

Two Boys

By Francis X. Kroncke

A. The boys

I heard him shriek. It was a haunting sound which had pursued me in my nightmares for years. Now, in a flash of photographic imagery, I was seeing my little brother enter death's jaws once again. He shrieked. I snapped back with the jerky, gasping astonishment of one just woken from a chase dream. I was alert. Clammy droplets of perspiration tingled me with the chill of the shudder felt as the pursuer grabs you...and you awake! He shrieked. I yanked my head around, forcing myself to confront this re-enactment. With heart-stopping dread, I allowed myself to accept the fact—my son was being gripped by the jaws of death.

Joey was two and one half and had just ambled up the stairs on threes and fours and nestled himself next to me. I continued reading. I touched him gently because I knew that he had had a terrible night. I had awoke, periodically, from deep and heavy sleep to his shrill cries which my parents could not comfort.

Between a page of a book I do not, and care not to, remember, death's grasp slipped between our brotherly bodies. Joey rose slightly, as if doing a baby push-up and his eyes (sweet baby brown) rotated, slowly but unstopably from left to right to lodge—jiggling to a halt like slot machine pictures—at the extremes of his sockets. Simultaneously, his body arched—recoiling as if driven upward by some fierce strike to his stomach—into a muscular rigidity. He uttered a desperate sound as foam spewed and fluttered from his mouth.

In the kitchen, my Nicholas recoiled, arms rifled upwards, and that desperate sound—a sound of pain accompanied by bewilderment—scored my ears. Convulsive spittle sprayed his high chair tray and the most terrifying re-run of my life began to unfold.

I had never wanted to know what Mom and Dad experienced as they scrambled, talking in shouts of fears and prayers, from our summer cottage in South Jersey with Joey in their arms, stiff as a fireplace log. I didn't want, ever, to ever approach the pain of diminishing hope as they raced along country roads not knowing where to find a doctor and, finally, having to settle for a bartender's whiskey bath, the sole medical application available to apply in an effort to lower Joey's extreme temperature. As I grew, I prayed that I would never have to walk into a hospital room and observe the

skilled dance of white-coated healers around the body of my child. [Never, it would never happen twice in one's life!] I never wanted to have that one-on-one meeting where such words as "We cannot determine the cause" and "We've done all one could, but..." and "It is now in the hands of God" were spoken.

I never, in all my prayers, ever prayed for the strength to be as stolid in the faith as my Mom and Dad were. They had been tested, and proven true. "No," I uttered, "I need not be tested. Surely, God is satisfied with our family's witness!" Yet, there is Nicky. Exactly the same age as Joey. Quite similar in body type, soft brown-eyes. There he is with tubes in and out of him and a seven minute rhythm of grand mal convulsions.

I was spared some of the duration of my parent's immediate pain. They had been at the shore during the summer, remote from hospitals and doctors. We lived but a dozen blocks from a medical center. As I screamed at my wife and older son to get dressed, I cradled Nicky in my arms, too dumbstruck to cry. So much of the event was like my Mom and Dad's that I kept pounding words and cries at the reality of the moment. I had only blocks to drive but we were in the midst of a Maryland blizzard. I was a wildman at the wheel. Flashing lights and pounding the horn, I slid and maneuvered every stoplight. Though I sped, the road before me seemed endless. I was treading every inch of the way as if I were crawling and could feel the road scrape my flesh. In the madness of it all, every car on the road resented my disregard for law and order and angrily beeped and flashed at me. Curses and cries of "Idiot!" were amplified by my wife's own gasps and cries that I slow down and "Don't get us all killed!"

The last fifty yards to the Emergency Room was slush and blowing snow. Nicholas was still rigid. I felt what could only have been the male equivalent of the onset of birthing. The door to Shady Grove hospital got larger and larger and I sensed that we, Nicholas and I, were dying towards a light.

When they brought us all—all eight of us, three brothers and five sisters—to see Joey at St. Vincent's in New York City, we, as a family, were beyond tears. We had dedicated our daily prayers to St. Jude, the patron saint of hopeless causes and we invoked the miraculous intercession of Blessed Mother Seton, whom the Roman Catholic church felt was a saint. When we entered the room, we harbored only the prayerful expectation that, in front of our eyes, God would work a miracle. We were of such a faith that what to others was unbelievable or impossible, was the stuff of daily anticipation. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead and cured numerous others. That such physical healing was to be confidently expected was part of both our beliefs and faith. We, confident in hope, expected a miracle-as-magic. A

suspension of physical laws. Something to happen to Joey.

Joey never recovered or even approached being what we term "normal." He became a vegetative person. Many times during my moments with him—at home or in the nursing facility where we sadly had to place him—I yearned to communicate with him. I'd try hard to speak to his eyes or hug him with an embrace which would say to his heart, "I love you. You are my brother—my little brother and I will care for you, protect you, forever." But I have never been able to state, to confess—until now—that I did not believe that I had touched him. I, for so many years, knew that through Joey all that I had believed in, all the comfort which I hoped Jesus would provide, was empty. My arms hugged him over the years, but only the void, that terrible emptiness, pressed my heart. What was I to make of faith, hope, and worship when at this moment of trial—trial not just for me but of God—I found only the hopelessness of my own inability to hear a response from God through Joey? God—offered the chance—had not acted as only God can—miraculously.

As I looked at Nicky, I knew that I must not leave him for a moment. The head nurse made me move, after the first night in intensive care, to a room with a roll down couch. Through snatches of sleep, I made it around the clock with frequent visits to see him. He was maintained at a high level of sedation though this did not stop his predictable seizures. His small body was like a sensitive seismograph. It registered each movement toward the seizure with twitches and an emptiness in his eyes. I could predict to the precise moment his progress to seizure. At first the nurses tolerated my insinuations, but as my accuracy improved they stood ready at my side. Despite the medication, he would seize for seven minutes. With him I slid into the contortions of his body (a miniature scale of my own) contortions from rigidity through spasm to flaccidity. He lay there—"my child!"—like jello. A doctor pushed up Nicky's arm and it slithered out of his hands like tear drops. I must confess that I wanted to die in his stead! That I petitioned heaven and all that is good on earth to cast the evil spirits from his body into mine—make me into a swine of Gadarene! But this miracle was not to be, as it had not been with Joey. I would have to live through this experience in death's jaws, two times.

It took nine years for Joey's body to surrender. On a crackling cold day—with the special Minnesota combination of bright sun and frozen earth—our family stood before the carved pit which would receive the last born but first dead. We cried and we grieved as much from the hurt of powerlessness as from that of loss. With Joey, draped on his casket aside the roses we each individually placed, were my lost beliefs and faith. No, I did not articulate it as such. Yes, I carried out in detail the ritual and the prayers. But as to each

parent so as to each child, I dissembled less than what I once had been as person and believer. As a family we were crushed by what had crushed so many - the chilling lack of God's response to the question, "Why do evil things happen to innocent children?" As a family, we have carried this story—without ending—for over 25 years. Why was it being revived through my flesh and blood? Am I the least believing of all?

All in all it was only ten days. Days which included the Super Bowl. Dates which most could not recall with precision. For me each of the three CAT scans, the spinal tap, the blood tests, the electroencephalogram, each probe, shot, testing and retesting is notched on my heart. Yet, all went so fast that several neighbors did not know what happened until it was over.

Yet, what was over has never and will never end. Because the lives of Joey and Nicholas became intertwined. Only while at Nick's bed side did the clarity of Joey's death reveal itself. Together, they healed me. Yes, healed me.

B. A message

For that is what happened. As with Joey, numerous friends were praying for Nicky. Our pastor had come to the hospital and prayed the healing liturgy. As before, so now, in my heart of hearts I ached for a miraculous intervention, for something visibly astounding to happen to Nicky. But unlike Joey's time, in Nick's time a message was heard by me. A miracle did occur. It happened in this manner. At some moment in one exhausting night of watching, I accepted Nicholas' life. Accepted his limp body as Mary accepted her son from the cross. In so accepting, I was enlivened by resurrection hope. I embraced Nicky's dying, his death, his possible living like Joey in a semi-dead state. I embraced him dying and was, thus, raised from my dying.

I did not proffer my life for his. I rejected being a Gazarene swine. I did not want to imitate Jesus as I had been taught—to offer myself in Nicky's stead. Rather, I embraced and accepted Nicholas for what our living together was and might be. I received his life. Instead of my embracing him, seeking to send forth my loving energies to him, I allowed myself to be embraced by him. I accepted his dying and thus my living. Yes, if death was to overtake his living, then, I would live without my child, my body. I affirmed, confirmed and celebrated his life -- Nicky as sick and dying. And in so doing, the fullness of Joey's life infused me.

I realized during this awesome but ordinary moment of embracing my child that he was miraculous in that I was touched by God's love and faithfulness.

I had pitied Nick and Joey as "the least," as the wretched to whom Jesus preached that I should serve. Yet, it is I who am the least, the despised, the outcast (sick one). My sin is in not accepting life with its death. In trying to live the resurrection without the cross. That is, to live in a magical land where external reality could be altered through my words and requests. I had to face the hard fact that the question is not, "Why do evil things happen to innocent children," but, "Why do worldly wise adults not do good things?" Meaning live joyously. Meaning live faithfully.

The good thing, here, is the acceptance of being loved. Yes, I had been loved by my wife, family and friends. But here for the first time was love which I could not return! It came to me without condition, without need -- as a gift. Why do I not accept the embrace of God? Why do I close my eyes so as not to see that the miraculous is cloaked in the ordinary? Why do I look at the world and proclaim that I only see sickness and death outside and around me when what I see is life, but a life I cloak with death's power?

What I have so wretchedly misinterpreted was the joy of my brother's life. I had not received Joey's embrace. I had only wanted to give to him, live my life for him, and not with him. Through Nicholas, Joey embraced me. Through them I have become a miracle.

Today, Nicholas is approaching four. Everyone was and is astonished at his unpredictable, unexpected and "miraculous" total recovery. She confessed that she was coming to tell me that possibly in six months (possibly!) through extensive rehabilitation that Nicholas might sit up. And this highly skilled and respected doctor said this to a sitting Nicholas! The next day I was pushing him around the ward in a stroller. The next, we walked hand in hand. Then, they said, "Err...do you think that you'd like to go home?!"

C. A theological perspective

As I retell these experiences I realize that the Two Boys revealed several truths to me. First, that what often appears to be chaos is really order. That is, a new and different order. Both boys were struck by forces which disordered their lives. More, I could not make any order, any sense out of what was happening and why it was happening. Slowly, I came to see the new order. What was happening to them was inextricably wound up with what was happening to me!

On the apparent level there was no causality. Yet, both boys were causes of my reordering and I a cause of theirs. Joey, was to most eyes "out of order," that is, a vegetative person. Many would struggle with defining him as a "full" person, if person at all. What they missed was the miracle! That is, the

peculiar way of seeing what is actually happening "to them, not to him". It was not that the world, nature, random chance attacked and destroyed Joey. Rather, while such can be said with some accuracy, what occurred was the unfolding of his and my new personal relationship. Joey took me into the world of the miraculous. No longer would I ever be able to be normal, that is, live without miracle.

Yet, the reality of this miraculous relationship was imprisoned within my mind for years because it did not fit the definition of miracle as something supernatural or beyond sense. Indeed, if the miracle was effected by me, then it would have been supernatural—messianic. But such does not exist! Rather, the miracle came from the boys to me. I was the one healed. The miraculous occurs when one is embraced by, accepts the embrace of, another. This is 180 degrees away from how tradition speaks of miracle. How is this grounded? What is the frame of reference for my statement? It is Jesus.

Jesus did not astound people by magical acts which conjured up forces or spirits which were unfamiliar, alien, or strange to his times. We do not find the gospels saying, "Hear this! Jesus did something we have never seen before —something so incredible, humans have never heard or seen the like!" No, a current reader is amazed at how unamazed are the witnesses of Jesus' healing the blind or raising the dead! How little attention is paid to those healed.

What did happen to Lazarus? How did he live his new life? Did he die again? Such questions are not raised, we can conjecture, because they are the wrong questions. Yes, they found such events spectacular, but it was not upon such events that faith in Jesus rested. Rather, what was unprecedented, what was termed blasphemy and sacrilege, was the forgiving of sins. But such forgiveness did not mean the simple invocation of an already established ritual such as a sacrament of penance or confession.

To the contrary, what Jesus did was accept the other, allow him or her to embrace him. Yes, he allowed them to enter his intimacy, to become one with him, to no longer be stranger. They entered, not by covenant but, by loving. Jesus accepted sin : our death and dying self, and he enlivened. He is still present as we accept him as we receive others with all of our sins.

Jesus was not a scapegoat—one who died in another's stead. He was not a substitute for you or me. Rather, he was/is you or me in loving embrace. Faith describes this embracing and being embraced. Through the embrace the miraculous reveals its ordinary dimensions.

This is the miracle of Jesus: he embraced others; he allowed himself to be embraced. He risked total vulnerability as one who accepts other "on their own terms". He did not covenant with others, that is, join with them through mutual acceptance of exclusive rules or beliefs. Rather, he went beyond all covenants and received the embrace of all—all sinners. He did this publically, thus revealing who was truly the sick and the sinners—those who heard and were healed by accepting others as Jesus himself did. Other people—you and I—are the cross which Jesus bore. And, we must embrace our cross and follow him.

One becomes a sinner by breaking certain codes or laws. While not abolishing the law (and therefore sin still exists) Jesus fulfills the law, that is, embraces the sinner and death and therefore forgives and heals the sinner. Together, in embrace, Jesus and Joey, Nicky and I express the miraculous presence of God as mercy, forgiveness, and healing.

Until Nicky's grasp by death, I did not understand Jesus. I had felt uncomfortable praying for miracles. I felt guilty about feeling uncomfortable! I was not ready to hear the meaning of my life—I was not ready to receive. I had been active in imitating the Jesus-as-magician. My prayers were uttered like magic phrases—"hocus pocus!" Only when the boys spoke and I listened did it become clear what my life was meant to be. It is a life free from sin, from imprisonment to the forms of darkness, a life in which death is real but meaningless.

Nicholas is growing big, strong and voraciously verbal. Yet, he will, more than likely, not remember the event. He will not know this story of his and Joey's miracle except as I tell it. But such is not important because it is for him to hear the call of Jesus to be embraced and to want for me and you to become miraculous.

END

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Note: A formative set of experiences. My brother's illness and early death which informed my [trial defense](#). Later, my son's illness which was part of my post-priso Dark Night journey.

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