy it more if you win, but the world is not coming to an end otherwise. This year my problem was that I had to eat crow from Brad because I was convinced that Alabama did not have a chance. However, I would rather eat crow than to have Auburn win, and between friends, I could dish it out just as much as he could, so it was all in great fun.

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As Christmas vacation approached there were a couple of events that were to be instrumental in my battle against shyness. One of my student teachers had helped me with this before by insisting that we all speak up and be sure that we take the initiative in our conversations with others. Now our current teacher was unknowingly taking some steps to add to this by planning a Christmas pageant. They had done this a few years before, and I had turned down a chance to have a speaking part, not wanting to speak in front of a crowd. My role became to just hold up a picture, and I had always wanted to kick myself for turning down the opportunity to contribute in a more significant way. So now I volunteered for a speaking role. There were several who were either speaking or reading from Luke. My part was to read the story and talk about the traditional meaning given to the season, while Steve, who was Jewish, would read something similar to this regarding Hanukkah. During the dress rehearsal when it was my time to speak, the teacher pushed me up to the podium and handed me the microphone. Stage fright hit me, and I told the teacher that I just could not do it. However, she would not let me leave. It seemed forever as I was staring at her, and she at me, neither one of us backing down. However, there was no way I could get away, and I realized that the only way for me to get out of there was to just settle down and read the part. Before I knew it I had done it, and it had all come out quite well, so that night when the real thing came along it went without a hitch.

As far as my own beliefs with regard to Christmas are concerned, I see nothing in the bible that would lead us to celebrate it as a religious holiday. On the other hand, I respect the beliefs of others in celebrating various religious beliefs around this time of year. Our family has its traditions, as I have pointed out, of getting together, lighting the lights and giving gifts. However, consistency compels us to limit our formal worship to just those things that the bible teaches. Participating in a religious pageant might be interpreted as my support of a religious celebration this time of year. However, my friends clearly understood my beliefs along these matters, as we all were free in discussing our various beliefs with regard to this time of year. It is interesting to see people’s reaction

when they know that you are a devoted follower of Jesus Christ and yet you do not favor “putting Christ in Christmas.”

Another major step to attack shyness was to occur about two days before getting out for Christmas vacation. Usually three or four days before school got out, schoolwork went out the proverbial window. Everyone was much more interested in having a good time. It was decided among the teachers that we would have a talent contest. One of the students decided to lip-sync to a Michael Jackson song. I knew I would not do this, but with the encouragement of the teacher and one of the teacher’s aids, I decided to enter the contest by reading an English paper that I had written a few months before. In it I explained what I believe makes our country so great. The connection with the season had to do with our toleration of religious diversity. A few days before the contest the teacher explained that the entry fee was 25 cents. However, she already paid it for her students, which was her Christmas present to them.

I was somewhat horrified when I found out that everyone was doing something similar to my “Michael-Jacksoning” friend. Singing, dancing, and stuff like that. I was toward the end, and felt that I was going to be like a nerd reading a poem in the middle of Soul Train. It would even be worse than the Christmas pageant, since everyone there expected some serious thoughts on Christmas. But now, this was so totally out of place. I looked around to try to find my teacher, who had already stated that once she had put in the quarters she was not planning on taking any of them out. I thought: “I don’t even have any money on me to pay her back.” Finally, my turn came up to go on and everyone was looking at me – there was no way to back out now. So, I went up to the podium, took the microphone and a good, deep breath, and began reading my paper.

Years later I remember reading somewhere that in Japan when anyone wants to become an executive over there they have to take an executive training class. One of the first things they do is force them to stand out at one of the busiest street corners at the middle of the day and scream their lungs out for about five or ten minutes. No matter how many people look, laugh, point at them, or whatever, they just have to get through it. The point is, if they can stand there and make a fool of themselves in front of the entire city, there is nothing that they are going to face that will be any more humiliating than that. In my battle against shyness I always hoped that we had something like that in this country.

Looking back now, I can see that I anticipated that this talent contest would be my “height of humiliation.” In the mind of most of the students there I was just a small blip in the radar screen. Everyone was in a festive mood with the music, dancing and other forms of entertainment, and then along comes this guy, reads his thing, and everything gets quiet. I felt a huge sense of relief as I finished the last line. Then one person started to applaud, then another. It was not the loudest of applause, but it was sufficient to know that a few in the crowd felt that what I had to contribute was worth something. And the rest, while not understanding, still joined in out of respect for them. My student teacher – the same one who had slipped me the I WILL PASS note that helped me through my math test – gave me assurance as well. I was not the overwhelming crowd-pleasing like some of the others, but it was what I had to offer.

These two growth events were minor bumps (or perhaps major potholes) on the road, and that December was not that bad. On the day before getting out for Christmas vacation, the entire day was pretty much a controlled free for all. We played hangman on the chalkboard almost all day, which was fairly educational. I did most of the drawing while the others played the game. We also exchanged some token gifts. Brad and myself also got to help make pizza for the entire class at the home economics room. When we returned to the classroom everyone was quite hungry, so we were the heroes coming in with, what seemed, the first food that they had seen in days.

As we were about to get on the buses to go home, Brad was in a very good mood, anticipating spending the holidays with his family. He was in the highest of spirits compared to last year when he had spent most of the season in the hospital. Everyone that he passed in getting on the bus received a pleasant “merry Christmas” greeting from him. This was a scene that will always remain quite vivid in my mind.

Soon after school let out we made our traditional trek to Louisiana. When we returned in town on the day after Christmas, I made my standard set of calls to everyone to let them know that I was back. The first one I called was Brad, since I did not even have to look up his number. A strange person picked up, and I asked to speak to Brad. The person said I had the wrong number. This was strange, since I had called it countless times before, but I looked it up anyway. It was the right number, but I decided not to call back since I was sure to get that same person. So, I talked Missy into calling. She asked for Brad, got a strange expression on her face, and then said: “Yea, RIGHT” in the typical sarcastic tone of this expression, and then hung up. Now Mom got curious, and she asked Missy what that was all about. Missy said that the man stated that Brad had died on Christmas eve, and that they were burying him that very day.

Well, suddenly this had become much more than just strange. It was scary. We did not know if the man was telling the truth or not, or if some crackpot had taken over their house. Since we had been out of town, our neighbor had been collecting our newspapers, so we decided to go over and get them and look through the obituaries. I was too nervous to look, but Mom and Missy did it for me. On the third paper Mom said: “Oh, I cannot believe ...” and that was when I knew that it was true.

I recalled at that point my very first brush with death, which happened in the fourth grade. A young girl had suffered from Spina Bifida and had gone to Birmingham for surgery to help with her condition. Somehow she got an infection that spread to her lungs and she died shortly after that. I had only known her for a year and had not formed a real close relationship with her. I recalled being sad, but more shocked and surprised than anything. The time when I was 14 or 15 also came to mind, when my father’s stepfather died, and then later when another classmate had died. Reality hit home in all of these cases. Someone who was just there and talking to you a few days ago was now gone, and you would never see them again, at least on this side of eternity.

While these were all shocking losses, Brad was different. This was the first time in my life that I had lost someone very close to me. We had become as close as brothers during the previous year, and I was not at all prepared for him to be leaving permanently. So, for the first time in my life I was to feel great personal loss because of death.

As soon as I learned that Brad had died I lost all control of my emotions and began crying and throwing things at the same time. Internally I was in denial, still hoping that someone would call and tell us that it was not true. Yet, I knew that this would not happen, and I had to face reality. My mother came over and comforted me, and she went to call a doctor to get a tranquilizer for me. But when she went to the phone I would not let go of her. My father came in and I grabbed hold of him – I just did not want to be left alone. They quickly got a prescription and I found some relief in that. It did not put you to sleep, but it calmed you down. Sitting there that night with a football game on TV, I just sat recalling Brad’s genius prediction of the Iron bowl. I needed something to divert my attention, but nothing was going to help here except time.

That night I had a dream about Brad still being alive, so the next day did not start off very well either. The medicine had my emotions under control, but I just did not feel like doing anything. For the next couple of weeks I did not eat very much. Mom and Dad tried to find things to get my mind off of it, and all of that helped. We went to the mall a couple of times, and we all spent a lot of time playing the mash trivia game that I had received for Christmas. It was not a cure, but it enabled time to pass in a tolerable manner while I was getting over the thought of going back to school and not seeing Brad there.

Brad and I had the same doctor, and we found out that Brad had awakened on Christmas eve day and was not feeling well. They admitted him to the hospital, and he seemed to be doing quite well; but very shortly after that his heart just gave out. That was when they pronounce him dead. Even though he had been in the hospital before, this was quite unexpected.

This also brought reality home to me. I knew that anyone with MD would ultimately succumb to it – the disease always kills the victim. No one had to tell me this. I do not really know when I realized this. I recall overhearing a radio program a few years back (I believe it was around the fall of 1982) that was talking about MD. The reporter said: “Those with MD usually die before the age of ...” and Dad turned the station quite quickly. I got the message. But with all of the hustle and bustle of school I had to put it in the back of my mind, and really never gave it too much thought after that.

Later I did some research on MD and found that it was a disease of the muscles, and technically your heart is a muscle. Sooner or later it had to go. But I did not think of Brad dying, since I had not yet grappled with the fact that MD affects different people in different ways. Here I was 18, and Brad was only 14. Surely he had many years left. Of course, this is what made his death all the more of a crushing blow to me personally.

Whenever such a traumatic event occurs your emotions are twisted up inside. You do not know whether you are sad, and who you are sad for; or whether you are just angry, or both. I had been wishing for years that one of the students would be an MD case. Not that I would wish this on anyone, but if they were afflicted anyway perhaps MD could be not as bad as some other disease. I was tired of being the odd man out, and Brad had provided something to me that I had never had before. It was a chance to help someone. And now that was gone.

My heart also went out to his parents and his sister, who was only eight at the time. Whenever someone dies at such a young age – in Brad’s case 14 – you cannot help but be tempted to disdain the unfairness of life itself. It kept going through my mind over the next few weeks: “Only 14, practically a child ...” Every time I would go out in public and see parents with a young child it would make me sad just to think of all of the things that go with the process of bringing up a child, many of them quite painful and undesirable. But when that child reaches young adulthood the parents can see that it was all worth it. How sad it is when they are denied this privilege, and how so many who have it just take it for granted. But they did have 14 years with him, and for that I am sure that they thank God. I had but a fraction of that, and I thank God for the joy that he gave me. The deeper the love, the deeper the grief. The grief that I paid was a small price to have known such a person and to have had the privilege to serve him in a small way.

New Year’s Eve came just a little over a week after Brad’s death. My usual celebration was to watch the ball drop at Times Square, and Missy and I would usually blow a horn at each other and sip some ginger ale. But, for the first time, I did not feel like celebrating on this occasion, for 1984 had ended on a very sour note, and so I went off to bed. As I heard the horns and firecrackers go off, I wondered what 1985 would hold.

This was the first loss of someone as close as Brad had been to me, and it was a definite reality check for me. Whenever you lose someone like that there are the inevitable setbacks in your recovery. Any little thing might set off the grieving process again, and while this gets less and less predominant over time, it never disappears completely. This is part of our humanity, but it is a good part. What would we be as humans if we did not feel grief? On New Years Day I was watching one of the bowl games and Dad started to take the decorations down. As I watched the tree come down it really set me off. This is a sad time in any event, and some people just leave their decorations up for extended times because they cannot bear to see the end of the season. I tried to keep it hidden, but it was very difficult, and I think that they knew because after the game they got me involved in another round of the Mash Trivia game.

Two or three weeks later as we were getting ready for a health exam, a classmate and I were reviewing what we had studied last semester. We were going through the various parts of the body and everything was going well until we got to the heart. Suddenly, as we were going over the veins and arteries and everything it hit me that this was what had failed Brad. But, I had to keep going and there was enough going on that I was able to stay in control of my emotions.

My thoughts continually reverted to Brad’s family, and this would cast me back into a state of grieving once again. The battle with my emotions as the New Year began was never-ending. The most frustrating part of it was that I felt that I should do something for Brad’s family. I could call them, but I felt that this would just further remind them of their grief. I knew in my heart that I might not be able to handle it myself. So, all that I could do was to send a sympathy card. I felt guilty – that I should have done more – but helpless to take any action.

One day at church a young man was leading the congregation in prayer, and toward the end of the prayer, he asked God to comfort those who had lost loved ones. That is when the light bulb went off in my head, and I realized that in my spiritual immaturity I had not turned to God for help.

Since I had no idea as to what to do, I should go to God and seek His help in providing comfort to Brad's family. Indeed, there is no way that I could do any more than just to put my trust in God.

The hardest part of losing Brad was watching the rest of the world go on just like nothing had happened. As soon as the Christmas vacation was over we all went back to school, everyone went back to work, Ronald Reagan began his second term as President, Alabama's basketball season went into full swing, and everything seemed to resume just as before.

A song came out in the early 1960's by Skeeter Davis that captured my feelings exactly:

I wake up in the morning and I wonder  
Why everything's the same as it was?  
I can't understand, no, I can't understand  
How life goes on the way it does.

Why does my heart go on beating?  
Why do these eyes of mine cry?  
Don't they know it's the end of the world?  
It ended when you said good-bye.

Why do birds go on singing?  
Why do the stars glow above?  
Don't they know it's the end of the world,  
It ended with I lost your love.

This was how I felt, and the song just reinforced this feeling and kept reminding me of the feeling. I wanted to shout out to the world: "Wait a minute; I have just lost my best friend! Doesn't anybody care? What is wrong with you people?"

Most of all I dreaded the first day back to school. I considered skipping it, but realized that this would just be putting off the inevitable – I had to go back sometime. In this case, however, the teachers and the teacher's aids were ready to handle this problem. My attitude was that I just wanted everyone to leave me alone – let me be alone with my grief. But, of course, the teachers were not going to have any of that. It started when I got on the bus. An aid that helped us on the bus started up a friendly conversation that lasted until we got to school. When we first got to school the teachers had already taken down the Christmas tree – that was a relief, not having to watch another Christmas tree come down.

I figured that once I got to school it would be business as usual, and my mind was on anything but work. I was still totally absorbed with what had transpired over the past few weeks. To my surprise the teacher came up with a variety of activities that we either did collectively as a class or in smaller groups. While I do not recall exactly what they were, they did keep us busy and prevented us from having time to feel sorry for ourselves. We did not even touch our schoolbooks all day. About 11:00, just before lunch, the principal came into the room and he and the teacher gathered us around and asked us all if we had anything to remember about Brad. Doug remembered his occa-

occasional fishing trips, but most of the kids were uncharacteristically quiet. I was having enough problems just keeping my emotions in check, so I really could not say anything. If I had mentioned one moment, it would have been the Alabama-LSU basketball game when Jimmy, Brad and I sat together behind the goal and watched the game together.

Our small class seemed to handle the tragedy quite well, since we were a tight knit surrogate family. A larger problem was dealing with those outside of our class. Every time that we left the class it seemed that someone would ask: Where's Brad? What happened to Brad? It seemed that they were overly curious, and in some cases just downright tasteless about it. In particular, on the first day back when some of us were going from the gym to the home economics classroom, one of the students came up behind and started pestering us about Brad. The other students told him to go away, and I just ignored him. Finally, he asked over and over: "Is Brad dead? Is Brad dead?" as if it were some good news. My friend turned to him and replied: "NO!" I am not sure if it was because my friend was still in denial or that he was just sick of these stupid questions.

One day we were in gym practicing bowling and I was sitting with a classmate while the coach was putting the pins back up. All of a sudden one of the students from another classroom (I am not sure what he was doing there) just came out and asked me: "What happened to your friend?" I lost patience by this time and replied in a very mean voice that I did not know. Perhaps I was being too touchy about this, but there was a real lack of sensitivity on their part as to the close relationship that we had established. I could not talk about Brad like you would some stranger from half way around the world. Perhaps because that was *their* relationship with Brad, they felt that it was everyone's. Brad was a person – flesh and blood just like any of them. Could they not see that?

The exception to this was at church. A large number of my friends there knew what I was going through and approached my agony with understanding. I was very grateful that I was a Christian at that time. I had only been a Christian for about a year, but there was something about the relationship that I had with my fellow Christians that made this process of grieving much more bearable. It was nice to know that I was not alone, and that others were willing to share in my misfortune. The avenue of prayer at this time was also a welcomed relief from what seemed to be a very cruel and uncaring world. I wondered how atheists handle crises of this magnitude ... not having any God to turn to and believing that this world is the end of everything.

I hit a low about two weeks after Brad's death on a Wednesday night after church. I could handle it no more and after the lights were out just cried myself to sleep. It was a turning point, for after that there was nothing more to hold back, and the healing process was about to begin.

The preacher at my church also did his part, offering a sermon one Sunday evening on death. At first I was not sure if I wanted to hear it; but I could not very well push myself out, so I decided to give it a chance. He started out talking about his own childhood and how he first experienced death. He went on to read in the scriptures how anyone and everyone can overcome death. It is not the ending, just the beginning. He quoted 1 Corinthians 15:54-57:

“So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Death is a sad event for those who are left behind, but for those who have gone on who have done all that they can to be pleasing to God and to serve their fellow man, there is no sadness in death. And I certainly place Brad in that category of the joyous.

In retrospect I can see the wisdom of this preacher in waiting a couple of weeks to allow my emotions to settle down somewhat. I really do not think that this sermon would have done me any good at all right after Brad’s death. I was too emotionally involved with my own loss and that of Brad’s family to be able to comprehend the essence of what he was saying. But coming as it did a few weeks later, I was able to place things in their proper perspective so that I could get on with the important things of living and not be stuck in my self-pity and grief.

Over the next few months I was to have an occasional spell of grief, and there were some setbacks with regard to my problems with depression. One in particular occurred about a month after Brad’s passing. However, it was not as severe as those that I had had during my “odd-year summers” of the past, and things were getting back to normal. This is the way that it should be. It is good that we remember our loved ones who have gone on. But death is a part of life, and we cannot allow these memories to destroy our ability to accomplish what the Lord has given us to accomplish. Rather, the memories should be an inspiration to us to do more to serve the Lord so that we do not cause others unnecessary grief when we depart this life.

A few weeks after Brad died his mother called our house. She seemed to be in good spirits considering what had recently happened. She offered me some of Brad’s personal things so I could remember him. I decided against it since I knew that I did not need anything to remember Brad, and I felt that someone else might better use his belongings. She said that when Brad had his illness the previous year that he had accepted death and was ready to go. Of course, his family was not ready for him to go, but they counted that extra year with him as a gift from God. This gave me a different perspective on the entire situation. Had Brad died the previous year I probably would not have been nearly as attached to him, and it certainly would not have been as hard on me. On the other hand, that extra year was a gift of God to me as well. I finally realized that the cost of parting was paid for thousands of times over by the experiences that we had shared in that year alone.

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While there was a sadness that enveloped my last semester of high school, it was not to be a totally negative time of my life. There were several things that occurred that got my mind off of my loss and added excitement to this time. In particular, there were three special Olympic trips that the school took that semester, the most that I had experienced in such a short period of time. One involved bowling, which is my favorite sport, and two were overnight trips. The Boy Scout troop also took a trip that semester which I found quite enjoyable. Of course, there was also the excite-

ment of completing high school, and as the semester rolled on I looked ahead with great anticipation toward graduation.

One of my classmates that I have mentioned, Steve, began attending Oak Hill the same time that Brad did. However, for some reason, we did not develop a close relationship until the last semester of my senior year. Steve had a great sense of humor, and he was always laughing and joking. This was exactly what I needed at this time, and it certainly got my mind off my problems. His joyous outlook on life was contagious, and it rubbed off on me and everyone else. Steve and I would play off of each other, and he brought out whatever sense of humor that I had at this time. Whenever I would start feeling down, which often occurred during our free times, I would go over and get with Steve and he would lift up my spirits.

Coach Wilson gave up his personal time to take us on these Special Olympics events, and on two occasions he gave up his weekends for us. I have always been grateful not only for him but the other teachers who gave up their time. I know for myself that these events served a major purpose of getting me back into life again after the loss of Brad. Not only were the trips themselves fun, but looking forward and anticipating the trips went a long way toward getting my mind off of my grief.

The first trip was to Huntsville, Alabama for Special Olympics bowling. Several weeks prior to the trip I was quite concerned that I would be sick and miss all of the fun. We were supposed to stay over but something came up so we went up early on a Friday morning and made the three-hour trip to Huntsville, getting there in time for lunch. After lunch we went over to the bowling alley. I got off to a slow start but came back and finished with a fairly decent score. Once the medals were handed out we piled back into the van and headed back for Tuscaloosa. We arrived there just as school was getting out. While I made this without getting sick, I managed to catch a 24-hour bug and was laid up right after the trip. I was very thankful that it had waited, but by the time it was over my greatest fear was that I might survive. It was short-lived, and I was back at school Monday morning.

The next two trips were Friday through Sunday, and I looked forward to them with great enthusiasm. The first started out at an Army base just outside of Anniston called Fort McClellan. A lot more of the students from Oak Hill came on this trip as opposed to the previous one. We took one or two school buses. The main events here were bowling and basketball. We spent the night in old dorm rooms on the campus of Jacksonville State University. While the sleeping quarters were crowded, this tended to make us all feel closer together as a group. The only problem that I had was that the dormitories were so old that they creaked at night and you could hear the pipes rattling. This made sleeping quite difficult.

The older dorms were not wheelchair accessible. I could not get through the door with my wheelchair, and that made normal things (like taking a shower) quite difficult. Coach Wilson had to lift me out of the chair and into the shower stall, and then back out. I knew that this was tiring me out, and I was sure that it would be him as well. This was confirmed the next evening when, on our way from the games at Fort McClellan to the dorms he suggested that we might just skip the shower routine that night. This was fine with me; in fact, I was trying at the time to get the courage

up to ask him if we could skip it. Coach Wilson certainly deserved a medal for all that he went through to make this experience the best that it would be for all of us. The buses that were transporting us did not have a lift, and so Coach Wilson took me in his car with him. He had to pull the chair out of the car and go through the detailed routine of putting me in and taking me out of the chair at each stop. Despite all of these efforts I never once heard him complain. As my Grandmother said: “there has to be a special place in heaven for him.”

Our meals at the mess hall for both lunch and dinner were fun experiences. There were all kinds of choices of foods and we just went down the line and chose whatever we wanted. I chose hamburgers every time. I realized that there was everything imaginable, but their hamburgers were the greatest so I figured, why bother with anything else?

While I enjoyed participating in the bowling, I also enjoyed watching our school compete in the basketball competition. It was fun sitting on the sidelines watching your fellow classmates play. On the last day we had won all of the quarterfinals and were playing for the gold. Coach Wilson let me pick out the starting line up. I selected the tallest players to get things going as an intimidation factor, and he substituted in others, as it was appropriate. But as the game got down to the final few minutes I could not even recall who had started. They had gotten off to a slow start, but now were giving it a valiant effort as it came down to the last few shots. Unfortunately for us, they would not go drop through the hoop, and we ended coming in second. This was not viewed as a major loss, however, as we all recognized that they had played a good game and had done their best. Of course, there was a little disappointment, but winning the silver medal was not bad at all. Within a few hours after the game after eating lunch, we were on our way back to Tuscaloosa.

Our next event was in Tuscaloosa, so it would not be nearly as trying. The opening ceremony got off to a rough start as the stands were not wheelchair accessible and several of us had to sit on the edge of the track to watch. We sat there as the games got started. After a period of time the wheelchair race was to start. This was the type race where someone pushes the person in the wheelchair, which has probably now been banned in most Special Olympics. Knowing the dangers of such an event, our coach had not put us down for this race so we were not going to participate. However, since we ended up sitting right where the starters were, and the judges thought that we were to be included in the wheelchair race. So, they lined us up and were preparing to start the race. I knew that coach Wilson had not included us in the wheelchair race, but I figured, “what’s the harm? Why not humor these teachers a little?”

One of the participants was a heavy-set individual who had extra equipment on his wheelchair. I was thinking that this must have been a spelling board since he had trouble speaking. The teachers and judges did not realize that this board made his wheelchair heavy in the front.

The gun went off and the pushers broke from the line as fast as they could. The heavy-set participant’s wheelchair got going so fast that the wheels started to come off, and the chair fell forward. My friend’s chair got tangled up in it and starting rotating forward, but he caught himself with his hand on the ground. Unfortunately, the heavy-set guy did not have the full use of his arms, and he landed right on his face and mouth as his face smashed on the pavement. The young lady pushing him fell over the chair and it came crashing down on him.

The heavy-set crash victim was bleeding profusely around the mouth. As they got him up, he was in great pain. However, my friend had gotten back up in his chair and without any regard for the injured participant, he started complaining that he had scratched his hand. I felt like reaching over and swatting him I was so mad, feeling basically that he ought to shut up and be grateful that that was all that was wrong with him.

The event supervisors were quite concerned about the accident, and, of course, the teachers from his school were also very concerned. My feeling was that if they had exhibited half the concern before the fact, this would not have happened. However, his wounds were superficial and probably had no long-term effects.

When coach Wilson got back he apologized to us for being “drafted” into this race, because he had not signed us up. Technically, I “won” the wheelchair race, although the person who should have gotten the medal is the person who was pushing me.

Over the years I have learned that when someone is down on himself, he can bring everyone else down with him. The handicapped can make a tremendous contribution when they are positive about life and do not dwell on their problems. People who would normally feel sorry for themselves realize what a futile and ridiculous venture this is when they see those who are so obviously disabled demonstrating an attitude of courage and not trying to make everyone around them miserable. Now there are going to be times when our grief will get the best of us, and we will not be able to bear up, and a temporary relapse into a little self-pity is not a total disaster. However, when this becomes a way of life, it is destructive to everyone involved. The real problem comes when we overdo it to the extent that no one wants to be around us. This, then, feeds on itself to the point that the person so saturated in self-pity begins to feel justified in holding these feelings, believing that the entire world, God and whatever else is against him.

The only time that I needed help was when we actually went over to the bowling lanes. A couple of weeks before we had participated in the Special Olympics a reporter had come out to Oak Hill and was interviewing the students asking what event they liked best and where they would be participating. I told him about bowling and discussed my strategy with him. I told him that I was not going to be very upset if I lost just as long as I did my best. A couple days later the article was printed in the paper with my strategy in the headline: Michael Mason aims for the center pin. Well, that was close.

The bowling event got off to a very slow start for me. Not only was I missing the middle pin, I was putting a number of balls in the gutter. It started bothering me that people would have read the article and it would make me look foolish. I lost really badly in the first game. But, things started to pick up, and after the third game was over I managed to eek out the first place spot.

The most memorable part of these games was after they were over when we gathered together in the dorm that night. One of the assistant coaches there brought a portable TV and we put an NBA final game on and ordered out for a pizza. Staying out late with your friends, watching sports and pigging out on pizza – it did not get any better than that. We had a marathon to see who

could stay up the latest, and it finally got down to the assistant coach and myself, and he started to flake off. The only thing on was a very boring movie and I realized how stupid it was for me to be staying up for no good, so I called it a day; and a good one it was.

The total event was one of the best that I have had part in. I recall the theme song, which was popular at the time: “We Are the World.” But when Sunday rolled around we went our separate ways. I had approached all three of these trips with the idea that I was going to miss Brad being there, and it was difficult in that regard. However, participating in them contributed heavily to my ability to cope, and I know that it was good to enjoy myself in this way to help me get through the grieving process and get on with life.

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As the school year moved on, things moved ever closer to graduation. The first indication of the upcoming event was an end of year senior party for all of the handicapped students in the area. It was similar to a prom, but more like an end-of-the-school-year party. I was not planning to attend because I had been to these before, and I felt that when you have seen one, you have seen them all. However, the student teacher in our classroom kept after me until I relented. I needed to get a date and asked Sherri. We had struggled together as we had taken the high school test together, and it was only fitting that we should be together for this final party. At first she had been unable to go because of some things that she had planned with her family. However, after she had a chance to discuss it with them, they decided that they could reschedule this to enable her to go. Since this was going to be our final school party, I felt that I should go all out for it, so I put on my Dad’s dress suit and even squeezed my feet into his dress shoes.

Sherri and her mother met me at my house, and my father pushed me outside. Sherri’s little brother had come along with them, and he immediately began teasing me because of the way I was dressed. For a second or two I felt like going back and putting on my blue jeans; but then I realized that Sherri was all dressed up as well, so I did not feel out of place. I presented her with the corsage but delicately allowed her mother to pin it on her. We then got in the car and went over to the country club that was hosting the party.

The party itself was heavily chaperoned by the sponsors and teachers’ aids from the schools. Once our parents dropped us off, however, we were left to ourselves. I was very impressed with the decorations and set up – it was as good as (if not better than) the one at the regular school. I was especially pleased and impressed with the way that everyone introduced everyone. It reminded me of a fairy tale. We all lined up out in the hallway and then as we walked in (alphabetically by the girl’s name) we were announced to everyone and everyone would applaud. A local radio station supplied the music, and they had a photographer who got a picture of Sherri and me. It was a great time with each other and our other classmates from Oak Hill. I was very grateful to the student teacher that had convinced me to go.

I never imagined how much emphasis that people place on graduation until mine came along. For one thing, I did not realize that people gave graduation gifts. Mom came into the room one day and asked me what I wanted for graduation. I was so caught off guard that I did not even give her an answer. I just figured you got a card ... but what was I going to do with a card? I told

her I would settle for an all-expense paid trip to Hawaii, but for some reason they thought that might be too expensive. For the life of me I could not think of anything that I needed, so I was quite surprised when they came up with a new VCR. At that time the price of VCRs was quite high, and I was not even thinking of this as a possibility, but a friend of Dad's was able to get him a great deal on one just at the perfect time. We kept it in the den so that everyone could enjoy it.

As I was going through the process of sending out graduation announcements, mostly to friends at church and others who I did not see that often, I did not expect much more than a friendly "congratulations," or perhaps a slap on the back or a shake of the hand. I was quite surprised how they responded in terms of their gifts, since I was not expecting that at all. Some of them were giving me gifts three months after the ceremony took place. Some of them even showed up at the ceremony, which I was not expecting either.

On graduation day my mind kept wandering back to the spring of 1977 when my fourth grade year was about to come to an end. One of the students there was about 17 or 18 and was looking forward to summer vacation more than any of us because that was his last year of school. I realized that when he left this time he was not coming back. That was probably the first that I realized that some day there would come a time when this madness of going to school would end. But when I was informed that I was going to have to wait 'til I was 18 before I could realize that dream, I felt that waiting that long was nothing short of an eternity. But now, eight years later, here I was and it was my turn to graduate.

We had a small graduating class – there were only four in addition to myself in our special education class. The worst part of the ceremony was having to wear the robe. It was hard not to feel silly in that outfit. The next worst part of it was the speaker, who went longer than he should have and lost everyone's interest about half way through it. At the end I received my diploma, and as far as I was concerned, I was at the summit of the mountain. We had three days of school left which was obviously not going to be any work – just organized fun on the part of the teacher.

Of course, I had mixed emotions about leaving my second family behind. But there was the excitement of having reached the goal that more than offset the sadness of the moment. One particular country song at that time had a line: "What am I going to do with the rest of my life?" I kept repeating this over and over in my mind from a few days before graduation until we were totally out of school. In the back of my mind, I was really asking: "What does lie ahead?"

If someone had told me in 1983 that I would have to face all of the adversity that I had this past year, I would have told them that there was no way that I could do it. I had only a fraction of those problems in 1983, and yet, I was in the pits of depression that summer. However, I not only survived, I had overcome. Perhaps this is one thing that is meant in 1 Corinthians 10 when it says that God will not suffer us to be tempted beyond that which we are able to bear, but with each temptation will provide a way of escape. If I were going to stay on my normal schedule I would have another major bout with depression in 1985. However, with God's help, and with the assurance that He had given me by getting me through this year, I knew that I could handle anything.

