

CHAPTER 12

HANDLING THE DOWN TIMES

As 1992 began I felt that it was time for me to initiate additional steps to bring about a full recovery from my broken leg. It would have to evolve slowly, I realized, but the setback had to be reversed. I realized that I would never have the strength in my arms to push myself in my wheelchair, and this was a major source of depression. However, I had to start somewhere in this comeback, so I started by attempting to feed myself. With the heavy brace on I was not able to place enough weight on my hip to lean forward far enough to bring the spoon or fork to my mouth. It had now been several months since the brace had been taken off, so all of the healing that was going to take place already had at this point. In fact, I was concerned that I had waited far too long in getting started with this exercise. I realized that if I did not take some action in the very near future I would never be able to feed myself again. There were many things that I knew would not be possible; but this was something that I wanted to be able to do again.

The hardest part was convincing my parents. They had been feeding me for so long that it had gotten to be second nature to them. It was certainly going to be easier for them to continue this process than to go through the mess of having me learn how to do it all over again. They tried to argue that it was not a burden for them to do it, but this was only a secondary reason for my wanting to do this. Mainly, I wanted the degree of independence that this would give me. We argued about it for a while, but finally they relented and let me give it a try.

On that particular night we were having chili. Of course, it took me a while to get the hang of it after the entire time since I broke my leg. I had been exercising my arms over a range of activities, although I did not have the full range. The primary problem, however, was one of leaning forward, and I felt that this was something that I could do at this point. It would have been better if I had started with something a bit easier. Chili went flying in various directions at first, but as soon as I got somewhat used to it, it became quite clear that with a little further practice it would be something that I could handle.

Most people take feeding themselves for granted. It might not seem like a large accomplishment with my other disabilities at this point, but in my mind it was a major accomplishment. My parents told me later that after so long, they had pretty much given up on my feeding myself again. So they felt that it was a major accomplishment as well. This helped to reinforce the psychological benefit that came from this victory.

At this point I was able to sit up for nine hours a day before going back to bed. The men from the hospital would come and get me up about 10 AM and then come back and put me back in the bed around 7 PM. I was still able to bend the leg that had been broken just a little – too much and it would start hurting. This was quite noticeable when I was being helped up, since, from time to time, my leg would get bent under me, and this was quite painful until the break had fully healed. The movement that I had in my legs was quite constrained and not very usable, however, because while I had the ability to bend my leg using my leg muscles, I did not have the ability to straighten them back out once they were bent. However, I was happy with my progress thus far and was

hoping that before too long I could get out of the house again. But, I needed some additional incentive to get me off dead center.

That incentive came in February 1992 when I learned that Oak Hill School was going to hold a reunion on the last Saturday of April. I was quite excited when I received word of it, and I made up my mind to set that as a goal as to the time at which I would be able to get out of the house. I decided to target church on the Sunday before the Oak Hill reunion as a the first time that I would get out since I felt that I would much prefer to be in the company of my fellow Christians the very first time that I got out. It would serve to get me readjusted somewhat to being out.

The first thing that I did was to deal with the extended leg rest. Since my recovery I had my leg held straight out when I was in my wheelchair. It was clear that I would not be able to get into the van with my foot sticking out like that. Gradually I began lowering the footrest ... a little each day. In the past I had only lowered it a little each week, but now I accelerated the process greatly. Finally I was able to graduate to the old setting for the footrest.

I had another incentive as well. After seven years at our church our preacher had decided to accept a teaching position at a college in Florida. He would be leaving by the end of the summer. We had become great friends over the years as we shared interests not only in religion, but also in history, politics and genealogy. He had come to see me on a fairly regular basis, almost weekly. I had mixed emotions when I learned of his decision. I was glad that he was able to find a better job. One of his daughters had a cancerous growth removed from her kidney, and he needed a good group health care plan that was not really feasible with an independent church like ours. At the same time I was sad knowing that one of my good friends was leaving. But the knowledge of this was a further incentive to me, since I wanted to return to church as soon as possible to hear his last series of sermons.

Sunday, April 19, 1992, the target date for church came up quickly. The Saturday before I debated as to whether I could pull it off. I was watching the weather, and felt somewhat like General Eisenhower. However, the rain held off the next day and Dad came in around 8:30 AM to help me get dressed. This was the first time that I had worn regular pants in a long time. The men from the hospital came early as a favor to us, and he got me into my chair.

The drive to church was exciting in itself. Other than the times when I was ushered to and from the hospital, I had not had a chance to see Tuscaloosa in over two years. It was nice to see that little had changed. The gas station, the bank, the fast-food places ... they were all still there. But then that small gray church building appeared and seemed to beckon me home. But just seeing the building was only a small foretaste to the excitement that I felt in being reunited with my Christian brothers and sisters. As soon as I entered the building I was greeted by dozens of smiling faces. I recognized most of them, but there were a few who had become members while I was gone. But they were just as friendly as the rest, as they came up to meet me, and I have since become as close to some of these as I had been to those whom I knew for many years.

What stood out most to me, however, were the children. Two years makes a lot of difference. Many of them had grown to a point where they now were taking the initiative in welcoming me, and I was surprised how much they had grown in just a couple of years. Once the

worship started and we started singing, I got the feeling that I had never left. This miserable time of separation was like a blur as I enjoyed this little foretaste of heaven. In my mind was that verse: "And they sing a new song, saying, Worthy art thou to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou was slain, and didst purchase unto God with thy blood (men) of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation" (Revelation 5:9). The songs that we sang were not new, but the feeling that I was experiencing was after being away for so long.

Now that I was getting back out again I felt that I had regained my freedom. It seemed like I was constantly on the go. Whenever anyone invited me to their house, to a movie, or to the mall, I would accept before they could finish their sentence. After two and a half years I was eager to do anything and go anywhere. It was still quite difficult for me to get out however, since Mom was recovering from an operation on her leg. So, other than the occasional afternoon that Dad could get off, I had to wait for weekends to go anywhere. This might seem restricting, but it was certainly a whole lot better than it was being laid up permanently. Then there had been no light at the end of the tunnel; now it was just a few days of waiting.

Of course, one of the first places that I went to was the reunion that had given me much of the motivation for getting on with my recovery. The event was held on Saturday April 25, 1992. Like all reunions, they prove to be a mixture of excitement and sadness. The excitement came from seeing all of my old teachers and many of my old friends. They had all kinds of music and varied it considerably ... rock and roll, country, R&B ... no one was disappointed. We all mostly just sat around and talked about all of the things that we had been doing since school. But in many cases there was not a whole lot to say. When I asked what they had been doing many of them said: not much. And then it got contagious and I started to respond "not much" myself. This is what made it sad. We now recognized just how much fun we had while we were in those four years of high school. The problem is that we did not know it at the time. Now it was clear.

In my case high school marked the end of getting out of the house on a daily basis. School was almost like a job. There was a lot of work to it, but in between there was a lot of socializing that went on. I felt that these were the best years of my life even though I was losing much of my physical capabilities during this time period. And so, the event had a touch of sadness. But talking to old friends was fun, and there were quite a few of them that had more than a "not much" response.

I guess that this is a problem with the handicapped and those of normal physical abilities alike: thinking that the future is going to be so much better. Living in the future rather than in the present. Failing to enjoy the present to the fullest because of dissatisfaction with some of the minor annoyances that go with youth. Like homework, or being under the control of your parents. For most normal kids looking forward to that time when they can drive a car separate and apart from their parents is a major milestone. But even for those of us who have no hope of ever driving ourselves, there is still this problem of living in the future. For those who are past their teen-age years I am merely preaching to the choir. All that I can hope is that there are some younger people reading this who will take full advantage of all of that life has to offer them while they are young.

Of course, at the other extreme is the problem of living in the past, and this is what I might be guilty of at this point. It is impossible to recreate the past, and perhaps what I was remembering

with such nostalgia was only a piece of the past – the piece that I wanted to remember. It is easy to gloss over the real difficulties of adolescence – the many pains that are unique to this age – once we have grown out of them. No, if I am totally honest with myself, I really do not want to go back. Yes, it was fun, but I could see from this experience that it was good to be on with life.

A few of my friends were not able to be there, including Jimmy. I had been in phone contact with Jimmy occasionally, although it had been about three years since we had seen each other. I felt closer to Jimmy than most of the others. When Kevin died I felt somewhat out there on my own, since I did not know anyone older than me who had MD. Now Jimmy had Spina Bifida, not MD, but most people who have both of these diseases die before the age of 20. I was about 6 months away from my 26th birthday at this point, and Jimmy was about 6 months from his 22 birthday. So we were both beating the odds. I feel that we did this by a combination of pure stubbornness and enjoying life one day at a time and being thankful for just having one more day.

Jimmy had finished high school four years after I did. He was now working as an office clerk at a local drug store. After the reunion I gave Jimmy a call and talked about getting together with him. We had to come up with something to do. I did not feel that watching a movie would be the thing, since we would not get to visit that much. Then I remembered that Coach Wilson had left his card with his home phone number on it. He had told me to give him a call once I got over my broken leg. I called him and told him about the reunion. He readily offered to take Jimmy and me bowling. So we set a date for it. By the time that the date arrived, however, he had invited many of the old gang, including Doug, Sherri and Pam.

Somehow having something to do made this event much more fun than the reunion. Perhaps it was also because there was a smaller group. Coach Wilson recognized how much we were all enjoying ourselves, and he suggested that we get together like this on a monthly basis. We initiated this and have managed to continue in on a regular basis ever since.

One of the things that bothered me most back when I lay in bed recovering from my broken leg was that I would no longer be able to get out of the house. Before the accident I had spent a lot of time going to the theatre, and that had come to an abrupt halt with the accident. Now I was anxious to get out again, and Missy accompanied me the first couple of times. The first time was a matinee and we were about the only ones in there, so we could talk and it was almost like watching TV. The next time we went it was a weekend and the place was really packed. I got a strange uncomfortable feeling of uneasiness. This was the first time that I had been in a crowd of strange people such as this since being cooped up, and it took some getting used to. I toughed it out and once the movie started the uneasiness diminished. I can only imagine how people who have been locked up for even longer, like Terry Anderson, who had been held hostage for four years, would have a tough time adapting.

Church had replaced my school as a center of my social activity beginning shortly after I had finished high school. I do not mean to minimize the spiritual significance of the church. The church should be a spiritual, not a social institution; it was designed to be the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). However, when you meet several times a week with the same people you cannot help but get attached to them socially, and the bible says that we are to "prefer one

another" (Romans 12:10). Since I was no longer seeing my high school friends on a regular basis, it was only natural for my social life to shift to those in the church.

While I enjoyed my church friends a great deal, I began to realize that something was missing. Only one person at church was the least bit handicapped, and this friend could still walk (even though he had been confined to a wheelchair earlier in life). Thus, it was difficult relating to them with regard to my handicap. I began to realize that losing contact with my handicapped friends was not something that was in my best interests. So these monthly trips to the bowling alley played a major role in enabling me to interact with those who had been through the same thing that I had. We could share our experiences in a way that was otherwise impossible. Most of them had suffered many of the things that I had and had overcome to the point where they were able to lead productive lives. It was quite beneficial being able to meet with each other every other month or so, and otherwise keeping in touch by phone.

Coach Wilson put me in charge of arranging our monthly outings. I would call him at his house and find out which weekend he could get away. Then I would call the gang and let them know. This led to other contacts as well, as I would try to invite each of my friends over as often as possible. This has enabled me to be as close to my former classmates as I ever was.

It was hard for my parents to keep me home once I tasted freedom. I got them to take me to the mall, and out to eat, and wherever I could get them to take me. It was as though I had discovered a new life.

There were some lingering effects from the injury that were not going to go away. My right leg – the one that had been broken – was now a little shorter than my left leg. This caused problems sometimes when I was sitting in my chair. Since the two foot rests on my chair are the same length (as they are on most), I had to put a pillow under my right leg to make it comfortable. The right leg also tends to go to sleep on me if I am sitting too far back in the chair, even though the left leg is doing fine. However, these minor inconveniences were, as the apostle Paul would say, a momentary light affliction (2 Cor 4:17-18): "For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."

The biggest problem to come out of my injury was that it necessitated a change to a different cushion for my chair. My old cushion was good but it, in addition to scoliosis, caused me to put too much weight on my right hip. This caused bedsores to develop. Medication helped, but it was necessary for me to frequently change positions from on hip to another. This became impossible with the brace on. Therefore we were forced to purchase a thicker cushion. This let the sores on my hip begin to clear up, and finally they healed altogether. The thicker cushion had not been a problem before when I was mostly in the house. However, when I started getting out of the house the cushion lifted me up so high that I could no longer use the arm rests as I had in the past. Without this support, my head and shoulders could fall over completely if I lost my balance, and then someone would have to push me back to an upright position so that I could regain my balance.

The first time that I noticed this problem was on my first day back at church. When I was outside of the building talking to friends that I had not seen in a long while, one of them came up to shake my hand and I extended my left hand out to shake his. As I did I lost my balance and my shoulders and head fell over. This was embarrassing within itself, in that many people were staring at me wondering what had happened and what they should do. On top of that, Dad was talking to some one else and was not watching me. So, I had to call to him to get his attention, which also attracted the attention of even more of the church folks. Dad got me realigned quickly, and this did not bother me too much, since, as I discuss elsewhere, I was just glad to be back with everyone. And, we remedied the overall problem by putting an additional cushion under my left arm to give me additional support.

Another problem that arose from the new cushion was the change in my sense of gravity. This became very apparent while riding in the van. Before the weight was distributed quite evenly, but now I shifted back and the weight was primarily on my hips. The van had wheelchair locks that kept it from moving. With my being toward the back of the chair now if we went up a steep hill it would cause the chair to tip over backwards.

We never thought about this until one time when we were going out to eat at a Quincy's restaurant. The one in Northport is in a shopping center off the main road, but the wide service road to the shopping center goes up on a very steep angle. Of course, when getting off the main road, which especially in this spot is quite congested, it is necessary to maintain speed, perhaps even accelerate. So Dad cut off the main road, gave it the gun and zipped up the service road. As he did the wheels of my chair stood still, but the chair itself rotated back. I saw the roof of the van rotate on by as a shot of adrenaline hit my central nervous system. I realized why they say that your whole life flashes before you: I figured we had probably turned completely over. It was like I was bronco bustin' and the animal had thrown me from its back as I crashed backwards with my feet dangling in mid air. I did have the presence of mind as I was on my way back to consider whether I was far enough forward to keep my head from hitting on the floor. Fortunately I was. As I fell over backwards I hit the back seat, which had a fluffy cushion, so I only got shook up a little bit.

As I was going backwards I called out to Dad: woooahhhh! Mom and Dad both turned to see what was going on. It must have been a strange sight to see feet where they expected my head to be. As Dad pulled up in front of the restaurant he quickly brought the van to a stop and opened the side door. This gathered the interest of the restaurant patrons in the parking lot who were wondering just what sort of an emergency this might be. Once I realized that I had not broken anything, my fear turned to embarrassment, and as they say, this was adding insult to injury. I just wanted Dad to get me straightened up and get to a parking place and get me out of there. But, once he got me upright, he began looking at all of the angles to try to figure what had caused the problem. We were not sure what had happened and figured that it was just a freak occurrence and so I did not give it much further attention, as was evident by my appetite once I got in the restaurant.

But a couple of months later we were going up another steep hill and over I go again. At that point we figured that it must be the weight redistribution of this new cushion. So Dad got an old chain – actually a leftover dog leash – that he attached to the drivers seat and back to bottom of my chair to keep it from tipping backwards again. Now whenever anyone sees the dog leash I just tell them that this is how Dad keeps his dog from flipping over.

The new cushion also created another problem in the van. With the old cushion if Dad slammed on the brakes my shoulders would move forward and I would get caught with the seatbelt that was connected to the chair, and I was able to sit back up by myself. With the new cushion my hips were right under my shoulders. When the brakes got slammed on, my entire body would slide forward together, and it was impossible for me to move back in place. The seatbelt did not do a whole lot to help here either. We tried to figure out how to solve this problem, but tended to put it off. It was Christmas of 1994 when we were on the way to church and we stopped at a redlight. The driver behind us smashed into us and the reaction pushed me forward. Fortunately, the seatbelt was positioned properly, but I was not able to sit back up after the impact. Dad had to reach around from the front seat and push me back to a sitting position. I hit the side of the van as well, and the next day I realized how those football players must feel the day after the game. Dad went back to his bag of tricks and found an old belt that we could put around my chest and the back of the chair to counter this problem. Nothing like a little engineering ingenuity when the standard packages fail to do the trick.

The hardest part to accept about this new cushion was that for the first time since I had been in a wheelchair I found that I was totally unable to push myself. With the original cushion I could push myself to some extent, and I felt that I might be able to regain the ability that I lost from not using my arms in this way for so long during recovery. The new cushion made me sit up so high that I could not grab the wheels. This was particularly problematic when going to the mall, since they would usually push me to a given store and then let me mill around there at my leisure. Now they would have to hang around, which was another loss of freedom that I have never gotten used to. However, to some extent this loss was tempered by the fact that my broken leg had resulted in an extended period of a total loss of mobility and almost total confinement to bed. Thus, any increase in mobility was welcomed, even if it required help from someone else.

After all of this discussion on cushions you might be wondering why I just did not go back to the old cushion. We did give it a try on one particular Sunday, but the bottom of my right hip had so adapted to the new cushion that within a couple hours the bottom of my hip began to hurt. I could not shift my weight or take the pressure off, and I began counting the hours until bedtime. We noticed that my hip was all red and my parents said that I should wait a couple days before trying that again. It took a few days for the soreness to go away. After a few more tries with the same results, I decided that it was a lost cause, and I would have to use the thicker cushion.

This was one more step away from independence. At the same time it was impossible for me to get in and out of the bathtub, and I had to settle for sponge baths. These were barely tolerable in the summer, and miserable in the winter. One of my greatest fantasies is to just lay back in a bathtub once again and soak in that warm water. These two things were the hardest to get used to – not being able to push myself and not being able to take a bath. But I could feed myself and I could get out of the house, so all was not lost.

After recovering from my broken leg and regaining some mobility, I still could lift my arms up, but it was clear that I was losing this ability as well. This became clear when I tried to use the phone. Before my broken leg I could wheel up to the desk and prop myself up on it and hold the phone to my ear. Now this was impossible, and we got a speakerphone to help with this problem. I

know that I would have eventually lost this ability, but there is no doubt that the lack of use of my arms during recovering from the broken leg had to hasten the onset of this loss. I was getting to a point where it was difficult to wave and to shake people's hands that extended them to me, and this gave me quite a problem, since I do not want people to think that I am snobbish. However, at this point I still had partial use of my arms and it was not the problem that it became later.

By spring of 1992 the hospital decided that they had provided free assistance to us long enough. Before my injury my father would take care of the chore of getting me up and down – in and out of the chair and bed. Since the hospital assumed responsibility for the injury, they provided the assistance during my recovery. Now I guess they figured that this should no longer be required – it had been about two and a half years. We learned that Medicaid, for which I qualified, would pay for someone to come out and help in this way. Ever since I had broken by leg it took two people to get me up – one lifting under my arms and another under my knees. Home health care did not have that many workers and they only wanted to send one person out. But that was how I had broken my leg in the first place. They came up with a compromise – they would send out one person, but that person would use the lift to get me out of bed.

Of course, you might recall that Mom had had a problem with the lift before, and she was still scared to death of it, remembering how when we tried to use it before I had landed in the middle of the floor. But with a little experimentation and the help of the people from the hospital who were adept at using it, we all got used to it.

The lift was quite convenient. Dad and I used to fight about me being completely done with everything that I was doing, teeth brushed and everything when the guy came in around 7 PM. I did not figure it to be a big deal if he had to wait five or ten minutes for me to finish up. So we got in some hassles about this. When we got the lift working it solved this problem, since now he could put me in bed whenever it was convenient for both of us. So the man would come over at about 7:30 AM or so and get me up, and Dad would get me back in bed in the evening. I especially liked using the lift on weekends. Before we got the lift I had to tell the man what time to get me up, and whenever he would come I had to get up one way or the other. Now that Dad could use the lift to get me up by himself, I could get up about whenever I wanted to.

There were several problems with the reliability of the men who were assigned to come and get me up. My caseworker told me that they had a man that they were training on how to use the lift. It would take about a week and then they would send him on over. Meanwhile, Dad would stand in to give me a hand. About a week later the caseworker came back telling us that the man suddenly quit and they would have to get someone else. So, we had to wait another two or three weeks. I was somewhat disappointed in that I was anxious to get things going. About the only day that I was getting fully dressed in normal clothes was on Sunday when we went to church. The rest of the time would depend on whether I was going out, which for the middle of the week was rarely the case. I was anxious to get fully dressed and get some normalcy in this regard every day. I felt that this would help my depression considerably.

I did not realize that the man quitting would be a harbinger of things to come. The next man that they got trained seemed to work out fine. He would come and get me up and dressed about

8:30 AM each day. That sounds simple enough; perhaps too simple. There were times when they would show, and times when they would come in late. One of them was an outright liar. Not only would he not show up, but he would make outlandish excuses as to why he could not get to a phone to let us know. After a few months he told us that he had gotten another job at a fast-food restaurant but that he would be back for one last time the next day. I halfway believed him but warned Dad that he should probably be ready. And, sure enough, he never showed up again.

The people that they would send over always claimed that they had experience with the lift, but when they came over Dad would ask them if they knew how to work the lift, and most of them told him: "No." So, we would have to start from scratch, not only on how to get me dressed, but how to work the lift as well. It usually took about two weeks for them to fully get the hang of it; some of them never did. It took all of the patience that I had (and more that I had to develop) to cope with them. But they were not all bad. Some of them knew what they were doing and caught on fast.

For whatever legal reason, the hospital soon turned the responsibility for me over to the state, and that did not improve the situation any. Every time that they would sign a contract it was just for one year. So, almost every October 1st we would get a new worker and have to repeat the entire training process all over again. On a couple of occasions they did not have any men available, so they would send over a women. This was not so bad since they were definitely more reliable and consistent. The women also seemed to be more dedicated, and they tended to have more people skills. (I am not being sexist: this was just my experience based on a small sample. You can take your own sample and reach your own conclusions.) This was a great relief from the common situation where it seemed that no one really cared. The ones that care were few and far between, and the last one left a short while ago, so that even now while I am writing this we are getting ready to train another helper.

The fall of 1992 finally arrived and we were into another football season. For the first time in about three years I was going to be able to go and watch Alabama play. I picked a good year to get back into things. It was the 100th year of college football at UA and they had a yearlong celebration that they called the "Century of Champions." They had weekly articles in the paper on historical reviews of 'Bama games over the past century. There were several contests; one of them was to try to pick the player of the century.

The rivalry between Auburn and Alabama is legendary even outside of Alabama. This game, held in late November, is called the Iron bowl after the city in which it was played throughout the 1980's. Of course, Birmingham got the name way back in the 40's and 50's when it was a major iron producer. Most states have their regional and intra-state rivalries, but I doubt that any objective judge could find one of them to be more intense than that between Auburn and Alabama. I can give personal testimony to the fact that a significant number of people are highly influenced by the outcome for the entire rest of the year. A few of them get physically ill when their team does not win this game. This, of course is the extreme fringe, and most Alabamians, whether Auburn or Alabama fans, just enjoy the fun part of the rivalry. However, legend had it that the rivalry got so fierce that at one point in the early part of the century the two schools had to go 40 years without playing each other. The legend that the reason that the two schools had stopped playing was that it had caused riots in the streets took on a life of its own. In reality, the problem was actually

disagreements between the administrations of the two universities, which started over a question amounting to only \$30. Apparently not much has changed. However, in the late 1940s the legislature got together and decided to put an end to all of this wrangling. Economically, it was costing the state a lot of money. So, by 1948 they forced an agreement.

In the late 1980s a great discussion occurred within the state over where the game should be played. Auburn argued that Birmingham was the de facto home field for 'Bama despite the fact that the tickets were divided based on it being a home game for each school every other year. Ultimately the deal was cut to allow Auburn to use their stadium every other year, and it appears that very few games will be played in Birmingham in the future since Alabama is currently enlarging the stadium at Tuscaloosa.

The stories surrounding the Auburn-Alabama game reflect the reality of what can only be described in terms of a football fringe fanatic feeding frenzy. There was the couple who postponed their marriage plans because it fell on the date of the game. Then there was the man who had his operation postponed and begged the doctor, practically on his deathbed, to allow a TV in his room. The doctor relented under the condition that the patient would not become excited. But it was only about five minutes into the game when he started yelling and screaming to such an extent that they had to take the TV out of his room to keep him from killing ... no, not himself ... it was the nurses that were subduing him that they were concerned about.

About two weeks before the annual showdown in 1992 my stomach began acting up, and I could tell that it was my old friend the intestinal blockage coming to pay me another visit. I tried to take care of it myself by going on a liquid diet, but I could soon tell that this would not do the trick this time around. I was going to have to go to the hospital. But the last thing I wanted was to have to watch the game from the hospital. Alabama had won 10 in a row at this point and was poised for their showdown with Auburn. Both schools had an open weekend before the big game, so I took aim at that time to get my treatment and get back home for the game. On Monday morning, 12 days before the game, the ambulance picked me up and they confirmed at the hospital that my suspicions had been correct. It only took four days for them to treat me and return me home, so I had a good week to spare. As it turned out, 'bama won 17 to nothing. One of the few games ever that has not gone down to the last seconds.

Back when I found out that MD was fatal I made up my mind that there was a few of things that I wanted to do and one thing that I wanted to witness before I left this earth. Some of these were under my control: I wanted to vote in a presidential election, and I had already done that twice. The one that was not under my control was to witness Alabama win another National Championship in football. The last one that they won was in 1979 when I was just turning 13 and just getting into football. I was too young to understand the complexity of this feat, and I wanted to experience it in a way that I could really appreciate. For a long time it looked like this would be impossible. Alabama was now on their third coach since Bear, and many had argued that the great 'Bama program was a thing of the past. I did not want to argue with them (although I did) because I figured that given enough time it would happen, but perhaps not in my lifetime.

It looked like they had a chance in 1992. Alabama beat Auburn in the annual classic, and they had an 11-0 regular season, the only unbeaten team in the southeastern conference. Under the

old rules Alabama would have been awarded the SEC championship based on this record. However, this was the first year that the conference had been divided into two divisions (eastern and western), each made up of six teams, and the winner of each division would compete in Birmingham for the championship. Alabama represented the west, while Florida, with only one conference loss, represented the east. Alabama had to face the pressure of winning one more game before even thinking about their bowl game in which they would hopefully be faced off against someone who would assure them the championship. The game was played about two weeks after the Auburn game, and like most Alabama fans, I did not think those two weeks would ever go by. Each day I could feel the pressure building. Lose it and not only is the conference gone after a perfect year, but the chances of winning a National championship go down the drain with it. I could only imagine what the players were going through.

The day finally arrived on December 5th and it was played in the afternoon. Missy and I both invited friends over for the afternoon to watch the game with us. The game did not start out too promising as the Gators on their first possession marched 77 yards to take a 7-0 lead. However, Alabama's offense settled down, and before the half was out they were up 21-7. I began to relax and think that at least playing for the National championship would be in the offing. However, not so quickly. Florida came back and before we knew it they had scored 14 unanswered points. 'Bama's offense had been shut down, and their defense was being picked apart by their outstanding quarterback, Shane Matthews. I saw Alabama's chances fizzle as the momentum had clearly shifted to Florida. Now they had the ball again at Alabama's 21 yard line with only 3 minutes and 25 seconds left in the game. Alabama had not been able to mount any kind of offense in the second half, and their defense was obviously quite tired. They had not been able to hold Florida's powerful offense very well throughout the fourth quarter, and there seemed to be no reason to think that they could do any better on this drive. On the first play from scrimmage Florida's Shane Matthews backed up and attempted to throw a pass to Monty Duncan. Out of nowhere, Alabama's Antonio Langham stepped in front of Duncan, caught the ball and returned it 27 yards for a touchdown to give Alabama a 28 to 21 victory. The win gave Alabama the conference crown and propelled them into the National Championship game.

The game took place on January first 1993 where they played Miami in the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. Of course, in college football there is not an official championship game. It just happened that the Sugar Bowl had booked the top-ranked teams, so that it was clear to all that the winner would take the championship. In this case the Miami Hurricanes were the number-one ranked team in the country, with their Heisman-winning quarterback, Gino Torretta. The Alabama Crimson Tide was second ranked and undefeated, and they led the nation in defense. Neither of these teams had tasted defeat in a long time – Miami came in with 29 straight victories while Alabama had 22 straight. Due to some of their struggles during the year, Alabama was getting the lessor of the two as far as respect from the media is concerned, as evidenced by their number two standing. (It is amazing how they run in packs.) The Miami players were quite outspoken as well with regard to their lack of concern for 'bama. Reporters kept saying that Alabama was playing out of their league and that they did not stand a chance against the mighty Hurricanes. They implied that Miami's players had come to New Orleans on business, and that was to win a football game, but Alabama's players were just out to have fun in the Crescent City.

As you would expect, the players on both teams tried to defend their turf. Some of the Miami players stated that Alabama had a one-dimensional offense, that they could not pass, and that some of the offensive linemen were fat and lazy. They claimed further that the Alabama defense would be too slow to counter that Miami passing game. I am sure that some of the 'bama players were equally as vocal; however, I have to admit my bias as I listened to this pre-game prattle.

Seven o'clock on January first, 1993 finally rolled around and it was time to stop talking and start playing the game. We ate supper early that evening, and I retired to bed to watch the game. As I clicked the remote control the game was just starting. As predicted by the Miami players, Alabama's offense was one-dimensional, and the commentators got onto this early. However, they soon proved that they did not need to pass, as the "fat, lazy" offensive lineman began working like mules as they blew big holes in the Miami line. The Alabama running backs were up to the task as they ground up both yardage and the game clock. Meanwhile, 'Bama's defense proved why they led the nation in that category, as they put enough pressure on the Miami quarterback to force three interceptions that led to 21 of Alabama's 34 points.

But the biggest play of the game is one that officially never happened. In the middle of the third quarter, with Miami down 27 to 6, for a brief moment it looked like the momentum might be shifting toward Miami. They had the ball deep in their own territory, when Torretta went back to pass, and hit Lamar Thomas, who streaked down the sidelines for an apparent six point that would have brought the hurricanes into striking distance for that time of the game. Earlier in the week the Miami players had been belittling Alabama's secondary saying that the players were slow and unable to cover the Miami passing machine. However, someone had forgotten to tell Alabama's George Teague. He ran across the field, and not only caught up to Thomas but stole the ball and began running it the other way. Needless to say it was a dramatic roller coaster ride for the fans on both sides of the field. But the net result was that Alabama had been offside on the play and so the entire episode never happened in the books. It was a dramatic turning point as Alabama beat back Miami's last big hope to grab the momentum of the game. Had Thomas held onto the ball there would have been a forty yard gain, Miami would have declined the penalty and accepted the play, which would have put them ten yards away from a touchdown. Given the circumstance, they had no choice but to decline the play and accept the penalty in order to retain possession. Alabama's newly inspired defense held them and they were forced to punt.

I saw that as one major turning point in the game, although Alabama was clearly in control throughout. They went on to win 34 to 13, and were quickly declared the National Champions.

At this point in my life I still enjoy watching Alabama play, but I am not nearly as intense about it, since that milestone has been reached. Even if they were to win again I am sure that it would not be as dramatic as it was that year. In fact, the next year when they opened up the season in Tuscaloosa for the first time, for some reason I found myself across town watching a movie.

As soon as I was able to go back to church I was anxious to get back to my level of participation. I had been teaching bible class, leading in prayer, reading the bible, and even preaching a lesson now and then. The only thing that I felt that I might not be able to sustain was the class teaching part of it, since I was not sure about my consistency in being able to attend. After a couple of weeks back they asked me to participate in reading and prayer and I readily accepted.

But I was also anxious to give some short lessons. I had to wait a while, almost an entire year, since I could not attend for the most part on Sunday or Wednesday night. I was glad to be back, even if only on Sunday morning. However, I would get depressed when the time for the evening services rolled around, knowing that the opportunity was there but I was not being able to take it. I discussed this with my parents and at first they felt that this was a bit much for me to go out that often. However, after a couple more months of recovering further I brought the subject up again.

It was a difficult situation, since the man from the hospital was coming out at 7:30 PM and this was paid for by the hospital. We did not want to place additional demands on them for obvious reasons. We thought about altering our schedule a bit, but felt that this would require us to leave right in the middle of things, which was not good alternative. So we called the hospital and asked if they could come a little later on Sunday night, which they found acceptable.

It had been almost four years since I had preached, and I wondered if I could get up the nerve. I started working up the notes on a couple topics, and as 1993 turned over I offered to speak. We do this on a voluntary basis with one man assigned the task of coordinating the worship assignments. On Wednesday night someone will do a 10-minute sermon, while on some Sunday nights (and when the regular preacher is gone) a full length sermon will be required. As I was preparing on my short lesson it turned into a very long one. I panicked as I realized that this would not do. So I tried to find the one that I had given just before I broke my leg. I figured that those who notice would not mind, but most would not notice because of the natural variation. However, I never had a chance to tell because I could not find the notes, so I had to start from scratch anyway.

All of this was a bit unsettling, but the last Sunday in May 1993 came around fast, and I was not nervous about it – until we pulled into the parking lot. It had been four years since I had taken on a speaking task like this, and I did not know if I could still do it. That is how it is like, as anyone who has had stage fright knows. You wonder just what in the world you are doing and your mind is practically blank. However, speaking is like riding a bicycle; you cannot explain how you do it, but once you get up there everything sort of falls into place. True, this was only a short sermon, and I still had the goal to get back on schedule and be able to preach full-length sermons. However, it was at this point that I felt that I had come full circle since I broke my leg – now I considered myself fully recovered.

It was a Saturday in October of 1993 when the phone rang and I answered it. It was Grandmother telling me that Paw Paw (as we called him) was having a good day, and she put him on the phone. I had always taken great comfort from the companionship that I got from my Grandfather, and, as his health continued to deteriorate, I just wondered how long he would be around. I wondered just how I was going to be able to handle the loss. I was really surprised, since I had a feeling for some time that I would never talk to him again. Mom was so happy that she started crying. I talked to him for a few minutes and then passed the phone over to Mom. We were lucky to catch him in such a good state of mind. It brought back old times ...

We had visited quite often over the past few years – several times a year when either we would visit them or they would come up for a holiday weekend. It seemed that while the rest of the

family was visiting, the two of us were always together. I became quite frightened wondering how I was going to survive this loss, whenever it came.

Paw Paw's health began to deteriorate in 1991. During that year he had a few minor strokes that affected his sense of balance. I did not realize how much it had affected him until in late 1991 they came to visit us and whenever he would start to walk he would stumble and have to grab hold of something to keep his balance. Since I had hurt my leg my grandfather would always come into my room and watch TV with me while sitting on the rocking chair. On this particular trip Paw Paw stumbled in the shower and stubbed his toe badly. After that he was too tired to come back to my room and had to go directly to bed. He sent Dad back to say goodnight for him. This early tiredness recurred each night that they were there, and they ended up leaving a day earlier than planned. It was not a total disaster; we did get to visit during the day. However, as it turned out, this was the last time that I was to see my grandfather alive.

A month later in November of 1991, when my grandmother was out of the house, Paw Paw was trying to walk around the house and fell down. He refused to go the doctor for several days, but finally he gave in and had some x-rays taken. They found that he had a couple of cracked ribs. They told my grandmother that someone would have to stay with him at all times during his recovery, since if he fell again it could be fatal. Since my grandmother was working full time, she had no choice but to place him temporarily in a nursing home during the week until his ribs healed. Unfortunately, just as his ribs were in process of healing he suffered additional minor strokes. With each stroke he was less able to take care of himself, and it looked like he would not come out of the nursing home.

As I heard this news I began to realize that things would never be the same. With each stroke I knew that the time that I would see them again would be further and further away, and the chances of them ever coming to Tuscaloosa again were getting smaller and smaller. I recalled all of the good times that we had together ... like the times that we went to the mall and he stayed with me while the others went off to shop ... our riding around in his pick-up ... or the time that we went down to the banks of the Black Warrior river. These were now things of the past. They were great memories now, and I had to contemplate them with mixed emotions. The strokes were beginning to damage his short-term memory. He could remember things from long ago, but sometimes he would be talking on the phone and forget who he was talking to.

Our family was unable to visit with him during this time because Mom was still recovering from her back surgery, and I was recovering from my broken leg. Dad was having minor back problems of his own, so he could not lift me like he used to. So we did not get to visit them for about a year. Looking back now, I wish that I could have spent more time with him during this last year. However, it is a blessing to me that I can only remember him as he was before he became seriously disabled. For, there seems to be nothing sadder to me than to see someone's mind go like that, especially when he had enough of his mind about him to realize what was going on. For example, at one point he told everyone that he would have to leave the nursing home so he could go down to his brother's house and go fishing with him. He became greatly despondent once he realized that his brother had died a couple years ago.

My grandmother came to visit us after about a year. We were glad to see her, since she had gone through some serious problems of her own. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer, but after some surgery they thought that they had it arrested. My aunt was taking care of Paw Paw in her absence. It was interesting that due to his loss of a sense of time, he never really knew how long my grandmother had been away.

It was mid-December in 1993 when my grandmother called and told us that Paw Paw had double pneumonia. He had been taken to the hospital and was not doing well. It was at this time that it hit me hard that I would probably not see Paw Paw alive again. I went to bed and said my prayers. It was difficult to pray for Paw Paw, for I did not know what to pray for. It is natural to want to pray for him to recover. But recovery was not a pretty prospect in this case. So, I just prayed that God's will be done and that He would give me the strength to accept whatever would happen. I learned several years later that one of Paw Paw's greatest fears was that he would linger on while losing his mind. Inside he was constantly praying that he would die before this would come about.

On December 17, 1993 his prayer was answered and he departed from this earth. It was around 6:30 AM when Dad came by to help me shave. I asked him how Paw Paw was doing and he told me that he had passed on. While I was saddened, I was not surprised, and I realized that it was for the best. At the same time it was difficult for me to address the situation emotion-wise. Should I just be sad? be glad that he is out of his misery? cry? or what? But before I reacted I asked about my grandmother. He said that the first time she called that she was quite upset, but she had called back again later indicating that she had accepted it and was doing better. This gave me strength to accept it as well.

It was unfathomable before the fact, but in retrospect I realize, and firmly believe, that God prepared me for the loss of my grandfather. I also recall back when he was still in fairly good health. We got to talking about religion and death. He told me that when Kevin was alive that they had made a deal that whichever one of them got to heaven first, he would save a place for the other one. So on that night in 1990 we also made that same deal. So I figure that Kevin and Paw Paw are saving a room for me. I can take great comfort in this, in that while I am very sad that Paw Paw is no longer giving me the pleasure of his company, I have the fond memories of him and he helped me to realize that we must not stop our lives when we lose a loved one. When we are walking with God we have nothing to fear, as the apostle Paul stated (1 Cor 15:55-58):

O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?
The sting of death is sin; and the power of sin is the law:
but thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable,
always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know
that your labor is not vain in the Lord.