



Love and Loss in Spiritual Memoir

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Abstract

This project represents the intersection of two of the biggest influences in my life story thus far: my Christian faith, and my older brother's life and death. In the ten years since his motorcycle accident, writing has been one of the biggest ways for me to process my grief. By transferring my memories of the two of us from early childhood to young adulthood onto paper, I mark them as both important and permanent, rather than letting them fade with time.

The first section tells about my background in writing and studying memoir. Sections two and three consist of my analysis of two spiritual memoirs that revolve around the death of a loved one. I examined *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son* by Richard Lischer, and *Touching the Edge: A Mother's Spiritual Path from Loss to Life*, by Margaret Wurtele. Piece by piece I reflected on each author's use of rhetorical tools and liturgical elements to shape a story that touches the reader's heart and spirit. In section four, I discuss how I use my findings to build my own work.

The fifth section is my personal spiritual memoir. I constructed my story following the order of worship commonly found in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), including elements such as confession, scripture and song. The story highlights my faith journey in the shadow of my brother's death as I strive to paint a picture of an admirable young man who lived a full life in twenty short years, and to honor him and memorialize his life for those he left behind.

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for loving us, near and far,
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of babysitting, and love,
and coffee.

Without the two of you,
none of this would be possible.

This story is for my baby boys, Logan and Henry,
who will one day know their uncle AJ
through the stories that keep the rest of us going.

This story is for my little brothers, Nathan and Nicholas,
through whom AJ still lives and smiles.

And for AJ, my role model
(in both good *and* bad decisions);
I pray that this story reflects the pride I have for you
that I may not have shared with you when I had the chance.

Thank you for loving me
even when you were beating me up.

Introduction

All About AJ

“How do you do it?” The question came from a friend, shortly after the tenth anniversary of my older brother’s death. “How do you go on? I mean, how do you live your life without making that your whole story? How do you cope?”

I was caught off guard and taken aback by her question. I really wasn’t sure. I mean, it seems like just yesterday that my world was crashing down around me and I didn’t even realize that as the days and years have passed, I’ve somehow become used to him being gone. I was surprised because I do feel that my brother’s death *is* my story, or at least, an enormous part of it. He’s a huge part of who I am, of the decisions I make every day. I weigh my choices against what I imagine he would advise me if he were still around. I feel like I wear his death on my sleeve; it feels so evident, the weight of losing my brother that I carry around everywhere I go. Where many people ask themselves, “What Would Jesus Do,” I wonder instead, “Would this make AJ proud?”

The answer to my friend’s question of how I cope is this: I write. I use journaling to unpack my thoughts, to sort through my emotions, and to keep my memories of my brother alive. I use writing as a way to make my memories tangible, and as a method of preserving them for years to come.

My brother made a lot of poor choices in his life. He got into trouble a lot and often became the butt of many jokes. He was very private and was well known for his troublesome antics, but I know he had a lot more to offer than people realized.

As his sister, I was privy to the side of AJ that most people didn't get to see. I knew about his good deeds, his commitment to his grandparents and extended family, and his dedication to becoming a better man. He was mature and wise beyond his years, and he was incredibly humble, but I don't think most people realized all these good qualities about him. They often got overlooked in his love for pushing the limits and suffering the consequences.

My motivation behind sharing stories of my brother's life is three-fold: 1) I want others to know what kind of person my brother was. He was a great man, and I'm very proud of him. I admire his life, I'm grateful for the time I got with him and I want to honor him by sharing his story. 2) I know that as the years pass and the amount of time since I've seen him grows longer and longer, my memories of AJ will begin to fade. By writing them down, I can always refer back to them. 3) My kids will never know their Uncle AJ. They won't know the way it feels for him to lift them up and toss them above his head, eyes sparkling as he looks up at them, engrossed together in laughter. They won't know how it feels to try to wrestle out from his grasp as he bear hugs them to give them another "noogie" on the head. They won't be able run away from him screeching after giving him a wet willie in the ear. They won't know what a wonderful uncle he would've been. But in reading his story, they can know what a wonderful young man he was.

Section One

Faith in Memoir

My journey in chronicling my life stories began in college at UNC Wilmington, when I took a class on creative fiction. I was unable to come up with anything from scratch for my assignments, so every week, I wrote about my own life, changed the names to protect the innocent, and passed the essays off as entirely made-up stories.

In 2012, I enrolled in Margaret Sartor's "Unconventional Memoir" course at Duke University. Each week we read and studied a memoir in an "unconventional" medium, such as theatrical plays, graphic novels, or a collection of childhood diary entries. Throughout the semester, we were to be working on writing our own short memoirs based on different prompts. Part of this assignment was to meet with the professor several times outside of class to discuss our writing and how to strengthen the pieces. Our classmates would read and critique our work throughout the process.

In 2015, I took Alex Harris' course on "The Autobiographical Impulse in Photography." The final assignment for this course was to create a digital slideshow of photographs along with a spoken narrative that shed light on the story we were trying to tell. The presentation of the final assignment was open to the public, thereby requiring a good bit of courage on the part of the autobiographer.

My first experience in studying the genre of "Spiritual Memoir" was in a class at the Duke Divinity School led by Dr. Richard Lischer, "The Life of Faith: Spiritual Autobiography

and Memoir.” The nature of the class seemed like the perfect intersection of two things about which I love to learn: 1) writing, and 2) religion.

The seminar-style course explored “the themes of faith, community, and vocation in Christian autobiographical writing” (Lischer syllabus). In reading together and reflecting on the autobiographical works, the purposes of the course included recognizing the theological character of the genre, developing an appreciation for literary features within the genre, reflecting on our own experiences, and increasing our skills in written and spoken expression.

According to the syllabus, each week had a spiritual theme, and we were assigned autobiographies or memoirs to read that fit the theme, along with a related writing assignment. The themes for each week were as follows:

- 1) Reading the Life of Faith
- 2) Journey to the Church
- 3) Crisis and Transformation
- 4) The Ocean of God’s Love
- 5) Something Larger than Oneself
- 6) The Turn to Community
- 7) Journey Through Purgatory
- 8) The Stripping of the Altar
- 9) The Search for God in Time and Memory (Lischer Syllabus)

One of the assigned readings for week eight, “The Stripping of the Altar,” was Lischer’s own spiritual memoir. In many Christian denominations, the altar represents

Jesus Christ. On Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter Sunday when Christians remember Christ's crucifixion, churches may strip the altar of its décor – paraments, candles, flowers, and any other ornaments. This tradition symbolizes how Christ was stripped of his garments for mockery and death being hung on the cross. He was left bare and vulnerable.

In his memoir about his son's last days on Earth, Lischer reveals how bare and vulnerable he felt. As the son of God, Jesus was often ridiculed because God could not save him from death on the cross. Lischer implied the same notion by assigning his work under the "Stripping of the Altar" theme; it may sometimes seem to others that pastors are "immune" to tragedy because of their commitment to God and the church. While Lischer would not assume he was any more protected than anyone else, he probably felt snubbed and helpless when his life began to shatter and his faith wavered as God seemed to ignore his prayers.

I was losing my ability to pray. I didn't stop praying in anger but in something nearer to fatigue; it was an emptiness so complete that I couldn't remember what it was to be full. It wasn't that I quit believing in God, only that I had apparently misunderstood the scope of God's responsibilities... It was my mistake, not God's fault. I simply took away the prayer book and candle from the little cabinet shrine in my study, where I had spent many hours telephoning God about Adam, and replaced them with an abridged dictionary. Lischer 112-113

I was intrigued by the way the class was organized by Christian themes. It was a subtle, clever tool that made a big impact on the way students processed the assignments,

rather than arranging them at random. Since each week had its own title, it was clear to the students what we should be focusing on as we completed the readings.

In reading Lischer's memoir, I noticed a similar technique in the format of the story. It was not a strictly chronological journey through the end of his son's life, and each chapter had a distinct motif. I began to wonder what kind of format I might use if I were to share the story of my own spiritual journey through loss as I read through Lischer's account.

I have a few reasons for choosing to do this for my final project. My spirituality is important to me on a personal level as well as a professional level. My job title is Director of Youth Ministry at my church. I'm always searching for ways to deepen my knowledge of and relationship with God and expand my horizons. Working in a church means I go to a lot of funerals, too. It's helpful to see others' experiences with grief, to read about ways that other people helped them (or not) through their mourning. I used to avoid funerals at all costs because it brought back memories of AJ's funeral and hurt me too badly, but in recent years, I've come to realize how important it is to be there for the loved ones who are left behind.

I admire the courage it must have taken for Lischer and the other memoirist whose work I studied, Margaret Wurtele, to put their thoughts on paper and share them with the world. To publish these raw emotions makes your heart vulnerable in a totally new way. It opens you up to the possibility of harsh criticism of your innermost thoughts and feeling. I believe that challenges make you stronger, though, and I look for new opportunities to expand my limitations. I wanted to explore different ways to make my writing better, especially because I was admittedly a little bit distracted when I was enrolled in Lischer's

class. I had a baby in the middle of the semester and missed a couple of class meetings, so I wanted more time to work on my story. Last, in spending time thinking about him and trying to put my memories into words, it felt like I was getting to spend more time with my brother, and that was a wonderful gift.

Section Two

Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son

The first piece I chose to examine is Richard Lischer's "Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son." This memoir was the inspiration behind this project. Lischer's ability to memorialize his son's life with such pride and gentle splendor is an inspiration to me as I seek to enter my older brother's life into publication, to mark it into the history books and prove that, though others may one day forget about him, he *did* exist and his story will live on. Because religion was of deep importance to my late brother, and now to me, I am captivated with a way to write that serves a purpose to others, and not just for my own satisfaction.

I was fascinated by Lischer's ability to weave Christian elements into his prose seamlessly and beautifully, from prayers, to hymns, to scripture, liturgy, and more. There was a real sense that the author truly lives his life's work of being a Lutheran pastor; he literally tries to "practice what he preaches" rather than just playing the role when he puts on his clerical collar. The inclusion of these elements was quite natural and not the least bit forced; in fact, in some places, it was almost unnoticeable to me as a reader.

Lischer details his son's final days on Earth, his own faith in God and God's promises waning as Adam's cancerous tumors and Adam's faith both multiply exponentially. The title of the memoir, "Stations of the Heart," is a subtle nod to Adam's faith as a devout Catholic, whereas Lischer himself is a Lutheran minister and does not deal much in practice with the Catholic tradition of walking the Stations of the Cross.

It wasn't until he got sick that I walked the Stations of the Cross for the first time. Until then, I had never thought of them as anything other than a ritual for pious Catholics and a few venturesome Protestants. But as his illness wore on, the Stations began to loom in my imagination, perhaps because cancer itself leads you from one obligatory shrine to the next. It is a disease that teaches incrementally....

It all begins with the Stations. You have to make every last one of them. You have to go with him for his labs and scans, hang out in the coffee shops, walk the dogs, listen to the same old stories, share the same old jokes, and carry on with him for hours about nothing in particular. And when things get serious, you have to keep your part of the bargain and try not to cry. When he wants to talk about God, you have to hide your own damaged faith, clear your palate of clichés, and find a witness deep within yourself. (Lischer 6-7)

Many people are not familiar with the Stations of the Cross. The Catholics in my family know what they represent, but most aren't sure how they work. They vary in form from church to church; they can be paintings, sculptures, statues, or something simple like a basic cross or just a rock. This is why Lischer mentions that the stations are mainly for "pious" Catholics. In my life as a Protestant, I have never heard anyone in my Presbyterian denomination even reference the Stations of the Cross; the word "venturesome" probably does not emphasize how out-of-the-ordinary it would be for most Protestants to walk them as a ritual.

This is a subtle nod to one of Adam's quirks. The reader discovers that Adam has always had a tendency to go beyond what's expected and do things his own way. We realize this early on as Lischer shares that Adam thinks he's found a "new way to die" (Lischer 5). Adam often goes against the grain and challenges the comfort level of those around him. As the book goes on, Lischer walks the reader through the different stations and the different increments of death by cancer – the roller coaster of shocking news, treatment, remission, relapse, more treatment and trials, and eventual death, as well as the assortment of emotions that go along with each stage. He sets the reader up for the challenges that one must face as a support person for a cancer patient, especially as a minister. The job responsibility of pastoral care becomes a completely different animal when the pastor is caring for his own son.

Lischer formats this memoir into six sections, or "stations," that he has chosen to represent Adam's last 95 days of life: The Fountain, The Labyrinth, Sanctuary, Cross, The Caves, and The Rock. Each station consists of a few chapters – anywhere from one to five – that follow the theme of the aforementioned station to describe Adam's character, his relationships with others, his faith in God, and his battle with cancer.

The Fountain

After an excerpt from Mary Jo Bang's poem, "The Role of Elegy," comes the first station, "The Fountain." At the beginning of this section, the reader is inside Lischer's ear and mind as the phone call comes from Adam that his cancer is back with a vengeance. Lischer describes both the way it felt and the way it sounded to get that phone call:

A familiar voice emerges from a piece of inexpensive black plastic. The voice has no body, and yet it makes a claim as firm and authoritative as flesh. It says, 'Hey, *Dad*' with an end stress on *Dad* that has always and in every circumstance meant trouble. 'Hey, *Dad*,' and ordinary time stands still and the room begins to turn while you wait for the rest of the sentence to do its work. (4)

Immediately, the reader notices Lischer's skill for rhetorical tools – metaphor, personification, imagery, and more – to paint a vivid picture, full of sights and sounds and emotions, so the reader feels like he or she is actually present at the scene. These tools are abundantly present on nearly every page of this memoir. This genius use of details evokes a personal connection for the reader and adds a deeper dimension to the story.

Lischer juxtaposes the weight of Adam's news with the cheap, lightweight phone which bears the bad news. Plain and unimpressive, the phone that might've never been given a second thought now carries a great significance in this story because of its place in this turning point of Lischer's life. He plays on the use of the words "Ordinary Time," a liturgical season in the church calendar that falls between the dates when Christians recognize Christ's birth, baptism, death, and resurrection.

After setting the tone in Chapter 1, Lischer goes back in time in Chapter 2 to the beginning of Adam's life – how his name was chosen, how he needed modern medicine and technology to survive his first few days, the story of his baptism, and then lays out the foundation for Adam's character, which he builds upon throughout the remainder of the book. Chapter 3 shares stories from Adam's childhood, teenage years, and college years, as

he struggles with the physical limitations from a mysterious medical condition, and his quest to find his own identity in both the secular and religious sphere.

“The Fountain” symbolizes the baptismal font, and the endless, continuous flowing of water from the fountain of life, despite the finiteness of life itself, and Adam’s life in particular.

The Labyrinth

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a labyrinth as “A structure consisting of a number of intercommunicating passages arranged in bewildering complexity, through which it is difficult or impossible to find one's way without guidance; a maze.” Modern Christians often use circular labyrinths to encourage prayer and meditation. The second station Lischer visits in his journey with Adam, “The Labyrinth,” portrays the hospital as a maze, where Lischer gets lost as he races around trying to find Adam.

After countless visits to the hospital and time spent walking its halls for his son’s treatments, Lischer eventually becomes familiar with the intricate layout and the various departments of Duke University Hospital.

With its interchangeable corridors and matching clinics, the hospital’s layout represents only a small section of the labyrinth. There is the cancer center itself, with the false hopes it engenders and its hard barrier-walls of suffering. Cancer also raises deeper religious and philosophical questions about the puzzle of existence and the moves required to solve it. Still for all its complications, the labyrinth leads

to an actual destination. If you pray your way through it, a labyrinth, or its guiding spirit, will take you to a quiet place at the center. (72)

Lischer describes Adam's journey as if it is a puzzle that can be solved, something that one can conquer if only the mind can overcome the trials. He seems to think that Adam has somehow taken a wrong turn somewhere along the way; perhaps he's gotten tricked when one corridor secretly swapped with another.

This section also depicts cancer itself as a labyrinth. This comes as a new realization for Lischer, who originally thought of Adam's earlier treatment to remove melanoma as "a brush, not a blot on the rest of his life.... Cancer: what an experience *that* had been" (48). A small blemish has become a bottomless pit. What was once considered an isolated occurrence is now the means to Adam's end.

Labyrinths are often described as mazes, but this is incorrect. A maze can be full of wrong turns and various complex paths, designed to exercise the mind and even frustrate those who attempt to find their way out. A labyrinth, however, has only one way in and one way out. Labyrinths are designed for spiritual reflection. Often, those who choose to walk the labyrinth are encouraged to bring something to the center to leave behind as they turn around and exit. While Lischer is walking this new labyrinth with Adam, praying his way to the quiet space at the center, he fails to acknowledge at this point that he will have to leave Adam behind and exit on his own.

Sanctuary

A church sanctuary is a place for rituals – prayers, songs, affirmations, and confessions, sitting and standing and kneeling as one. In section three, “Sanctuary,” Lischer tells about Adam’s conversion to Catholicism and his new rituals as he stares death in the face. This stage of life is Adam’s most pious, as he and his pregnant wife take on an almost monastic way of life, living their days by the rituals, both religious and secular, rather than by the clock. They wake in the morning and Adam rubs his wife’s belly, talking to their unborn child, calling her by the name they have chosen together. They light candles, read scripture, and pray together. They go to mass. They go to lunch. If Adam has the energy, they will sometimes go shopping for the baby. Dinner at Lischer’s house often includes a couple of guests who provide the meal (friends or coworkers, etc.), and Adam and his wife return home early to watch a movie together – almost always a comedy – before they end their day just as it began, lighting candles, reading scripture and saying prayers, and chatting with the baby.

This station reminds me of a popular contemporary Christian hymn by the same name. “Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, / pure and holy, tried and true / With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living / sanctuary for you” (Scruggs and Thompson, 1-4). It would seem that Adam is doing his best to live out these lyrics, to become the embodiment of a sanctuary, whether he realizes it or not. Lischer admits, “Adam became my altar, and on him I laid my every offering. His spirit was approaching perfection...” (113). I surmise that Lischer decided to omit the word “The” in this section’s title because he did not mean that Adam himself was a sanctuary, but rather his state of mind was, in contrast to everyone else’s around him, pure and holy, tried and true. While Lischer became devoted to following

Adam and caring for him, Adam became more devoted than ever to following Christ's example and proving his faith in God by not questioning his life's path.

Cross

The cross is where Jesus died, and "Cross" is the station where Adam dies, too. Like Jesus, Adam did not have a quick and easy death. Adam's death was plagued by violent seizures and enormous doses of medication to reduce his pain, stabilize his vitals, stop his convulsions and prevent future episodes. We often think of death as a singular, quick event – boom! – and take for granted that it can also be a long, drawn-out process filled with suffering. Lischer looks on helplessly as "Adam had [another] powerful seizure. He suddenly lost consciousness, and his body began to struggle violently like that of a prisoner under restraints" (162); "now he was having occasional half seizures and brief moments of unconsciousness, sometimes called 'absence seizures'" (177); the pharmacist refused to fill the [OxyContin] prescription [for pain] because its dosage level was extraordinarily high" (182). Adam's brain swells without relief and his bodily functions begin to shut down. The seizures begin to come at a rapid pace, and the doctors argue over whether they should be working to keep Adam alive for the birth of his baby or relieve his suffering.

His oxygen and IV fluids would continue, and the agreement prohibiting heroic measure would remain in place, but now the staff would protect him from seizures with medicines so powerful that they might have the secondary effect of

ending his life. Standing there in the hall, we implicitly agreed to cross the line from palliation to the possibility of terminal sedation. (Lischer 194)

It must have been horrific to witness his son's gradual death, just like Jesus' crucifixion. He must have felt helpless, traitorous, and conflicted – to wish that his son could live just a little bit longer in order to meet his daughter, but at the same time wish that his suffering could just be over.

The image of a cross symbolizes this inner conflict. Ultimately, Lischer wants his son alive, but not in this comatose state. It is a lose-lose situation. Either way, Adam is gone, even if his body remains. Here, two perpendicular wishes – one for life and one for death – intersect in a realization that the only power Lischer has over the situation is the power to instruct the hospital staff to let Adam die.

On his deathbed, Adam wears around his neck two different crosses that are particularly meaningful to him. “They are not incidental to his humanity; even as he sleeps, he is wholly dependent on them” (195). It seems appropriate that Adam passed away on a Sunday morning, almost as if he had planned it that way. And in death, there is new life:

Nine days after the funeral, we got a call from an exhausted but jubilant widow. Jenny was on the line... In a voice that reminded me of Adam's way of delivering good news, she said, “*Hey, Rick. I just [just!] wanted to let you now that you have a new granddaughter.* (214)

In an instant, Duke Medical Center is transformed from “a scene of suffering and death” to “a place of resurrection” (215). Lischer realizes that birth and death cannot be separated. “The St. Andrew’s Cross that ushered Adam into the next world welcomed Elizabeth into this one. His departure and her arrival were marked by fearful pangs and cries and a leap into the unknown” (216). Adam’s death may have been gradual overall, in the sense that it was not a quick accident, but it was sudden in the sense that just a few short months prior, he seemed fit as a fiddle. He had many questions about life after death, and his daughter’s entrance into the world was just as new and mysterious as his exit.

The St. Andrew’s Cross is not like the cross seen in most Christian churches; it is shaped like the letter X. As the story goes, St. Andrew insisted he was not worthy to be crucified on the same kind of cross as Jesus, and he pleaded with his executioners to alter the shape. The fact that Adam clung to this particular cross implies that he echoes St. Andrews’ sentiments of unworthiness. Regardless of the shape, the cross is a Christian symbol of a cruel, brutal death, but it is also the symbol of resurrection and rebirth.

The Caves

In his next-to-last station, Lischer begins to explore the process of grieving. He likens grief to a series of caves, “dark, multiple, and unfathomed. You do not explore them. You fall into them. Which means you are constantly righting yourself and daily, sometimes hourly, recovering from little plunges into unrequited longing and despair” (220). His prayers for Adam’s life were not answered, and any prayers to bring Adam back to life would certainly be ignored, as well. He discusses the heartbreak of “losing touch with

Adam,” of not feeling his presence, and of longing to see him in his dreams, the way his wife sees Adam every night. Where Lischer dreads the darkness, his wife welcomes it.

Chapter 17 is unusual because, unlike all the other chapters, it begins with a verse of scripture: Psalm 139:8b – *“If I make my bed in hell, you are there.”* Lischer and his wife learn to cope with their tragic loss. Lischer explores how various philosophers, theologians, and other less-certified thinkers view death and God, and he begins to reshape his view of Adam’s life and death. He describes awkward moments when people recognize him in the grocery store and reference him as Adam’s dad in the past tense, or when someone from Adam’s distant past asks him about Adam and Lischer must break the news to an unassuming friend that his son has died. “It occurs to me that I have acquired a new responsibility,” he shares, “I have become the interpreter of his death. God, I must do a better job” (Lischer 328).

It is this epiphany that encourages Lischer to write down Adam’s story, to interpret his death, to memorialize his beautiful spirit. Adam interpreted his own life, sure, but he lived his dying days as generously and as lovingly as ever. He did not pity himself and ask “why me?” He did not get angry at God. He did not abandon his wife and baby, and he did not go down without a fight, but these details are completely unknown to anyone who was not privy to his last few months. For all anyone knows, his death at such a young age could’ve been a suicide, a homicide, or a freak accident. Lischer realizes that there is more to be shared of Adam’s death than just the fact of it.

He was an inspiration to his father, and Lischer feels compelled to share the incredible story of his death with others. He never considered himself a victim of life’s circumstances, and while he was certainly not a naïve optimist, his glass was definitely half

full, despite his life being cut short so unfairly. When Lischer bumps into an old friend of Adam's and must break the news of Adam's death, he realizes he doesn't know what to say. "Later, I realize I have said absolutely nothing to comfort him. To a young minister, no less, I have said not a word about Adam's goodness, his faith, his capacity for friendship, or my hope. Only that he is gone" (Lischer 237). This memoir is Lischer's opportunity to share all of these things.

The Rock

In the Bible, Jesus is referred to as a rock, a solid foundation, a refuge and a source of strength. It is also a rock, or stone, which is rolled away to reveal that Jesus' tomb is empty, that he is freed from death and he will not be forgotten. In this way, Adam's infant daughter serves as a source of strength and refuge for Lischer and his wife. As the rock is significant in the gospel of Matthew, Adam's daughter is a reminder to his family that he is also freed from suffering, freed from death and his life will not be forgotten because he lives on through his daughter.

The story of Adam's life comes full circle in the final pages of "Stations of the Heart." The tale ends as it began – with a baptism, this time, Adam's daughter is being baptized, and the reader is taken back to a line from the first few pages: "The child begins life's journey with a dramatic funeral – his own" (12). The final section that on the very last page begins just as the very first sentence of the book did – with a reference to the seven years since Adam's death, and a short, poignant, intimate conversation between father and son.

Section Three

Touching the Edge: A Mother's Spiritual Path from Loss to Life

Like Lischer's memoir, Margaret Wurtele's novel tells the story of a parent losing a child – in this case, a mother grieving the loss of her son after a tragic rock climbing accident. Phil was twenty-two years old, a thrill seeker who found his spirituality in nature, and his mother's only biological child (although he grew up with several half-siblings and step-siblings). While his mother's story appealed to me on a spiritual level, as well as on an academic level in regards to this project, Phil's story appealed to me in a different way because his personality reminded me so much of my brother.

Tone

Where *Stations of the Heart* is written to reflect the months leading up to Adam's death, *Touching the Edge* focuses on the months following Phil's unexpected death. There is a tension throughout Lischer's book that builds as the days pass and the pages turn – will Adam live long enough to meet his baby girl? This tension propels the story and keeps the reader guessing.

Touching the Edge does not have the same sense of tension. In fact, the tone of Wurtele's book is much calmer. This is partly because the reader knows from the very beginning that Phil is going to die. For Wurtele, though, for the storyteller, Phil's death is unanticipated and the storyteller is not a witness to his death. There can be no rising action, the way there is in *Stations of the Heart*, because Wurtele was hundreds of miles

away from Phil, entertaining houseguests and living her normal life while Phil was working as a summer intern at Washington's Mount Rainier Park. She knew where he was, had spoken to him recently on the phone, and had no reason out of the ordinary to worry about him that weekend. She shares a summary of his death in the first three pages of the book – in the prologue, to be exact, before the story even starts.

Although she mentions intense fear and anxiety many times as she is reflecting back on stories where Phil almost died as a child on various adventures, the majority of the book reads very peacefully. Wurtele's training in yoga and meditation is likely a driving factor behind the calm energy that her words emit. She shares that a thirteenth-century German monk and priest, Meister Eckhart, helps her find her way to God. "Eckhart wrote the kind of prayer I had been drawn to, one of pure receptivity, silence, and stillness: the *Via Negativa*, the path of inwardness" (Wurtele 40). She realizes that the meditation practices she has enjoyed for years share a long history and tradition in Christianity. "Meditation had attracted me since this whole process of awakening had begun. Prayer felt right to me in silence, in a relaxation pose at the end of a yoga class, in the breathing exercises called *pranayama* that I was beginning to practice daily" (Wurtele 40-41). This awareness allows her to accept God into her life where some of her doubts used to be. After studying Dorothy Day and Martin Luther, she wonders if she can still be a Christian if she doesn't feel called to work for social justice in the way that they did. But in yoga, she finds both prayer and peace.

Yoga was unlike attention at work or play, attention that drew me out to the world. This awareness drew me strongly into myself and beyond, to a suspended

mental state in which thoughts and fantasies, worries and anxiety were crowded out and irrelevant, where the only thing that mattered was utter awareness of the orientation of limbs, muscle, sinew, even blood flow, all in an attempt to hold myself in a harmonious, graceful posture....

The utter calm, the peace, the isolation from everything else became for me a kind of prayer. (Wurtele 6)

It becomes evident that peace is something that Wurtele craves – peace in her marriage, peace in her relationship with Phil and with her sister, and peace with Phil’s death. In her forties, she begins to use Christianity as a way to help her find peace, harmony, and grace in all aspects of her life.

The Author’s Spiritual Background

Just shy of her 50th birthday, Wurtele’s spirituality is still relatively new. As the daughter of agnostic parents, prayer “just wasn’t done... It wasn’t bad; it just wasn’t for them, for us,” as if being a Christian is simply going through a set of motions (Wurtele 7). Wurtele explains that in her forties, she decided that a new path was beckoning to her. She started exploring Christianity after a chance encounter with an Episcopalian bishop during a layover in an airport. Later, she went to visit him in his office and share some doubts with him. She expected shock or surprise, but is met instead with calm and thoughtful insight as he recites the Nicene Creed¹ to her and invites her to think of it as a song. When Wurtele

¹ We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came

realizes she can think of the creed – her biggest issue with Christianity – as poetry, art, or music, rather than believing every single word in a literal sense, she finally feels like Christianity is something she can truly support and try to understand. It is as if she wants so badly to genuinely explore Christianity, but the Creed was getting in her way. The bishop gives her permission to ask questions, to pose criticism, and to study God’s word in the ways that appeal to her – not just the ways she *thinks* she’s supposed to – and still be a member of the body of Christ.

As the bishop is reciting the Nicene Creed to her, Wurtele had a physical reaction that she believes is deeply spiritual. “Something cracked inside of me. I felt a little explosion, like a blast opening the entrance to a tunnel” (Wurtele 9). This experience is like a great explosion inside of her, not a slight fissure that results from a bit of pressure, but something loud and shattering that cannot be ignored. She takes that as a sign from God that she is headed in the right direction. “After that day, I felt I had made a choice. I was sure I wanted to see if Christianity would work for me. I continued to take yoga, to explore meditation, and to read freely in Eastern as well as Christian literature. But in my daily life, in my heart, I started down the Christian path in earnest” (Wurtele 9). She realizes that it

down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen. (Book of Common Worship, 64).

will take effort, but, like yoga, the path of Christianity is a practice, an exercise, that may change from day to day, ever deepening, ever evolving.

From then on, she begins to explore how church, spiritual retreats, and scripture can guide her in her life.

I took in the stories, but I set them free inside of me. I played with them. I considered the dynamic of the characters, put myself in the settings. I began to see that the Bible and Christian liturgy were tools. Rather than things that I was being asked to “believe” against my better judgment, they were rich storehouses of wisdom, poetic images and metaphors passed down through time, that I could dip into at will and apply to my own life. (Wurtele 10)

She seems to realize that much of her life already reflects what the Bible teaches: love and respect, treating others the way you’d like to be treated, and finding an inner strength to help you through difficulties. By using the scriptures as a sort of lens through which to look at her life, she can find greater wisdom and deeper meaning in the stories of others, finding comfort in the assurance that God is in control of it all.

Throughout the memoir, Wurtele shares Biblical stories that she feels a connection to in her own life. These reflections draw the reader into a deeper understanding of Wurtele’s spirituality by illustrating exactly how she applies the Bible to her modern day experiences. “I could see how the rhythm of the church year was reflected in so many life situations and how it could be of value to Christians to teach them to hope when things seem blackest” (Wurtele 40). She recognizes a pattern of death and rebirth as the tide of

life ebbs and flows, that discomfort and agony are essential to – and often signs of – new growth.

In dealing with her divorce from Phil's biological father, Wurtele relates to how Jesus might have felt in his final days on Earth. "The story of Christ's passion – his death and resurrection – mirrored my own way through pain and suffering into a new marriage and new life" (Wurtele 40). After Phil's death, she reflects on an Advent meditation just before Christmas that asked her to imagine herself as a different character of the story. As Bethlehem, "I had become the quiet manger, tucked out of the way, an empty place where new and sacred life would be welcome, would find a fertile place to be born As a shepherd, I felt awed by the star filled firmament," she continues, "I felt too their poverty of spirit. In grief I was bereft, humbled, ready to follow a promising star wherever it might lead" (Wurtele 166).

She finds herself particularly drawn to Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was fully "receptive and responsive to God's invitation to bear a son, whatever his future might hold...and, knowing that one day she also would lose a son, I could see that she would accept that too and seek to discover the fruits that his death would bear" (Wurtele 166). In the wake of his death, there are many times when Wurtele questions why God would give her a son if he were just going to take him away from her.

After all the months I spent trying to get pregnant, hoping for a miracle, my child, like [Mary's], was a gift from God. In receiving that gift, in offering my body as a recipient of life-giving power, I, like Mary, was never in control...I was a vessel of

new life, but that life was never truly mine. The course of that child's life and death were – for me as for Mary – out of my hands. (Wurtele 207)

Through Mary's story, she finally understands that Phil's death is part of what makes her who *she* is, and begins to look for good things that may come from the midst of her pain.

Just as Holy Communion allows me to consume the body and the blood, to remember both death and Resurrection, so too this tragic accident can be a pivotal passage for me, even a sacrament. By consuming this death...and embracing it fully, I can allow its pain to become a source of nourishment, to feed new growth for the years that come. (Wurtele 234)

By leaning on lessons from the Bible, Wurtele is able to see hope in times of despair and glean strength in times of weakness. She uses scripture to help her process her grief and to illuminate God's purpose for her life once Phil is gone and her identity as "Phil's mom" is no more.

Structure

After studying *Stations of the Heart*, I wondered about the structure of *Parting With A Son* and began to look into the themes of each section as I tried to decide how I might

organize my own story. The memoir is made up of 28 chapters, surrounded by a prologue and an epilogue. Each chapter has a title that succinctly touches on the subject matter within it: “House of Prayer” (chapter 8) is an Episcopalian retreat house of which Wurtele is a board member, and where she was when she got the news about Phil’s death; “The Birthday Visitor” (chapter 18) tells the story of how Wurtele dreams of Phil on her 50th birthday; in “Nancy” (chapter 21), Wurtele shares her experience of her close friend’s death from cancer. The titles of these chapters are relevant to the text within them, but they are a bit arbitrary. That is to say, chapter 21 could’ve been named “Cancer” or “Sadness” or “A Different Kind of Death” without impacting the overall story.

Other chapters have titles that relate to rock climbing, which is how Phil died. In doing this, she is able to create a clever, subtle analogy for her readers, while honoring Phil as she tries to look at her experiences from a rock climber’s perspective, as if her life is a mountain that she must figure out how to summit.

However, the connections to the focus of these chapters are metaphorical, rather than literal. “The View from the Bottom” (chapter 2) describes the very beginning of Phil’s life. The reader learns that his life on earth started off very shaky, as his parents’ marriage ended and Wurtele felt like she was at rock bottom as a single mother. In “Continental Divide” (chapter 17), Wurtele talks about feeling isolated from her sister, someone she is genetically so close to, but in personality types, very different and far away. She feels like she should be able to go to her sister for emotional support, but instead has always felt there was a sense of competition and resentment between the two. One a student, and the other somewhat of a flower child, Wurtele describes the conflict of the emotional distance between two sisters who should be much closer.

Each chapter begins with a quote or a scripture. The quotes come from a variety of academic sources: poets (Emily Dickinson, Denise Levertov, Mary Oliver, J. V. Cunningham, etc.), psychologists and psychiatrists (James Hillman, Rudolf Dreikurs, Carl Jung), and various well-known religious writers such as Rabbi Harold Kushner, John of the Cross, and Rumi. Most quotes are philosophical in nature and reflective of Wurtele's penchant for analysis, philosophy, and poetry. The quotes and scriptures serve as an elaboration to the title. Upon observing the quote or scripture, the reader is allowed a brief glimpse into the theme of the chapter ahead and into Wurtele's state of mind as she explores the different memories within the chapter.

For instance, in chapter 12, "New Family," she struggles to figure out her place in a family comprising a father and his two children. She no longer feels her presence is necessary to make the family complete. The quote comes from philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff: "Now he's gone, and the family has to restructure itself.... We have to live around the gap. Take one out and everything changes." The gap could also be described as "the elephant in the room." No one wants to talk about Phil, or the way their family is now, but Wurtele is dying for validation and security of having someone who is related to her by blood. "I considered the family landscape, primarily [my husband] Angus and his three children. The lay of the land had changed. I felt unmistakably and undeniably alone. I no longer had my ally, my buddy, the one I knew loved me unconditionally. I no longer had a child of my own" (Wurtele 103). If she were to acknowledge "the gap" with her family, she would immediately be reassured that she, as a stepmother, is just as important to them as their biological father. Later in the book, her concerns are dismissed and this uneasiness is mended, but it takes a lot of pain and resentment to get to that point.

Chapter 16, "Terrible Glory," is about the blessings that can be found in tragedy. In this chapter, Wurtele's stepdaughter comforts her in the middle of a meltdown of grief and reassures her that in Phil's absence, her stepchildren can be closer to her than ever before. The poetry excerpt at the beginning of the chapter is from Denise Levertov: "What becomes / of the past if the future / snaps off, brittle, / the present left as a jagged edge / open on nothing?" Phil would surely not want his mother to live the rest of her life in mourning, bitter and lonely. From this excerpt, Wurtele is implying that it dishonors the past, and Phil's memory, to remain "brittle" and "jagged." It would hurt others if she were to never heal, and that is the last thing that her son would want.

From chapter 20, "Something to Leave the World": "There is not one big cosmic meaning for it all, there is only the meaning we each give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person. *Anais Nin*" (Wurtele 173). Throughout the book, Wurtele struggles to accept that, since her only child died before having children of his own, she will not leave a bloodline after her life is over. "That place of hope, of dreams that anchored me to the future, that promised me grandchildren and great-grandchildren was now a dead end, a void. I was untethered, floating, a flesh-and-blood universe of one" (Wurtele 103-104). What then, she wonders, can she leave behind?

Motivation for Writing

The answer comes to her when her friend and business partner urges her to try to publish her writings. She has shared her manuscript, a spiritual journal of sorts, with a few

friends who then tell her that her work has “helped them wrestle with questions that plagued their own spiritual lives” (Wurtele 175), but she “couldn’t even think about it being published” (Wurtele 174). As the possibility of publishing her work becomes more real, she has a revelation. “Maybe, if I could no longer leave behind a child, maybe, just maybe, I could give the world a book. . . .” (Wurtele 175). She may not be able to leave progeny, but she can mark hers and Phil’s existence in the world with their stories. Inspired by this realization and encouraged by her business partner, Wurtele decides to send out her manuscript in an effort to memorialize Phil’s life in print, in her own words. Shakily, she says to her business partner, “OK...I will agree to send the manuscript to these six publishers. But if they all turn it down, will *you* agree to let the whole thing drop?”

In the weeks after Phil’s death, Wurtele is jolted when the pages from one of Phil’s journals were nearly lost in a sudden wind. It is not the incident that shakes her so much as the realization that that is all there is left of her son: “a few photographs that will surely fade, some letters and books of his writing that will turn to dust, the memories cherished by his family and friends who – like him – will die too?” (Wurtele 2). In addition to her leaving nothing behind, in terms of progeny, Wurtele feels brokenhearted that Phil has not left anything behind, either. This is her inspiration for writing her memoir:

I am seeking power of a sort, the power to reclaim my own life in the wake of this death, the power to tell Phil’s story, the power to fill the void. I want to gather the waves and particles of his energy, spin a three-dimensional holographic image where the beams of recollection intersect in space, merge them back together into a living, shimmering whole. (Wurtele 3)

It is evident that Wurtele sees spirituality in her life as a process that takes work. For so long, her purpose in life was to be “Phil’s mom.” Without him, she suddenly feels lost, powerless, and alone. She needs to make the effort to gather up what is left of him before she loses it in an effort to reestablish his presence on earth in the form of a book.

In writing this story, in sharing Phil’s life and death and her own life in the wake of tragedy, she can leave something behind for both of them. His time on earth has ended, but his legacy lives on. His death provides an opportunity for Wurtele to grow closer to God, to use writing as a tool to both recreate her son’s presence on earth and to unpack her emotions, and to help others understand the God in whom she has chosen to believe.

Section Four

Personal Commentary

I chose these two spiritual memoirs because they both used rhetorical tools and liturgical references that attracted me to the stories they told, and even more to the ways in which they told their stories. In order to analyze the stories and the writing, I came up with a series of questions to consider, and made a chart to compare and contrast the two different styles. I referred to this chart and used it as a guide as I was working to strengthen my own account of my loved one's death.

So what did I learn, as a writer, from reading and examining "Stations of the Heart" and "Parting With A Son"? I am profoundly impressed by the poetry of the prose, especially in Lischer's memoir. Not only does Lischer paint beautiful images, but the words even sound beautiful together when you read them aloud.

Lischer goes to great lengths to describe a scene or an emotion, using tools that are uncommon – or, at least, unfamiliar to me in my own reading experiences. He discusses smells, sounds, body language, the twinkle in one's eye, the juxtaposition of the world around him going on like everything is perfectly normal. And then, with every description, he continues on with analogies, personification, or some other rhetorical tool(s) to emphasize his point.

On the very first page, when he talks about how the phone call caught him off-guard, for example, Lischer gives half a dozen comparable scenarios where someone could've been caught off guard by news of tragedy. He opens the door to invite everyone in, no matter what their experience with loss may be, not just other parents who have lost a child.

I am somewhat overwhelmed (in a good way) by Lischer's vast knowledge of relevant passages from other writers and theologians from which to sample and expand upon his own points; it seems there is something on every other page to supplement the feelings he is trying to convey. Scripture, poetry, songs, passages from other novels – we read almost as much from others as we do from Lischer, and yet this story remains all about Adam.

The thought of trying to interject outside sources on my own memoir is intimidating because it doesn't come naturally to me (Having been a student of Dr. Lischer, I can attest that this way of thinking does come naturally to him!).

I love that Lischer shaped the timeline of this memoir to follow a religious tradition. In creating my own spiritual memoir, I wonder what I can do along these lines to give my story a unique, liturgical element.

I wonder if he chose to open and close his book by mentioning the seven years since Adam's death on purpose; in the Bible, the number seven is seen as a symbol of completion and perfection. It stems from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in which God created the world in seven days. God rested on the seventh day, because his work was complete. The book begins and ends with this allusion to the number seven, hinting at the completeness of Adam's life, even though it was cut short.

It strikes me that one of the personal rituals that Adam and his father cling to in his final days is the love of retelling old stories, like the paper route they both were fired from. In writing his memoir, Lischer is once again making it possible for these funny stories to be enjoyed again and again, by others now. Lischer and Adam go back to those stories over

and over, almost obsessively, and I feel like they were looking back together because they both understood that they couldn't look forward.

The overall tone of "Stations of the Heart" is both heartbreaking and hopeful. Adam's life as a whole, and his commitment to his faith, despite the "unfairness" of it all – a charming young man with a successful career as an attorney leaves behind a wife in her last few days of pregnancy – is inspiring. He never once sees himself as a victim or questions why God chose him for this path. Based on the vignettes and conversations Lischer shares about their lighthearted, loving relationship – the practical jokes, the inside jokes and the love they share – I imagine that Adam would be at once embarrassed and honored by the fact that his father preserved his life story in the pages of a book, that he might give Lischer a sly smile and elbow him in the ribs as he gives his dear old dad a hard time about being so sappy.

In Wurtele's memoir, I found myself relating on a very personal level. I recognized emotional responses that I had hidden from my memory, and found a bit of comfort in awakening those sentiments again and allowing myself to feel them. Reading this story of loss from a mother's perspective helped me to understand what my own mother went through when we lost my brother. Back then, I couldn't fathom how my mother's loss was any worse than mine (she had lived for decades without my brother, after all, and I had never lived a day without him in my life). Now, as a mother myself, I see things in a new light. Wurtele's honest descriptions of the many ways Phil's death affected her break down the complicated nature of a mother who has lost a son and makes the reader comprehend her agony and heartbreak.

Her approach is far more frank than Lischer's; where he paints a landscape of imagery and metaphors, Wurtele is blunt and honest in describing all of her emotions. I was struck by the rawness of the reactions she shares, especially when she is confessing the ways she feels jealous about her husband and stepchildren. When I write, I often try to gloss over some things and hide the way I truly feel for fear that it might hurt someone else's feelings or embarrass myself, but Wurtele's style reminds me that if I am writing a memoir, it is my duty to be honest. This vulnerability allows readers to have a deeper connection to the writer and to the story.

In my own writing, I tend to use a very conversational tone. I sometimes worry about this habit, especially in the academic world, because I fear it may come off as too informal. The candor and honesty in Wurtele's language and made me realize that there is no room for distance between the reader and the author. In reading about her pain, my heart broke for her. Her descriptions of her emotions was explicit; I felt as if I were practically in her shoes, as if I were the one who had lost a son and I were the one struggling to not resent the rest of my family and the world around me. The way she shares her deepest, truest feelings without hesitation helped me to strengthen my writing by following her lead.

Both memoirs have an interesting chronology. The majority of Lischer's story takes place during the last three months of Adam's life and he wraps the story up shortly after Adam's death. The majority of Wurtele's story takes place in the first couple of years following Phil's death, after she spends a few chapters describing bits and pieces of his early life. Lischer bounces back and forth in time to describe his memories of Adam growing up; Wurtele does the same with Phil, but overall, the story is told linearly.

I decided I did not want to share my account in this way. Instead, I wanted to use most of my words talking about the memories AJ and I made together as we were growing up. There is no real linear timeline to my story, but it ends with his death. As in Lischer's and Wurtele's stories, readers of my memoir are aware of the death from the very beginning.

I like how Wurtele sampled from scriptures and quotes to begin each chapter. I always have a difficult time coming up with titles, so I appreciate the convention of including an outside source to succinctly expound upon my own writing using a different voice. I chose to write my story loosely following the order of worship that my church uses, prescribed by the Presbyterian Church (USA). I hope the reader gets the sense of, first, a gathering around the word, next, listening for the word, and finally, responding to the word. I did not use every single aspect that is included in the Appendix (and it may be worth mentioning that most worship services, in my experience, do not include all of them) but focused on a couple of facets that were applicable and important to me.

In "We Enter," I greet the reader and tell them right off the bat what the story is about, much how in a worship service, the purpose of the attendee's presence is clear from the start. In a church service, the purpose is to worship God; in my story, the purpose is to tell about my brother's death. During my "prelude," I briefly introduce my brother's character to the reader by giving samples of his personality. I use this as a time for readers to prepare to meet him in greater detail as the story progresses.

"The word worship comes from an old English term that was not originally religious in connotation. Worship simply meant 'to ascribe honor to something or someone because of its/their ultimate importance'" (Our Order of Worship 2). While it is certainly not my

goal to paint my brother as Godlike or as someone of *ultimate* importance, one of my biggest purposes for writing about him is to honor his memory, because of his importance to me and to our family, as I have mentioned before.

The “Confession” portion is simply where I confess my weaknesses. In Presbyterian worship, we often confess how we are defiant because we are human. We are often hypocritical because we assert with our words to be Christians but our actions do not reflect our claims. There is no fear in confessing honestly because “God loves us enough to call us to confess whatever gets in the way of having a good relationship with the Holy One of Perfect Love” (Our Order of Worship 2). Therefore, acknowledging your sins is necessary in order to be forgiven. “Presbyterians are big on having confessions of sin in almost every worship service since the greatest sin may be the unwillingness to admit that we are sinful” (Our Order of Worship 3). I may not have been committing the kinds of sin that typically come to mind, like murder, for instance, but I was in a state of sin because I was too proud and full of self-importance to admit that I did, in fact, need God.

Many would argue that the elements included in the section under “To Hear a Word from the Lord” are the most important parts of a worship service: a prayer for illumination, scripture, musical anthem, and the sermon – the subject of which is usually related to one or more of the scriptures. The sermon is usually the part of the service that takes up the most amount of time. In this way, this section of my story is by far the longest. Some pastors have a tendency of including various anecdotes throughout their sermons – stories of sports games, comic strips, jokes, movie scenes, etc. – tales that are more widely known, situations that are more modern and easier for their congregants to relate to and understand. The hope is that something will strike a chord with listeners. If it’s not the

music, maybe it's the prayer. If it's not the scripture, maybe it's the sermon. If the sermon is too long, perhaps they can at least recall the humorous story in the middle of it before their attention span fades.

I hope that my readers' attention will not be lost in this section. In the way that pastors include anecdotes, I chose to share several stories about growing up with AJ that shed light on different aspects of his personality. I hope that these will paint him as a three-dimensional character; if not, I hope that at least one story sticks with the readers.

My last section "To Respond in Joyful Service," is very brief. These few short sentences act as a tool to wrap up the memoir, and my brother's life. Additionally, they affirm what he believed, and what I now know to be true in terms of faith. I included a few lines from a hymn that serves as my doxology, the last few lines that the congregation sings before exiting the sanctuary at the end of the service. "The Doxology is an ancient chorus of praise with a vision of joining all the created beings of all times and places who forever sing praise to God. (Imagine joining the grand chorus of praise ringing through all of creation.)" (Our Order of Worship 7). I specifically chose a hymn that includes mention of brothers and sisters because of the importance of my relationship with AJ. I rejoice in God's promise that I will one day see my brother again in the Kingdom of Heaven.

I deliberately chose not to include a written section on "To Go Forth to Serve." However, I hope that my writing is fulfilling a service. If one person can read my story and feel a closer relationship to God because of what I have shared, then I consider that a successful service. "We go forth to serve God in all of life, confident in our hope in God, singing as we go, come what may" (Our Order of Worship 8). I ended my story on a hopeful

note. I think it reflects my confidence in God's plan, despite the heartbreak that sometimes comes along with it.

"We go forth into the world to serve God in our daily lives as a continuation of our worship so that our work is our worship until such time as the assembly gathers again" (Our Order of Worship 9). My work is my worship. My writing is a way to honor God by sharing my trials and experiences on my spiritual journey, by showing that God is always there even when we try to hide. Furthermore, I "worship" my brother, in the non-religious sense, throughout the writing of this story by honoring his life and my memories of him.

I started with a simple story that I thought was decent. It was helpful for me trying to process my grief to illustrate the relationship I had with my brother, to pinpoint the characteristics of our bond that made losing him so difficult on me. Reading these memoirs, and many others, gave me a set of tools to help me write my story better, to articulate my thoughts and feelings, and to know that raw honesty is best if you want your reader to care about your writing.

Word choice is important to Lischer, Wurtele, and me. Wurtele inserts small references to rock climbing all throughout her memoir, whether it's a word or an analogy or a phrase. Lischer's inclusions of liturgical jargon are almost magical; they are so subtle that an "un-churched" reader would probably never notice them, but those who are more familiar with the significance of terms like "ordinary time," "communion," "labyrinth" understand what Lischer is saying on a deeper level.

In my original project proposal, I imagined I would be examining how different memoirists describe their relationship with God following a heartbreaking loss, and focusing on writing as a mechanism for processing grief. When I began working on this

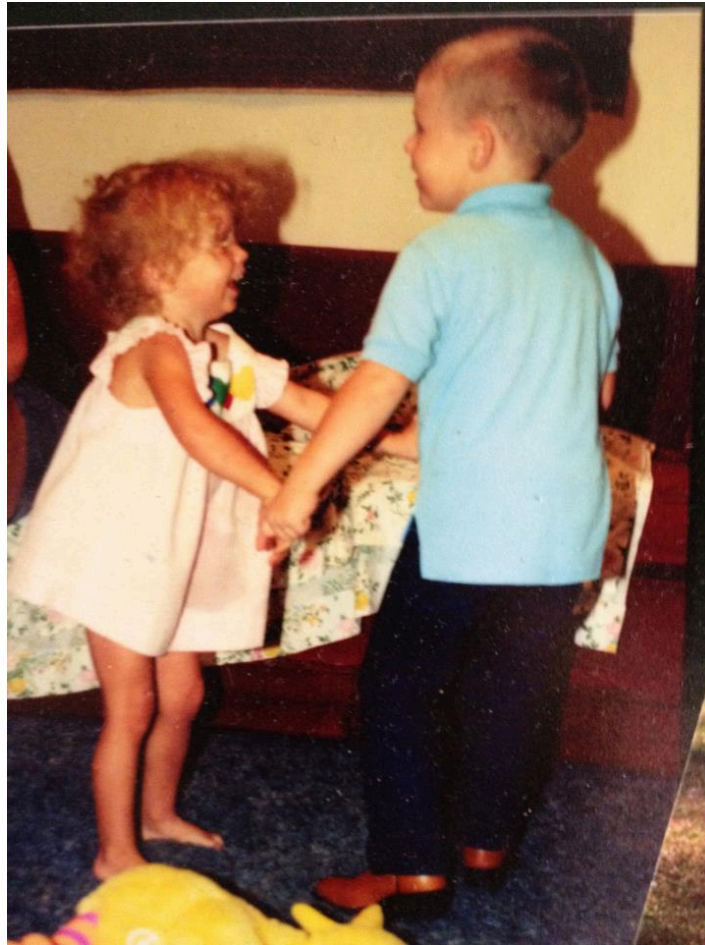
project, I realized a few things: 1) While grief (the emotion) is universal, grief (the process) is not. 2) I have no academic experience with grief; the only experience I know is my own. 3) There are not a great deal of spiritual memoirs with the exact focus of journeying through grief and Christian faith. I was trying to be far too specific.

Rather than pull small bits and pieces from many works, I decided rather to focus on the process of writing a memoir, the structure of the memoir, and the rhetorical tools that would strengthen my own writing. The spiritual aspect is a secondary motivation.

I chose Lischer's memoir, which I've mentioned was my inspiration for this project, and Wurtele's because they both aligned with the project I was trying to complete – a spiritual memoir about the loss of a loved one – and each author employed different tools to deepen the reader's emotional connection to the author and his or her loss in a way that was appealing to me as both a reader and a writer.

Section Five

My Brother is My Keeper



But Ruth said, "Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!"

– Ruth 1:16-17 (MSG)

WE ENTER

“The church is not an institution but the gathered community of faith. ‘Wherever two or more are gathered in my name,’ Jesus said, ‘there am I in the midst of them.’ The church is a gathering of people who need God and are interested in participating in the journey of faith in Jesus Christ, the Way. When we gather together in worship, we are watching the body of Christ assemble like Ezekiel’s dry bones coming together in the resurrection power of God’s Holy Spirit. We should greet one another in love like family, for even if we haven’t met, in Christ we are brothers and sisters, children of God. As we come together, there may be announcements, instructions regarding the service, family news...”

My brother died when he was 20 years old. I hate when my mother says he “passed away.” It sounds so passive, so gentle, like he was lying peacefully in a hospital bed and just slipped away from us. Like he was surrounded by family, a chaplain at his feet, reassuring us all that he was at peace. Like we had time to prepare for it, to appreciate the last few times we spent with him. Like we got to say goodbye. “Passed away” sounds so peaceful, and so *not* my brother.

I used to say to people that he “got killed,” because I thought that’s the way he would’ve liked me to describe it. Because he was a daredevil, or as much as he could be in our small no-stoplight town in southeastern North Carolina. But the truth is he wasn’t doing anything wild or stupid that day. He was just on his way home from an early shift on base on an ordinary humid Saturday morning. I like to think that the sun was in his eyes

and he couldn't see what was about to happen.

Now I say that he died in a motorcycle accident. It still sounds kind of badass, without suggesting something gruesome. I mean, I'm sure it was gruesome, getting hit head-on by a pickup truck when you're going 45 miles an hour. But I try not to think about that part. Saying AJ died in a motorcycle accident is just stating the facts. And I've got to say *something* when someone asks me to explain the two blurry, cursive initials – *AJ* – inked on my right wrist.

AJ was just shy of his 21st birthday. In other words, he was old enough to get blown out of the turret of his Humvee while manning a gun in the deserts of Iraq, but young enough to get arrested for drinking in a rowdy Fayetteville bar. He was exactly 18 months and two days older than me, but regardless of the actual age difference, AJ and I were twins. Not by any medical definition, but by an emotional one: his and mine.

CONFESSION OF SIN AND RESPONSE

“Sin is not just what we’ve done wrong, though committing sins (wrongdoing) is the result of sin. Rather, sin is a condition in which we fall short of God’s hopes for us and in which we are separated from God. It is a state in which it is impossible to make amends on our own; we are caught by the recognition of sin and our inability to set things right. The only thing we can do is turn to Christ and ask that he forgive and conquer sin for us in our current situation.”

At that time, I had considered myself too smart to believe in God for several years already. Why should I rely on something in the afterlife that may or not be true? I wasn't foolish enough to believe in something that no one could see or prove. I made my own way. Everything that happened to me was a result of my own choices or other earthly forces. I couldn't risk my limited time to have fun and enjoy life on earth for a silly chance that this whole "God" thing might be real. And if it were? Well, I could always profess my faith in God on my deathbed and still get into heaven. Right?

I certainly wasn't going to count on this mystic "God" to help heal my spirit and bring me peace when my brother died. My brother! My freaking brother. Where is the peace to be found when someone you love is ripped from your world without warning? What kind of "loving" God would take him from me? What was God going to do, put a cheap Barbie band-aid on my heart? My heart was too strong to need a band-aid. I was tough enough to face this pain on my own. AJ made me tough. I thought he would be proud of me. I didn't need a God.

But then sometimes I would recall the MercyMe CD in AJ's Z28 Camaro. The bright yellow contemporary Christian album stood out like a sore thumb in the collection of CDs by hardcore rappers and rock bands. The memory of seeing this album would splash into my mind, uninvited, like a surprise cannonball when you're quietly sipping your sweet tea by the edge of the swimming pool. I would push the image out of my head, refusing to recognize it. If I didn't acknowledge it, I didn't have to try to rationalize why my brother had it in his car in the first place. I wouldn't have to admit that AJ would've been disappointed in my stubbornness.

TO HEAR A WORD FROM THE LORD

“God’s Word comes to us in many ways—through scripture, special music, sermons. The words spoken are quite human, including those of scripture, yet God chooses to speak through them. Listen for God’s eternal Word addressing you with good news about the Lord’s love for you and all people among all the human words.

“Presbyterians believe the Word is central to our faith; hence, we put the service of the Word right in the middle of our service.”

AJ was six and I was five when our twin brothers were born. Our parents did not find out the sex of the babies until they were born, preferring instead to be surprised. I remember standing at the kitchen table when Daddy walked in and told us the news. “Pack up your crayons, we’re going to visit your new baby brothers.” Instead, AJ picked up the picture I had been so eagerly working on and tore it down the middle. I admit, I was a little disappointed by Dad’s news; I’d hoped for a boy and a girl. But what sparked AJ’s angry reaction? I never thought to ask him.

The real twins, Nicholas and Nathan, had their own twin quirks. They talked in their own secret language, finished each other’s sentences, would smile and giggle at the same secret jokes and bawled together even if one wasn’t sure why the other was crying, like a chain reaction. AJ and I had a special bond, and ours didn’t require words either. We could read each other’s emotions from afar, hidden to others, even if we didn’t understand the source. I could see beyond the storm in his eyes. He was a bully right up through his teens

and we rarely got along, but there was no denying our silent connection. People often asked us if we were twins too. And in many ways, maybe the most important ones, we were.

Shortly before Nicholas and Nathan were born, we moved into the house that became our family home. AJ and I continued to share a bedroom for a couple of years, until AJ grew up enough to deserve his own room. After sharing close quarters since my birth, AJ and I developed a bit of separation anxiety. Until that point, I'd only slept alone when AJ stayed at Gramma and Grandad's one night a week, and even those nights I'd cry myself to sleep after convincing myself there was a monster in our room.

All other nights, I'd wait until I heard our parents settle into watching TV on the cushy blue living room couch that he and I had once painted with chocolate syrup. I'd crawl out of my Ninja Turtle bed and tiptoe across the cold, hardwood floor, climbing into AJ's Ninja Turtle bed. He'd share with me what he was learning about in school, who was in his class, and sometimes he'd even tell me ghost stories. Any time I got scared, he would calm me down by "erasing" my memory, wiping my forehead with his hand like a cloth eraser on a classroom chalkboard and we'd giggle together at our silliness. He rarely got a chance to tell the whole story. I liked to get scared, because then he'd let me snuggle up to him and fall asleep there.

When our parents decided AJ was at the point where he needed his own "big boy" room, we were both upset. It felt like we were being torn apart by evil forces. AJ turned red and cried as Daddy tried to convince him that having his own room was a good thing. I moped around as Mom rearranged my furniture and stuck out my lower lip as she tried to make my room look feminine. Across the hall was a long, long way for a little girl to tiptoe. I

liked our matching Ninja Turtles.

As a kid, AJ had a problem wetting the bed. He couldn't control his bladder in his sleep and had to sleep with special underwear on. This worked out in my favor, because he was too embarrassed to stay over at a friend's house, fearful someone might discover his secret. Somehow, he never had an accident when we would share his Ninja Turtle bed in one corner of our room, but after being exiled across the hall, he once wet his bed on purpose. He did it just for me, so I wouldn't have to cry myself to sleep, scared in my new pink bed, all alone.

Nathan and Nicholas were just starting their freshman year in high school when AJ died. Tall, tow-headed, sneaky, and rebellious, they were already threatening to drop out, a threat they continued to make right up until the morning of their high school graduation. I was beginning my sophomore year of college in sunny, sexy, sandy, Wilmington, North Carolina. AJ was stationed at Ft. Bragg Army base, an infantryman, working his ass off, as soldiers do, to climb the ladder of military ranks. He'd gone straight into the Army after high school, just as he'd sworn he'd do since he was a little boy. He'd always hated school and his grades had been just good enough to keep him out of trouble and in JROTC, but not long before the accident, he'd hired a tutor to help him bring up the test scores necessary to qualify to train as an Army pilot.

Flying is what made AJ tick. We all had it in our blood, but arguably none of us so much as AJ. He and I had grown up on a drop zone with our cousin Kacey, three kids running the skydiving manifest while Daddy took up load after load of jumpers in Granddad's little Cessna to make extra money on the weekends. But AJ never let me handle

the cash or the clipboard. Instead, I followed him around like an innocent puppy dog, and no one seemed to think it strange that a nine year-old boy was in charge of running a big skydiving operation. On his 16th birthday, instead of heading to the DMV to get his driver's license, AJ was at the local airport, soloing in a single engine airplane for the first time and on his way to getting his pilot's license, trying in vain to hide his irrepressible grin as Daddy photographed the instructor cutting off his t-shirt in true pilot tradition.

I often wonder what life would be like if my big brother were still here, for me and for him. Would he have any kids by now? How many? How old? What would he name them? Would they still live nearby? I knew his wife didn't want to have children so young, but for the first few months after his death, I couldn't help but hope that she was pregnant, just so I could have a little piece of him around.

Those pseudo-prayers went unanswered, and it's probably for the best. However, my parents still have AJ's dog, Boomer, more than 10 years later. Our family jokes that he has AJ's personality. Stubborn as hell, Boomer only hears what he wants to hear. Despite his silky fur, his heavy, floppy ears, and warm brown eyes that could melt the iciest of hearts, Boomer has a criminal record and is in the police books as "vicious and dangerous." Just like AJ when he was younger, Boomer has a hard time with boundaries. He refuses to heed training and stay in my parents' yard. His fur is too thick for the electric fence, and he can Houdini his way out of any physical fence man can build. No matter what, he can't seem to stay out of trouble.

Now, yes, Boomer is at fault for his criminal label, no matter how sweet he may look.

But if he could talk I know he would come up with some sort of convincing excuse. AJ could always find a reason, provide an explanation for whatever mess he was in, too.

Adventurers, both of them, they have been known to wander a little too far into someone else's territory. Boomer once bit a woman's hand when she tried to break up a fight between him and another dog. He'd wandered into the wrong dog's territory, got attacked, and was fighting back. If dogs could talk, Boomer would reason that it was simply self-defense. There's no use trying to convince the old knucklehead that he should've just stayed in his own damn yard.

AJ got suspended from school many times growing up, and once in high school for fighting on the bus. He told our parents he only jumped in to help out the shrimp who'd gotten jumped, so our dad marched into the principal's office the next day and demanded to know why his son had been suspended for fighting if he was protecting someone else. The principal apologized for the confusion and pointed out that AJ was absolutely right, but it wasn't his choice to suspend AJ. The principal had in fact suspended everyone involved *but* AJ, and AJ didn't think that was fair, so he told the principal to suspend him as well. Maybe he should've stayed in his own backyard, but AJ believed in sticking up for the little guy.

As I look back on our lives, it makes complete sense that he would've loved MercyMe's music. Their lyrics embodied the lessons and values our grandparents instilled in us from an early age, Gramma pushing us in Grandad's lap in his wheelchair to their little church around the corner after a Saturday night sleepover at their house.

The band's style of music was edgy enough that it didn't seem like total wussy fluff. AJ had seen more than I had, a lot more. He knew more about danger and death and dependence than his goody-two-shoed little sister. Between his military training, his tour in Iraq, and his escapades and narrow escapes in countless fast cars, he knew what it meant to need something more. I was a spoiled brat who was living in a bubble, with a false sense of logical security and an overwhelming know-it-all attitude. It bothered me that the song played during his funeral was MercyMe's smash hit, "I Can Only Imagine," which touches on the grand possibilities of heaven. It wouldn't have been my choice to be so spiritual. But it was AJ's funeral, even if it felt like mine.

I remember AJ in fifth grade, when he walked away in the middle of a fight at school with another boy. He started the argument, instigated the physical fight, and then stopped, as if he'd changed his mind. Didn't give up. Didn't lose. He just stopped and walked away.

Our mom talked to him about the altercation on our way home from school that afternoon. Not knowing how it ended, she asked him to tell her what happened. "I remembered the cross you gave me," he admitted, handling the simple charm on a string around his neck. "I remembered the cross, and I just couldn't do it."

When AJ was away at basic training, he wrote home often. This surprised all of us. He barely spoke to us when he was at home, but I suppose he realized when his world was turned upside down that maybe our company wasn't so bad, after all.

Even more surprising were the things he wrote. "I miss you." "I can't wait to come home." "I even miss your burned pork chops." "I'm proud of you for getting into college. You'll go farther than I ever will." And, "I've been going to church on Sundays."

That one stopped us in our tracks. This kid probably hadn't been to church since he was 10 years old, at least not of his own accord. And even then he was probably kicking and screaming. Reading those words made me proud of him because I knew it would make our mom proud – good for him, great for her – but in my head I respectfully disagreed with his views. I brushed that admittance of his under the rug and filed it in my memory under “small things that don't matter.”

But the image of that MercyMe CD continued to pop into my head time and time again, for years after his death. When life got really bad for me, when all my poor decisions started catching up to me all at once and I didn't know what to do next, I started going back to church.

I hid in the balcony on my first Sunday back. The last time I'd been to this church was when I sat on the second row at my brother's funeral, avoiding looking at the casket draped with a fresh American flag. I hid in the balcony on my first Sunday back, and the next, and the next, and the next. Each week I wept silently. For myself, for my brother, for my family, and for my own life that seemed to have hit a dead end. Why was I still here and he was gone? AJ had places to go. He had plans. He was motivated. He had offered up his life for so many people. I was a selfish bump on the log. I was going nowhere. I should've been the one God chose to take.

Six years after AJ's accident, I found myself in the very same football stadium where he'd given me that noogie and kiss just hours before he died. I was with the youth group from church, and we were there to watch a performance by the popular contemporary Christian band, MercyMe. I hadn't planned to go; in fact, I initially made plans to be busy on

the evening of their concert, but a band member's illness caused the group to reschedule. I was offered a free ticket, and I suddenly found myself with no excuse not to go.

As I stood there that night among the sold-out crowd, under the dark night sky with the neon stage lights blazing and the tears streaming down my face, I knew the pounding in my heart came from more than just the drum beat. I knew my brother was there with me. I was fully confident that he had arranged all these "coincidences" to make it happen that I would be there, including the opportunity to meet and greet his favorite Christian band before the show. I knew I was in the right place at the right time, with the right people, and doing exactly what AJ would've wanted me to do. I was there with him, because he couldn't be there himself.

I hadn't planned on driving home that particular weekend in 2006. I'd recently moved into my first apartment at college and had every intention of staying close to the beach in Wilmington until at least Thanksgiving. It was two and a half hours from home – far enough to taste plenty of freedom, yet close enough for a day's drive home. AJ still lived in our hometown with his wife, and commuted about 45 minutes to work at the base in Fayetteville every day. We all knew he couldn't bear to live far from Grandad, who lived just around the corner from the house where we grew up. It was Grandad who raised AJ part-time and defended him from our mother's anger when her patience ran out. She was tired from raising four rowdy kids on her own since Daddy was always out of town or overseas on various tours of duty, and our grandparents made a great refuge. Grandad, who harbored and relished his first grandchild, and AJ, the little spitfire with a twinkle in his eye to match Grandad's. To be honest, I attended college close to home because I didn't

want to be too far from Granddad, either. Yes, I wanted my freedom but I got bitter and jealous any time I heard about the family getting together back home without me.

To this day, I'm really not sure what made me decide to make the two-hour trip home that Friday night. Nathan and Nicholas were playing on the drumline for the first time at the high school football game, so I'm sure seeing them follow in my footsteps was part of it, but I could've watched them any other weekend that season. And I'll never know why AJ showed up either. Nobody knew he was coming to the game. There I was, unintentionally embarrassing my little brothers by trying to relive some of my glory days through them, standing too close to the drumline in the football stands, when AJ ran up to me and gave the surprise of my life. He hugged me. Hugged me? MY tough guy brother? I can't remember the last time he even *acknowledged* me in public before that – it must've been years.

I saw him out of the corner of my eye, darting through the crowded walkway at the front of the football stands. Since I hadn't expected to see his face there, my mind took its time comprehending the situation as his head bobbed in and out of my line of vision. Still trying to process the surprise of seeing him, I was nearly the victim of a sideline tackle. Without slowing to a halt, he made contact. The force of his body would've knocked me over, had his arms not wrapped around me, saving me from disaster. He hugged me, in public, in front of our family and the rest of the world, and he gave me a noogie. He even kissed me on my head. I treasure that kiss and visit it often in my mind, afraid if I go too long without it, it might leave me in a flash, just like my brother did.

Now, I know I said we were twins, but this was not typical AJ behavior and it

shocked the hell out of me. He was usually stoic. Kept his distance. Rarely even smiled in public. The most I got was a sly, sneaking glance. I could always feel his eyes burning into me, even when I wasn't looking.

But that night, my heart swelled with pride and love at his display of brotherly affection, ecstatic because my friends saw, everyone saw. Sure, he used to chase me around the house, threatening to kill me with his friends, his fists, butcher knives, metal baseball bats and more, but he was also the one who panicked when my blood sugar was low while we were riding dirt bikes, raced me to the nearest store and ordered the clerk to find me some candy or he would call an ambulance and the cops.

And his skipping school to practice flipping cars, well, that wasn't quite so long ago, but it was still in the past. Growing up, he'd earned a bad rap for all his pranks and bad grades and skirmishes and poor decisions, but he was a man now, a changed man, there in his Army uniform, surprising his family with his mere presence, and being happy and openly expressing his love. All my life I had longed for approval from my big brother, and that night I'd finally gotten it. And with witnesses! AJ wasn't an insecure, goofy, angry kid anymore, running around in an orange jumpsuit and one glove, pretending he was Luke Skywalker and our family dog was Chewbacca. He wasn't screaming in rage as our frustrated mother dumped a gallon of milk on his head after he'd pushed her buttons one too many times at the dinner table. He wasn't threatening to throw my cat into the ceiling fan. It was like when Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia realize after years of being separated that they're twins. He was my big brother. He was something to be proud of.

What followed is a bit fuzzy. Chalk it up to my excitement. I was blindsided by his

affection and too focused on myself to pay attention to what else was going on. I know he hugged my mom, too. I know she kissed him back and she was thrilled to see him there. I know her voice raised a few octaves as she talked to him. I don't remember how he greeted Nathan and Nicholas. I don't even remember that he *did* greet them, but of course he must have. It never crossed my mind until much later to consider how they felt when he surprised them at their performance that night and what that may mean to them now.

My last memory of my brother is seeing him as I was walking out the front gates of the football field with my friends after the game was over. I've been there many times since that evening, and I always ponder the exact spot where he was standing. I had turned around to wave goodbye, not knowing, of course, it would be the last time I would see him alive. Still happily perplexed by his hug and kiss, I left that night feeling like I had hit the family jackpot.

My brother would be dead before I woke up the next morning, but it was hours before any of us knew. I had to leave our family home early to make it back to work in Wilmington on time. My little brothers were still asleep. Mom cooked me French toast, a breakfast usually reserved for my birthday. She was excited to have me home and still elated from my brother happily surprising us the night before. We chatted about how special it was to see him as I chowed down. She'd also run into AJ after the football game, at a gas station. I remember feeling a tinge of jealousy, even during that breakfast, that she'd seen him again, just for a few extra minutes. She was thrilled to have given him gas money and gotten another hug, but I felt a little like she was trying to one-up me, rubbing it in that

she got to see him. In retrospect, I believe that there's a reason my mother got those final moments with her first-born son, but it doesn't erase my envy. I tried not to ruin her pleasure as I wiggled the fork to cut my French toast into small pieces, appreciating the rare luxury of hot, sticky syrup and real butter.

In typical fashion, I ended up talking too much, staying too long, and running behind. I thanked my mom for breakfast as I kissed her on the cheek, and yelled that I loved her too as I rushed down the front steps of our house and into my old three-door Saturn. I knew I wouldn't have time to stop by my apartment and shower first, but I'd be okay. It was a short Saturday shift at the campus bookstore, and nobody else really took that job seriously. Most of my coworkers would probably be nursing a hangover anyway.

The song "I Loved Her First" by the country band Heartland was on the radio as I approached the overpass across Leland that led into Wilmington. I remember that as I sang along, I was thinking about my dear old Daddy, who'd had to miss the football game because he was out of state for some National Guard training. I sniffled a little when it got to the part in the song about a father giving his daughter away at her wedding. When my cell phone rang midway through the second verse, I was a little irked about it ruining the moment, but thrilled to see it was my daddy. Perfect timing!

"Hey, Sweetie." His voice was flat. "What are you doing?" Curious, but nothing alarming. I told him I was just getting back into Wilmington.

"Are you driving?"

Red flag.

“Pull over.”

I knew what this meant, without having a clue. I had to cross four lanes of traffic, hyperventilating as I begged him to tell me what was wrong.

“Okay, Daddy, I’m pulled over.”

“Are you sure?”

“I promise.”

I was stopped on the side of the highway, barely even off the road, just in front of the signs for US-74, so close that I wasn’t sure I’d be able to pull back onto the road safely, with dozens of cars whizzing by so fast that in the back of my mind I knew I should be nervous.

“Your brother died this morning.”

Nicholas’ face flashed through my mind, then Nathan’s, but I already knew he meant AJ. Why was my *dad* calling me to tell me this? Daddy was all the way in Alabama. Maybe he was confused.

“WHAT!” I managed to force an ugly scream past the ugly lump that had appeared in my throat. It was more of a statement than a question. I was gasping for breath. My Saturn coupe shuddered with each passing car, each drafts pressing in on me as my world began to implode.

“He was on his motorcycle. Someone hit him.”

Nothing is more terrifying than hearing a crack in your father’s voice, and the rise in pitch

as he tries to hide it. My daddy, to me, was superhuman. He was our Papa Bear, slow to anger, abounding in love, quick to forgive. Large and intimidating, he'd yell about having too many dogs and cats and too much pet hair, threaten to take them all to the pound, but he'd be the first to lie down on the floor and talk in a baby voice while playing with them. He was a jolly old giant, with a belly that jiggled when he laughed at his own jokes, a sight that was often funnier than the joke. He was never the bearer of bad news. I expected another phone call where he'd ramble on and I'd have to cut him off three or four times before he realized I was really trying to end the conversation, oblivious that I'd already mentioned that 10 minutes ago.

I had been hoping against hope that he was wrong, misinformed. Playing a really cruel joke on me. Flat out lying. It couldn't be true. But when Daddy's voice cracked, there was no denying it.

No matter how much time you have to "prepare" for the death of a loved one, you're never ready for it. Years later, I'm glad AJ went out the way he did. It would have killed him (although not fast enough) to suffer, to lie in bed, and die a slow, quiet death. AJ had too much energy, too much drive, too much love for adventure and thrill. He wouldn't ever have been the type to "pass away."

I don't say he "was killed" anymore, because that makes it sound like someone else's fault. It doesn't do any good to place the blame. Being angry wouldn't bring him back. The harsh morning sun was in his eyes. He didn't see the truck pull out in front of him.

TO RESPOND IN JOYFUL SERVICE

“The affirmation of faith is when we declare what it is we believe. We have faith as a result of God’s Word. As Paul writes, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word of God.” This faith is not just our individual belief, but that of the community that nurtures faith. Thus, the affirmation may be a creed of the ancient church or a modern statement of faith that is a consensus of what the church believes. We stand as a way of saying, “This is where I stand,” and as a way of standing in continuity with the people of God of ages past, even if it means we’re martyred like some of them were.”

AJ lived a long life in his short 20 years. He was married, had a good job, and after years of trouble, he had made his family happy and proud. He had goals and he was determined to accomplish them. He had faith in God, and he taught us all that no matter how tough you are, you need to believe in the big man upstairs. Not all of us get a peaceful deathbed opportunity. AJ knew that. And he was prepared.

We will walk with God, my brothers; we will walk with God.

We will walk with God, my sisters; we will walk with God.

We will go rejoicing till the kingdom has come.

We will go rejoicing till the kingdom has come.

Appendix A

OUR ORDER OF WORSHIP

by Teresa Lockhart Stricklen
Associate for Worship
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The order of worship that centuries of Christians have adapted from the pattern of Jewish worship is an ancient order that is intended to move us more deeply into intimate communion with God in Christ. There is a reason why we do what we do when we do it. Understanding this structure may help you move more fully aware into the divine presence as you worship.

WE ENTER

To Greet One Another in Love

The church is not an institution but the gathered community of faith. “Wherever two or more are gathered in my name,” Jesus said, “there am I in the midst of them.” The church is a gathering of people who need God and are interested in participating in the journey of faith in Jesus Christ, the Way. When we gather together in worship, we are watching the body of Christ assemble like Ezekiel’s dry bones coming together in the resurrection power of God’s Holy Spirit. We should greet one another in love like family, for even if we haven’t met, in Christ we are brothers and sisters, children of God. As we come together, there may be announcements, instructions regarding the service, family news.

To Be Still and Know that God is God / Prelude

A musical prelude provides a way of entering into a more meditative, receptive mood to examine our hearts as we prepare to meet our Maker. The prelude is like a curtained door into another place where we can meet God. Times of silence in worship are for your individual prayer and meditation. The prelude is a time to get quiet in your soul to prepare yourself to meet God in worship. Open yourself to God and ask God to speak during worship as you prepare to give God glory.

Entrance in Light

In some churches, acolytes process up the aisle to light the candles on the table. This is to symbolize the entrance of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, into our midst as we gather together. Some churches don’t have acolytes, but the lit candles remind us of the presence of Christ that precedes us and is waiting for us.

Call to Worship

This is usually a brief responsive reading that basically says, “Hey, let’s worship God!” It is God’s invitation to enter into the divine presence. The word worship comes from an old English term that was not originally religious in connotation. Worship simply meant “to ascribe honor to something or someone because of its/their ultimate importance.” This is what we do when we worship God.

The call to worship calls us to leave our daily cares behind to focus on what’s really important—God, the Creator of all; Jesus Christ, the divine and eternal Word; and the Spirit which binds us all together as brothers and sisters yoked in Christ.

It is often responsive in form so that one person calls, and there is a response. This represents God's call to us and our response-ability to respond to the divine. Though the words may be from human beings, it is ultimately God (through even the likes of people like us) who calls us into right relationship, God whose loving call initiates our response.

Hymn(s) of Praise

We enter into God's presence delighting in the glory of the Lord and reveling in the humbling notion that the Almighty actually wants to be in relationship with us. So we sing praise with all we've got (even if that's a little out of tune), just enjoying God for who God is. As we open up the pathways of breath to sing praise, we make space for the Spirit breath to fill us.

CONFESSION OF SIN AND RESPONSE

Call to Confession

Even as we praise God and encounter the Lord’s Spirit/breath, we realize there are impediments that keep us from our best desires to worship. God loves us enough to call us to confess whatever gets in the way of having a good relationship with the Holy One of Perfect Love. When someone wrongs us, we have the responsibility of calling it to their attention so that the relationship that has been harmed can be restored and healed. If we fail to say anything and just ignore them instead, we are not exhibiting love. A call to confession is a call to further love, which God does with a reassurance of divine good intentions toward us so that we're not afraid to confess our shortcomings in the light of God's love.

Confession of Sin

Sin is not just what we've done wrong, though committing sins (wrongdoing) is the result of sin. Rather, sin is a condition in which we fall short of God's hopes for us and in which we are separated from God. It is a state in which it is impossible to make amends on our own; we are caught by the recognition of sin and our inability to set things right. The only thing we can do is turn to Christ and ask that he forgive and conquer sin for us in our current situation.

Sin is both individual and social in nature. Even though we don't want or mean to, we sin just by belonging to certain groups who sin against others. Sin is complex and inescapable. So Presbyterians are big on having confessions of sin in almost every worship service since the greatest sin may be the unwillingness to admit that we are sinful.

Because sin is corporate in nature, as well as individual, we say a corporate prayer together for the sin we live in and sins we commit as groups; we also have time for silent prayer to confess our individual sin and sins and to offer up our shortcomings before God so that we might be drawn closer to God, live more in accord with the Lord's good desires for humanity, and be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Assurance of Pardon

As we confess our shortcomings and God offers us the assurance that in Jesus Christ—who lived, died, and was raised to show us the power of God's love that conquers the power of sin—we are forgiven and loved regardless of what we have done in the past. We have the assurance that we are continually being made new into the Image of Christ. The slate is wiped clean and we can live in hope toward the future without being enslaved to our past failures. In Christ, we have the power to work with God's Spirit who is continually making all things in accord with the divine purpose.

Response

Because the assurance of pardon in Christ is such good news, we've got to respond to the message of God's love with joy and thanksgiving. Usually we do this in song that comes bursting forth with full-throttle praise or reflective wonder.

Passing of the Peace

This is an ancient greeting of brothers and sisters in Christ. After the preliminary entrance rites in which we enter into God's presence, we greet one another with the peace of Christ as common forgiven sinners. As we are forgiven, so we forgive. This is also a good time to reconcile with those family members who drove us crazy trying to get to church on time, church members with whom we have tensions, or people we're not so happy to see. What is acknowledged as most important between us at this time in the service is the peace of Christ that passes all understanding (and misunderstanding!).

The peace may also come at other times in the service and function in different ways. A passing of the peace before the offering and communion, for example, is an opportunity to reconcile with our brother or sister before we present our gift at the offering. Regardless of where it comes in the service and how it functions, the passing of the peace stresses what the community has in common—the grace of God in Christ that holds us all in communion with one another regardless of how we feel about it.

TO HEAR A WORD FROM THE LORD

When we are truly sorry, we listen to what it is the person we have wronged would have us do to make things better between us. After the time of confession and assurance that we all live as forgiven sinners in the light of Christ, we move deeper into relationship with God by hearing the Word of the Lord.

God's Word comes to us in many ways—through scripture, special music, sermons. The words spoken are quite human, including those of scripture, yet God chooses to speak through them. Listen for God's eternal Word addressing you with good news about the Lord's love for you and all people among all the human words.

Presbyterians believe the Word is central to our faith; hence, we put the service of the Word right in the middle of our service.

Prayer for Illumination

This is a prayer for the Spirit to open our lives to really hear God's Word among human words. Without the Spirit to help us discern God's voice, the words that we hear are just a bunch of dead letters that cannot adequately convey the living, transformative nature of the Word of God.

Scripture

Since before the time of Christ, the Jewish tradition, which Jesus participated in, has had a list (a lectionary) of appropriate readings (lections) for daily prayer services. The Christian church continued this tradition, though the lectionary was often not used by revival preachers from the nineteenth century on in the United States. Shaped by both revival and liturgical traditions, your church may or may not use the New Revised Common Lectionary, which is a three-year list of an Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle reading for each Sunday and special holy days. When the three years are up, we start over again with Year A. What the lectionary does is help us experience the broad sweep of God's salvific work over the course of the church year. The lections often correspond to the different seasons of the

year, which also determines the different colors we use on the fabric arts present in worship. Sometimes the lections are designed to run continuously through a book of the Bible to help form our faith through one particular Biblical book.

Since Psalms were originally sung, the psalm may be chanted or sung. Lections may be used elsewhere in the service in an appropriate place. For example, the psalm is often the basis of the call to worship. Sometimes the epistle reading for the day makes a good affirmation of faith. Those churches who do not follow a lectionary follow whatever the pastor discerns needs to be preached from scripture. Other churches may choose to follow the Reformation's lectio continua tradition of reading through a book of the Bible and preaching on its various sections.

Anthem

God's Word can come to us in a variety of ways—not just through scripture and preaching. God speaks through many means, including music. Indeed, many people say God speaks best to them through the music of the church.

Having a choir or band of instruments isn't about good musicians putting on a superb recital in the middle of the service, which is why applause isn't appropriate for anyone but God in a worship service. We are not being entertained by a musical interlude. Of course, sometimes we burst into applause as a way of expressing thanks for the Spirit that has moved us, but we need to be careful that worship is not perceived as us getting something, but about giving ourselves to God in praise and prayer and service.

Sometimes the anthem is done as an offertory, an offering of our gifts in thanksgiving for all God's gifts to us. The choir is intended to be representative of the congregation's voices rising in praise or petition to God. Similarly, God speaks to us through the music of the choir. So when the choir sings, the people become instruments—instruments of the congregation and/or instruments of God's Spirit blowing through them to sing the good news.

Because each piece of music functions differently, the choir's anthem may be more appropriate elsewhere in the service, but if it functions to expound upon the Word, it will be placed here in the service.

Sermon

Though spoken through a person, we are to hear the sermon as God speaking to us. Thus, some sermons begin with the Triune ascription: "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Preaching is the announcement of God's good news in Christ who invites

us to participate in the ongoing activity of God at work in the world to bring about redemption, not only for us, but for all of creation. The sermon is usually based upon one or more scripture readings and unfolds the Bible in such a way that we see how God is continuing to speak to us today in ways that are similar to those experienced by our ancestors of the faith. Basically, the sermon is God's dynamic, eternal Word spoken to us in such a way that we might hear what God has to say to us and be encouraged to follow the Lord in faith.

TO RESPOND IN JOYFUL SERVICE

God has spoken, so we respond. All of the following are our grateful responses to hearing God speak to us. We affirm our faith, give ourselves to God and others, pray for the world, and give thanks and praise that God continues to speak.

Affirmation of Faith

The affirmation of faith is when we declare what it is we believe. We have faith as a result of God's Word. As Paul writes, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word of God." This faith is not just our individual belief, but that of the community that nurtures faith. Thus, the affirmation may be a creed of the ancient church or a modern statement of faith that is a consensus of what the church believes. We stand as a way of saying, "This is where I stand," and as a way of standing in continuity with the people of God of ages past, even if it means we're martyred like some of them were.

Hymn

This is usually a hymn of reflection in which we pledge ourselves to the Lord. It may serve as an affirmation of faith or precede it.

Reception of New Members

It is God who brings people to us; we just receive them in celebration and promise to help them along the journey of faith. At this point in the service, we baptize and/or confirm new members with ancient rituals that transfer our citizenship into the Kingdom of God's sovereign rule over all things. (For more on baptism, ask the pastor for other resources.) We also receive new members by transfer of church letter. In the ancient church, Christians who moved or traveled were given letters of introduction to admit them into other Christian assemblies, important during times of persecution. Receiving members by

transfer of letter also indicates our common fellowship as baptized believers in the universal church of Christ Jesus the Lord. We continue this practice today.

Minute for Mission

This is news of how we can get involved in responding to and spreading the good news of God's love through the various missions of the church. It's not just asking-for- money time; it's a way of telling people how their offerings are furthering the gospel and offering them the opportunity to give of their time, talents, and money to advance God's sovereign reign on earth. Church announcements may occur during this time, and placing them within worship helps us know which announcements are God's calls to further commitment in Christ's work of redeeming the world. The minute for mission may be omitted or be switched with the prayer of intercession.

Prayer of Intercession

Belief isn't just affirmation; it's also action. Saying "I believe" means we care enough to do something as a result of our belief. Thus, the first thing we do is pray—for our world, the church, other people. The prayer is our prayer as a church. One person may pray for us, but we are all praying together as one in our hearts, continuing Christ's ministry of prayer for the world.

Offering

This is the time when we give ourselves, all that we are, and all that we have, to God's service. As a symbol of power and of what is value to us, we make an offering of money to help others and promote the gospel. During the time of musical reflection (known as the offertory), we are also encouraged to think about ways we can give of ourselves in what we do everyday to help out with God's project of healing the world. The choir may sing during this time as their offering to God and to help us offer ourselves to God's ways in the world. Or they just may flat-out praise God since offering all we are in service to God is an offering of thanksgiving in response to all God does for us in Christ.

Doxology/Song of Praise

As we offer our gifts for God's service, we praise God for letting us have use of all the resources the Lord has provided for us, and we praise God for the opportunity to serve on God's behalf. The Doxology is an ancient chorus of praise with a vision of joining all the created beings of all times and places who forever sing praise to God. (Imagine joining the grand chorus of praise ringing through all of creation.)

Prayer of Thanksgiving

This is a prayer that thanks God for being who God is: eternal provider and self-giving lover of all. The first responsive section (“The Lord be with you... It is right to give our thanks and praise”) is from one of the church’s earliest liturgies. It is also the first part of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the communion liturgy.

When we have communion, we go right into the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving with the same words. Here the prayer is longer, giving thanks to God for who God is, giving thanks for Christ, and asking for the Spirit’s presence so that we might commune with God at this anticipatory covenant meal of the Kingdom. As we offer ourselves, God offers Godself to nourish us to go forth to care for the world. The offering and God’s self-offering in the Lord’s Supper reminds us that life in God is one great big gift exchange.

The Lord’s Prayer

This follows the Prayer of Thanksgiving because it was part of the early, early church’s communion liturgy. Even as we praise God, we pray for others, for only when we’re in communion with others can we be in communion with God. The Lord’s prayer is also one of the tradition’s closest links to Jesus Christ whose prayer helps us be in communion with God through its focus on what’s important: praising God, straining forward in anticipation of God’s will and new order that ultimately rules the earth, asking for the bread of heaven to sustain us, asking for forgiveness, recognizing the need to forgive others, praying for deliverance from the things that destroy true life, and acknowledging that God is God forever. It’s a great prayer to really pray, not just recite, at any time. Sometimes the Lord’s Prayer comes at the end of the prayer of intercession.

TO GO FORTH TO SERVE

Hymn

We go forth to serve God in all of life, confident in our hope in God, singing as we go, come what may.

Charge

These are the final words with which we are charged to be faithful ministers of Christ in the world we’re going back into. The word “charge” has several appropriate meanings and images that apply to this part of worship: (1) to fill or furnish a thing with the quantity, as

of fuel, that it is fitted to receive; (2) to supply with electrical energy; (3) to fill an atmosphere with other matter in a state of diffusion or solution; (4) to lay a command or injunction upon; (5) to instruct authoritatively, like a judge does a jury; (6) to ascribe responsibility for; (7) to list or record as a debt; (8) to impose or ask for a price.

Benediction

The minister raises hands over the congregation to simulate laying hands on each person's head. Biblically, laying hands on people was done in prayer for healing and at ordination as a way of symbolizing God's giving of power to accomplish our ministry. We have hands laid on us in baptism, ordaining us all as prophets and priests in Christ, the King's, behalf. The words invoke God's blessing upon each of us.

Postlude

We exit through the curtain of music in which we came. Like God's omnipresent Spirit, the music that draws us into God's presence and undergirds the worship experience also goes with us as a morale booster and a spring of joy as we depart to blend the work of our individual lives with that of the chorus of praise continually offered up to the ruler of all creation.

Departure to Serve

We go forth into the world to serve God in our daily lives as a continuation of our worship so that our work is our worship until such time as the assembly gathers again.

Appendix B

Influential Sources

Augustine. *The Confessions*. Trans. Mary Boulding, O.S.B. Vintage Spiritual Classics, New York, 1997.

This autobiography features spiritual meditations and insights from Saint Augustine as he reflects on his life of sinfulness and he struggles to find a religion that he truly believes in. He shares his difficulties in accepting God as his savior with honesty. He begins each chapter with a prayer to God as he tells the linear story of his life.

Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. Convergent Books, New York, 2015.

Balancing raucous humor with deep, serious theology, Bolz-Weber shares stories about finding grace in the least expected places – namely, in those whom society labels as outcasts. Using profanity and the Bible, she tells how God keeps showing up in her life, no matter how hard she tries to run away.

Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*. Jericho Books, New York, 2013.

Bolz-Weber, a heavily tattooed, foul-mouthed standup comedian and recovering alcoholic shares the journey that led to her becoming a pastor. Her

candid voice and willingness to talk about things that churchgoers usually try to keep hidden are enlightening.

Daniel, Lillian. "The Cracked Vase." *The Christian Century* Aug 08 2006: 31. *ProQuest*. Web. 21 Nov. 2016.

Day, Dorothy. *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist Dorothy Day*. HarperOne, New York, 1952.

Julian of Norwich. *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love*. Trans. M. Spearing. Penguin Classics, London, 1998.

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1961.

Lewis' style of writing and formatting in this memoir is unique and unusual. From this story, I realized some elements of style – such as the journal-style of writing and referring to characters by only an initial – that I did *not* want to use in my own memoir.

Mansfield, Elaine. *Leaning into Love: a spiritual journey through grief*. Larson Publications, Burdett, 2014.

This memoir shares the story of a woman who lost her husband to cancer. I was originally attracted to this book for my project because it offered a different relationship from the other two memoirs I focused on (husband/wife versus

parent/child), and I hoped it might offer different insight. I would categorize the author's sense of faith as "spiritual but not religious;" she subscribes to her own medley of Christianity, paganism, Buddhism, and plain old logic. I was interested in the significance of her faith in the grieving and healing process, but it ended up being a bit too distracting from my purposes in writing.

Neumark, Heidi. *Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory, and Faith*. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2015.

Norris, Kathleen. *The Cloister Walk*. Riverhead Books, New York, 1996.

I admired Norris' willingness as a Protestant woman to explore a world that was foreign to her – a Benedictine monastery – and share the explicit details with her readers. I learned a great deal about Catholicism, such as the importance of things like ritual, community, and gender roles in these communities, and admired Norris' ability to describe these things for readers who might have very little prior understanding of monasticism.

Sedaris, David. "Now We Are Five: A big family, at the beach." *The New Yorker*. 28 October 2013. Web. 21 November 2016.

In this essay, I was struck by Sedaris' use of conversation to build his characters. Rather than using lots of description and background information, he uses brief dialogue to succinctly and immediately communicate the relationships

among the characters. I tried to emulate this style towards the end of my story in the phone conversation with my father.

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