

The Parable of the Zebra Finch

Random rants and ramblings taken from a 28 June 2015 Cloverdale Ward sacrament meeting talk and elder's quorum lesson, along with new journal entries that have been restarted thanks to a little zebra finch.

My son!

The other day we went over to Simon and Amanda's home in Lesmurdie to celebrate Isaac's 18th birthday party with their family. When we arrived, EJ was still on his way there, having spent the previous couple of months with his grandparents in the Bunbury area. Simon started showing us around their home in the meantime, and we were amazed at the progress of the renovations. We had lots of questions, since we've been talking about doing something similar someday. Right in the middle of the conversation, though, Simon caught a glimpse of EJ coming through the door and instantly dropped what he was saying.

"My son!" he shouted and ran over to give EJ a big hug. "Son! My son! Good to see you! How have you been?"

From the bright smiles on both of their faces and the big hug being absolutely reciprocated, it was obvious that they were both really happy to see each other; the embrace left no room for doubt as to the love between father and son. In the car on the way home, we spoke about how cool that was – to see that special relationship in action. Little did we know... Well really, how little do we ever know in any given instant what sort of turbulence or tempests might lie only a few short steps ahead of us along life's path.

Best birthday ever!

The next day we took our daughter Berkeley down to the Bird Fish & Reptile Place. Anybody who has been to Lesmurdie knows it as the place at the foot of the hill with the life-size dinosaurs and dragons. We've stopped there before just to let the kids have a look around, but we had never actually bought anything there. This time was different: Berkeley had just turned 9, so we told her she could pick out some birds for her birthday. When we came home, I took photos and videos of her releasing the birds into their new cage. She was absolutely excited.

"Best birthday ever!" she said with a huge smile on her face.

A lot of the photos and videos I take of the kids are posed. "Smile kids," I tell them, and they'll give me a

fake grin, if at all. But this time I happened to record genuine, un-manipulated, real-time joy.

Berkeley spent hours outside with her new birds, naming them and setting up their nests and perches inside their cage. It took some convincing to finally get her to come inside for the family birthday party we had planned for her. I took a bunch of other birthday pictures and videos that day – each one captured a memory I hoped to preserve for her forever.

Memory loss

The next day at church I was in the middle of my typical efforts of trying to keep kids quiet during sacrament meeting. Berkeley asked for my phone to have a look at the photos and videos, so I shut off the volume and handed it to her. After sacrament meeting she handed it back to me and quickly headed to her primary class. When I looked at the phone, I thought it was weird that it was asking me for a language and country just like when I had first turned it on straight out of the box. I chased Berkeley down and asked her what she had done to the phone.

"I don't know," she said, "the password wouldn't work."

Suddenly the strange start-up screen made a sickening amount of sense to me. My company's security settings require me to change the password once a month – I had forgotten to tell her that I had just changed it, so she had tried an old password. And when it didn't work, she tried again. And again. And again and again and again. Well, it turns out another company security setting is that once you enter the wrong password ten times, it assumes you're a thief and wipes the phone's memory clean. Not just clean, but the kind of un-recoverably clean that would prevent a criminal or an inattentive dad from taking the phone to some hack shop to restore the memory.

Woulda coulda shoulda

Well it had been quite some time since my last backup, so all of those birthday photos and videos were gone. And it wasn't just the memories. I tend to keep my life on my iPhone. As chaotic as things get in my brain trying to juggle work and family life with 6 kids, sometimes the iPhone is the only thing keeping my schedule somewhat on track. Well now I was back to a blank slate, with texts and contacts and calendar items all wiped clean.

The *woulda coulda shoulda* scenarios running through my head kept leading me straight to being really

angry with myself. How stupid I was for not backing up my files! How easy that would have been just a day before! The last time I lost some files when a hard drive failed a few years ago, I swore I'd never find myself without a recent backup again. Well here I was once more, obviously not having learnt my lesson.

[It's like when you're reeling in pain from an abscessed tooth and you think how easy a few minutes of daily flossing would have been. In that situation – which I've certainly been in before – I always find myself committing to doing a better job in the future...and then eventually I forget the pain and revert back to the same old bad habits.]

Lost records

Now this may seem silly, but a gap in the records bugs me. I mean REALLY bugs me. It's hard to describe to someone who doesn't have whatever form of OCD I've got, but I tend to focus on voids and get preoccupied with the missing pieces of any incomplete puzzle. Perhaps this stems from the fact that my father and his father before him were meticulous record keepers, tracking even the most mundane details of life with journal entries and tons of accompanying photos.

Those details might be boring to others, but I have found myself fascinated by family history; at one point, in fact, I spent years of my precious little free time digging through thousands of pages of my grandfather's journals after he died to try to get to know him better and put together a biography for our extended family. Well now, due to my negligence, Berkeley's 9th birthday would never be available to her or to countless generations of her posterity. It was lost forever to her future biographers [missing somewhere right along with the first eleventy-six pages of the Book of Mormon.] Yes, I'm sure that sounds goofy to all of the normal people out there – and it drives me nuts at times – but it's just the way my mind rolls.

Trigger event

Well instead of incessantly dwelling on it, wallowing in my regret, and beating myself up over it when these sorts of things happen – and they always do – sometimes I try a little self-help as cheap therapy. Much like the hunger of a fast can be used to trigger our thoughts toward the thing we're fasting for, I try to turn my annoyance into a *trigger event*, forcing myself to make something positive out of it. For this particular case, it seemed fitting to use journal writing as my newfound cause. Although I take more photos than I care to admit, my last journal entry was before Berkeley was

even born, and I've certainly done a very poor job encouraging my kids to keep their own journals.

So I told Berkeley I was sorry for being upset with her for unwittingly wiping my phone clean. And then I asked her to write down her thoughts about how she felt when she first got her birds, so that she would have a personal record of it even if the photos were gone. I made a list of other things she might want to write about as well and told her I'd remind her to write something down every time I started to think about the missing photos on my phone. Now if she can form a life-long habit of journal writing going forward, then perhaps this little mishap will have served a positive purpose in the end – she will then have journal entries that she wouldn't have otherwise had if I hadn't messed up. So in essence, my mess-up can then evolve into a good thing, even if it still bugs me inside.

I told Berkeley I'd try to do the same myself and restart my journals. Now to keep that positive impact going even further, I'll issue the same challenge to you. Go home today and record your thoughts in your own journal – write down your testimony, your emotions, your impressions, your opinions; write a letter to your kids, your spouse, or your parents. There are no wrong answers – just write! And next time you accidentally delete something or lose something that's important to you, you may want to try using any regret or loss that you feel as a trigger to prompt yourself to keep writing. [And in the process, you'll be unwittingly helping me cope with my OCD!]

This bird has flown

So after issuing this challenge to Berkeley I was starting to feel a bit better about things. Berkeley very quickly forgot about the missing digital files and went back to focussing on the birds she loved so much. I went back to work that Monday and started the process of restoring my phone. When I came home from work, though, I found Berkeley outside the house, sitting by the birdcage with a look of absolute devastation on her face. One of her birds was gone.

I couldn't make any sense of it, because I thought we had secured the cage pretty well. I interrogated each of the kids and nobody had seen anything out of the ordinary. The bird had simply disappeared. Whatever the cause, Berkeley was feeling a deep sense of loss; seeing how hard she was taking it, I felt stupid for having made such a big deal out of the missing photos, but now that upset me even more since she would never even have a picture of that vanished bird. She was heartbroken, so I

tried to squelch those thoughts and find a way to comfort her.

“Maybe that bird wasn’t meant for a cage,” I told her, trying in vain to pull some soothing words out of the air, “Maybe he needed to be free to fly wherever he wanted to go.”

Un-understandable

That night after trying to comfort her some more, I finally put Berkeley to bed and logged onto my e-mail. One of the messages was about EJ. I glanced through it, but it didn’t quite sink in at first. We had just seen him a few days before; I thought I must have misread it, since it didn’t seem possible that he was gone. But then as I re-read the message, I felt the numbing sensation of how deeply devastating an event had occurred that day as I had been walking through my paces. Thoughts of missing birds or photos at once became absolutely irrelevant, and our thoughts turned completely to EJ’s family.

When I tried to explain to the kids what had happened, I struggled to find anything to say that might help the very wide range of ages in our household understand the un-understandable. Little as we had known about EJ’s struggles, there did seem to be some parallels with the free bird, so I started with that:

“Berkeley thought that the only way she and her birds could be happy was for her to take care of them right there in their cage,” I said, “but maybe this particular bird couldn’t cope with a cage. Maybe he wasn’t meant for confinement. Maybe he needed to be flying free out in the bigger world.”

The underlying message was that we might have thought we knew what was good for that bird, but maybe God knew better; and maybe the same held for EJ. I don’t know if this parable of the zebra finch helped the kids come to any deeper awareness of incomprehensible things, but I told them whenever they hear a chirp out in the bush, maybe it’s Berkeley’s little friend. Maybe EJ sent it back to sing for us and maybe it’s much happier being free than it would have been in Berkeley’s cage.

Not one is forgotten

At first I thought the disappearance of the bird on that particular day was just a coincidence. I do believe in miracles, but I usually tend to look for the most logical explanation first. In this case, though, the only logical explanation I could come up with is that our dog, a cat, or our curious 1-year old snuck out of the house, climbed up on the cage, set the bird free, and snuck back into the

house without anyone noticing. But why would that explanation be any more or less miraculous than if God simply freed the bird – just as he opened the doors of so many other prisons that we can read about in the scriptures? We believe that otherwise inexplicable prison breaks were orchestrated for the Disciples of Christ in past centuries; the scriptures are also full of the vivid imagery of birds being set free from their snares or cages. So why couldn’t God free an innocent little bird from its cage today?

I don’t want to trivialise things around such a tough time, but no matter whether God prompted a 1-year old to open the cage that day, or whether He somehow had a direct hand in it, I don’t believe it was coincidental. And I do find myself wondering what lesson or sign might be encrypted in it. Was it meant to just give our family a teaching moment? Was it meant to be shared with others who were closer to EJ than we were? Or was there some other purpose that I don’t yet understand? I don’t claim to know the answer, but the one thing we do know is that God takes notice of every single creature on this Earth, from this little zebra finch to you, me, and certainly EJ: Not one sparrow will fall without our Father taking notice, Christ told his apostles in the New Testament, and “not one of them is forgotten before God.” He then made His point in the form of a question: “Aren’t we each worth many, many sparrows?”

Fishhook

Sometimes the smallest miracles are the hardest to believe, but they can also be the most meaningful. They teach us that if God cares about the smallest sparrow, each lily of the field, and every hair on our head, He certainly values our souls even more. When a particular fish swallowed a particular coin on a particular day a few thousand years ago, and a particular fisherman was told to go out to sea and “randomly” throw his hook into the water, and then that same fish with the coin in its mouth happened to be drawn to that particular hook, imagine the astonishment of Simon Peter when he drew it in, laid the fish on the deck, opened its mouth, and found the prophesied coin!

That coin was a mundane, tiny object. To us, it would appear identical to any of the thousands of other coins minted with it, all cast from the same mould. How could the Creator of our universe possibly be bothered with that particular coin? How could He possibly be bothered with me or you or any one among billions?

Well that common coin wasn’t just noticed, it was distinctly set apart from the others to serve God’s purpose. It was no better or worse than the other coins

around it, but it was selected and picked up and sent on a mission by a common fish – a fish that was indistinguishable to us from any of the millions of other fish of its type in the sea and that was completely unaware of the divine purpose it was serving. But in this case God commanded it to do a job and to serve as an instrument by teaching the apostles and tax collectors a lesson about His knowledge and power. Through centuries of time, we are still learning lessons from that particular coin and that particular fish. He valued them and He needed them right then and there. So how does that relate to us? Jumping back to Christ’s statement: “Ye are of more value than many [coins or fishes or] sparrows.”

Lottery winner

We don’t know the rest of that story, but I’m guessing the haters of the day would have told Peter it was just a lucky guess, or perhaps sleight of hand. Is it a miracle when someone wins the lottery? To the winner, it sure is. But to the rest of us, it’s just a random draw, and somebody out there had to win it. I don’t dispute that there is a minute chance that the presence of that particular coin in the fish’s mouth could have been by mere coincidence. Given the number of shipwrecks over generations of time and the millions of creatures in that particular sea, perhaps a handful of fish would be attracted enough to one of the glimmering coins falling through the depths or resting on the seabed at some point during their lifespan to try to eat the coin.

So how many fish would you have to pull from the sea to randomly find one with a coin in its mouth? Perhaps a million or more? But this wasn’t a gamble on one in a million odds; Christ told Peter with absolute certainty what he would find; to me, at least, that has got to be amongst the most significant of all the miracles recorded in the Bible. Other miracles may have required great power, but this one required absolute omniscience of past, present, and future.

Heidelberg

Now here is a story I’ve told a hundred times over the years, but I’ve previously left out some key parts. When I volunteered to move our family to Australia to start a new international operation for my company six long years ago, I didn’t know a soul here and had no idea where to start. We were basically given the opportunity to throw darts at a map and pick where to live. As I panned around on Google Earth, the Melbourne suburb of Heidelberg jumped out at me, probably just because I grew up in Germany and the name sounded familiar.

I had run out of time while packing up our house in the US and had not had any time to make contacts in Australia before our flight. So with a heap of kids in tow, we boarded a plane with nothing but our suitcases and a hotel reservation in Tullamarine. Right before taking off from LAX airport, I logged onto Ids.org, grabbed the contact details listed under Heidelberg, and sent a Hail Mary pass out to the universe in the form of an e-mail saying I’m on my way to Australia with my family and we’d appreciate any advice or assistance in finding housing.

After we landed in Australia, I ended up getting a response from President Robert Dudfield, the stake president of the Heidelberg Stake; he offered us some well-needed advice and contacts, and we started the tedious task of trying to get established on a new frontier.

Murphy’s storm

Well over the next few weeks, one thing after another went wrong. I’ll spare you the details, but in short, Murphy’s Law dropped a perfect storm of financial mishaps and other missteps into my lap that left me facing a mountain of debt without a penny to my name. As one thing after another went wrong with the business, the personal finances, and our efforts to get settled, I came to the conclusion that I was the wrong guy for the job and that I had just made the worst decision of my life. I had dragged my wife and kids half-way around the world to quell some selfish need for adventure, leaving behind family, friends, and every ounce of stability we ever knew.

I began to look back, and I suddenly recognised all of the warning signs I had ignored along the way – things I should have done differently. I suddenly felt that God had been trying to send me messages in the form of these signs that I had rejected in favour of my own selfish plans. With the warped perspective of feeling like I had rebelled against God in making each of the decisions that had landed us in this boat, guilt set in; with that realisation, I felt unworthy to ask Him for any help.

As I approached a breakdown, I found myself absolutely incapable of doing anything; but I can be very stubborn in giving up completely – and besides, we couldn’t even afford to go back home if we had wanted to – so my solution was to just work harder to try to juggle it all. In the face of looming deadlines, I ended up going days without sleeping to try to repair things. I don’t remember the exact moment, but at some point my brain just shut down. I discovered that mental illness isn’t just a chronic condition that affects certain people who

are born with it; it can be self-inflicted through poor choices. Just as your muscles and organs will give out if they are strained, abused, or overexerted, I had neglected my brain. It simply quit on me, and I lost my mind in a total breakdown.

Incapable of making crucial decisions right when some of the most consequential decisions of our lives had to be made, the situation spiralled further downward, and my job was quite literally on the line. I'd find myself up at all hours of the night battling panic attacks, intense guilt, and a darkness that felt like it was trying to consume me. Looking back, I don't know if these battles were imagined or real, but at the time it didn't matter – at that moment the struggle was a literal battle against dark forces that were absolutely tangible to me.

Open your mouth!

Somewhere in the midst of that sleep-deprived mania, I ended up on a plane to Brisbane in a ditch effort to try to drum up some business with a presentation to some prospective clients. I began the two-hour flight staring at my computer screen trying in vain to put a presentation together, but I couldn't think straight enough to finish a single slide. All I could do was look out at the clouds and pray for deliverance. So I sat there and prayed as intensely as I've ever prayed, but I was about to face a bunch of strangers with nothing to show them, so my prayers kept getting interrupted by sheer panic and the sickening knowledge that I ought to be working on my presentation instead.

The inadequacy overwhelmed me again. I had been an engineer for fifteen years, and now I was suddenly supposed to be Mister Marketing guy? Did I even have what it takes to approach people and be a salesman? I thought of my mission and how hard it had initially been to approach people, but how easy it became by the end. My mission president's advice at the time had been quite simple: "Open your mouth!"

Wasn't this new task easier than the foreign assignment I had accepted as a nineteen-year old? [There's a reason why so many marketing companies set up shop in Provo under the unwritten slogan, "If you can sell religion door-to-door in a foreign language, you can sell anything!"] Shouldn't it be easier to sell water consulting services in the land of drought and flooding rain than to go around trying to convince former communists to make a wholesale paradigm shift and lifestyle change like I had tried to do as a missionary?

Well I decided I had nothing to lose, so I might as well practice on my fellow passengers. I closed my laptop

and tried to open my mouth – but I couldn't think of anything to say. At least as a missionary, God cared about me. Now that I had messed up, why would He care enough about me to put words in my mouth? I stalled for a few more minutes with these doubts. The flight was just about over and I still had nothing ready for my presentation. So I held my tongue, opened my computer again, and scrambled to throw together a few slides.

Coincidence?

All too soon, the flight attendant came around to tell me to put away my laptop. As we approached the airport and touched down, I finally turned to the guy in a nice business suit sitting next to me. He hadn't said a word the whole flight, so I doubted he had any desire to strike up a brief, superficial conversation. But I sucked it up and blurted out a question about what he was going to be doing in Brisbane. He mentioned something about a trade show of some sort. I wasn't sure what else to say, so I just handed him one of my freshly printed business cards. He had a look at it and paused for a while, looking a bit confused.

"Well that was a bit awkward," I thought to myself, "Maybe being a business development guy just isn't in my cards."

He was still staring at the card. Finally he spoke up. "Oh yes, now I remember why I recognise your name," he said, "You sent me an e-mail when you were first arriving in Australia."

I was totally stunned.

"I'm Robert Dudfield," he said.

Little as my mind was functioning, it was at least alert enough to be absolutely taken back at his response. As it turned out, the Hail Mary pass that I had sent out from the other side of the world had somehow ended up in the hands of the Heidelberg stake president, who just so happened to be sitting in this particular seat right next to me on this particular plane.

Given the tiny percentage of people we ever get to know in this life, I could live in airports and take flights every day for the rest of my life...and chances are I would never just randomly sit by anyone I knew, let alone the first contact I made in a city of strangers at this particularly trying time in my life – right at the very moment when I was begging God to help me. Given the four million people living in the Melbourne area who might have stepped onto a plane that day, the chance that I'd find a familiar face in the seat next to me is probably just about the same as if I were to drive to

Fremantle right now, throw out a hook, and pull in a fish with a coin in its mouth. Possible? Yes! Coincidence? Not a chance!

Divine intervention

When I relate those events to my atheist friends, they have a hard time explaining it, but in the end they have to dismiss it as coincidence in order to satisfy their own view of the world. To them I'm just the guy who happened to win the lottery – which is a miracle to me but mere chance to them. For the rest of us who might recognise some form of divine intervention, there must have been some reason for God to step in.

As much as I believe this to be a case of intercession, to this day I'm not quite sure of the reason. Sure, to me this chance encounter was a certain sign that God was in charge and was watching over me and my family. But at the time it didn't solve a single problem. I had been praying for deliverance from my situation, not for acknowledgment that the problem was being noted. What I wanted was to be sitting next to a billionaire who would hand me a check for the 10-year nest egg of equity that the GFC had just taken from my house, or perhaps to run into some company director who would sign a multi-million dollar contract with my new business so I could justify a request for a raise or at least keep my job.

Well, the 30-second conversation with President Dudfield didn't put a single penny in my pocket; I got off the plane facing the same challenges as before. But what I did get out of it was the knowledge that I had a Father in Heaven who had my back. And with that came the will power to keep working and fight my way out of depression, with a renewed belief that things would work out in the end. Digging myself out of the financial situation I was praying to be delivered from actually took years and is still ongoing. There were no magic windfalls, and some of the nightmare scenarios that were running through my head at the time and waking me up at night – such as the business failing – actually came true in the end. But with the added perspective of God's support, even that ended up being ok.

Lessons learnt

The lessons learnt from failure over the years now form as much a part of my life, my resolve, and my character as the successes. And every step along the way, I have no doubt that God has been watching over things. Did that fall off a financial cliff warrant leaping off a real one? No way! But my warped perspective at the time had me blinded. In the process of ruining our personal finances and running a company into the ground –

despite my best efforts – I met hundreds of awesome people, travelled all around Australia with my family, and had experiences and memories that I wouldn't trade for anything. The positive spin is simply a matter of focus. [How many missionaries get depressed when they focus on numbers of baptisms, for instance, only to find afterwards that the real measure of success was how much they learnt from the 10,000 very unique people they met during their two-year ministry?]

In the end, our failures can help put things into an eternal perspective. A friend of mine who had been through a similar financial ordeal told me that the experience had prepared him to live the law of consecration; having lost everything and regained it with the Lord's help, consecrating it back to the Lord again just didn't seem to be that intimidating anymore. Having been there before – facing the loss of all temporal things – and having survived it just fine, I would agree that the experience can bolster the willingness to offer everything to the Lord. Everything temporal, that is. For those who have lost children, there is a whole new degree of loss to consider, which opens up a much deeper understanding of the intense struggle that the law of sacrifice can entail.

So the little miracle on the plane didn't solve anything temporal for me. Did the coin in the fish's mouth solve anyone's problems? Maybe it paid a minor tax account, but as far as we know, it didn't make anyone independently wealthy. This tiny miracle that required immense knowledge and foresight was divinely designed to do nothing more than to give a few people the surety to trust a carpenter preaching peace over Caesar himself. I guess the same could be said for my run-in with President Dudfield.

So what of the bird escaping its cage at our house? It didn't reverse time or take away any sorrow or heartache from EJ's family. So why would God intervene in something so small, if He indeed had something to do with that? It seems sometimes all we get out of a miracle is the knowledge that God is with us. The problems are still there, but we can then choose to face them with the added boost of that knowledge. And perhaps – rather than being granted the thing that we're actually asking for – that boost will end up being exactly what we needed in order to get our souls closer to Him.

The rest of the story

So that's the standard version of the story I've told time and again. But the part I've generally left off deals with how far gone my mind actually was at the time. You see, when I was at rock bottom, wallowing in my stress 10,000 metres above the ground, I remember

staring out the window at the clouds when we hit some turbulence. Now when a plane starts shaking, the normal reaction is “Oh no!” Well my reaction was quite the opposite:

“Oh yes!” I thought, “We’re going to crash!”

I thought we were going down, and I welcomed the comforting prospect. And I don’t know if I’ve ever been more disappointed in my life than when the plane touched down safely.

“No, no, no NO!!!!” I was screaming in my head.

The doors of the plane were going to open, and I was going to have to face the day with my body in one piece. How much easier it would have been to just disappear in a ball of flame. My life insurance money would have taken care of my family, and all would have been well. Looking back on it, I can’t believe those thoughts crossed my brain, but I have to acknowledge that’s what I honestly thought at the time. And it wasn’t an isolated, fleeting thought; in the preceding days when I was lying in bed and my heart would start pounding with anxiety, I’d fool myself into thinking it was a heart attack coming on – and I welcomed that thought just as much as I would have welcomed the plane crash. When I’d briefly doze off in the middle of the night in this unfamiliar land, I quite literally hoped I wouldn’t wake up. To me there was no beauty in the new sound of the birds at first light – to me their songs marked the absolute terror that another day had arrived and that I hadn’t managed to disappear out of existence overnight.

Raging tempest

The day after we found out about EJ, we had a ward council meeting and the Bishop shared a spiritual thought that centred on the lyrics of the hymn “Master the Tempest is Raging.” His message focussed on the descriptive lyrics:

“blackness...anguish...grief...torrents...billows...w rath...demons...terror,” followed by the contrasting words, “peace..calm...bliss...sweetly rest.”

Few hymns have lyrics that are as honest as these. At least in my experience, the description of the raging storm includes probably the most powerful words our language has to describe what someone might be feeling in the midst of a depressive episode. Those images are then followed by words that just as powerfully describe the ensuing peace that casts out the darkness.

I went home after that meeting and played the song through a few times on my keyboard. The last time EJ had been over at our house, he sat down at that same keyboard and I showed him a few new things. He couldn’t do much with his injured wrist, but with his other hand he picked things up very quickly. I taught music lessons out of our home in the US for many years. And I don’t think I’ve ever had a student with as much natural ability to just pick things up the way EJ did. But at the time I had no idea of the inner turmoil he was dealing with.

As I played the song through with that image and memories of my own bout with depression in mind, I put on the headphones and turned it up all the way. The crescendo through the minor chord progression in the chorus can be played with fear and anger, and the volume and tempo can be tailored to reflect the lyrics. In the end the dissonance resolves back to the root chords in a familiar circle, but you don’t sense the contrast of the peaceful ending unless you play the preceding bit really, really forcefully. ([Link to mp3 file](#)) It is a profound harmony of words and music; but the main thought that struck me as I played the notes was how the lyrics assume a desire to be delivered. How far gone does your mind have to be to welcome the turbulence that would sink a ship or bring down a plane?

When Simon Peter walked on water, his faith wavered and he started to sink; but he wished to be saved. How far from reality must I have been during my struggle to want to sink, wishing the sea of storm clouds would swallow me whole? And how had those very thoughts been going on in EJ’s mind right there on that same piano bench without my having taken any notice?

Marching band

On the very few occasions when I have brought myself to expose my own experience with depression to someone else, I have found that as lonely as it feels at the time, no one is alone in their struggle. Like miscarriages, financial troubles, embarrassing health problems, eating disorders, spiritual doubts, or other burdens typically borne in private, the response from sharing them is typically not, “you psycho!” as you might convince yourself to expect, but rather a surprising, resounding, reassuring, “me too!”

Perhaps there is some solidarity to be gained in sharing our experiences with each other and in the knowledge that we are all marching together in unison. Perhaps there is relief in the recognition that we all struggle in unique but surprisingly similar ways.

In my younger days, I was in the drum line of some marching bands, and I have sensed the unity of marching side by side. The next time I played through the hymn *Master the Tempest is Raging*, I tried syncopating it into a march beat and added the snare drum. And then a bass drum. And then a bass line. It's certainly not how it was written but I think it actually lends itself quite well to it. Through the crescendo of the chorus, I can picture an ever-expanding army joining us in our fight as the song progresses and more instruments join in. Finally, it's the Saviour Himself commanding the army while all of the elements obey His will.

When we read about the hosts of heaven, we might at first picture a "host" to be a butler or a servant or a cook or a maid. But a host is an army – in my German Bible, it's the same word – like the armies of heaven who are singing and shouting in *The Spirit of God*. And the term *hosts* doesn't refer to just any rag-tag army, but a large and powerful group of armies actively engaged in a battle. If we could sense these spiritual soldiers at our side in this march ahead, we might find ourselves singing and shouting and marching in step with them.

Maybe for EJ's family the current battle is just trying to put one foot in front of the other in getting back to the daily routine of marching to the grocery store, picking up kids from school, or heading into their rooms to tuck them in over the coming weeks and months and years. But whatever the battle might be about, I do believe there's an army of angels around us, and whatever life throws our way and however mundane and routine the task might appear, we can feel ourselves walking in step with heavenly hosts throughout the day – especially during those times where just getting through the day is a battle in itself.

Brown Brown

If you believe the hosts of heaven are those who have gone before us, then our ancestors are among them. For those in our ranks who have inherited some gene that increases the propensity or vulnerability to depression, then no doubt plenty of your ancestors spent their mortal existence with similar struggles. Perhaps they were demonised by a society that could offer no diagnosis or treatment or understanding; in any case, whether it's an incapacitating fight to get out of bed or a clash with suicidal thoughts, if our hearts are turned to those who have gone before us, we will find that we are not the first ones in our lines to deal with these issues, and we have never been alone.

We can even read about plenty of instances of ancient and modern-day prophets and apostles who

wanted to disappear into the sea or be wiped off the face of the earth. One account shared by Hugh Brown Brown [yes, Hugh B. Brown's middle initial B. actually stood for Brown, too] stands out to me in particular. Elder Brown is one of my heroes for a lot of reasons, including the fact that he stood up against racism long before it was politically or religiously correct to do so. [If you think the apostles always agree with each other, then you haven't read their memoirs.] He always spoke his mind and expressed his conviction whether he was in academic circles, political forums, or right there in the temple with his fellow apostles – regardless if he was in the minority.

Elder Brown's children were my grandfather's high school classmates, and I interviewed some of the Brown family members when I was writing a biography about my grandfather. In the process I ran across some of Elder Brown's writings and found that he had battled depression at times. It threatened to consume him when he gave the eulogy for his own teenage son who had died in battle. Elder Brown felt tremendously guilty for having told war stories from his past that had perhaps inspired the bravado that got his own son killed. During one of his episodes, he wrote:

"That night I drove from the camp...still spiritually disturbed and depressed...I was possessed with the spirit of wishing that I could be rubbed out of existence...I wished the Lord would provide a way for me to cease to be."

He was eventually delivered from these thoughts, but it goes to show us that even the Lord's anointed sometimes struggle with life.

Cloudiness

Now for the haters out there who are ready to cast some sort of judgment on EJ, his family, or anyone else facing these challenges, how dare you? If you have concocted yourself up some imaginary chasm that automatically separates EJ from his Saviour, you will need to apply that same fictitious barrier to me as well. Because I've been there. So say it to my face. Tell me I'm beyond salvation. I won't believe it. Whether you're right or wrong, I'll be in the same boat as EJ someday, rowing just as hard together with him to try reach the Lord's presence.

If you won't say it to my face because you feel like I have some small slice of a chance, then grant him that same benefit of the doubt. Regardless of the thoughts that possessed my mind or EJ's or Elder Brown's when overshadowed by a fog of depression, with a clear mind and an eternal perspective, there's no doubt that

the trajectory will be set for the arms of Christ. And any judgment you reserve for me, you'll need to apply to Elder Brown, and Peter the Rock, and hundreds of people you've encountered in your own life, some of whom you're close to and others you pass on the street without ever noticing.

For those who contributed to the intolerance EJ was subjected to while he was still with us, how dare you put someone else down? How dare you ridicule or harass or mock one of God's children? And if you're still willing to cast judgment now that he is gone, how dare you? How dare you judge another? How dare you deprive yourself of God's willingness to forgive your own trespasses by being judgmental of others? How dare you stand in the way of inner peace from the Comforter? How dare you separate yourself from the arms of the Lord or from your own eternal family through pride, unforgiveness, intolerance or any other vice we might let get in the way of our own salvation?

How many of us are guilty of causing sadness and rifts amongst our loved ones through our own transgressions and the vices we refuse to turn from? And of thereby causing essentially the same effects that we might hold against those who have felt such hopelessness and despair that they entertained thoughts of ending their own life? In the end, we will all stand before God begging for mercy, equally in need of His forgiveness. If you never throw the first stone, you'll never throw a single stone at all. So let's drop the stones and never pick them up again.

And if you do happen to find someone throwing a stone, perhaps in the form of an insensitive comment spoken by those who didn't know EJ or his family well enough, will you do something about it? Will you speak up for them? I've got a teenage son who doesn't feel like he belongs in our large family and has a hard time coping with the accompanying challenges – anger being the first expression of that frustration. So a lot of the things said in the eulogy about EJ's difficulties at home sound very familiar. And I would take certain comments that could be said about EJ and his family very personally. I've had to defend myself against plenty of ignorant comments about large families, for example; given the things that have been said to my face, I can only imagine what's said behind my back. Let's hope none of us take part in that sort of back-stabbing talk, but rather take an active part against it when we're given that chance.

Extrapolation

As a father, the angriest I ever get comes in moments when I see one of my own kids hurting or

threatening another. The conflicting emotions are intense and indescribable. A part of you is hurting another part of you. You see that your kids have inherited or learnt your vices right along with any virtues. I get that. But when one of your vices is used to attack the virtue of another, the outcome is pure, protective rage. [Perhaps that rage is based in some form of self-loathing, knowing that you are capable of the same things and have probably caused someone similar pain through your own past actions.]

In EJ's case, it is absolutely heart-wrenching to see the pain his choice has caused to those who loved him most. Now I don't know any details of the events or thoughts that led him down this path, but from what I can remember of my own episode, I would be willing to bet that none of that pain was intentional or even factored into the decision. When I wished for my plane to crash or for my heart to stop beating, I imagined only the relief that the life insurance payment would bring to my family as they continued down some happy path with whatever worthier figure might replace me. There was not a single thought of their sorrow or grief. In that instant, somehow you assume that they will feel the same way you do – that the world would just be a better place without you.

In reading Elder Brown's account, there is no mention of how his elimination would affect his family, not a word of remorse for the traumatic impact that this devastating void would have had on his loved ones. I don't know why, but for some reason that missing projection seems to be very common for the victims of a depressive episode. The condition hit Elder Brown the same as it hits many others; it leaves you looking for an escape route, and the repercussions are not even a consideration. In that moment, I guarantee you there is no clarity that allows you to feel the pain that your decision will inflict on others. So don't go holding the pain and sorrow felt by EJ's family against him, unless you're going to hold the same against me, Elder Brown, and millions of others who have had their vision temporarily obscured by that same cloud.

Enemy forces

When Elder Brown buried his own son during World War II, hundreds of other families around the world were also holding services for young soldiers lost in battle. At the time there was a very real enemy that threatened the future of humanity, and those who lost their children in that fight – though devastated at the loss – sometimes also used the service as a battle cry to warn

people about the imminent danger and to call on others to take up arms to defeat the enemy. As a ward and as a community, we've now lost one of our own in a completely different sort of battle with an unseen enemy.

With the tremendous diversity of community support, the radiant outpouring of energy, and the prevailing positive spirit that was present at EJ's memorial service, we found it to be surprisingly uplifting. Seeing his whole cheer squad enter the chapel in their uniforms was one of the most touching scenes I've ever witnessed. Although we took a positive message home from the funeral – almost feeling guilty for doing so – we recognised that it also came with a warning and a call to action. As Simon mentioned in his eulogy, unfortunately at this very moment we all know that thousands of kids are struggling to cope with life. We may not know how to help or what to do with our emotions, but Simon challenged us all to try helping those who may be engaged in struggles similar to EJ's. If I know anything about EJ's personality, I think he would agree. I don't think he would want hugs and good memories be the only message we take home to our kids; there should also be a call to arms.

Like the subordinate who asks his commanding officer for "permission to speak freely," maybe I should be asking the same of you now. I don't want to dance around a topic like this, worrying about offending someone or being concerned with how I might be reprimanded for expressing my personal views. But having been there and faced that enemy – whether it was in my head or whether it represented some external force – my freely-spoken message to my kids and to anyone else who is facing a similar battle is this:

You fight like hell! If you find yourself in a moment of despair unable to feel the love of those around you, you fight like hell to feel it again! If you have somehow allowed the problems of life to overwhelm you into thinking they're unsolvable, you fight like hell to forget them and focus on what is going right! If you're trying to solve those problems yourself and can't find a fix, you fight like hell to have the humility and courage to ask your friends and family for help! If you are focussing on comments from bullying and belittling people – the tiny percentage of people on this planet who might not like you – and if you have somehow allowed those comments to warp your perspective into the false notion that it reflects some sort of unanimous or majority opinion, you fight like hell to cast them into insignificance and replace them with those who do love you!

That's what I took from the battle cry that was issued from the pulpit at EJ's memorial service, which seemed to cover the full spectrum of emotions that the human spirit is capable of feeling. Although I felt some measure of peace and comfort during the service, I also felt intense anger. When you hear stories of bullying and intolerance, as a father the immediate, automatic reaction is a protective anger, because I naturally extrapolate those scenarios to my own kids, especially to those who might have trouble fitting in and whose interests don't comply with the nonsensical gender roles that small-minded people have arbitrarily imposed on our youth. When I hear of bullying being used as an attempted enforcement of this imposition, and when I hear that others judged or ridiculed EJ for his interests, as little sense as it makes to fight violence with violence, it stirs up memories and emotions in me that instantly lead my mind to want to justify an aggressive intervention – which sounds like the same blighted reaction those words and actions stirred up in EJ.

From what I understand, EJ had all sorts of conflicting emotions, anger certainly being one of them. Applied anger sometimes has tragic results, but I believe it is only a vice when it's misused – and that anger actually has a divine purpose in the grand scheme of things. If anger helps you to help others, and if you can tap into it as motivation to stand up for something positive, so be it. Let it serve that purpose. Sometimes it's the only tool we've got.

For those who are suffering under a cloud of despair, if it helps stir you to action, picture the boxing gloves that EJ has with him in his casket; whatever you do and however you do it, grab your armour, suit up, and fight like hell to come back to us! And I mean that quite literally: You fight as if you are fighting demons at the gates of hell. I don't care if you picture this enemy like the Nazis, ISIS, Orcs, devils, or any combination of the things you stand against, we want you back, so pop in that mouthpiece, strap on those gloves, stand up, and fight like hell!

At stake

I believe some things shouldn't just be brushed over; because there is a real battle going on with real stakes. And sometimes there isn't a Disney ending – in this life or the next. That's the whole point of any effort we go through; otherwise we could all just sit back and wait for the inevitable. If there are improvements we can make through our efforts, then let's make them and not accept defeat.

The stakes are much higher than we can possibly imagine. Because there *are* eternal rifts. And we *can* actually play a part in preventing them. In EJ's case, I don't believe for a second that there's anything permanent about the separation. But I do believe there are unrepentant abusers out there and others who separate themselves permanently from their loved ones. And that is a real tragedy. So if you want to pick a fight, fight against that. If the temporary heartbreak of a temporary separation drives you into sorrow, imagine the permanent heartbreak of a permanent separation. Then take that image and do something to prevent abuse, do something to help someone turn their life around, do something to heal a self-inflicted rift; whatever you choose to do, do something about it! If you feel anger threatening your spirit, bridle it, harness it, and channel it into the motivation to fight for all of the things you stand for – and fight actively and incessantly against those things that you oppose.

Common interests

One thing I fiercely oppose is the misguided notion that interests should fall neatly along gender lines or that anyone has the right to ridicule or judge another on the basis of those interests or for their beliefs, orientation, skin colour, nationality, or any of the thousands of things that make us who we are – the things that contribute to the beautiful work of art that can be created when our individual diversity is allowed to flourish.

Perhaps in EJ's case, the stories of intolerance shared at the memorial service sparked that much more of a fire in me because I also happen to share some of the same interests as EJ. You see, the [bucket list](#) of goals that I made for myself back in high school included doing a standing back flip and holding an iron cross. But for years I never worked up the strength or courage to try either one, especially since my ego wouldn't allow me to fail in front of anybody who might be watching; besides, male gymnasts were completely non-existent in my high school, and I wasn't about to endure the ridicule that would come with being the first and only one.

It wasn't until I was finishing university that a construction job renovating a gymnastics centre gave me full, private access to the facility – and the chance to finally give my goals a go. I'd come in when nobody was around, put on the chalk and dowel grips, and try to work up the guts to tackle the next feat on my list. If I landed on my head, I was glad no one was there to see it, and I'd psyche myself up to try to get my confidence back and then try it again and again and again until until I'd finally

get it right. It was stupid to do that without a spotter, I have to admit, but I liked attacking the challenge on my own. It took months and months of painful effort, but I finally checked my goals off my list. [This was before internet videos, so I had nothing to go on other than what I had learnt in my physics class – to hear that EJ mastered a back flip in a day or so with nothing but a YouTube video is simply amazing!]

Well in the process of working toward and checking off my goals, I found that – like EJ – I really enjoyed gymnastics. So when I moved to the San Francisco area after graduation, I added a double back flip to my bucket list and joined a gymnastics club to make it happen. I was pretty excited about it and started working on some ring routines for an upcoming competition. When I told some of my friends that I had joined a gymnastics club, all they said was how gay they thought that was.

“Why would you want to do that?” they'd ask.

I'd show them my [ski photos](#).

“Cool!” they'd say.

At this point in my life, I was old enough not to care one ounce what they thought, but I found some of the younger members of the club struggling to cope with hurtful comments people would make, even if they were supposedly made in jest.

It didn't make a bit of sense to me at all. If I did a backflip in the gym it was gay, but when I did it on skis it was suddenly cool? What sort of simple-minded people came up with that stupid definition? It's the same set of people who believe that if you do a backflip after scoring a goal on the footy pitch it's cool, but if you do it in the presence of cheerleaders it's gay! Who makes up those sorts of ludicrous rules?

Brummer

I found similar quackery with my interest in music. I used to like to sing as a kid. I'd go out and sing at the top of my lungs to the cows in the field on the German dairy farm where I grew up. But then one day my primary school principal, who also happened to be the school's choir director, heard something woefully off-key during one of our rehearsals for the end-of-year school concert. He went around the room with his hand to his ear, turning his head as he passed directly in front of us one by one. He stopped when he got to me.

“Du bist ein Brummer!” he shouted, pointing to the door, “Raus mit Dir!”

With that I was thrown out of the choir, which actually didn't bother me a bit at the time because I got a free period while everyone else had to deal with Herr Koch and his baton. But after that, armed with my new excuse, I walked out on singing time in primary, never cracked open a hymnbook in church, and never opened my mouth to sing again.

Once I reached high school age, I dug my heels in even further. At one point when I was out of commission with a sports injury, my dad told me I should try out for the musical instead. I laughed at him.

"Are you kidding?" I told him, "that's social suicide!"

I never would have even thought of doing anything musical in my bogged high school. It was a place and time where gay-bashing was a crowd sport condoned by peers, school teachers, and church leaders alike.

Over a decade after Herr Koch's reprimand, though, I ended up paired with a mission companion who loved to sing (and who happens to be a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir now.) The mission rules stated that wherever he went, I had to go. Well nothing was going to stop him from being in the MTC choir. So I consented – as long as I could just lip sync. A little at a time – and only when everyone else was loud enough to completely drown me out – I started letting some small sounds come through. I was stuck there anyway, so I figured maybe a little bit of "brumming" wouldn't hurt. A slight volume increase accompanied each little measure of increased confidence, until somewhere during my 8-week stay in the MTC, like Sam I Am, I found that I did like the Green Eggs and Ham of singing!

I was impressed with the power that can be felt when hundreds of voices are united in harmony. It is simply awesome. Well, it's awesome to a missionary; but for some reason it's gay to the high school peanut gallery. What gives?

Choir boy

Well after being knocked around as a missionary – where everyone judges you by your uniform and 9 out of 10 people you meet don't like you – I sure didn't care what anyone thought anymore. Seeing two dudes paired up 24/7, people would ask us if we were gay; rather than being offended at their remarks, as I might have been a few years earlier, I was just glad they had given me a funny conversation starter.

Armed with my fresh disregard for people's opinions of my hobbies, when I finished my mission I took my newfound interest in music and signed up for some university music classes. I eventually auditioned for the University of California's mens chorus and even for some musicals. When I got to do the solo in a big cathedral during our final choir concert, part of it was fulfilling because I enjoyed it, but I think the main enjoyment I got out of it was being able to thumb my nose at Herr Koch.

Being a gymnast-gee-club-choir-boy in the San Francisco area, you can imagine straight guys in this circle of friends were a minority. My interests in these supposedly gay activities came late enough in life to shield me from any trauma or concern with derogatory remarks, but some of the guys who had had life-long interests in these pastimes told me some awful stories of hazing and bullying that were downright cruel. The straight guys were ridiculed for their "gay" interests, and sometimes their reaction and offense to the supposed insult was just as insulting to the guys who actually were gay.

As I heard the harmonies and overtones bouncing around the cathedral during our concert, it was irrelevant whether the members of the choir behind me were straight, openly gay, or in the closet. It's unfortunate how much beautiful music goes unheard or unsung because of concerns about the perception it might give to others. How many life experiences are omitted, and how many passions and interests are dropped, neglected, ignored, or replaced? Again, it led me to question the absurd rules of the game. If you can harmonise with another dude, it's cool so long as an electric guitar is on the stage, but the instant you pull away the instrument, the acapella harmony is gay? It's the same freaking notes sung in the same freaking way. Seriously? Or the notion that a vibrating string makes a really cool sound when it is set into vibration by a pick and amplified. But when that same vibration is caused by EJ's violin bow, suddenly it's gay?

[Don't believe those lies! And if the rules sound preposterous, go ahead and question them. I used to pole vault in high school; sometimes some of the girls on the athletics team would want to try it out just for fun. I specifically remember my coach telling them to go away, saying "Girls can't pole vault."

"Why not?" they would ask.

"Because they just don't have the upper body strength that it takes."

I actually believed that lie at the time. Why? Because that's what I was told and I never saw anyone prove him wrong. Well now try to tell that to my niece who actually beat some of my heights when she competed at the state track meet last year. How many more of the things we accept today will be proved wrong in another generation? And how will we feel looking back at the things we blindly believed when we have to acknowledge how short-sighted we had been?]

I could think of a thousand other examples of arbitrary gender roles that limit our progress and reflect absurd traditions. Like the accepted assumption that a master with a needle and thread is some sort of hero when he uses those tools in life-saving operations as a world-class surgeon, but if he uses those same tools on textiles instead of skin suddenly he's gay? It may seem silly but think how much better that surgeon would have been with some practice on fabric as a kid. And think of how many women would have made awesome surgeons but were told their hands are made to push a needle through fabric but not through skin – or that female hands are somehow designed for cutting intricate patterns through textiles but incapable of making delicate cuts through vital organs with a scalpel? Complete nonsense? Of course! But it's no more nonsensical than the stupid, biased idea that guys like EJ have no place on a cheer squad. How many people miss out on some of the richness of life and pass up their real calling just because simple-minded people make simple-minded remarks? Well we can all start to effect a change by not boxing people in with these baseless ideas.

Lukewarm?

So when I heard that EJ had been mocked for his interests in music and gymnastics, it certainly struck a chord with me. I don't know if others attending the funeral felt the same anger at the thought of the long-lasting effects of unaccepting peers. If so, why not take what you felt during the service and turn those powerful emotions into an arsenal of ammunition to use in a battle against intolerance. Does the thought of someone being bullied make you mad? Good! It should! Take a stand and go do something about it! When you see someone being put down – even if it's behind the victim's back – will you look the other way? Or will you fight it? Will you stand up against mocking, belittling, and bullying? Will you take a stand against unfairness, intolerance, injustice, and brutality? If you hear someone judging another or making fun of them for their interests, their haircut, their favourite colour, or whatever it is, just open your mouth and say something!

Better to use your mouth to take a stand rather than your fists, but if EJ's boxing gloves provide you with any added incentive, use that image to stand up and fight one way or another. Christ said that if we're lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – he'll spue us out of his mouth. From what I've heard, nobody ever accused EJ of being lukewarm. So use those gloves to be patient! Not as the world defines patience but as a living apostle has re-defined it for us:

Just a little patience

“Never give up on anyone,” President Uchtdorf said in his 2010 General Conference talk about patience, “including not giving up on yourself.”

Patience, he continued, “is far more than simply waiting for something to happen.” It is “actively waiting and enduring” and “actively working toward goals.” It is “staying with something until the end, reigning in anger and holding back the unkind word.” It includes “resisting evil, working, hoping, exercising faith, bearing hardship with fortitude, staying with something and doing all we can.” In other words, patience is a battle.

He also defined patience as “being willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon us.” That is hard enough, especially when the thing testing our patience seems to make no sense and we fail to see how anything positive could ever possibly come from it. But President Uchtdorf also said that how we submit is just as important, since patience means “accepting that which cannot be changed and facing it with courage, grace, and faith.”

Now I've never seen a better example of this quality in action than in the funeral service that was designed by those who had lost the most to support and strengthen others, including those who may have only known EJ in passing [and all the while trying to maintain composure in the face of sometimes insensitive comments from people who don't quite know how to help.]

President Uchtdorf began his talk speaking merely of the patience required to abstain from food. But his definition is much more far-reaching. He called patience a “purifying process,” acknowledging that “waiting can be hard” and that “the ability to put our desires on hold for a time – even when the desires of our hearts are delayed” is a “precious and rare virtue.” In the case of EJ's friends and family these desires are not just some random craving but rather a righteous desire is to see their son, their brother, their nephew, and their grandson again.

President Uchtdorf contrasted the definitions in his message by describing the things that patience is not: It is not withdrawal from life. It is not inactivity. It is not “selfish self-absorption”. It is not “passive resignation or failing to act because of fears.” It is not “simply enduring, but enduring well.”

He then used the imagery of mountains and valleys to describe the quality of patience and the end result that will come our way should we be successful in developing patience in this life:

“Often the deep valleys of our present will be understood only by looking back on them from the mountains of our future experience. Often we can’t see the Lord’s hand in our lives until long after trials have passed. Often the most difficult times of our lives are essential building blocks that form the foundation of our character and pave the way to future opportunity, understanding,” and hard as it may be to see in this moment – “happiness.”

Patience doesn’t mean you lie down and wait until something else comes along. Patience is a fight!

Hunger pain

President Uchtdorf’s remarks relate directly to hunger pains and the patience needed to fast. Without a purpose, hunger pains are nothing more than a physical trigger that tells your brain, “It’s time to eat!” With a fast and a purpose, though, that signal becomes much more meaningful. It becomes a mental and spiritual trigger to point our thoughts, prayers, and efforts toward the thing that we are fasting for. In the middle of a fast, the hunger pains point us to a void that won’t be filled until we’re ready to break our fast. Until that time, the sense of hunger does us no good at all on its own. Only when we use it as a reminder of the purpose of our fast – that thing that we’re fasting for – are we fulfilling its purpose. That reminder comes every time the hunger hits us, which could be once a second, once a minute, or once an hour.

I wonder if in some way the grief and the longing to see EJ again is similar for his family. It is a feeling that won’t be quenched in this lifetime. They have now entered a period of not permanent but excruciatingly long-term fasting, since that “hunger” to see EJ again will always be with them. I believe that as a result they’ll be blessed with a thin veil that allows supporting angels to help them to be that much more enlightened and receptive to promptings going forward – just as we can become more in tune to our prayers’ purposes during a fast.

This desire is shared by the hundreds of people who attended EJ’s memorial service and thousands of others who weren’t there but still share some sort of a connection with him. Whether they knew him personally or have only now come to know him, there is an army of people who feel the pain of his loss and want to stand by him by prolonging the story of his life and supporting his family.

Perhaps the loss felt by the “host” of EJ’s supporters could be made much more meaningful if it became a trigger for something with a real purpose. If feelings of sadness or regret or empathy strike any of us in the days, weeks, and years ahead, we could choose to let those feelings get us down or alternatively prompt us to action. Grief on its own has its place, but channelling that grief into commitment, resolution, or service could make it as meaningful as a dedicated fast...a fast that gets everyone more in tune with the eternities.

Just like the thought of the missing zebra finch now prompts me to write in my journal, I can try to do something positive any time I’m reminded of EJ and the loss felt by his family. I’ve got a list of unfinished things a mile long, so maybe that means I’ll make myself get off my butt and tackle the next thing on that list. Maybe it’s to go home teaching, pull the boys off the PlayStation and take them outside to play sport, ask my daughters or my wife to go on a date with me, write a missionary, or give my Grandma a call. I don’t know, I guess it could be anything. If you don’t have an unfinished list, start a new list. Pick up an instrument; learn Japanese; run a marathon; go down to Bounce and do a back flip; or just go out and help someone with their yardwork!

Whatever you do, don’t let sorrow or grief or regret exist without building yourself a channel to turn those feelings into something that helps EJ’s influence continue indefinitely. The cascading effect of positive acts can be endless. If hundreds and hundreds of people who are feeling sorry right now could each do something about it every time they sense that void, we could collectively “pay it forward” – accumulating a wealth of service that is dedicated to EJ’s memory.

Heads up

Speaking of regrets, I’ve often told a story as a missionary that has now come back to haunt me. My companion and I had run into a fifty-year old East German man who had spent his entire career working as a munitions specialist in a Soviet tank factory. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, he had just lost his job, his livelihood, his trade, and his entire industry. Given his age, he was unlikely to ever find gainful employment to

support his family again. We didn't have any temporal help we could offer him, and he didn't seem to want to feel any better about his circumstances – he just wanted to complain and certainly wasn't interested in any pep talks from a couple of spoiled Americans. So we let him be and went on our way.

The next day as we were making our way between appointments, my greenie companion suggested we drop back by and pay the poor guy another visit. It didn't make any sense and didn't fit the itinerary we had carefully and prayerfully planned out that morning, so I objected at first. He kept insisting, and I finally consented just to shut him up.

We made our way back across town and caught our friend just as he was leaving his flat. He broke into tears when we went back inside his living room; he confessed that he had packed some rope in his bag and had been on his way to his garden house to hang himself. We weren't quite sure what to say so we sat with him and talked everything out for quite some time. In the end, he took our appearance at that very moment as a sign and changed his mind about ending his life.

Now this might seem like the kind of positive, uplifting story that is supposed to build faith. But as far as I'm concerned, it actually scares the daylights out of me. Because I don't necessarily consider myself to be in tune with the sort of promptings that God had sent to my companion. I believe that God intervenes at times of His choosing; but I also believe that He generally intervenes by calling on us to act on his behalf, usually answering the prayers of others by asking us to personally intervene and help each other out. And with that belief comes the knowledge that we sometimes choose not to act, even when prompted. To help fulfil His own purposes, He has granted us the sometimes agonising agency to either heed His call or ignore it.

Maybe in this particular case I eventually listened, but how many other times don't I listen? How often do I stubbornly follow my own plan instead of God's plan? I had tried to talk my companion out of the visit, since we had just seen the guy the day before. And when I did go, I went reluctantly. What if he had just submitted or if I had exercised my right as a senior companion to make the final call on whether to go? If I had stalled for two more minutes, giving this story an alternate, tragic ending, would people be telling me it was inevitable and there was nothing I could have done? I know otherwise; there was definitely something I could have done and by pure luck we did just that. But I dread finding out someday that there might have been other

occasions when I didn't listen. Will the effects of those omissions flash before my eyes when I close them for the last time?

Three doors down

I agree that it's absolutely unproductive to run these "what if" scenarios through your head. But what is productive is stepping back up to the plate with renewed conviction. Just like sorrow and grief on their own – without a commitment or resolution to make things better – are essentially worthless in themselves, so is regret. Now I have plenty of regrets – a lot of things I should have done differently over almost half a century of mistakes. That seems like a lot when it's put that way, but I believe that every little thing – every right or wrong decision we have ever made – becomes a necessary part of God's plan once the present becomes the past. So the ridiculous notion of regret is something I don't believe in living with. The problem for me is that I don't really believe in coincidence, either.

Was it coincidence that we spent several months living three houses away from EJ while he fought off depression and anger? How about the fact that he had a passion for music, and I had packed up my music studio in the US and shipped it half way around the world to land three doors down from him. Was that coincidence? What about the fact that two young men in our household were not just in his priesthood quorum but also in his high school class, travelling the same routes to school and back? That his home teacher and his teachers quorum president were less than 100 metres away from him while he struggled with thoughts of ending his own life? Is that coincidence? Or was there a grander purpose – a call we didn't answer? If you tell me it was just coincidence, then you'll also need to tell me that my encounter with President Dudfield was coincidence, as was the chance intervention with my jobless German friend, as was the disappearance of our little zebra finch the day EJ left us. Possible? Sure, but to me that's pushing the limits of reality.

So if there was indeed a deeper purpose, could I have done more to help EJ? Would he have even wanted any help from some nerdy old fart who just happened to live down the street from him? I have no idea. But that's the crux of it; in truth, I didn't even bother to try. Given the length and the contents of this homily, you might say, "But you hardly knew him. Why go on and on about it?" Well I guess that's the whole point. You're right, I hardly knew him. But I wish I had known him better and should have made a more concerted effort to do so.

Looking back on it, I have to admit I was cautious around EJ, especially when it came to our kids. Stories of expulsion from school for fighting, or hearing some of the sarcastic comments EJ would make about religion [some of which, frankly, I agree with but didn't want to expose my kids to quite yet] led me to advise my boys to keep their distance. Perhaps that excuses them, but what was I worried about for myself? In taking EJ back and forth to church a few times, I never asked him anything beyond superficial questions. Perhaps that wasn't my place. Or perhaps I let pride or selfishness or laziness get in the way of answering the call or the prompting to help by at least asking how he was doing.

Gamechanger

I do believe that EJ's family – knowing his struggles – did all they could to help him. Perhaps his teachers and peers and youth leaders can say they did as well. For me, though, it seems like the scare I got from my jobless German friend ended up coming true in a way. In some ways I feel like I dropped the ball for the team. No matter how minor a position I played, the whole team is affected by the fumble; even if I was the only one who fell short, then collectively as a support system, we could have done better.

In the fear that I didn't do my part and was a broken or inadequate instrument in God's hands, I need to apologise to EJ's family and ask for forgiveness. It is painful to have to admit that I might have done more to help; I certainly wouldn't want anyone telling me those words after the fact if we were to lose one of our own. I don't know if anything I could have done would have changed the outcome – perhaps not. I'll never know the whole answer for sure, but I'd much rather be standing here saying I did everything I could. And whether or not the end result would have changed, the sure thing is that had I truly done everything I could, EJ would have at least known that a few more people in his life cared about him.

Of course we can't go around sulking about our errors and omissions – because in this room alone we could probably come up with thousands of things that might have been different, and none of us will ever know just how those things might have been changed the outcome. A therapist would probably tell me that this is the typical fallout after a suicide and that others will be feeling the same thing. And that I shouldn't beat myself up over it. I guess I could try to make up excuses instead; like perhaps that I didn't understand what was at stake. Or that the other demands of life caused a lapse in concentration that resulted in the fumble. Or the sun or the lights or the roar of the crowd got in the way and I

didn't hear the coach. Or maybe I heard him and thought I knew better so I ignored his advice. Or maybe I hadn't trained hard enough, hadn't watched my diet, and wasn't quite ready for the game. Whatever the reasons, in this instance I can't honestly say I played to the best of my ability.

Grand Final

Perhaps these things are all excusable; I really don't know. But what would be inexcusable is not learning from this lesson. Not making a change once you do understand what is at stake. And dropping the ball in the next game by making the same mistake again. If I know anything about EJ's personality, he wouldn't have us all going around patting each other on the back saying, "good game, well played" when we lost this particular match. That won't help you master the next skill or win the next game when the grand final comes around. EJ wouldn't go around giving high fives for getting a participant medal. He'd shoot higher.

He knew full well that if you fall on your face during a tumbling routine, you'll find yourself back on your face again if you do it the same way next time around. So what are you going to change going forward? To find that adjustment, you have to sit down and watch the game tape while accepting the loss that can't be changed anymore – not to wallow in that loss, but to identify the lessons to be learnt. If you want to win the next one, you then have to go back out and attack the next game with a renewed resolution to improve those shortcomings.

I for one will try my hardest not to take my eye off the ball again. And if everyone else makes the same commitment, we'll come out of it a stronger team in the end. While no therapist will ever be able to convince me that that I didn't stumble in this instance, I think everyone would agree that whatever occurred in the past, you've got to get your head back into the game and try to do something positive.

"Guilt is to the spirit what pain is to the body," Elder Bednar has said. That makes sense to me, because I try to avoid guilt just like I try to avoid pain. But I also realise that people affected by CIP – which sounds rather appealing at first – don't live long precisely because of their inability to feel physical pain. In a similar way, if you stop feeling guilt, your soul may be in mortal danger. Either that or you're about to get translated. Maybe there are some people out there who rarely feel guilt because they are so close to perfection. But for the rest of us, the ability to feel guilt is actually a sign of a

functioning spirit and as necessary to our progression as pain is to life itself.

With “a determination to do better and especially to become better,” as President Uchtdorf said, the Saviour “wipes away tears of regret.” So whatever it is that you could have done or should have done, just commit to do it better in the future. Change the “should have done ___” into “now I’ll do ___!” Fill in the blanks with every regret and move on; that’s all we ever can do. It is the only way out of the depths and the only way forward; the alternative is a downward spiral.

One comfort I can take is that God needs these recent mistakes of mine just as much as He needs every previous mistake I’ve ever made. He needs our mistakes because He needs our improvements. He needs our past pitfalls because he needs our present and future commitments. From the poor decisions that nearly bankrupted us on our arrival in Australia to the resistance I had initially put up against my mission companion’s promptings, God needs these things because He needs me to motivate myself and perhaps others around me to do better. We would not become who we need to be without learning from our mistakes, so He needs them to frame up every positive thing that will happen in the future. Every future triumph is built on the foundations we have laid with our own mistakes, failures, and personal tragedies; all of our future victories fall apart without our previous mistakes. No matter how painful, each past slipup now forms an integral part of God’s future plan for us.

So what’s the game plan going forward? I’ve already heard from many people who knew EJ that they are attacking life with a renewed resolve to strengthen personal relationships with family members and others, or a new commitment to raise awareness of mental health issues to potentially help hundreds of other kids. I believe that’s precisely what God would have us take from this loss – and precisely what His enemies would try to prevent us from doing!

Empathy

Maybe this particular series of events also hits me hard because I thought we were next in line. Seeing the things Simon and Amanda are dealing with feels painfully familiar, because I thought it would be us; in fact, I’ve pictured every excruciating detail from making a slide show and delivering a eulogy to making a casket, dressing a lifeless body, and choosing a mortal resting place for my own son. Man, does it hurt – the thought alone just about does me in. The fact that millions of other parents throughout history have had to face these

same unmentionable scenes doesn’t alleviate my own fears; when those possible realities attack me, I am reminded of the fact that staring out at the clouds on the shaking plane wasn’t the only time in my life that I wanted to die. It had happened before, but under completely different circumstances:

Sixteen years ago, a surgeon sat us down in a cold consulting room and told us it was essentially a coin toss whether our newborn son Jaedin would make it through the first of many open heart surgeries that were his only chance at life. Again and again as he grew up, we retired helplessly to a waiting room, knowing that his tiny heart was on ice, and not knowing whether it would start beating again when they tried to shock him back to life.

In those moments of desperation, powerless except for prayer, you make all sorts of deals with God. You start to negotiate crazy things to try to prevent a power outage, a mechanical failure of the heart-lung machine, a slip of the surgeon’s hands, a lapse in his concentration, or the thousand other things that hold you completely hostage – but over which you have absolutely no control whatsoever. And when you have nothing left to bargain with, like Jean Valjean standing over his adopted son, I kept finding myself praying, Lord “let him live...let me die.”

So I’ve been there before, wanting to die...to save my son. Whether or not I realistically expected God to take me up on the offer, I don’t know, but I certainly put it on the table for His consideration. I’m sure Simon found himself with that same inclination during the most difficult days last week. Because I think that’s a universal reaction when there is true, unconditional love. If there had been a button that would allow me to trade places with Jaedin, I would have jumped off that cliff and pushed it without a moment’s hesitation. Somehow you convince yourself that your death could save this other soul – this piece of you that is on the brink of being torn from you. Maybe it’s a symbolic emotion that is granted to allow us to comprehend a tiny fraction of the real sacrifice that the Saviour made – one that actually could and did give others a chance at life. Whatever the reason, I do believe there is a deeper symbolism in these powerful emotions and that they are divinely designed to give us a slight glimpse of God’s love for us.

In Jaedin’s case, again and again, miracles, medical advances, and skilled surgeons returned him to our care so we could all face another round of the bout. I never wanted to believe it when the experts told us he wasn’t likely to reach adulthood; that prospect certainly didn’t get any easier to deal with over time. We had hope

in God's healing power, but I also knew that if we lost him, I'd find myself in a heap on the ground unable to function and unable to give him the service that he deserved and that others might need. So I did feel the need to prepare myself for that awful, just-in-case scenario – if for no other reason than to avoid letting down my family by being incapable of making crucial decisions or just putting one foot in front of the other if he did leave us. To avoid having to make any decisions if the worst case actually came to pass, I had planned out a service and covered the necessary logistics in my head.

The thought of Simon alone in a tool shed last week, trying to stay on his feet while he constructed the casket for his own son is heartbreaking, absolutely heartbreaking. I can't imagine the grief of a father in that setting. Actually I can imagine it, because I've lived the nightmare scenarios in my head, and the thought alone consumes me at times. Knowing that even greater pain was coming as he would have to lay his son's body in that casket, seal it up, and say goodbye...to me that scene conjures up the image of Christ the carpenter's son bearing the burden of his own cross, marching up to Calvary, weakened to the point of collapse, and knowing that greater suffering would come at the crest of the hill before the greater reward could be granted. When He stumbled along the way, someone stepped in to help, and I would hope that friends and family provided that same support to Simon and his family when they stumbled and struggled to stand up again and again over this past week.

Absalom

As much as we tend to beg God for deliverance from these things, I have to believe that these are the sorts of trials that tie us emotionally to our Father in Heaven's willingness to offer us His son. These experiences – though endured unwillingly – also tie us to Abraham and to countless of our own ancestors who have grieved and mourned as they suffered great loss...but somehow ended up blessed for the willingness to submit and give a child back to God. Even David, who was as imperfect as any of us, had to walk that road when his son Absalom died. His son had hurt him and those he loved very deeply with his actions, but David mourned relentlessly nonetheless. He cried out loud as he made his way to the city gate:

"O my son Absalom, my son, my son, my son Absalom! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son."

The rebellious choices his son had made preceding his death are irrelevant in that moment; love

prevails in the end, and to me at least, that wish to trade places sounds awfully familiar. A chapter later David is still weeping, still mourning, still wailing:

"O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

How many more unrecorded times did he cry out "my son, my son"? I'm sure it continued out loud for days on end and in his heart for weeks and then months and then years. There is something to be said for cultures with a wailing wall – there are inherent needs of mourning that aren't best met by the way we feel we need to conduct ourselves in polite Western society. Sometimes in the days leading up to one of Jaedin's surgeries, I'd find comfort at the bottom of a swimming pool after a long, exhausting run. You can scream underwater and let it all out. You can feel the pressure supporting you from every angle and the peace of floating. To leave gravity behind and eliminate any effort of having to hold yourself up is comforting in a way. And I imagine David's incessant wailing must have been in pursuit of a similar release.

As he shaped and moulded the wood of EJ's casket, no doubt Simon was mourning with those same words, "My son, my son." It seems striking that those are the same as the last words I heard Simon speak to his son in this life, when he said, "Son, my son!" with excitement and happiness as EJ arrived after some time away. It was the same set of words spoken only a few days apart, both founded in love and devotion, but with a stark contrast in their emotional context. I have to believe that the next time Simon says those words to EJ, the accompanying emotions will reflect that first reunion that I was privileged enough to witness – not dampened by the years apart but rather made that much more poignant by the love felt and expressed during the temporary separation.

I don't know how to imagine the sequence of heavenly events that transpire in a realm where we're told space and time aren't even measured – and past, present, and future are one – but I picture EJ having heard those same words already from his Father in Heaven while being comforted in a loving embrace: "My son, my son." Just like our earthly reunions we periodically have with our loved ones, that embrace represents a reuniting after a time away. The heavenly version is an experience we can all hope for and look forward to – and one that those who have lost children can appreciate and relate to that much more.

So in the meantime, how do we spend our efforts during the period of separation? One of the greatest

losses everyone keeps talking about is how much talent and potential EJ had, perhaps focussing on the tragedy of that lost potential. Was EJ's life cut short by the shortcut he took? Of course it was! Can we do anything about it? Of course we can! We can still help extend his influence and expand the ambitions of his life, and we can use those actions to improve our own lives and the lives of others. We don't need to create a fictitious character in our heads by ignoring his mistakes, his vices, and his shortcomings; we can still learn from them just like we can learn from our own imperfections – and each of us can come out of it a better person in the end.

However we build on it, it is up to those of us he left behind to foster the rest of his legacy. For one reason or another, he has left that privilege and that right of authorship in our hands. Now you and I both have the opportunity to choose the direction of his unfinished work. I keep coming back to this, but if you feel any pain or sorrow or regret or remorse, pick one of his talents or ambitions or positive attributes that you remember or have been told about, then adopt it, build on it, and circulate it. Those actions will add more chapters to EJ's book of life and keep it from closing.

Knowledge and doubts

Even in the most difficult circumstances, I believe that God provides some ways for us to turn tragedy into triumph. But I have to acknowledge that God also grants us the painful freedom to allow trying times to sink us instead. A tragedy certainly has just as much a chance to damage faith as to strengthen it. Wherever you are on that spectrum – whether you have a firm belief that there's no more to this life than we can see, a glimmer of hope that there might be something else, a belief that sometimes wavers, a firm belief that never falters, or a clear understanding and absolute knowledge of things to come – we can all choose to be better to each other in the future. Some of us have to rely on the knowledge of others to keep our faith; that is our lot in life. We're all at different points on the spiritual spectrum; but even levels of faith that fall well short of absolute knowledge are nonetheless gifts of the spirit. Modern-day revelation tells us that “to some it is given to *know*” but also that:

“To others it is given to *believe* on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful.”

In that passage, we're told that belief – which really isn't any different from hope – is no less a gift of the spirit than knowledge. Some of us don't get an actual knowledge of things unseen, so hope and belief is all we have to go on. But for one reason or another, the Lord

has promised the same ultimate reward to those who exercise these apparently lesser gifts of the spirit.

For better or for worse, my mind allows me to question absolutely everything, including the existence of the ground my feet walk on or this table that my hands can knock on. As real as they feel, science tells us that they're just empty space and energy. The apparently solid ground I'm standing on is nothing but a force, and a billion of these tables would be a billion times smaller than the tiniest grain of sand if you took away the empty space. So when I question things about the existence of God or the reality of an afterlife or the purpose of life's challenges, I can equally question my own existence or that of this table. And with those sorts of questions in my head, I can't claim the gift of knowing anything absolutely. Nothing except knowing what I believe, that is. And faithful adherence to that belief seems to be all that is asked of us in the scriptures.

When life doesn't seem to make sense, doubts do creep in. Sometimes my doubts don't come just in the form of questions but rather as a skewed focus. In my mind, the void of the missing puzzle piece can become much more significant than the many beautiful pieces that do fall neatly into place. I have this unfortunate tendency to ignore the finished work completely, overlooking it in favour of the empty hole where the missing piece should be. As an example of how that affects my faith, I believe that God intervenes in our lives sometimes, and that Christ had and still has the power to heal; but then that same belief leads me to focus on the rest of the time when He doesn't intervene. Instead of asking “Why are there miracles?” when they do happen, I find myself asking “Why aren't there miracles?” for all the rest of the situations when they don't happen.

I believe, for instance, that Christ healed the man who was told to wash himself in the pool at Bethesda. Now maybe this is the water engineer in me coming out, but bathing in a turbid pool next to a sheep market doesn't seem to be all that good for your health. If Jesus really wanted to heal people, how about some advice on separating potable water from sewer systems? Wouldn't that simple advice have healed a whole lot more people than just the lone man who exercised his faith in the Master and did as he was told? Adherence to advice about septic systems could have saved millions and millions of lives over centuries of time. Why not make that part of the Law of Moses instead all of the random rituals that fill up endless pages of the Old Testament? Yes that sounds ridiculous, but that's honestly the way I think.

And I have a hard time drawing the line there. If He can heal some, then why not others? If He can free a little zebra finch from its cage, couldn't He have done something else to heal EJ from his pain? Did He try and we didn't pick up on the clues? Was this path part of a deliberate, inevitable plan? Or are we all left to fend for ourselves without any Divine intervention at all? This line of thinking sounds so preposterous and the answers seem so clear when we're surrounded by support, but in times of sorrowful solitude and isolation, I know all too well that our thoughts can become clouded and these sorts of doubts can set in.

Acknowledging the occasional doubts, I do have a firm belief that healings – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – still occur in our day. But their sporadic manifestation is selective, and I can't say I understand the selection process. When Joseph Smith returned to Nauvoo and found many Saints bedridden with severe sickness, he told Parley P. Pratt and other apostles to quit blessing the people and to start healing them. So the apostles would raise their arm to the square and command the infirm to stand up and walk in the name of Christ. And matter-of-factly in their journals, these modern-day disciples – who had acted as instruments in God's hands – would then write about people instantly being made whole right there on the spot. I believe that power exists. I believe that those who are blessed with that gift of the spirit are able to invoke God's priesthood power to fulfil His purposes – whether that was centuries ago, millennia ago, or in our own day.

But I also know some of the tragic stories of loss within the walls of their own homes. Blessed with this power of healing, for example, why could Joseph Smith heal people he barely knew but not his own children? I believe that he bore the mantle of the sealing power. So with the five young children he and Emma lost, was he unable or just unwilling to exercise that power? Did Brother Joseph beg God to intervene only to recognise that it wasn't His will at that time? To have the faith that there is a grander purpose is sometimes the greatest trial in itself; if that was indeed the case, then he was effectively tested with the Abrahamic trial that comes back to President Uchtdorf's definition of patience: the willingness to submit to that which God chooses to inflict upon us. And despite my doubts, questions, and resistance to that submission, I always come back to the belief that God knows what's best for us in the end.

Self-diagnosis

In the forty four years I've been on this planet I've never known anyone to take their own life. Perhaps

that is statistically unlikely, but what is statistically impossible is my previous assumption that my jobless German friend was the only one I ever knew who had even considered ending his own life. I now recognise that it's a common enough condition that others around me have certainly been through, but that they may have chosen to bear it in silence. I've rarely had the desire or opportunity or prompting to share my own experience with depression, so I can see why it is typically withheld from polite conversation. Yes, it is a private thing. But if it's withheld, let's make sure it's not out of pride but rather that discretion happens to be warranted at the moment. And if prompted to share an experience, let's not hesitate to do so and potentially help someone else feel supported.

Now when I do open up about it I don't want anyone feeling guilty for not asking me how I was doing at the time or trying to help me somehow. For me it lasted only a few days and luckily it's not something I've struggled with since then. A few days later I found myself shaking my head wondering how I possibly could have been entertaining such crazy thoughts. I can't imagine the disorientation, debilitation, and pure exhaustion someone with a chronic mental illness deals with day in and day out. But my brief experience gave me enough of a glimpse that I now recognise the warning signs of my brain shutting down so that I can try to treat the causes – be that stress, sleep deprivation, or any other source – rather than the symptoms well before depression can fully set in.

I think the biggest revelation for me, though, is that mental illness is just that – an illness. Not a weakness, not a choice. Once subjected to the illness, the battle can take on a deeper symbolism, and perhaps other forces then come into play, but it begins as an inherently physical condition. Given that we have evolved with such a strong survival instinct, I can't grasp what advantage could ever come from the eventual wish to be removed from creation. Suicidal tendencies seem counter to the natural inclination of every creature on this planet. So perhaps once stricken by mental illness, the idea is more easily implanted by an adversarial force, or perhaps it is just a succession of the disease like a cancer or anything else. I don't know. Like substance addictions that begin as purely physical, chemical, and biological issues, though, once depression sets in I do know that in the midst of it, the physical, spiritual, and emotional conflicts can join forces against the victim in a very real battle for the soul.

Whether someone's vices include junk food or alcohol or hard-core drugs, everyone recognises the

need to take care of your physical body so that you can remain in control of your own destiny. Not so with taking care of your mind; for some reason, it seems to be the most neglected organ as far as seeking professional treatment. Nobody would put up with a broken arm for long without a visit to the doctor – you wouldn't hear anyone giving the advice to just pray and read your scriptures to stop the pain. For some reason, though, broken minds are often prescribed these home remedies; and when the remedies fail, it is sometimes perceived as a weakness of spirit.

If someone succumbs to an illness of the body, there doesn't seem to be any talk about how they should have fought harder or that they somehow gave up. Yes, the disease may have got the better of them, but losing a battle against mental illness is no more an abdication than losing a battle against cancer or a heart attack. I'm not sure I understood that before nearly doing myself in with an all but lethal combination of stress and sleep deprivation. The mind is a part of the body just like any other organ, making mental illness an inherently physical illness. And at its root, an illness of the mind is no different than an illness of the body.

And just like an illness or injury to the body, the mind can be treated and in some cases healed. There are often neglected but generally effective treatments available if we would recognise the symptoms early enough – talking with others being one of those proven but intimidating first steps of the triage. If I were afraid of how others would look at the cast on my arm, I might put up with the pain and go about my day with a broken arm. That's essentially what many of us do with our minds every day. So I'm all for removing any remaining taboos around the subject of mental health. And if my story or EJ's story or anybody else's story can help accomplish that, I guess that's why I'm sharing this with you.

Emotional spectrum

In addition to our varied physical traits, God has given us a full spectrum of emotions, each with its own purpose. Our emotional needs and responses are perhaps even more varied than our physical features. Everyone in the congregation here will hear the same words spoken; but the difficulty in preparing a talk or a lesson is knowing that the same words that enlighten some will offend others; what motivates one person just annoys another.

I watched EJ stand up and walk out of boring church meetings when he didn't see the substance in it or feel the application to real life. So would he really want

me to speak of him from the pulpit in a boring, monotonous tribute that triggers only the emotion of glassy-eyed comfort? Maybe that works for some of us, but I don't think EJ would want us all sitting around singing Kumbaya and patting each other on the back for being righteous enough to go to heaven. Is that real life? No! I think he'd want things to be a bit more direct and honest – blunt, all-encompassing, and to the point. I think he'd want a sermon to be diversified and piercing when needed – perhaps even shouted at times for effect! Why not? What are we afraid of? Offending someone with volume or enthusiasm?

The same could be said for our music. Do our songs have to be mumbled or can we apply the same constructive critique there? From what I know of EJ's musical tastes, I think he'd want the music expressed with more animation and with a wider range of emotions as well – not just the happy music, but the full spectrum of songs that deal with contrasting feelings. Elder Oaks said our hymns should be sung "fervently." Paul said songs should not just teach but admonish as well. To me that implies a range of purposes besides just placid praise. When my dad was a bishop, he used to stand up and stop the music right in the middle of the hymn, scolding the congregation by saying that angelic choirs would never mumble their lyrics. As a teenager in the audience, I'd duck my head in shame, but I actually agree with him now.

So let's liven it up a notch! In planning a possible service for Jaedin, I had gone so far as to choose the photos and songs for a slide show, knowing that I wouldn't be able to bear going through pictures and music if we lost him. If my OCD gets the better of me with a missing puzzle piece or a missing video driving me mad, you can imagine that a missing family member would do me in entirely, bringing my brain to a screeching halt...let alone the effect on my heart. With that prospect in mind, I imagined that music – the whole range of music from Metallica to Motab – would be one of my only bridges to sanity and expression.

A song can take on any meaning that we give it, and from then on, it can become a trigger for a wide range of emotions. In the decade or more since I made the original playlist for Jaedin, each time the DJ in the sky puts one of these songs on the radio or my iPod "randomly" shuffles to it, it reminds me of our tough times with Jaedin, and of the uncertainty in the number of days that may still lie ahead for him – or for any of us for that matter. With certain songs, I'll instantly find myself choked up and wiping tears from my eyes on a jog or at my computer or on a city bus. I try to use those

emotional times to prompt me to better appreciate each day with him and with each of our other kids who could just as well face some tragic circumstance at any moment.

I also recognise that some of the songs I chose are songs of despair. Some focus on anger or sadness rather than just hope. But at the time I didn't want some sugar-coated view of the future that would try to take away any of the hurt. I think I needed to hurt. And I felt like I would have been cheating Jaedin somehow by circumventing or in any way trying to minimise that part of the healing process. Songs of comfort are of course also necessary but I think it takes a full mix to match the roller coaster of the deep emotions associated with loss, and to cope with feelings that sway back and forth across the entire spectrum.

Placation

While we were freaking out about the great unknown that preceded each of Jaedin's imminent surgeries, a lot of people would bear their testimonies and say things like "Either way, you'll see your son again." Well of course we would...yes, I believe that, too, just as I believe Simon will see his son again and that their family will be reunited. But the repetition of those words sometimes seemed to undermine the true intentions behind the statements. Our Mormon friends would testify again and again of eternal families – I think I heard it so many times that the words began to lose their significance to me. If there's someone out there who doesn't believe in an afterlife, and after they lose a child you can somehow convince them of your belief that families are eternal, to that person the message of eternal families may be comforting. But it's not something that I question any more than I can question my own existence, so having people tell me that they firmly believe it is fine for them, but I have to admit that eventually I didn't feel any additional comfort in that message.

I can certainly say that without my faith the potential loss would have been completely unbearable, but no part of my faith made it any easier to imagine mortal life without Jaedin in the meantime. No comprehension of the "brief" time without him made that time seem any shorter. It just stretched eternity out to an unfathomable timeframe. I found myself with the unfortunate ability to project the impact of the missing puzzle pieces of his life into future generations around the world all the way to the threshold of the eternities.

I could nod and say thanks for their comments, but at the time, I think I needed a full spectrum of

people's support. What I really needed from my real friends and from my family was to know that they realised how huge a loss it would be. Of course I believed I would see him again if we had lost him; the belief in an eternal reunion is integral to my soul. But in my mind and in my heart I had also taken every possible path to its own succession and I knew how deeply and extensively it would hurt every day for the rest of my life. I guess I needed to know that, like me, they had considered each of the 20,000 family photos that he would be missing from. The vacations, the milestones, the birthdays, the holidays and the everydays.

"Don't tell me I should feel better because it's only temporary," I would respond silently, "I know that already!" Maybe people did feel that potential loss with me but were afraid to express it. But to me true sympathy or empathy involves a need to know that they understand how significant a loss it would be – and that it can't just be brushed aside in a 160-character tweet about how I'll see him again someday. Until they have followed every path to its end, considered every implication of the void, thought of every relationship and missed opportunity and memory, having seen the entirety of the future all at once and comprehended the significance of that loss...until then, I didn't see how anyone could really say they were grieving with us.

Maybe people were just afraid of offending me by bringing up things that might be considered negative. Maybe they thought that mentioning these sorts of things would get me down. And that happy, positive thought are the only appropriate thoughts to share under the circumstances. I don't blame anyone for that. I do the same thing, using the fear of offending others as an excuse to dodge reality and keep things superficial. Maybe I shouldn't mention these sorts of things now, fearing the words might hurt EJ's family – as if they hadn't thought through the trials themselves. But I know they have. And I know that's why it hurts so badly. And I would hope that mentioning some of the sadder aspects wouldn't necessarily get them down but would rather show them some small understanding of the implications. Because I've covered these tracks a thousand times over every time we said goodbye to Jaedin and didn't know whether his heart would be beating the next time we saw him. That was my reality at the time, and it is my reality now – as real as anything can ever be.

What I think I would have needed from people at the time was for them to grieve with me and let me know that they understood how the loss would have affected every single relationship in our family. Jaedin had no

siblings during his first surgery, and we mourned the thought of losing our own time with him. The next time around he had a brother, and it felt even harder to think of that lost relationship. Every time we added another member of our family, the potential loss and pain seemed to increase exponentially – not just for the kids who were close to him but for those who would never know him as well. EJ has eight lost relationships in his immediate family to be mourned, and I know that every single one of those special and unique relationships adds to the loss felt by Simon and Amanda. In mourning together with them through service or support, all we can hope for is that sharing the loss and expressing the sympathy and empathy we feel has the effect of lightening that burden as much as possible.

Perspective

So back to the missing zebra finch and birthday photos, if I was feeling sorry for myself and for my daughter at the time, the events that followed sure put it all into perspective – along with every other mundane concern I tend to pre-occupy myself with while the really important things in life go unnoticed and unappreciated.

Really, what was I stressing about? How much of my future will actually be affected by the loss of my phone's memory? I rarely take the time to go back and look at old videos; how long until I would have watched these particular missing clips? Would I have ever missed them at all? At most I've lost maybe ten minutes of total reminiscing time out of my future. That's it! Big deal! But I let that loss ruin a whole day of my life and then some. And now, in fact, you've just spent longer listening to me complain about it than the amount of time those clips ever covered in the first place. And if you felt sorry for Berkeley losing her bird, I felt sorry for her too, but knowing that a hug and \$7.50 at the pet store has now largely compensated for that void, I recognise that my own perspective needs a major adjustment.

In the end, I think it comes down to the lessons that we take from each of the apparently random experiences that are thrown our way – some seemingly inconsequential and others immediately and catastrophically consequential. I'm still not sure of the intended lesson in the little bird's disappearance, but I do see some symbolism to much more significant losses. Although I told Berkeley I was sure her missing bird was happier in the wild, I have to admit my doubts. If that were true, shouldn't we just set all of her birds free and go down to the Bird Fish and Reptile Place with some bolt cutters to orchestrate a mass breakout?

Even if we deliberately set them free with the belief that animals shouldn't be caged, we all know that the real, outdoor world can be cruel, and that the cage may have been much safer in the end. To make the best decision for each bird, we would need a perfect understanding of each one's individual abilities. Without a crystal ball to warn us of every possible predator or peril, we can never know which birds will do better on the loose than in a cage. This train of thought leads me to some parallels with EJ's story, and to the attempts that were made to help him over the years – alternating between freedom and restraint. And it shows me that all we can ever do is to take our best initiative given our limited perspective.

Berkeley had expressed these same fears – worrying how her little bird might be coping in a big, scary world full of danger. I told her that the pain she felt for that missing bird was actually a thing of beauty, because her hurt and concern only reflects a caring love. I believe in that concept – in the idea that sorrowful pain can be healing because it is only painful when there is love to back it up – but just because I tried to turn the experience into a life lesson for Berkeley doesn't mean I've actually learnt that lesson myself. Given the uncertainties on the road ahead, I may need to keep learning that lesson the hard way. The only way. The Lord's way. Which despite our resistance ultimately becomes the best way forward for our souls and – unlikely as it seems – the easiest way back to Him.

Just like the thought of granting a bird its freedom scared Berkeley, parents everywhere share a similar but much deeper concern for their kids – whether it's the first day of Kindy or a foster home for a wayward teenager. On top of their physical welfare, parents have the added concern and sometimes overwhelming responsibility for their children's spiritual welfare. For those kids who struggle to cope in a cage, the knowledge that freedom can also bring harm makes the decision to grant any measure of that freedom much more difficult. We won't be blessed with the absolute insights and foresights and omniscience to be able to predict the ultimate outcome of our best efforts; sometimes they will go horribly wrong. What I do take from it boils down to our limited knowledge and power in relation to God's unlimited knowledge and power. God understands that predicament and expects only our best effort – along with our mistakes and our improvements.

Supporting Angels

A few years before we moved to Australia, my youngest uncle passed away unexpectedly. I remember

watching my Grandma trying to walk around at her son's funeral – barely managing to put one foot in front of the other. Her other kids huddled around her, and it was touching to me to see how they all propped her up and supported her as she walked.

When my younger sister lost her little boy two years ago, I wanted very badly to be there with her to support her – to help prop her up like my aunts and uncles had done for my Grandma. But we were stuck here on the other side of the world, so angels had to stand in for me. My parents and other siblings offered their shoulders for her to lean on as she walked through each of the trying obligations she had to fulfil – the things I had dreaded facing with Jaedin.

During those strenuous times, I believe that if we could only put on spiritual lenses, we would see my Grandma and my sister not just propped up by their parents, children and siblings, but also surrounded by many others. I've read enough accounts of people who have had a glimpse of deeper powers to know that if you could tune in, you would see grieving parents literally supported by angels like a wounded and shell-shocked soldier on the battlefield who walks only because he's got his arms around his brothers-in-arms. We have that promise of support directly from the Lord:

"I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up."

People who are walking around carefree probably aren't looking to the angels to prop them up. If we hadn't been knocked down, we wouldn't call on them to stand in. In cases of deep loss, though, I believe the angels have been directly instructed to bear up those who are mourning – instructed by the Saviour Himself, who is literally at our left and at our right, going before our faces to clear the way and lead us home in His own time and along His chosen path for us. I believe that when we watch the celestial channel's replay of EJ's memorial service, graveside service, and all of the things that preceded it, we'll see that we were in the minority compared to the heavenly hosts who were surrounding us and propping up those who needed it most.

Bargain Price

As we hit the road after EJ's touching memorial service, we left with a resolve to hug our children much tighter and to get to know them even better as we march together along this new path. Even though the effects of light, joy and blessings may appear to lie in the distant

future, the net effect of EJ's life on the hundreds and hundreds of people who knew him has already resulted in a deeper appreciation for each of the relationships around us.

To wrap this up, I thought I'd add my last memory of EJ to the stories that were shared at the memorial service. I guess I'd prefer to call it my *most recent* memory, since I don't believe in last memories...but I wanted to at least write it down in my journal as part of my commitment to make a change in my own life.

My most recent memory of EJ was outside the house around the bonfire at Isaac's party. EJ came out and started playing with the younger kids who were out on the trampoline. He picked up Berkeley and was carrying her around just for fun. She was really enjoying herself, and I thought to myself, "He's like that fun-loving, crazy uncle you see in the movies!" Without family anywhere near us, our kids don't have the chance to get to know any real uncles. So substitute uncles like EJ take their place. When the thought that he'll make an awesome uncle or dad someday crossed my mind, it did so in absolute silence; I didn't even think of telling him that myself. Looking back on it, of course now I wish I would have put the generational gaps aside and said something to him instead of just saying it to myself.

How much does a compliment cost, anyway? I mean really, what's the cost of a kind word, an encouraging remark, or a question to find out how somebody is doing?

Should have done it?

Now go do it!

Little did I know that would be the long-lasting, last living memory I'd have of EJ. But it was a good one, and if you can picture it yourself now that I've shared it with you, hopefully it's been added to your permanent impressions of him, whether you knew him or not. What a great kid! He wasn't perfect, but he'll be missed and never forgotten. Let's help make sure of that by respecting each other and helping each other, remembering that God cares about and values every little zebra finch and every little one of us.

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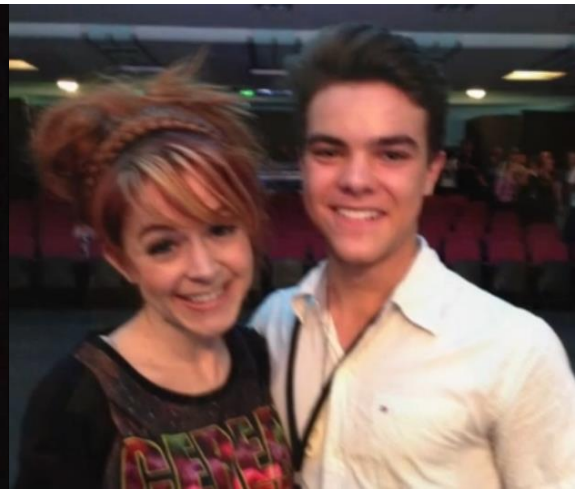
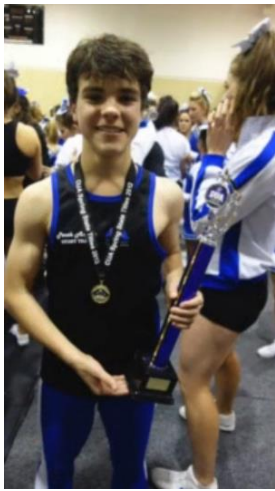
Epilogue: Just a few weeks after this talk, I heard from a member of my old church youth group back home that her sixteen-year-old son Zeb – who had shared many of the same interests and passions as EJ – had likewise taken his own life. Though it happened half a world away, the tragically similar circumstances sounded all too familiar; I can now picture Zeb and EJ called on a mission together, perhaps knocking on my door to prompt me to share this.





EJ at Isaac's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party

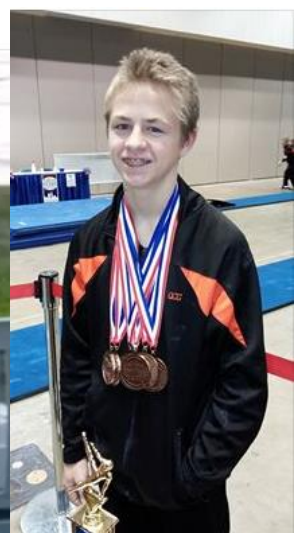
Zebra finches in their cage



Gymnastics trophy

EJ with his violin

EJ with Lindsey Stirling



EJ at 15

Zeb at the keyboard

Zeb with gymnastics medals

Links:

[EJ's eulogy](#)

[EJ's video slideshow](#)

[BYU Men's Choir performing Master the Tempest is Raging](#)

[Story of Master the Tempest is Raging](#)

["Tempestuous" \(Variation on Master the Tempest is Raging\)](#)



EJ's handmade casket with lacquered photos



Graffiti on a wall in Melbourne in honour of EJ



Team Zeb



A Final Salute