

CHAPTER 10

THE CHALLENGES OF MATURITY

(Ages 18-22 Years – Summer, 1985 through September, 1989)

The question that kept running through my mind was – what was I going to do with the rest of my life? And, of course, there was no simple answer to this question. I decided to take some courses starting that summer at Shelton State Community College, which deferred this question to some extent. I was not quite ready for a major university, such as The University of Alabama. By going to a junior college I could begin gaining college credit without having to worry about things like entrance exams and other requirements. Going over to Shelton made the transition from high school much more seamless, and for a while it looked like I would be able to defer serious questions regarding my future.

During high school I had lost much of the use of my arms. The deterioration was so slow that it is difficult to pinpoint just when any particular capability was lost. While I could still do some things with my arms at this point, I could not lift them above my head. Of course, I had not had the use of my legs for several years now. However, I was still able to push myself short distances. And, since the classrooms and offices at Shelton State were all short distances apart, I was able to get around there pretty well. So, as I began my study at Shelton State, Mom would drive me to the school in our customized van and then push me to the classroom.

The first course that I took was Western Civilization Part 1, a type of history course. Since I had just gotten out of high school a few weeks before, I decided to just audit one course to see what it was like. Shelton State Community College had just been established a few years before, and it was located in what had been a department store. Over the years they have grown by leaps and bounds, and they now have a very large campus. However, at the time it seemed ironic that I was continuing my education in the same building where I used to shop with my mother.

As important as the history lessons were those in the red tape of higher education. We had to fill out endless forms and go from one booth to another getting signatures. Then we had to get our picture ID made and pick up our books, and on and on. It seemed that for every station there was a long line of other unhappy pilgrims seeking the Promised Land.

I did not care too much for the class. Both the teacher and the textbook were boring, and the class met at 7:30 in the morning. I am hardly alive at that hour of the morning, especially during the summer when I was used to sleeping late. I would skip class occasionally since I was only auditing it. Mom hated to get up as much as I did, but she was more than glad to take me to class whenever I was willing and able to go.

The teacher was an interesting character. He seemed to know every foul word that had ever been used in the English language, and he probably added a few of his own. You could not afford to be thin-skinned in his class, especially if you asked a question. He would reply with a few choice expletives that tended to express more of the meaning of the sentence as opposed to its punctuation.

In the first class a young female student asked a question and was quite put off when the response was so unnecessarily vulgar. She never came back. He was not mean, but he rubbed people the wrong way with his attitude. He was a hard teacher and a tough grader. In most courses you go in with the idea of making an A (at least this was the case for me in history courses). Talking to several of his former students I found out that the best you could expect was a B. For these two reasons I decided to just audit it rather than subject myself to unnecessary distress. Shelton State was under the quarter (rather than semester) system, and I planned at this point to take one class per quarter.

When September of 1985 came around, the fall quarter began and I took American History Part 1, this time for credit. This classroom environment was quite a bit different since both the subject and the teacher were much more interesting. The teacher was also much friendlier than in my first college experience. His language was cleaner, although once in a while an expletive would come out. (I figured that just goes with the turf in higher education.) I got a lot out of this class, and I began to get over the battle of shyness that I had been fighting over the past several years. As a review the teacher would ask a series of questions and ask for volunteers to answer. I sat in the back of the room since that was the only place that there were desks for handicapped students. (Actually there were two long tables as opposed to the combination desk-chair that most of the students used.) In order to be heard from the back, I had to speak up much louder than normal. Usually I would be too shy to shout out the answer, but as time went by I began to get over this. I found myself on several occasions actually volunteering, which was a major turning point for me.

The first test that I took in this class was particularly stressful. We knew it had been coming for a week, and I had been studying every night for it. I thought that I had done a good job, but on the day of the test my self-confidence plummeted. The first page of the test was like a crossword puzzle. This seemed to be fairly easy and I began to fill in the ones that I knew. However, as I got about half way through this part I realized that everything that I had studied was covered right in this part, and that there were several pages to go. I felt that I was really in trouble. I struggled through the rest of the test doing the best that I could. I figured that I passed, but just barely, and it was a disappointing ride home.

One of the major changes for me in coming to college from Oak Hill was that just being a few of us, the teacher would grade our tests immediately and give us feedback within a half hour. Now I had to wait a week or so before we would get our grades back. This was sort of like being a kid waiting for Christmas, except that the package could contain something worse than coal. When I did get the test back about a week later the teacher was not at all happy, and he vented his anger for the whole class. This was when I felt that I was really in trouble. Flunking the first class that I was taking for credit was not going to be fun. He went on and on as to how disappointed he was. He stated how he had gone over the entire multiple-choice portion before the test, and yet some of the people had not even made an attempt to fill them out. He also wanted us to calculate our own grades as a further punishment. So, he gave back the tests and we had to calculate the grades according to the number we missed in each section. I was afraid to even look. I felt that if I could not even pass history, how was I going to pass the subjects that gave me difficulty? I finally got the paper and began following his instructions as to how to calculate my grade. As we were doing this he mentioned the people that he was proud of. He mentioned a couple of others that I recognized as

the real stars of the class. Then he said: “And I am proud of Mr. Mason.” I could not believe that I had gotten the third highest score in the class – I was so sure that I had failed it completely.

This was a real confidence builder, although I found that my study methods could really stand major improvement. For one thing, since he continued to give out the multiple-choice answers, I took full advantage of this to be sure that I had them memorized cold. I also began taping his lectures and found that if I listened to them again a couple days before the test this was sufficient to get most of the questions that he was asking. Also, I would write out what I anticipated would be on the test, pretending that I was the teacher. In this I discovered that there just were not that many things that he could ask. While these things do not seem to be that significant, they built my confidence to where I never again felt that I was going to flunk a test as I felt on this first test.

I took two other classes from this same teacher, and the pattern was the same. He would give out the answers to the multiple choice sections and would be furious after the first test with the students who did not take advantage of this, especially those who did not even attempt to try to answer them. I had difficulty understanding this, and finally came to the conclusion that many of the students were just plain lazy. I overheard one student tell another that he had never even opened a textbook before coming to college. While this might have been an exaggeration, it was not stretching it that much.

The reason that we send kids to school is to prepare them for the future, and particularly, for high school and ultimately, college. For some reason the students at this college just were not at all prepared, and I was quite thankful for the high school teachers that I had up to this point. However, most of the students rose to the occasion and were able to pull it out before the end of the quarter. For the most part they had to find out that this was different from high school, and real work was required.

A couple of my friends were also taking classes at Shelton and once in a while I would run into them. Pam and I both had a class at the same time, so we had opportunities to visit before and after class while we waited for our rides back home. There were several times when classes got out early and we would go to the snack room and talk. We found that we have many things in common. Recall that Pam suffered from Cerebral Palsy.

I had first met Pam in the fall of 1975 when we began attending special education classes together in the third grade at Northington elementary school in Tuscaloosa. I was in the third grade and she was in the fourth. We really did not get to know each other until I started the fifth grade. I decided, like all boys who reach a certain age, that perhaps girls were not so bad after all. She was afflicted with Cerebral Palsy, and this affected her speech just a little. However there was no problem in understanding her. For the most part Cerebral Palsy affected her legs, and she was not able to stand up or walk, without the aid of crutches or a walker. She was quite comfortable in her wheelchair, however, and was able to push herself quite well.

Pam was a great source of strength to me, for it was about this time that her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer and died the following year. The loss of a parent is quite difficult, especially when that person is still fairly young. This was quite difficult for Pam since her parents had

divorced when she was quite young. So she was quite close and dependent on her mother. However, despite this crisis, she did not give up. She continued to take and pass her courses at Shelton state, and eventually went on to The University of Alabama and earned a degree in English. It would have been easy for her to give up between the loss of her mother and her handicap. However, she kept on battling despite adversity, and for that reason she will always be an inspiration to me. And should I outlive one of my parents I would hope that this would not destroy me and negatively impact all those with whom I come in contact.

Taking courses from Shelton only took up two days out of the week, and I was looking for something to do with the others. During the summer I considered going to the West Alabama Comprehensive Services (WACS), where I had spent my summers during high school. However, there was no real schedule of activities over there, and it was hit and miss. Some days it was quite interesting, with a number of activities; but on others there was little planned and it was quite boring. I certainly had nothing against the people who were there, or who worked there; it is just that I decided that it was not for me. I did continue to keep in contact with them, and from time to time I would go see a movie with some of them.

I decided that it might be more productive and fun to go back over to Oak Hill and do some volunteer work. Since I still knew many of the teachers and students, this would be like going home. This would give me something to do during the week while I was not taking classes from Shelton. As soon as the 1985-86 school year began, my mother and I went over and talked to the principal at Oak Hill about the possibility. He seemed to like the idea and was very encouraging. After two or three weeks we did not hear from him, so we called again. He repeated that he thought it was a good idea and would get back with us. Well, this went on for several iterations until finally we just gave up on the idea. I guess this is what some people consider to be Southern hospitality – put off all undesirable decisions and perhaps they will just go away.

Even though volunteering at Oak Hill did not work out, I still made periodic visits to the school over the first few years following my graduation from high school. There is a tradition there, like at many schools, that before the major holidays (Thanksgiving and Christmas), they would serve the traditional meals and invite guests. Since I knew many of the teachers, and several of my friends were still there, I was invited to several of these affairs. I took these occasions and others to visit with the classes and participate, especially in physical education. In the spring of 1986 the school initiated a sports banquet where I was invited as a former student. Coach Wilson allowed me to help in handing out the awards from the previous year's Special Olympics. They also had a special award for my previous bowling accomplishments, since they did not give out awards prior to initiating the sports banquet. They gave me a special trophy for four years of bowling, which was a great surprise to me, since I was not even attending Oak Hill any longer.

On those rare occasions when I would visit Oak Hill, Coach Wilson would let me bowl with the PE classes. Shortly after this, Oak Hill was involved in a Special Olympics trip to Huntsville, Alabama in which one of the activities was bowling. To my surprise, Coach Wilson called me at home and asked me if I would like to make the trip with them and participate. He did not have to ask me twice. It was going to give me the chance to participate in my favorite sport and at the same

time visit with old friends. This tour was going to be a sleepover and we were going to get the chance to visit the Space Center at Huntsville. We made a similar trip in 1985 but we had to forego the tour of the Space Center since we had to make the trip in one day.

Coach Wilson borrowed a church bus and we were on our way. They had wheelchair locks in the back of the bus, but the first time around they did not hold. Just as the bus got on the interstate the lock came loose and I went flying across ending up at the lift in the center of the bus. Fortunately, there was no damage to either me or the lift, and they put my chair at a different angle this time.

A number of former classmates were still attending Oak Hill, and they also made the trip. Doug and Jimmy kept me close company and the three-hour trip seemed to go by in a few minutes. As we were all talking and joking. I stumbled into an embarrassing situation in talking about a Woody Allen movie at that time where he was in jail and, as punishment, had to spend 24 hours in confinement with an insurance salesman. It was just at this time that I realized that Jimmy's father, who was on the bus with us, was an insurance salesman. I thought that I had dodged a bullet as I looked over and found Jimmy's father not paying attention to what we were saying. Then Jimmy let him in on the joke, and I was back in trouble again. With friends like that you don't need enemies. It was all in good fun, and he got over it by the time we got to Huntsville.

As soon as we got to the city we went to the Space Center. It was extremely cold even though the sun was out. Once we got into the Center it warmed up considerably. It was quite informative as they gave various demonstrations of all of the space gadgetry. The most impressive thing was a 360-degree theatre in which they showed movies taken from cameras on the space shuttle. It was so real that one of our friends had to put her head between her legs to keep from getting motion sickness.

We then loaded back on the bus and went back to the hotel. It was necessary for us to get back and get in bed since we were going to have to get up around 5:00 AM in order to get to the competition on time. We got up and had breakfast after which we loaded up once again for the bowling alley. One lane was assigned to each of four contestants. There were plenty of volunteers that day for the event -- one volunteer per participant to get the bowling ball for them, and if they used a ramp they would help them get the ramps set up as well. Each volunteer wanted their own competitor to win, but at the same time everyone had a very cooperative spirit wishing all to do well.

There was one volunteer that day that just did not get it. He took the competition so seriously that you would think he was the one who was bowling. He happened to be the one assisting a young lady who was sharing the lane where I was. When one of the others at our lane got a strike, this guy could not contain himself and let out a stream of cuss words that shocked us all. Not that he meant anyone ill by it -- he was just so caught up in the competitive nature of things and wanted to help his competitor in every way possible. Unfortunately, this is the common attitude in most sporting events in our country today, and the Special Olympics is one of the few places left where people can compete for the pleasure of competition and not feel that they have to win in order to

have a good time. In fact, I know that I won some prize at the awards ceremony -- it was either first or second for my category, but it was not the important thing.

When I was making my way from the lanes to the table where we were going to have lunch, there was a young boy sitting in a wheelchair with some of his classmates. Just by looking at him I could tell that he had MD. Immediately I felt some bond between us and was drawn to go over and initiate a conversation with him. However, with all of the confusion surrounding getting everyone to lunch, it just did not work out that I could. As soon as lunch was over we had to go right to the bus, and I felt that I missed an opportunity.

That night back in Tuscaloosa I felt a debt of gratitude to Coach Wilson for asking me to go with them. I did not know it at the time but this was to be my last significant visit to Oak Hill. Over the next few years my friends started graduating and many of the teachers left as well. It was a graceful transition, allowing me to come back and help out in every way that I could, but Oak Hill would soon be in the realm of memory. I still stay in contact with those who I grew up with, but no longer in a formal way through the school. Those were some good years, but I try not to dwell too long on them, not desiring to live in the past.

When the winter quarter of 1985-86 began I was taking American History Part 2. It was my fate this quarter, however, to draw the teacher that I had during the summer (whom I called the cusser). I had gotten an A on my first history course and did not want to chance getting a B, but I still wanted to get the experience of this course, so I decided to take this as an audit. There were not that many students in this class so we sat close together. Over the first few weeks we had interesting conversations before and after class. When the first test came I stayed at home since, auditing, I did not need to take it. When I arrived for the next class the teacher met me at door and asked if I was just auditing. I indicated that I was, and he apologized for not notifying me not to come that day. The class, it seems, had done so poorly on the first test that he was making them take another one. After that the students began treating me differently, and there seemed to be silence when I arrived in the classroom. Interesting how people discriminate – they had no problem with my handicap as long as I was one of the grade-seeking kind. However, now that I was just an observer ... Perhaps I am making too much of this, or perhaps it was the combination of auditing and my handicap that pushed some over the edge. Or, perhaps this was just my punishment for taking the easy way out and not taking the course for credit. Whatever, I did not let this affect me too much and enjoyed the course the best that I could. The real downer, however, was that he left out any consideration of World War II, and that was the main reason that I was sitting through all of it.

That following spring (1986) I took Western Civilization 1 for credit, which I had audited before. I took off the summer of 1986. The following Fall I took Western Civilization 2. We were going along fine until we got down to the third and final test for the quarter. We had to go over the last two chapters of the book, but the teacher got the flu, so we were told to just go home and read them for the test. This made it quite difficult since we did not know what he felt was important. I went home and tried to look at every possible angle. I was quite nervous about this, but it worked out fine and I got an A in the course. I guess the fact that everyone was in the same boat leveled things out quite a bit.

December of 1986 rolled around, and I had taken every history course that I could. So I decided to take a course in religion that they called a “survey of the New Testament.” It was somewhat different from the way that I had studied the bible at church. In this case the bible was treated as literature as opposed to an authoritative book from God intended to save men’s souls. I have heard horror stories about men who would teach the bible as a series of fairy tales, since they did not believe it themselves. Fortunately, I was spared that, since the teacher was also a full-time preacher at one of the churches in town, and seemed to have an understanding for both the believers and unbelievers. I found it quite easy with my background, and got an A out of the class.

As I mentioned above, in all the classes that I took at Shelton, the area allocated to my wheelchair was at the back of the room, and this required that I shout to be heard. I was still battling with shyness and this did not help the situation. Not that it was important for me to speak up. Usually if I knew the answer, that was good enough for me. It certainly was not going to affect anyone very much if I spoke out or not. However, this changed when I took the survey of the New Testament course. I felt compelled as a Christian to speak up when something was said which challenged my faith. I never expected that this would be the case, but the point was driven home early in the semester. We were studying the early life of Jesus in Matthew, chapter three, the event being where he was baptized by John the Baptist. The teacher asked what happened right after Jesus was baptized. Of course, I knew the answer was that the Spirit descended on him like a dove. However, I felt uncomfortable about giving the answer across the room. I would just let someone else answer it instead. I was surprised to find out that no one knew the answer. So was the teacher. The teacher regressed to his preaching mode and suddenly went into a tirade about how the reason that people don't know these things is that they just don't care. He suddenly became apologetic, but it made me realize that if I did not answer I was giving the impression that I did not care at all about the bible, which is a terrible example to set for someone who is a Christian.

From that time forward I made an effort to speak up when he asked questions for which I knew the answer. I did not try to hog all of the questions, but tried to answer every other one or so. This was the first time that I could actually bring myself to get involved in class like that.

This brings us to March of 1987. I had taken six classes at Shelton State, and had gotten A’s in all four that I had taken for credit. However, I was beginning to get somewhat tired of school. It was clear that I was going to have to start taking some English and math courses before long, and I was not looking forward to that, especially the math. There were also a few things that I wanted to do at home on my own, which taking courses had prevented me from doing. For one thing, I had always wanted to go into much more depth in writing up some major events in American history. I had done several projects for courses but had never gotten into the depth that I felt I would enjoy – the course requirements in other areas had always gotten in the way.

So I decided to take some time away from school and get involved more in the things that interested me. My idea was to get it out of my system and then I would return to school. However, the project took longer than I thought. It took at least a year, and there were other factors beyond

my control that prevented me from going back to Shelton State. Mom had had back surgery, and it became impossible for her to take me to class on a regular basis. So, even though I did not know it at the time, this was the end of my college career.

My interests began to evolve more toward the spiritual, and I began to get more involved with my church activities. I took part in public worship, primarily reading the scriptures, and I had been satisfied to contribute in this way. However, one day in the summer of 1987 my grandparents came to visit. During lunch with them on Sunday after church Dad asked me to offer thanks for our food. He did this often, and I would generally offer a generic prayer in thanks for our food and other things with which God had blessed us. However, on this occasion, I felt that I should deviate from this and pray more from the heart. I was nervous about this, even though it was just my own family. A couple days later Dad asked me if I was ready to lead public prayer at church. This caught me by surprise. I did not want to say yes, but I did not want to say no either. I had never thought about it until he brought it up, and I decided that I would wait a few weeks and practice somewhat.

The biggest difference between reading scripture and offering a prayer is that the scripture is all written down for you. But, when you are leading prayer you have to say what is in your heart and think on your feet at the same time. In our church this privilege is shared among the men who wish to participate in this regard. The quality of the prayers, of course, varies considerably. However, some of the best prayers are not the most eloquent. Everyone knows that in a public situation like this, things come out that are not exactly what is meant, and the bible states that the Holy Spirit helps in these situations by properly translating what we really want and need so that it is acceptable before God (Romans 8:26). It is probably for this reason that I have never known of any of our members to write out their prayer ahead of time.

Our formal worship service typically has two prayers led by members of the congregation: one early in the service and the other at the close of the service. Usually the first is longer and more detailed, although there are not hard and fast rules in this regard. However, I figured that in starting off, I would prefer to do the closing prayer. It was time that I moved beyond just reading the scripture, so I finally agreed to lead a closing prayer. The particular situation was on a special service that we have one Sunday evening per month in which there is no formal lesson, and we devote ourselves to singing, prayer and bible reading. When they asked me that Sunday morning if I would like to read scripture I went ahead and told them that I would be willing to lead the closing prayer. I was nervous all Sunday afternoon, but I think Mom and Dad were even more concerned than I was. As we were singing the last song before the closing prayer I suddenly went blank and got to thinking: "Who is leading the closing prayer." Then it hit me: "It's me!" A shot of adrenaline hit my system and my heart raced. But, by the end of the song I had calmed down somewhat and when they announced my name to lead the prayer I took a deep breath and paraphrased what I had rehearsed. It went fine, and I was grateful that I was now recognized as being able to do more than just read scripture.

I began to get involved in other ways as well. For several years our church had put out a weekly bulletin. Several articles were required, and one particular individual organized those who

volunteered to write articles. One day in early fall, 1987, I suddenly had an idea that could be used as a sermon, and it was also short enough to be formed into an article for the bulletin. I spent a week getting my thoughts together, looking up a number of scriptures, and getting it drafted. I was able to get Missy to type it up for me, and then I gave it to the one who selects articles, and he was quite pleased with it, and a couple weeks later it was printed. It was called “Hearing or Listening?” and it illustrated the difference between the two by an event common to many situation comedies. The wife comes into the kitchen while her husband is reading the paper over breakfast. As the conversation goes on the husband keeps nodding his head and saying “uh-hu.” Finally the wife realizes that her mate is not paying any attention and she tests him by saying: “I want a divorce,” to which he replies: “That’s nice, dear.” I go on to say that the problem was not that he did not hear – he could hear and know that it was her voice, but he did not have the slightest idea of what she said because he was not listening. This led to the application of the passage in Galatians 1 where Paul stated that he was surprised how quickly they had left the faith so soon after it had proclaimed to them. They had heard what he said, but they were not listening or they would not have fallen away. The article concluded that this was the problem with many Christians who hear the word all the time but do not make it a part of their lives.

I did not know it at the time but this was a major turning point in my spiritual development. For, the process of putting my thoughts down on paper is much the same as preparing a sermon. The only difference is that you need not articulate it out loud. Thinking through various scriptural topics, however, gave me confidence that I could preach. I was not ready for a full-length lesson, but opportunities are given to the men on Wednesday night and on Sunday singing nights to offer a short lesson (maybe five or ten minutes). These were sermons as much as they were “invitations.” An appeal is made for anyone who was not in the right relationship with God to come forward at that time. I decided that I would volunteer to offer an invitation, and it took me about a week to work up a short lesson. The topic was baptism and how for so many years religious leaders had tried to play down its role in our salvation. I spent several weeks going over it and making sure that it was not too long. The main thing I was worried about was whether I could talk loud enough. I had always been shy and naturally soft-spoken. To overcome this habit, I would go to one corner of the largest room in our house and have my parents listen to me in the other corner, and I would speak as loud as I could.

Finally, after about a month I announced to the coordinator of our worship services that I was ready when the next opportunity came up. To my surprise, the opportunity came up a lot quicker than I had anticipated. It was the next week that he put me on the schedule. To say I was nervous is a gross understatement. However, this motivated me to rehearse over and over night and day. I would still wake up at 4 AM wondering why I had agreed to do this. I figured that no one was going to take me seriously anyway, so why should I bother? However, I kept coming back to a passage that the apostle Paul had written: “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor. 13:11). I realize now that this is more a statement of fact than a command to “grow up.” Paul was talking about spiritual gifts and the fact that the Corinthians were being childish in their use of them. However, this verse impressed upon me the necessity to put away some of the things that I had held so dear, and to move on to more important things. This thing about being too shy to speak in public was a childish thing, and I was going to put it aside.

From the Wednesday evening when they informed me that I would be preaching on Sunday evening to that Sunday seemed like the longest four days of my life. It turned out that the preacher was out of town that Sunday morning, and a visiting preacher was giving the sermon. He was quite young and inexperienced. As I listened to him I was able to relax for the first time. After all, he was younger than I was, and he made his share of bloopers and blunders. The congregation was very forgiving, realizing that he was doing the best that he could do, and we all have to start somewhere. Nobody booed him or threw him out of the pulpit. I realized that if he could do this, certainly I could.

That afternoon I went over the lesson a few more times. The hardest part for me was during the singing. I always liked to participate in the singing to the best of my ability, which often left my throat quite dry. So, I had to restrict myself to be sure that I did not use up all of my voice before I even got up to speak. While I was still apprehensive about this, I was not terribly concerned; at least not as much as I had been before my first prayer. I am not too sure about my father, however. He seemed to be singing in a greatly reduced voice as well. I had no doubt about my mother being nervous – after all, she is a mother.

As the final song before the lesson was coming to a close, Dad got up and pushed me to the front of the auditorium and turned me to face the congregation. This was different from leading prayer from your seat. Now they were looking back at me. It was quite frightening and disarming. But I had been over this so many times that I did not have to worry about what I was going to say. I began a bit rough at first, but as things got rolling, it was no problem. I said everything that I had prepared on the subject of baptism. I started with Matthew 3:16 where Jesus set the example of being baptized “to fulfill all righteousness.” I emphasized the command that Jesus gave to his apostles in Matthew 28:19, which is the great commission, where he told them to baptize those who would be disciples. This was reinforced with Peter’s words in Acts 2:38 when he was asked: “What must we do to be saved?” his response was: “Repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins.” Finally, I went to Romans 6:3 which illustrates that baptism is emblematic of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and that it puts us into his body, the church, since we are “baptized into Christ.”

Over the next few years I always gave several invitations each year and continued to write articles for the church bulletin. One of the things that bothered me at first in speaking in public was the thought that everyone would be too preoccupied by my wheelchair to listen to what I was saying. But on one particular occasion when I was giving a lesson I looked out at the congregation and saw a young girl of about 6 who was almost asleep on her mother’s lap. That is when I began to relax. If I was not a person in a wheelchair to her, then surely others could perceive me similarly. Perhaps as just another boring preacher that puts you to sleep – but that’s OK, I will take it.

A year after I gave my first invitation I offered to teach a bible class. I began as a bible teacher apprentice, working with a more experienced teacher. He would let me teach the class every other week or so. There were times when I did not prepare enough material, but having a more experienced person backing me up helped, since he covered in cases like these. The major problem that I had was getting the students involved. It seemed quite clear to me that I was getting

a whole lot more out of these lessons than they were. But, that is true of all teachers. The trick is to motivate the students to do just a fraction of the work that the teacher does. I don't know if it was me, or if they were not interested.

While this aspect of my spiritual efforts was somewhat frustrating, a transformation was taking place in my life where the center was no longer on secular activities. I began to realize that my contribution and purpose in this life would not be in the physical things that I could produce for others. However, there were some things much more important than physical things. It was not just the fact of being a teacher or being a preacher that was important. It was effectively applying these things to my life so that I could be an example to others. I might not be the best teacher or preacher, but I did have a unique role that only I could play.

I had always suspected in the back of my mind (at least for the past few years) that those suffering from MD would eventually lose the battle. They told me that my Grandmother had three or four brothers with MD. One time when thinking about it I realized that I never heard anyone mention those brothers. I knew that if they were normal they would still be with us. Then, of course, when Brad Stevens died, it really began to reinforce my suspicions. They always described it as a disease of the muscles, and I learned quite early that the heart was a muscle.

But having suspicions and having it confirmed for you in the printed word are two different things. A couple years earlier my parents bought my sister and me a set of World Book encyclopedias for Christmas to replace our old, outdated set. These had color pictures and interesting articles that made reading and learning from it a lot of fun. Occasionally I would take a volume and just flip through it to see if any of the articles were of interest to me. It was a couple years later in the summer of 1986 when I grabbed the M volume and came across an article entitled Muscular Dystrophy. The article title obviously caught my eye even though I was not really looking for it. I began reading the article, and it stated that MD is a name given to a variety of diseases affecting the muscles. As I skimmed through the article I came to the description of the type of MD that I had. I immediately recognized some of the symptoms given. It described how it affects the muscles and ultimately the heart and lungs. Then at the end of the article I read: "... and those suffering from this disease usually die before the age of 20." When I read that I felt like I had just been shot through the chest. Suspecting something like that is one thing – having it right there in front of you in black and white is completely different. The World Book Encyclopedia made it that much more authoritative, and it was at this point that I went from suspicion to knowledge.

I was 19 at the time that I came across this, just 4 months away from my 20th birthday. Suddenly I felt like I was living on borrowed time. This was not only disturbing and depressing, it was quite frightening as well. The only thing that kept me from losing all hope was that Kevin had just turned 21. So, there was one relative of mine who had beaten the odds. This helped somewhat, but it did not totally stave off the depression that came to me. It was early afternoon on a Saturday when I made this discovery and the reality hit me (not that I had not subconsciously known it before). I tried to keep myself busy writing, reading, drawing and whatever else I could find to do for the rest of the day. I got down on myself for even reading the article to start with – why didn't I just go on by it and find another article? But, of course, it was too late for that.

Fortunately, the next day was Sunday and I went to church. Somehow there the enormity of the ramifications of the article just did not seem so great. I know that this is true of all of the problems that I have ever faced in life. When I take them to the Lord, they just seem to fizzle away. As the preacher once said: if we could bottle and sell the peace of mind that we get when we turn to the Lord with our problems, we could all be millionaires. Yet, it is not for sale ... it is completely free. When you are feeling depressed about the prospect of your own death, it is the only thing that can put those thoughts into perspective. I remember going home after services that day and thinking that, although I would probably die much earlier in life than most of the other people there, I was no different than they were. The actual time of death is a mystery. Any one of them could be swept away by an unknown disease or an accident in an instant. True, the probability of most of them outliving me was fairly high. But nothing is certain. It could happen tomorrow morning, or ten years from now, so why worry about it. If you are ready to go anytime there need be no worry, and if you are not then you need to worry even if you are in the best of health. One hundred years from now, we will all be in the same boat.

When November 1986 came and I finally turned 20 we did not do anything differently than in other years. We gathered around the table where Mom had prepared a birthday cake. Instead of 20 candles she got only two, one in the shape of a 2 and the other in the shape of a 0. After making my wish and blowing out the candles I opened the gifts. The usual celebration; but there was one thing that I had never felt before. I had the satisfaction of knowing that both Kevin and I had beaten the odds. He made it to 21 and I made it to 20, and that was an achievement in itself.

I believe that when most people learn that their life is going to be shortened they make a mental list of things that they want to do before they die. In the back of my mind I had been doing this even before I read the encyclopedia article. One of the goals that I had set was to vote in a presidential election. That might sound strange, but beginning with the 1980 presidential election, I began to take a keen interest in politics. I was disappointed in 1984 that I could not vote because I would not turn 18 until a week after the election. I was not sure if I would be around in another four years. Nevertheless, as soon as I turned 18 I registered to vote. The first time I got to exercise this right was in the summer of 1985 at the local mayoralty election. In the following summer of 1986 I voted in Alabama's gubernatorial election. I take pride in helping to put the first Republican governor in office in recent history. Not that I was a great fan of the Republicans, but he seemed to be the lesser of the two evils. Ironically, by the time he was sworn in I got tired of hearing the term: "first Republican governor since reconstruction."

There was excitement in going down and voting – being part of the system and exercising your rights. Also, I enjoyed going home and watching how my candidates fared. However, I felt that this was nothing compared to being a part of the Presidential elections. Local and state politics mostly bored me, and I was much more interested in things at the national level. I looked forward to the 1988 election for that purpose. In 1987 there was a prelude to this election. The University of Alabama asked three former presidents to come and talk on the campus; two accepted -- Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. I figured it would be greedy to ask my parents to take me to both of these presentations, so I decided to just go with Gerald Ford. On that day Dad had to be out of town, so

Mom agreed to take Missy and me. It began at 7:00 PM, and although we got there at 6:30 PM the parking lot was almost packed. The van had to have a little more room than other vehicles in order for the side lift to work, so we had to park far off in a spot where there were two spaces. However, just as we pulled in another little sports car pulled right in next to us. So, we had to pull out and try again. We managed to find another one and got in shortly before his talk started.

There were secret service men (probably some women too, but I did not notice them) all around, and none of them seemed very happy about anything. (They were not wearing sun glasses though.) Many of my friends were there in order to get extra credit for their classes. We had fairly good seats, and he gave a great speech that I found quite interesting. This almost made up for the time that I had to miss Ronald Reagan because of school. However, the one man who was invited and who had refused to come was Richard Nixon, and I would have loved to hear him speak despite his shady past.

When the 1988 election year arrived, I was quite excited to be taking part in the process and followed it closely from the very first primary right through the final election in November. Watching the National political conventions got easier for me, since my parents gave me an early color TV set to go in my room. Perhaps they knew how glued to the process that I wanted to be, and did not want to have to have it on the family TV all the time. It came just in time for me to watch the Republican convention. It did not take long for the elections to roll around and on Tuesday, November 8th, 1998 I felt considerable excitement as I participate in the process of voting along with many others. That evening I had supper early and retired immediately to my room to watch the returns come in. This was the third presidential election that I had observed in this way, but this one was much more exciting in that I had voted. I took pride in helping Vice President Bush become the first sitting VP to be elected President since 1837.

Taking part in the presidential elections was just one of the many things that I began to enjoy as I entered adulthood. One thing that brought this home is my registering in order to begin receiving a monthly Social Security disability check. Part of the money would go to help my parents cover the many expenses that were being incurred and part if it would be contributed to the Lord. The rest enabled me to have some freedom to purchase things on my own without asking my parents. Since my disability had prevented me from ever having a paying job, this was a degree of freedom that I had not previously experienced.

This new freedom brought about some pitfalls, especially when I was in a bookstore. I had a real problem in resisting picking up everything that looked interesting to me, which was quite a bit. I did run up some fairly large bills at the bookstore, and I did not have time to read them all. At other times I would find that some of the books that I bought were somewhat boring, and I was running out of room to store them all. My parents never said anything to me about it, but I realized that something was going to have to change. So, I started working on the problem and did things like waiting until the book I wanted came out in paperback to get the space and cost down. I also visited the library more often and would check a book out before seeing if I really wanted to purchase it.

The thing that I liked best about getting out of school was that I could stay up later. Normally when going to school I would be in bed by nine or ten in order to assure that I would be rested enough to meet the bus and cope with school. Even while going to Shelton State, however, I would take afternoon classes and would not have to be in bed so early. One problem was that Dad had to help me get into bed, and he had a habit of getting to bed quite early himself. Finally we reached a compromise that even though he would help me get in bed early, I would then read or watch TV and Mom would come by later to help turn off the lights and put the books up. This also helped me to catch up with stock of books that had built up.

Graduation from high school is a rite of passage to adulthood for most people, and while we are still considered as young people, most high school graduates expect to begin being treated as an adult at this point. This transition is sometimes uncomfortable, especially around those who have watched you grow up. But this is especially difficult for those who are in wheelchairs. The handicapped feel a special need to prove themselves capable as adults, since the tendency is to view a physical handicap as a mental handicap as well. While this occurs in some diseases, the actual coupling of physical and mental disabilities is the exception rather than the rule. However, it seems difficult for most people to separate the two. It is not that they are trying to be prejudiced or mean, it just seems a natural inclination, and so we need to work on it in our society. The solution, of course, is for normal people to get to know their handicapped counterparts as individuals, so that they do not generalize from the physical to the mental if it is not justified. When people comment on the mental abilities of the handicapped they often betray this generalization. For example, if they say: "he has a really sharp mind," my response would be: "why would you expect anything else?"

As an example, in the spring of 1986 my sister and I had invited a number of the college kids over to our house to play trivial pursuit. I had only been out of high school for about a year and so this was the first that I had an opportunity to get to know these students. We divided into two teams with 6 or 7 on each team. Our team got to answer the first question. The question was: Which state flag is the only one with a cactus on it? I knew it was Arizona from either reading or hearing it a few weeks back, so I immediately shouted it out. The rest of the team began talking among them and did not seem to want to take me seriously. I told them again: "It's Arizona." One of them looked at me and said: "Do you really know this stuff." I responded that I was sure of this particular item. Now I will agree that the interpretation of this incident could just be my imagination, but I did not see them responding to each other in this same way. It seemed that they would not take me seriously at the outset. Once they got to know me, however, most of their first impressions were erased, and I got to be close friends with many of them.

It was also about this time that I considered enlisting in the Marines. The government kept running these ads for anyone 18 or over had to sign up for the Selective Service. I jokingly said to my mother that I had better go on down to the post office and sign up. At first it was a joke, but then she got to thinking that perhaps we should check on it to avoid any red tape that we would get into if we did not comply with the law. Sure enough, when she called they told her that it did not matter if I was confined to a wheelchair, registering was still required by law. If the time ever came

when I was called up, then we would deal with the disability. A couple weeks after signing up I got something in the mail about sending off to receive brochures about the military services (for recruiting purposes). I had always been a fan of the US Marines, and my history classes had taught me that they were generally the first on the scene to any military involvement. So, just for kicks, I sent off to them. The price was right.

About four to six weeks later a Marines brochure arrived. I read it cover to cover and then set it aside. It was a couple weeks later that I got a phone call from the local recruiting station wanting to know if I read the brochure and wanted to enlist. In hindsight I should have just told him my situation and let it go at that. However, instead I gave him some vague answers and sort of played along. He began to get a little suspicious when he asked how many there were in my high school graduating class and I told him four. He then asked if there were any physical ailments that might keep me from being able to function as a Marine. I told him that I had an eye problem and wore glasses. He gave me his number and told me to call if I wanted to pursue it further, and never called me back. So my brief encounter with the marines was over, and I guess I will never be able to fight my "country's battles on the land and on the sea."

The funny thing about reaching adulthood is that it is something that you long for as a child and think that it will never come. But once you reach it you have a tendency to want to go back to those easier days when all of your decisions were pretty much made for you. This tendency is reinforced if you are handicapped with a gradually deteriorating disease like MD. By reaching adulthood some handicapped people are able to obtain a greater independence than what they had before. It all boils down to what type of handicap or disease they have. If it is a stable thing it is possible to make all of the allowances for it and obtain some freedom under those circumstances. However, with something like MD that is a moving target, you might make all of the provisions for the current situation only to find that this is not sufficient a short time later. For example, the loss of most of the use of my arms was becoming a reality that I was going to have to face in the near future. Unless someone can come up with a cure, or at least a way to stabilize or reverse the process, the chances for increased independence with age are not promising.

There were a number of other personal problems associated with my condition that came with age as well. Usually around five or six AM I would wake up in a very painful condition from lying in one position all night. The reader might try this sometime and see how long you can lie in one position without moving. I could not roll over by myself and would have to call for assistance. For the most part this was not too bad, since Dad was getting up about this time to get ready for work, and he would help me. But there were other nights when this same type of thing would happen earlier, around 2 or 3 AM, perhaps because I had stressed my back the day before or else I just could not sleep. When I was younger I did not mind calling for help, but now that I was older I did not want to be a burden on my family. Waking people up at this hour of the morning was quite emotionally distressing to me. I recall thinking that if I were only ten years younger I would not care about this – I would yell and scream until someone came and helped me out. As children we tend to think the whole world revolves around us. But now I could put myself in the place of my parents, and I knew how inconvenient this could be. Dad needed his sleep to deal with the problems that he had at work, and Mom had back problems of her own that she needed to sleep through. So I would really think hard before calling for their help. When it did happen and I had to call out

for help, neither one of us would say a whole lot, since we recognized that neither of us was in a good mood.

At this time I needed help getting in and out of bed, getting dressed, taking a bath and going to the bathroom. As you reach adulthood with MD you have evolved into this situation from about the age of 12 (when it gets really noticeable), and so by the time you reach 20 it is not a traumatic situation. The problem is that many of your friends and cousins of your own age are moving out on their own, going to college, going to work, getting married and having children of their own. But you are not. You are staying home with your parents and they have to help you with many of the things that you do. This again impresses upon you the differences. As long as your friends were living at home you could relate to them since this was something that you both had in common. Now that they were leaving, however, there is a whole new set of circumstances that dominates their lives and provides the grist for the conversation mill. It is harder to relate to them, and them to me. It is not that we ignore each other and are not still friends. However, there is not the old commonality that pulled us together.

This is the hardest part about getting older with MD. I could watch TV and read as late as I wanted to, and I had considerable freedom in many areas. But, I could not determine things about moving around physically, such as when I could get into and out of bed. And, of course this would have a heavy impact on my ability to gain independence. Earlier in life, when in high school, many of my friends went through these same things because of their disabilities. Now that I did not have a close daily association with them I had gravitated toward many more young people who did not have disabilities, and they were more difficult to relate to in this regard. Another difficult thing was to observe my parents growing older. I recognized that their capacity to assist was going to decline as my problems grew worse. The thought of depending on strangers to help was not a very inviting one to me.

The first time that this really became apparent was in the spring of 1988. My mother had a bad back for the past five years. Her slipped disk became much more serious, and she had to have an operation. Obvious under these circumstances she was not able to help me in and out of bed. So, when my father went out of town, we had to hire someone from a local home health care provider to assist me with these physical things. I believe that this was the most difficult thing for me to accept. There was something about a stranger doing this that removed some of your independence. During the day when I made the decisions as to what I was going to study, watch and do, I had a feeling of independence; however, when this person would have to come to help me, I felt once again as a child.

First my mother and I decided that we would compromise. The man from the hospital would come in the evening and put me to bed. However, in the morning she would do that herself using the lift that we had installed over the bed for the purpose of moving me from the bed to the wheelchair and vice versa. The way it worked was that they would roll me over on my right side. Then they would roll up the right side of the canvas and place it as close to my body as possible. Next they would roll me to my left side and unroll the canvas. This would position me in the middle of the canvas, which was then hooked to the lift with chains that hooked onto the canvas. This

would be used then to raise me to a sitting position slightly above the height of the bed. Then they would rotate the arm of the lift to where I could come down in the chair. The canvas would remain under me during the day so that the process could be reversed that night when I got back in bed.

We had had the lift for many years, but thought of it more as a nuisance than a help. Dad felt it would be much easier and quicker if he just lifted me in and out of bed himself. We placed the lift in the corner of my room and it became an instant success as a clothes rack. However, if my mother were going to get me up in the mornings, as we had planned, she would have to use the lift.

On one particular Friday morning in the spring of 1988, Dad was out of town and Mom came in around 8:30 AM and placed me on the canvas. All seemed to be going well as she hooked the canvas up to the lift and pulled me up. Then she rotated me over the chair. At that point I noticed that something was not going right. My body was too far forward in the chair, and I could not lean back and get my head up. She realized something was amiss and as she was trying to get things straightened up she kept stressing her back more and more. Every time she would go to adjust me it just made me slip further and further out of the chair. Mom did not panic. Realizing that getting me properly positioned in the chair was an impossibility at this point, she slowly began to lower me to the floor. Letting me lay there she called the home health care people at the hospital and told them what had happened. They sent two people over to get me back in the chair.

As I lay there for just ten to fifteen minutes I began to realize how hard the floor was even with the padded carpeting. Missy was with me and I told her that I did not think that the people from the hospital were ever going to get there. She helped me roll back and forth from one hip to the other to relieve the pressure of the floor on my hips. They finally arrived and were somewhat confused as to what had happened. At about this time I was feeling that the entire situation was impossible and that there was a high probability of spending the rest of my life on the floor. However, they managed to get me up and stabilized in my chair once again.

The major problem here was that Mom had re-injured her back in the process, and she was laid up in bed for the next couple of days. When Dad found out what had happened he cancelled the rest of his trip and came home early. After this incident the lift was placed back in the corner, and we decided that when Dad was out of town that we would get the man from the Home Health Service to come and help us both in the morning and at night. And so, once again the lift assumed its rightful place in my room as the intermediate repository for clothes intended for the closet.

The first man that came from the provider was quite friendly and we got along quite well. I did not say much when he was getting me up and helping me with my clothes. But once he got me into the chair it was like we were two adults visiting with each other. But being at the mercy of someone that you hardly know can be both frightening and humiliating. This was something that I had to deal with as I got older, my condition deteriorated, and my parents did not have the capacity to help me as they previously had.

Kevin was probably having the same feeling. His father had left home at this time, and his mother had to go out and get a job. It was necessary for Kevin to go to a nursing home, and so he had to depend on strangers to help him on a regular basis. I knew how distressing it was for me to

have someone come to the house; I can imagine what a blow to his psyche it was for him to be constantly under the control of strangers. Not only that, but being in a nursing home he was subject to robbery. As an example, he wore a gold chain around his neck. One night while he was sound asleep someone came in and without disturbing him stole the chain. In frustration he told his mother that he was just going to put all of his things out on display and let anyone who wanted to have them just take what they wanted, and just get it over with all at once.

But, of course, that was just the least of the problems at that nursing home. I knew how I felt being dependent on strangers even in a very limited capacity. However, Kevin was now totally dependent on them, and I just could not imagine how he must have felt. As in all other endeavors of life, there are good people and bad people at the nursing homes. Some of them, especially the non-professionals, had not taken the job to help people – they took it because it is the only one that they could find. Having compassion for the patient was just foreign to some of them.

When Kevin was about 12 he was involved in a bad car crash that broke his hip. Although eventually it did heal, it was never the same. He could never put much pressure on it for any length of time. Thus, he spent most of his time at night lying on his left hip. This would get quite tiresome after while and he would switch, but not for long. On one particular night when he was in the nursing home, he was having a rough time getting comfortable on his left side. So, he called the nurses' aid to roll him over onto his right hip – the one that he had broken. After a short time, however, his right hip could not take anymore and he had to roll back over. The nurses' aid refused saying: "I just turned you over." Kevin called one of the nurses to come in, but before they turned him over they made him promise that he would stay on his left side for a while. (As if he had any choice in the matter.) Events like this really made him bitter as it was clear that every shred of independence was now gone.

When Kevin told me stories like these I became quite fearful of having to be placed in a nursing home. But the worst was still ahead for Kevin. One day in early November 1988, it was early in the morning and Kevin decided that he was ready to get out of bed. This was right during a shift change and the new nurses' aid had not arrived. So, one of the men who was working overtime without getting paid for it, came in and began helping Kevin get out of bed and dressed. He was about out of his pajamas when the new person arrived. Words were exchanged between the two nurses' aids that got more and more heated, and the next thing the two of them got into a fight. They grappled with each other and fell right on top of Kevin, who was still lying in bed, causing him to break his leg.

They quickly apologized and wanted Kevin to keep it a secret. It is not possible to keep pain like that a secret. It was a severe fracture right up close to his hip. The only redeeming aspect of this was that the nursing home, not wishing to be sued over this, arranged for Kevin to get assigned to a nurses' aid that he particularly liked. For a while the doctors thought that the break would spread to his hipbone. But once they got him immobilized in a cast it began to heal properly.

When I would visit with Kevin we would enjoy each other's company. We both had good senses of humor that we thought we inherited from our grandfather. Kevin did not dwell on the negatives, and the only time that we ever got really serious is when we had a discussion with regard

to suicide. Not that we are talking about whether or not we wanted to do it – neither of us had that inclination. We were just talking about that if we did do it, what would be the fastest and most painless way to go. He favored slitting your wrists while I placed my bet on sleeping pills. Mom just happened to be passing by one time when we were arguing about this and she asked us what we were talking about. Kevin told her we were arguing about what is the best way to commit suicide, which gave everyone a laugh, since he said it in a rather sarcastic way. It reflected the fact that we were really not seriously considering doing anything like this.

On the other hand, everyone at some time or another gives suicide a thought. Those who are disabled probably have more reasons than most to lean in this direction. But there were two things that kept me from seriously considering it. One was that I would be taking a chance of eternal separation from God since this is in clear violation to a law that he has had in effect since the very beginning. "Thou shalt not kill" applies to everyone, including oneself. This is a chance that I would never want to take. The other reason was the guilt that my friends and family would have if I carried out such an act. It would not be an act of love toward them. I never really talked about this with Kevin, but I suppose he felt the same way as I did.

There is another problem associated with getting older – all of your relatives get older as well. Kevin and I were really close to our grandfather. He suffered from diabetes and had to take an early retirement at age 60, which made him more available to us. He worked some off and on, but spent most of his time around the house, and thus, when we went to visit he was accessible to us most of the time, and we got quite close. When my grandparents first got their remote control TV set, my grandfather would not allow any of us to touch it except for Kevin and me. Whenever he would go fishing and bring home some fish for us to eat, he would separate the bones from the fish for Kevin and me, but the rest of the grandkids had to fend for themselves. And, whenever he would be doing carpentry work, he would find something for us to do. He was quite handy at assigning little things for us to do, and we really enjoyed his company. We all made each other feel quite useful.

I don't think that either Kevin or I realize just how tight a bond that we had with Grandpa until the summer of 1986. He began having a series of minor heart attacks, and we had to face the distinct possibility of losing him. My aunt and grandmother had gone to the mountains of Tennessee with Grandpa, and were going to stop by Tuscaloosa on the way back. That was when he started having chest pains. Even though he kept claiming it was just indigestion, they decided to skip the visit with us and head back to Louisiana. That night, when they got there, his chest pains started again, and they convinced him that he needed to go to the hospital. On the way there he decided that he did not want to go, but my grandmother refused to go back, which is a good thing, since he had a heart attack just as he arrived at the hospital. His heart stopped. It took them a while, but they were successful in restarting it. They began running tests over the next few days to see if open-heart surgery was called for. Of course, this was a very trying time for all of us, but I felt particularly vulnerable such a short time after Brad died facing the possibility of another person that I loved passing away. I spent a lot of time in prayer. Open heart surgery sounded very formidable to me – I imagined that they would take the heart out and open it up or something like that. It was difficult for me to imagine Grandpa going through such a procedure.

They decided that it would be best to operate at this time, but once they explained it to me I realized my misconception, and began praying that he would survive the surgery. Just before going in to surgery, Grandpa asked the doctors if he would be able to play the violin after surgery. They said: "Yes, no problem ... once you get your strength back." He replied: "Well that will be great since I have never been able to play it before this."

All of this was happening in late August, which was the time that we usually made our trip to Louisiana in any event. So we decided to go and help out in any way that we could. Actually, we left for Louisiana one day after his surgery. The night before we left my grandmother called and let us know that he had come through the surgery but was unable to furnish us with any other information. The 7 ½ hour trip seemed quite long not knowing what was going on. Every couple of hours we would stop and my mother would call the hospital.

By the time we arrived most of the anesthesia had worn off. He was awake and alert. We did not know it, but the doctors had only given him a 40% chance of surviving the operation. The main thing that I remember is that while he was laying in the hospital with the wires and tubes all connected to him, when he should have been concerned for himself all that he could think about was that he was not at home to entertain us. Eventually he came through the surgery and, although he was never as strong again, his life did get back to normal with their being able to come and see us at times as well.

About two years later another seemingly innocent thing gave him trouble again. Suffering from diabetes, he had poor circulation in his legs. Sometimes this gets so bad that amputation is required. In his case the doctors felt that some vein replacements in his calves would be beneficial. This was the first year that our family was not going to Louisiana for Christmas, since Mom had just had back surgery. So, they decided that they would come and see us instead. Grandpa was to have the surgery on one leg in late November that year, and then the other one in early December. Once he recovered from that they were planning on coming to see us. The first operation went quite well. The second surgery also seemed to go OK, but shortly after returning to his room they discovered that the blood was not flowing as they thought it should, and additional surgery was required. This seemed to be a success except for the fact that a blood clot formed as a result of this. The blood clot moved to his lungs, and they were not sure if this was the problem or if it was pneumonia, so they treated him for both. Things were not improving and when his kidneys began to fail, they did not expect him to survive.

For me this seemed perplexing. I could understand the heart wearing out and the problem with the heart attack two years before. If he had died from that we would have grieved but still have felt that it was nature taking its course. However, this time it seemed that it was brought on by elective surgery, which added an element of anger to my grief. I was fervent with my prayers, much more than before, praying almost hourly.

It was a Wednesday night when the doctors predicted that he would not survive the night. Kevin and I were very upset about the circumstances. We had both expected and perhaps even hoped that our times would come before his. Now it looked like we were not going to get out wish.

Not minimizing the effect on the others, but it seemed that Kevin and I spent the most time with him, and he seemed to relate better to us than the others.

The next day -- Thursday afternoon -- my grandmother called with some good news. It turned out that he was now in stable condition and was slowly coming around. He could respond to simple things like squeezing the doctor's hand, and it appeared that he might recover. The doctors started talking about him as the miracle man. Actually, the problem with the lungs had been pneumonia. The bad news was that the blood clot had gone to the brain and he had suffered a slight stroke. When he came around he did not have the use of his lower right leg, and would be forced to wear a brace and a cane.

Other than that, he seemed to be OK, with the exception of some problems with his memory. One time we were sitting on our front porch watching the squirrels and birds as we had done for over ten years. After quite a while went by he suddenly stated that he finally knew where he was. But he remembered names and faces quite well and did not seem to have any problems in functioning.

The strange thing about the whole event was that I came out of it with a strange sense of postponement. I knew that some time in the very near future God would not answer my prayers as he had done the two times in the past. It is appointed for every man once to die, and while it can be postponed somewhat, it cannot be put off indefinitely. I knew that I would have to face this at some point. I did not know how I would handle it. But, we have a way of putting such terrible events out of our minds and moving on. I was just thankful that we had a few more months or perhaps a year or so more together.

This had distracted me from realizing that Kevin's health was also deteriorating significantly at this time. A couple years back Kevin entered the hospital with a bout of pneumonia and stayed for a couple of weeks. It was not until now that I discovered how serious his condition was. He began having to use oxygen because of a shortness of breath when he would wake up at night, but I was unaware of this as well. He began losing weight, which I felt was a good thing. I did not realize that this was necessarily bad, since MD people tend to appear overweight due to the loss of muscle tone. So, I felt that if he could lose a little weight and look better, more power to him.

There were a number of reasons that I did not know his health was failing. For one thing, Kevin was a very positive guy and we never dwelt on the negatives of health. We both had problems, and sure -- we would talk about them at times; but for the most part we would not complain or try to beat each other in the game of worst ailment. The other reason was that we were not as close as we were when we were children. Most people probably have cousins that they are quite close to when young, but as time goes by interests diverge and we go in different directions. We stayed in communication, but did not visit with the same frequency. In the early 1980s Kevin's parents moved from a rural area and moved to the city of Alexandria. When they lived in the country they were just next to our mutual grandparents, so a visit to one was a visit to all. Now that they had moved this was not so convenient. Then, when he moved into the nursing home things got even worse as far as being able to visit.

Unlike most people our age, we could not just hop into our cars and run over to visit, since we both had MD. It always depended on what everyone else's schedule was, and it was difficult to get them together. It was late summer of 1986 when Kevin and I were to have our last normal visit. This was the time when Grandpa was having open-heart surgery and the nursing home where Kevin was staying was not too far from the hospital. So, on the way for one of their visits they dropped me off at the nursing home. Kevin and I sat and talked in the lobby. It was just the two of us with occasional interruptions from his friends who introduced themselves from time to time. I really enjoyed myself. This was the first time that we were able to visit one-on-one. Even though we had grown older and apart somewhat, we still had much in common. This visit made me feel real good, since I was concerned about our relationship. It disturbed me that we were not as close as we had been. During that visit it seemed like old times.

I saw him again at Christmas (1987) but we did not have much of a chance to spend time together. The New Orleans Saints were on their way to the playoffs that year, and Kevin's family asked us over to their house to watch the game. We visited and talked some, but with the game and everyone around, we did not have the chance to really get into any in-depth discussions. With my mother's back surgery, this would also be one of the last trips to Louisiana for the next few years. It was during this period that Kevin's condition continued to worsen, and this is another reason that I was not aware of it.

It was Saturday, June 10th, 1989. It started out as a normal Saturday for me. I got up, read the paper and turned on the TV. On the TV that morning the college World Series was on. Mom was exercising her back on the stationary bicycle, and Dad was preparing lunch for himself when the phone rang. Dad answered it, but he only stayed on the phone for a couple of minutes. When he got off Mom asked who it was and he said it was my grandmother, but he was very noncommittal on what she wanted. This struck me as strange but I went on reading the paper. As soon as Mom finished her exercise they both went to the back of the house, which also struck me as strange since Mom would usually grab a cool drink after exercising. They stayed in the back of the house for quite a while, and I heard her blow her nose several times, but since she had a sinus problem did not think much about it. Dad went on to work and Mom fixed me lunch. After I finished, she stood by me and asked me if I was going to hear bad news would I want Dad to be here. Well, I was not going to answer, since I was too busy trying to figure out what the bad news was. But she would not tell me until I answered the first question. So, I thought I would just start guessing.

I started out being silly and asked if she and Dad were getting a divorce. She said no with a shrug, and I realized that this was serious. I asked if Grandpa had died. She replied no to this as well. So, the only person left was Kevin. I asked if he had died, and to my surprise she nodded yes. A lot of things went through my mind – shock, surprise, sorrow. I had not talked to him for a while, and I was not aware of his deteriorating condition. I was not sure what I was supposed to do. I did not feel like crying. I had not seen him in almost two years, but I did feel sorry for my grandparents, Kevin's mother and sister. I looked up at the TV and ironically I saw the team that won the college world series ecstatic with celebration over their victory. It hit me hard that while someone was in terrible grief, someone else could have such joy.

I started asking questions. What happened? When did it happen? What was wrong? It turned out that that Saturday morning Kevin was discovered by a woman who did volunteer work at the nursing home. She got along quite well with Kevin, and apparently she saw him on a regular basis. She tried to wake him up but he just would not wake up. They rushed him to the hospital where my Aunt and grandparents were waiting. The only procedure that they could recommend was to put him on a respirator. However, he made it clear that he did not want this. He said that if it came to that he would rather be left alone and die in peace. They communicated this to the doctors, and as they took turns holding his hand, he passed on to the other world.

There were a lot of things that were going through my mind at this time. One was a sense of guilt over my grandfather, for it had only been six months since he had had surgery on his legs. I felt in some way responsible for his survival now just to see one of his grandkids die. Of course, this was not a logical response, but it is the type of thing that goes through your head when you are faced with grief. The other thing was that Grandpa was getting old and was not in the best of health. I felt that when he did go Kevin and I could comfort each other, since we both had a special bond with him. I also began wondering what I was going to do when that time came.

As the afternoon progressed so did my sadness. I felt like crying but kept it under control. I was all right for the rest of the day. I convinced myself that I could handle this better than I had when Brad died, since that was the first time that someone close to me had died. Now I felt that I was hardened to it. But this was hardly the case. As I went to bed I could not sleep. I had not really come to grips and said good-bye to Kevin. I should have let myself go ahead and cry earlier.

I was teaching a bible class on Sundays, but fortunately I was alternating with another teacher and this was not my turn to teach. I do not think I could have concentrated on the lesson, but I went on to church. A couple of the songs moved my emotions to the point of tears, but I held them in check. I appreciated everyone expressing their sympathy for me, although they could not have known how really close Kevin and I were. I made it through that day without giving in to my inclination to cry. It might be a manhood thing, or just that I hate to lose control, but I was resolved to do my best to hold up.

I learned over the next few days that Kevin had been really sick about a year before and evidently had thought that he was close to death. After that they believed Kevin was resolved that he was ready to leave this world. He began really studying his bible, and attempted to convince his mother that he would be better off in heaven than to continue in his situation here on earth. It made me feel much better to know that he was ready and prepared to go. But, as always, it is the ones left behind that cannot help but miss those who have gone on.

It was quite ironic that out of the last ten years of his life, Kevin would have several reasons to be jealous of me. I was still living at home, while he was in a nursing home. My parents were still together, and I could enjoy my family and my friends at church. But now, I was jealous of him. Because no matter what hardships that I was going to face for the rest of my stay here on this earth, he had already gone through his and was now enjoying everlasting peace.

As Monday morning approached I was still able to keep my emotions under control. Then my grandmother called and described the funeral to Mom. It was when she related this to me that I finally lost it. My emotions had been building up all weekend, and the idea of Kevin's body lying in a casket just got to me. I will say that I slept quite a bit better that night; it was like I had finally said good-bye to Kevin. A few days after his funeral my aunt had a tombstone placed over his grave with the words "If love could have saved him, he never would have died."

It would be easy on everyone if when someone dies we could live out the "life goes on" statement and not carry the heavy load of bereavement. But normal people are not made that way, and there is a good reason for that. It takes the death of a loved one or a close friend to demonstrate to us just how valuable life really is. They say that after the loss of a loved one, it takes about a year before you really get over the loss. Of course, the grieving never really ends, but over the years it becomes easier to accept. When Brad died it took about eight months before I would consider myself to have been fully recovered even though we had only known each other for four years and only grown close for about six months. With Kevin it was different. We had known each other all our lives. When Brad died I took the coward's way out and just ignored the last two years. But with Kevin I could not put my entire life aside.

The main difference between Brad's death and Kevin's death was that Kevin's hit me in other ways as well. While Brad and I both had MD, we were not blood related. When Brad died it brought home to me what a delicate balance life really is. However, I could rationalize it somewhat, since I could be different. But Kevin's death hit hard at my own mortality, since I had always used Kevin as my forerunner. He was just a year older than I, and every time that he had a birthday it would give me the assurance that I had one more year myself. Now that was gone. Kevin was 24 when he died. Suddenly I felt that I had maybe a year and a half myself. I started getting tentative, not wishing to start any long-term projects.

Fortunately, my parents had anticipated this reaction, and they were able to come up with some arguments against this thinking. Even if I was right and only had a year and a half, I could not just sit around and wait to die. If I were afraid to start anything, what good would I be to others and myself during that time? All of us are going to die sooner or later, and if we all refused to start anything long term because of it, nothing would ever get started. My grandmother also told me of several things that Kevin had going against him. Having his leg broken probably generally weakened his system – just the inactivity would have to do this, to say nothing of the psychological factors of being victimized like that. There was also the bout with pneumonia that I was just finding out about. Then there was the time when he was 12 and suffered a bad concussion and broke his hip in the car crash, which required a very long recovery. At that point the doctors predicted that he would be lucky to make it past 16. Despite that, he lived another 12 years.

Basically what this boiled down to was that just because Kevin had died at 24 was no reason that I could not make it to 30, or maybe a lot further than that. But Kevin's death was a signal to me to give additional concern to my own mortality. I was on my own now, breaking my own new ground. However, I decided to write out a will in which I described how I wanted things to be handled after my death.

It was not my intention to let anyone know what I was doing when I wrote the will out. Once I had finished I planned to put it in an envelope and write my name on it. I was going to give it to my father so he could put it in a safe deposit box at the bank (or wherever he thought it would be safe). I felt he would handle the conversation about this a lot better than Mom would. So I started working on the will late one afternoon, and before I knew it, it was time for me to take a bath and get ready for bed. So I tried to hide the papers under some other stuff on my desk as best I could. When I came back into the den after my bath I noticed Mom was upset. She had just happened to come to my desk looking for something else and happened upon it. It was a crazy quirk of fate, since under ordinary circumstances she would never have even been in the area.

Writing out the will was, to me, a proactive step of accepting reality. It was not intended to make anyone feel sorry for me or feel depressed. However, in negatively affecting my mother it also negatively affected me. In this regard, I was not nearly as concerned with my own fate as I was with her reaction to it. Those who deal with the terminally ill need to recognize that attitudes are contagious. Allow those who are facing death to express their confidence in whatever way they feel most comfortable. Not that I considered myself terminally ill then, nor do I today. No one has set a date and said you will not live beyond another six months or anything like that. In other words, I was merely addressing the possibility of death as all responsible people do. I recognize that this is not something that people in their twenties typically do, but then they don't have MD.

It was also during this time that other realities began to surface. I had always dreamed of traveling to places like Hawaii and Washington DC, but when Kevin died reality came home and I began to realize that these dreams would probably never become reality. I had dreamed that some day I would get married, but now I could see that this was not going to happen. Every time that I would think about this I would get depressed. However, the one thing that would keep me going was when I remembered that the apostle Paul was never married but that did not keep him from living a fulfilled life and making a contribution to society.

It was also during this period that I began wondering what contribution that I was going to make. When I left this earth, what was my legacy going to be. It was right after the funeral when I saw all of the people coming up to my aunt telling her all the good things that Kevin had done that I began wondering what people were going to say about me after I passed away. I wished that an angel would show up to me like one did to Jimmy Stewart in "It's a Wonderful Life" and tell me the effect that I had had on others. Of course, I recognize that this was just a fairy tale, but occasionally I would get a hint of what I meant to other people. For example, a friend of mine at church, Jeff Armstrong, had a very bad and painful case of arthritis. A couple of weeks after Kevin passed away he and his wife invited me to their house and one of the first things that they did when I arrived was to take a picture of us together. He told me that whenever he got down in the dumps he thought about me and how I was able to handle things being in much worse shape than he was. I am not sure that I was that great at handling things, but I tried not to afflict others with my problems, so he probably took this for strength. This was at least one couple that I think I influenced positively.

Regardless of one's physical capabilities, it is whether you decide to give yourself totally over to the will of God that will determine the legacy that you leave to others. The death of a loved one can bring out the best but also the worst in some people. I did not realize how bad the worst

could be until Kevin died. It seemed like many folks came crawling out of the woodwork to ask my aunt if they could have stuff that belonged to Kevin. One of the patients at the nursing home called to see if they could have Kevin's telephone, and another called about his television set. A friend called and asked for the state license plate that was on Kevin's wheelchair. The worst one was a member of the local chapter of the JayCees. Four years earlier Kevin had passed the GED and gotten his high school diploma, and the JayCees had taken up a collection to buy him a school ring. Now he wanted to give it to one of his kids as a play toy.

My depression was not just for myself, but also for my grandparents and especially my aunt and Kevin's sister. I believe their jobs helped them somewhat to put it behind them and get on with some semblance of order in their lives. Of course, in the evenings and weekends this would not help. I did not have a job and was not going to school at this time, so there was little to distract my thoughts from thinking about Kevin.

I had several long phone talks with my grandfather at this time. We talked about the weather and what we were doing – pretty much avoiding talk about Kevin. But he was on our minds. One time he tried to call me and with his sense of humor he never called anyone by his or her right name but made up names for them. He called my mother Duke of Paduka after the famous radio comedian -- Duke for short. He called my uncle Luddy Pup. My aunt's name was Betty Lee, and he just added a few syllables to this and called her Bet-Ti-Te Lucas. Kevin was Old Man and I was Joe. Where he came up with these names I will never know.

One day during the summer of 1989 my father and I had a free day and Grandpa called to talk to me but Dad answered the phone. Grandpa asked to speak to Joe and Dad told him he had the wrong number and hung up. Grandpa was mystified and double-checked the number, since he was prone to make mistakes in dialing. He called again and Dad answered the phone repeating the process, but feeling that he had the right number he just blurted out: "Let me talk to Linda Sue's boy." Dad came into the den and told me someone wanted to talk, but he had no idea who it was. I got the phone and said hello and, and he said: "Hello Joe." What I did not realize is that Dad told my mother to pick up the phone ... that there is someone on the phone who insists on calling me Joe. Right away she knew that it was her father who was calling, leaving both of the men somewhat embarrassed about the situation. However, the rest of us got a real good laugh out of it, and my grandfather had no reservations about spreading the story all over.

The summer of 1989 was one of the longest that I can remember, and at times I had trouble coping with the depression brought on by Kevin's death. Later the doctor put me on an antidepressant that seemed to help for a while – maybe a couple weeks, but then I would go back into it again. I was not too impressed with the medicine since once your body gets used to it more and more seems to be required, and this can lead to some serious problems. So, it can only solve the problem for a short time and then you have to face it again. A more positive approach is to stay busy, and that is what I tried to do throughout the summer. I went to a lot of movies. One of the first was a rather depressing, dark drama that seemed to make things worse. I learned to stay away from those and stick with adventure and comedies.

Another thing that kept me busy was Nintendo. It was a gift from a friend of my father's. I had never seen one of these games before. My sister helped me put it together, since she had been playing it at her friend's houses. We would play one game until it got boring and then go rent another one for a while. This helped to keep us busy during the summer.

But of all the things, teaching bible class and staying involved at church was the most helpful. It was the first time that I had taught these particular subjects, so I had to study particularly hard. Each time I went to God's word it seemed as though there was something there especially for me to help me through these troubled times.

Even though the summer was a bad one, there were still some exciting events. There were two that were totally unexpected. One evening the phone rang and someone asked to speak to me. On the other end was Bill Curry, the head football coach at The University of Alabama. Apparently he heard that Kevin had died and he called me to give me a pep talk. He said that there were a lot of people who cared for me and that football season was just around the corner, so cheer up and keep the faith. Needless to say, this call cheered me up considerably. I had not been that excited since I met Bear Bryant.

The other event was near the end of July. It was a Sunday morning – my Sunday to teach. The preacher came up to me before class and asked me to do a favor for him. He was going to be out of town the next week and asked if I would preach the Wednesday night short talk for him after bible study. I had no idea of what subject, but since I had a week or so to get ready I agreed to do it. Being asked by the preacher had been exciting enough but then I found out that my grandparents were to be in town at that time. Now I had to come up with a topic. A TV western gave me an idea. It was about a midget who in the old west was considered to be quite useless, since most men's jobs (and women's too for that matter) required a fair degree of strength. The man was put down and quite persecuted as most people just looked on the outside. However, one day a small child fell down a well and no one knew what to do, since if they tried to dig her out the walls of well would cave in. The little man volunteered to go down and get her, since he was the only one small enough to fit down the hole.

The biblical principle involved is one of just looking on the outside. God has created us all for some purpose, both physical and spiritual. None of us should feel inferior because of our size or physical capabilities. There is always something that a "little man" can do better than anyone else.

As the time approached I realized that there were many college students going to be there who had many more college courses than I had. However, once I got started I settled down and was able to make my points quite well. This was the first time that my Grandfather heard me preach, and it was to be his last.

On this particular trip my grandparents brought some of Kevin's possessions for me to have – his collection of hats and his books on military planes, among other things. I had been doing quite well with all of the activities prior to this, but these things tended to bring back Kevin's memories and I sank again into a bout with depression. This was the first time that they had come to visit me since Kevin had died. But, after a week or so I was able to bounce back. Then in the

early part of August Kevin's mother and sister came to Alabama for a brief visit. They came on a Friday evening and left early Sunday morning. It is hard to describe this brief visit – parts of it were quite joyous but parts of it were extremely difficult. However, it was something that had to be done. As much as we might feel bad just going on, it is essential that we do.

In the first week of September, 1989 some other relatives came by and it was at that time that I realized that I was winning the battle. When my aunt began talking about Kevin I did not feel so much hurt. I was sad, but not to the point of distress.

The point at which I really knew that I had it beat was in the middle of October when my grandparents came to visit with us. By this time I was teaching bible classes every week. I had been working for quite a while on my lesson, but my mind wandered into thinking about Kevin. I took control of my mind and decided that I would not just wander into these depressive thoughts, but that I would continue to study for the lesson that I had to teach. It would be an honor to Kevin, and an honor to my Lord who died for me.