Robert David Cordell

Remembrance

Think of me as a distant cousin of the Ghost of Jacob Marley. I’m going to tell a story about a family. Although it is my family, it could have been yours. Be thankful that it is not yours.

My son died.

If that sentence seems harsh, abrupt, and without transition, then it is a fair reflection of the event it represents. It has nine measly letters and three ordinary words in a simple sentence construction, yet the underlying concept is too complex for human understanding.

Just about all of us expect our parents to die before we do. Most of us recognize that there is a good chance that our spouse may die before we do. Hardly any of us expect our children to die before we do. The sense of loss is so far beyond any other life experience.

I have seen the difference in the reaction of my friends and acquaintances. When they learned that my mother died, they responded with an appropriate and concerned, “I’m sorry for your loss.” When they learned that my son died, they gasped. They told me that they didn’t know what to say. There really was nothing that they could say.

I’m not a great man. Great men distinguish themselves by their great ideas or great deeds, bravery, originality, creativity. Their accomplishments transcend generations. They become immortal. Although I’m not a great man by that standard, I’d like to think of myself as a good man.

We merely good men can achieve immortality only vicariously, through our children. Perhaps there is something in our DNA that seeks self-replication not merely to preserve the species, but to preserve something of ourselves. When we lose a parent, we lose part of our past. When we lose a child, we lose a part of our future. We lose our legacy.

Some parents lose a child to disease. Some, to an accident. Some, to a heroic activity. Those of us who lose a child to something self-inflicted, whether intentional or not, experience not merely a sense of loss, but a sense of failure as well. My son’s behaviors put his life and the lives of others at risk. He chose those behaviors. Ultimately, one of those behaviors killed him.

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A few weeks ago I walked to the student union for lunch. As I stood in line I caught a glimpse from the corner of my eye of a young man with a mop of curly blond hair. Could it be Rob? For a fraction of an instant, the immeasurable period of time that separates
fantasy from reality, I experienced a rapturous level of joy that I had never known. My son had been resurrected. It had all been a surreal nightmare from which I had finally awoken. He was alive!

Then the sledgehammer of reality slammed into my chest. The young man was too blonde. Too tall. Too thin. Most of all, he was too alive.

I wish I were articulate enough to describe the speed and depth of my descent from ecstasy to misery. I have tried to find the right words, but I can’t. I don’t think they exist.

As a professor of a large university I see hundreds of young coeds every day. Sometimes I look at a young woman and wonder if she’s the one—the one who could have turned Rob’s life around.

One of my students is pretty and cheery with a ready smile. She is energetic, enthusiastic, religious, conscientious. She reminds me of my wife Martha. Why couldn’t Rob have found someone like her—someone who could help him realize where his life was headed; to help him change directions; to fill the voids in his life?

I keep thinking of two movie scenes. At the end of Jerry Maguire, the title character barges into a gathering of women at the home of his estranged wife. He is determined to win her back, and within a long explanation of his thoughts, he reveals earnestly, “You complete me.”

In the original Rocky, Paulie asks Rocky why he is interested in Paulie’s sister Adrian.
Paulie: What’s the attraction? I don’t see it?
Rocky: I dunno -- she fills gaps.
Paulie: What gaps?
Rocky: (shrugs) She got gaps. I got gaps. Together we fill the gaps.

Rob needed someone to complete him. He had gaps. I don’t know why, but Rob had gaps. I kept hoping that he would find someone or something productive to fill the gaps. A girl. A career interest. A hobby. Instead, Rob filled the gaps with alcohol and drugs.

It wasn’t always that way, of course. It might help to share some of his early life. Rob was our first child and our only child for over five years. He was the first grandchild of my parents, and the favorite grandchild of my wife’s mother. We doted on him. He was a bright, handsome, good-natured boy, with a little bit of attention deficit, but he was in every way a normal and happy child.

By ninth grade, Rob began to change and became less pleasant to be around. That’s not particularly unusual for a ninth grader, so we weren’t overly concerned. In the meantime, Rob’s younger brother Christopher became involved in the theatre,
eventually going on a national tour and appearing in three Broadway shows. Rob had always struggled dealing with Christopher, who was very bright and had a natural presence. One time when they were about 10 and 4 respectively, Rob asked me, “How come Christopher notices things that I don’t notice?” I think that Rob developed a deep resentment toward Christopher.

We lived in Philadelphia when Rob was 16. His grades had begun to fall, and his general behavior and attitude were disturbing. He was getting into trouble at school. We didn’t see evidence of drug or alcohol use, but we were suspicious of marijuana. Still, he remained involved in Scouts and in the band at school. We hoped that he would straighten out eventually.

One Saturday morning Martha and I drove to New York to see Christopher in a matinee, leaving Rob behind. When we returned home that evening, Rob was sitting in the family room with his Scoutmaster. We learned that Rob had been arrested for shoplifting four CDs from a record store.

Rob’s class rank fell from the top quarter to the bottom half. I found evidence of marijuana use in his room. Home-made bongs. I found evidence on the computer that he had gone to websites that sold techniques that purportedly could beat drug tests.

One Saturday night, he returned from a band trip to Florida. No sooner did he set foot in the house than he asked if he could go over to a friend’s house. We begrudgingly let him take the car, but made it clear that he needed to be home by midnight. But he called from the friend’s house and asked if he could spend the night. We were very annoyed at this ploy, but we allowed him to stay as long as he returned home by 8:30 the next morning for church. We received a call from him just before 8:30 on Sunday morning. He had been driving home from the friend’s house but fell asleep at the wheel. He ran through a stop sign at a T intersection in a residential neighborhood, jumped the curb, and ran into a tree in middle of someone’s yard. The tree, which was over 25 years old, was knocked off kilter, and the car, a minivan, was totaled. The homeowner was a physician and assured us that she could smell alcohol on Rob.

Still, he completed his Eagle Scout rank and received the Order of the Arrow, and we were very proud of those accomplishments. We glowed when he graduated from high school, but when we took photos of him and his date prior to the senior prom, it was obvious that he was under the influence of something.
After Rob’s graduation, Martha, Christopher, Mark, and I took the long car trip to Texas to visit family and friends. Rob was now 18, of legal age, and we decided that we should trust him to stay by himself. We were on I-35 between San Antonio and Austin, trying to get through to him on our cellphone because we hadn’t been able to reach him for many days. A neighbor answered our home phone. She was there to take care of our dogs because, she revealed to us, Rob was in jail.

Rob and some friends had planned to go to a July 4th outdoor concert, and a couple of them decided to steal two outdoor umbrellas that were installed in picnic tables at the grocery store behind our house. Witnesses told the police the direction taken by the culprits, and sure enough, the police showed up at our door. Rob let them in, and they found the missing umbrellas. They also found open beer bottles, illegal fireworks, an electronic scale, and a small amount of marijuana. Rob was charged with five crimes, one of which was possession with intent to distribute. After $10,000 in legal fees and several hundred more in fines and court costs, the charges were reduced to disorderly conduct.

One night I was awakened by the telephone at 3:45 AM. It was the police asking me what Rob’s cellphone number was. When I questioned them, they revealed that they had found his car, seriously damaged in a one-vehicle wreck, but they couldn’t find Rob, who was apparently hiding. I called Rob, who insisted that he was OK. He added that he wasn’t drunk, and that some friends were going to pick him up.

The police laid low in surveillance, watching as the car with Rob’s friends drove to a spot near the wrecked car to pick him up. The police moved in immediately and eventually arrested Rob for driving under the influence. They took him to the hospital because the wreck was serious enough that they thought he may have internal injuries. His 34-hour stay in the hospital carried a bill of $23,000, and, since he wasn’t in school at the time, he wasn’t covered on my insurance policy. His blood alcohol level was .15, almost twice the legal limit in Pennsylvania.

By the way, here is what the car looked like. Thank goodness for safety belts. Rob was only bruised up a bit, but he lost his drivers license.

When I took this position at Texas Tech, I hoped that Rob, who was then 21, would come with us. We thought that the change of environment might be helpful—a new set of friends. But he had a few other “events,” in Pennsylvania and here. Meanwhile, he was in and out of school, earning grades far below his
abilities. Every semester we had the hope that he just might be coming around, but every semester was a disappointment. And it seemed like most of the times that we saw him, he was either under the influence, or hung over. And his personality was badly affected by either condition.

Events surrounding death

On Friday afternoon, July 28, 2006, I went to a store to buy adult beverages for a party we were giving at our house that evening. As I was pondering the offerings in the store, I looked to my right and saw Rob and one of his friends. Seeing Rob at a liquor store was troubling to me because I believed that he had a serious problem with alcohol. We had a pleasant but brief conversation. He was excited about going on a date that night and told me he was doing well in school. He gave me a hug before he left the store.

Rob also talked to Martha that day. He was enthusiastic about moving into a new house and asked if we could help him with a check for the deposit. Rob seemed happy.

The next morning we tried to phone Rob several times to remind him that we were going to take him to visit his brother Mark, who was in an inpatient treatment facility. Rob never answered, but we drove to his house at 12:30 to pick him up. His door was locked and no one answered our knock. One of his housemates arrived at about the same time, but he had been staying at his parents’ home for a few nights and didn’t have a key with him. We left to visit Mark, somewhat annoyed at Rob since he had assured us that he wanted to visit his brother. We assumed that Rob wasn’t home or was in no condition to accompany us, and we continued trying to phone him on Saturday and on Sunday morning.

On Sunday morning before going to church, we experienced something that seemed odd, although not extraordinary. Martha and I saw a mourning dove on our driveway, which is at the back of our house. The dove was by itself and wouldn’t move, even when I walked right next to it. We assumed it was sick and may have eaten some fertilizer. We thought about putting it in the flower bed, out of sight of cats, but we left it alone since it might have been carrying a disease.

After church we drove to Rob’s house at 12:30 thinking that we would wake him up and the run an errand while he was getting ready to visit his brother. I left Martha in the car and walked to the front door. When one of Rob’s housemates answered the door, he said he thought Rob was there, and after checking Rob’s room, told me that he was still sleeping. I explained that I needed to take Rob to see his brother, and I walked to his bedroom. Rob was lying on his back in bed. His skin had a beige-yellow hue and somewhat mottled. He was unresponsive and didn’t appear to be breathing. Some parts of his body were warm, but some were not. I yelled at the housemate to call 911, and I started to administer CPR. I had no success and ran out to the car to get Martha, and told her rather clumsily that I thought he might be dead. She was screaming as we ran into the house.
We spoke with the 911 operator who tried to help us in our CPR effort. The EMS personnel arrived just a couple of minutes later in two ambulances, a fire truck, and a police car. There were ten professionals in the room. They injected him with something and tried to use the defibrillator, but there was still not response. Administering CPR to my lifeless first-born child and seeing the EMS person use electrical paddles on him are two experiences that are forever and sadly burned into my memory.

They took Rob on a stretcher to the ambulance, and we followed the ambulance to Covenant Hospital. We arrived right behind the ambulance and were directed to a small, private waiting room. Then the hospital’s chaplain entered the room. A few moments later, Rob’s friend Devin arrived, having heard about the situation from Rob’s housemate, and was clearly distraught.

Sometime after 1:00 P.M. the emergency room physician entered the room and told us what we already knew.

We telephoned my sister Peggy, who was Rob’s godmother, and Martha’s sister Maggie to tell them the bad news. We called our priest’s house, leaving a message for him and his wife. We also called Martha’s friend Vickie, who is the wife of one of my colleagues.

The hospital personnel told us we could visit and stay with Rob as long as we wanted. He was on a gurney in a small room and had an apparatus covering his mouth—something like a baby’s pacifier with a wide soda straw sticking out of it—that the emergency personnel had used. We weren’t allowed to remove it.

We stayed with Rob for over an hour. Martha spent much of the time standing next to the gurney, leaning over with her head across Rob’s chest and crying, “Why, Rob? Why?” During that time Father Steve Sellers and his wife Dixie arrived. Devin and the chaplain also stayed with us. We called our son Christopher, who arrived awhile later, visibly upset.

By the time we returned home, people were beginning to arrive to offer their support. There were at least thirty guests, and it seemed almost like a reception. We were in shock at the time, and the reality hadn’t sunk in. I’m certain many who saw us wondered why we weren’t suffering more.

We had called Canyon Lakes, the facility where Mark was staying, to tell the personnel what had happened and that we would be late for our visit. The crowd at our house began to dissipate, but two women stayed there in case anyone else called or came by. Telling Mark at Canyon Lakes was very difficult, but leaving him behind was even more so.

After we returned home, we walked the two women to the car. The mourning dove that we had seen earlier was on our front porch, dead, on the opposite side of the house and approximately 150 feet from where we had seen it earlier. I told the two women that I had seen the mourning dove earlier in the day and that I wondered if there was any meaning
to it. Somehow it was positioned where I would see it alive at the beginning of the day and dead at the end of the day. It was as if Rob’s spirit had passed through the house.

I decided to bury the dove in our flower bed. Probably it was just an ordinary bird that became ill and died, but I will always wonder if there was some larger force at work. We later learned that the husband of the older of the two women had committed suicide twenty-nine years earlier. The younger woman, a 23-year-old doctoral student at Texas Tech who was a Harvard graduate, died in an automobile accident two weeks after we found Rob.

On the night before Rob’s funeral, I was tossing and turning in bed at about 3:00 in the morning. I sleep on my side, so I kept shifting from facing Martha to facing the clock. I couldn’t stop grieving long enough to get to sleep. I'm sure that I was secretly hoping that Martha would wake up because I selfishly needed her to share my pain. I wasn’t even trying to be gentle as I changed positions. After I flipped for the umpteenth time, now facing the clock, I felt a gentle hand on my back. I was relieved that Martha had awakened, but when I turned quickly toward her, I realized that she was sound asleep, facing the other way with both hands under the covers. It was not a dream. I was wide awake.
Eulogy
for

Robert David Cordell

by his father,
David Mark Cordell

St. Paul’s-on-the-Plains Episcopal Church
Lubbock, Texas
August 3, 2006

First, I’d like to advise everyone that I won’t make it through this eulogy without stopping to sob. I ask your patience and forbearance. I will make it through, though, however haltingly. By the way, in case you think my tie is too cheery, it is a Jerry Garcia design given to me by Rob.

I would like to thank everyone for being here because I know that funerals are no fun. I’d also like to thank the many church friends, work colleagues, and others who have helped ease our burden by bringing food and comfort and so many flowers. Martha and I have been overwhelmed by your kindness, and our fellow parishioners should be proud of how helpful Dixie and Father Sellers have been.

Many people traveled great length to be here. My brother Vic came from San Francisco and my sister Peggy and her husband Louis and children Lizzie and Cubby came from Dallas. Martha’s sister Julia is here from San Francisco and her sister Maggie is here from New Orleans. Martha’s brother Wright and his wife Glenda came from Houston, and Wright’s son Brad traveled from St. Petersburg, Florida. Martha’s cousin Bill and wife Leah also came from Houston.

Martha’s childhood best friend Nancy and her husband Richard traveled from Bay City, and brought Christine, who practically raised Martha. She spent lots of time with Rob, and I know this breaks her heart. Three of Martha’s sorority sisters Lynn, Edelle, and Liz flew in from Chicago, Houston, and Atlanta because of their fondness for Martha. My
friends Hull and Lance came in from Tyler and Dallas respectively because of their fondness for…. Martha. Hmmm. Seems to be a pattern.

Rob’s friend Crystal drove in from Kansas, and most impressive are Rob’s friends Bob and Gonzo. When they heard of Rob’s death, they hopped in the car and drove straight through from Philadelphia to be here. Such friends.

I have heard many people tell me what a big heart Rob had, and it makes me think of the end of the *Wizard of Oz* when the unveiled Wizard tells the Tin Man, "A heart is not judged by how much you love; but by how much you are loved by others." By that standard, Rob’s heart was very big, indeed.

When my father died, my brother and sister and I tried our best to eulogize him in a way that celebrated his life rather than mourning his death. He had experienced great successes in his personal and professional life and was 80 years old—a full life by almost any standard.

Rob was named for my father, but Rob lived only 24 years—less than a third as many as my father and less than one-fifteenth as many adult years.

As Shakespeare noted in Twelfth Night, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” He might have added that some don’t live long enough to achieve their greatness. Rob didn’t live long enough to achieve his greatness.

Rob was our first-born and our only child for over five years. Those of you who knew Rob have your own version of him, but only a few of you knew him when he was very young. As a little boy Rob liked to play catch with me, and I taught him to ride a bike. He enjoyed going to the hardware store and to Martha’s mother’s farm implements dealership where he loved to ride the tractors. Bebe loved that little boy, and he loved
her. My mother also loved him dearly, although at one point when he was about two and getting into everything, she offered that she wished he were more contemplative.

I called him my little Chubby Chubster, and I made up a little song that I sang to him often. Martha had her own song for Rob, based on a tune from *Guys and Dolls*.

Rob loved to put on costumes to play characters. Pirates. Knights. Pioneers. At some point in his Alamo phase he decided that Santa Anna had a pretty cool uniform. So he did his best to dress up like Santa Ana. One day Martha took our little fair-skinned, fair-haired boy to Home Depot when he was in full gear. At the checkout counter, to her surprise he brandished his sword and enthusiastically shouted, “Tell everyone! I’m a Mexican!”

When we moved to Pennsylvania, Rob at first retained his Dallas Cowboy allegiance. It didn’t set well with the local Cowboy haters, and they can be pretty vicious in Philadelphia. Eventually, though, he joined the dark green side and began rooting for Philadelphia teams. He loved to play sports, although it wasn’t really his strength. In fact, I was pretty sure that his main interest was the snacks after the game. He played on organized teams through the eighth grade, and eventually joined the marching band at his high school. Ultimately, he became one of the band managers, which allowed more time for socializing and required less for practice. The perfect activity. Along the way he earned his Eagle Scout rank, which we feel was his greatest success in life. He loved going on campouts with the guys. Whether in Scouts or band, it was the socializing he loved, and sadly that love led him to the activity that took his life. He began drinking and never seemed to know when to stop.

He started college up in Philly, and when I accepted my position here, one of the ancillary reasons was that we hoped a change of environment might interrupt the destructive cycle. But as the old line says, no matter where you go, there you are.
We never quite fully understood that Rob was a binge drinker. We knew he drank too often and too much, and we knew it impeded his success in school and endangered his and other lives on the road, so we were almost pleased when he lost his driver’s license. We never thought he would drink enough to die in bed.

Many people suggested that what he needed was military service, but Rob was not at all interested in the military. We not-so-secretly hoped that he would find the right girl—someone who could settle him down and show him the way, but that never happened.

Rob’s legacy is mostly in this nave and in the hearts of his many friends who can’t be here, and it saddens us that he didn’t have time to leave more of a mark. But, as John Donne noted in Meditation XVII:

No man is an island, entire of itself.
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were.
Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls
It tolls for thee.

The title of another Donne poem was used by John Gunther in his heart-wrenching book about the death of his son. In Donne’s words:

DEATH be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think’st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
And better then thy stroake; why swell'st thou then;
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

And although this wonderful church service includes quotations from the Bible, Shakespeare, and Donne, everyone knows that the real depth of human suffering is found in country music lyrics. In 1962 Skeeter Davis sang a torch song called *The End of the World* which, with slight editing, reflects Martha’s and my sense of loss.

Why does the sun go on shining?
Why does the sea rush to shore?
Don't they know it's the end of the world?

Why do the birds go on singing?
Why do the stars glow above?
Don't they know it's the end of the world?

I wake up in the morning and I wonder
Why everything's the same as it was.
I can't understand. No, I can't understand
How life goes on the way it does.

Why does my heart go on beating?
Why do these eyes of mine cry?
Don't they know it's the end of the world?
It ended when you said goodbye.
Of course, we never had a chance to say goodbye to Rob. And his death is the end of our world as we knew it. Oh, we still have two fine sons and other family and friends, but his loss leaves a hole in our hearts that will never, ever be filled. We can only hope and pray that scar tissue will close it a bit. But no day will pass, no prayer will be said, without our feeling the loss of our sweet boy.

Can you hear us now, Rob? Is heaven like a giant, cosmic party line where you hear everything, or do you just hear us when we call on you? Can you feel our pain? Do you know how much we love you?

Finally, I recall Juliet’s words to Romeo: “Parting is such sweet sorrow.” Of course Juliet expected to see Romeo the next day, but we’ll never see our-first born child for the rest of our earthly lives. So, Good night, Sweet Prince. Parting is such…Parting is such miserable, gut-wrenching, painful, never-ending sorrow. But we have faith that we will see you in another life.

And to all of you, thank you for being here. My fervent hope that this service and your presence will somehow siphon out some of the pain we feel, that it might evaporate within these walls, that we will remember only the great guy that Rob was, and the great man he might have become.

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**OBITUARY**

**ROBERT DAVID CORDELL**

Robert David Cordell, a junior at Texas Tech University, passed from this life on July 30, 2006, in Lubbock.

Rob was born in Baton Rouge, LA on April 3, 1982. He moved to Seabrook, TX with his family in 1985, and then to Berwyn, PA in 1992. In 2000 he was graduated from Conestoga High School in Berwyn and played baritone horn in the marching band. An
avid Boy Scout, he earned the Eagle Scout rank and the Order of the Arrow. He moved with his family to Lubbock in August 2003 and enrolled at Texas Tech

Rob was a liberal politically and was known for having strong feelings and a big heart. He thrived on enthusiastic discussions about political and social issues. An avid guitar player, Rob enjoyed socializing with friends and listening to music of the Grateful Dead, Phish, and Disco Biscuits. As a Boy Scout, he camped frequently and hiked to the top of Mt. Whitney, using an ice pick and carving dugouts in the snow for shelter. Rob was a passionate fan of Philadelphia sports teams. He was confirmed in the Episcopal Church. His wonderful smile will be greatly missed by family and friends.

Rob was preceded in death by grandparents Eugenia and Wright Salter of Bay City and grandfather Robert J. Cordell of Richardson. He is survived by parents Martha Elizabeth Salter Cordell and David Mark Cordell of Lubbock, brothers Christopher Wright Cordell and Mark William Cordell, and grandmother Frances Sparacio Cordell McGrew. Surviving aunts and uncles include Julia Hollister of San Francisco, Wright and Glenda Salter of Houston, Maggie Carrington of Slidell, LA, Victor and Karin Cordell of San Francisco, and Peggy and Louis Beil of Richardson, TX. Surviving cousins include Cornell Barnard, Diana Barnard, Scott Salter, Brad Salter, Tge Carrington, Austi Carrington, Lizzie Beil, and Cubby Beil.

A viewing will be held on Wednesday, August 2 from 6-8:00 PM at Rix Funeral Home, 1901 Broadway, and a memorial service will be held at St.Paul’s on the Plains Episcopal Church, 1Quiz 4-110 Avenue X, on Thursday, August 3 at 11:00 AM.

We received so many flowers prior to the funeral that we couldn’t fit them comfortably in the house. We were very grateful and donated many of the flowers to the church to send to shut-ins.

Among those who sent flowers was the Dean of Students at Texas Tech. He called me at our home to express his condolences, and he told me about an email he received from one of Rob’s professors. She said she was shocked and that Rob was one of the best students in her government class and was earning an A.
For several years I suffered from the delusion that Rob was turning the corner—that he was gaining the maturity and stability that would lead him into adulthood and to the promise of his natural talents. Now I learn that he really was turning the corner.

Texas Tech also scheduled a special outdoor ceremony to honor recently deceased students, faculty, and staff. The Men’s Choir sang and the university president offered a brief memorial. All the assembled families of survivors were given a helium-filled balloon. As the name of each of the deceased was read, the surviving family members released their respective balloons. The west Texas wind carried them rapidly beyond sight.

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An 8-week Thank You

We have learned much during the eight weeks since Rob died. One thing we learned is that our friends are better friends than we are. They have been unbelievably supportive and helpful, starting within an hour of Rob’s death. We have received food and drinks, flowers and plants, cards and calls from many, many thoughtful friends, and we were blessed to have so many friends and family travel to Lubbock. Several people have made donations to worthy causes in Rob’s name, and others have asked us to suggest a donee.

We have endowed a scholarship in Rob’s name for a student in the Addictive Disorders and Recovery Studies program at Texas Tech University.

Many people have asked how we are doing. I suppose we should put on a happy face, but we just can’t. The truth is that we are suffering.

We are still seeking some form of closure, but we haven’t received the autopsy report yet.
A Postscript at Thirteen Weeks

We finally received the autopsy. I will never forgive the cruelty of the Lubbock medical examiner’s office for taking so long to complete it.

Rob didn’t die of alcohol poisoning. He died of “acute combined drug intoxication.” In common parlance, he OD’ed. His system contained a combination of morphine, cocaine, and Xanax, a treatment for anxiety. Using morphine (or heroine) and cocaine together is called speedballing, the same combination that killed John Belushi, Chris Farley, and River Phoenix. The cocaine acts as a stimulant, raising the pulse, but its effects wear off more quickly than those of either heroin or morphine, which in turn slow the heart down. As a result, it is possible to experience a delayed overdose—a severe respiratory depression—when the stimulant wears off and the full effects of the morphine are felt in isolation. Rob’s heart just slowed down during his sleep, and finally stopped.

I have a good friend who is a pathologist, and I asked him to look at the autopsy. The relatively small amount of morphine in Rob’s system suggests that he was not a “sophisticated” user. Habitual users build up a tolerance for large amounts of morphine.

Rob’s life was characterized by excess. I think he tried morphine for only a short period of time, but he typically went overboard. It only takes once.

A Postscript at Six Months

My mother died today, January 24, 2007.

A month before Rob died, Mother learned that she had a terminal case of pancreatic cancer. At age 84, she decided not to go through treatments that would prolong her life but that would not offer any hope of cure and would cause greater discomfort.

My sister Peggy revealed to me that Mother decided to take life extending treatments after learning of Rob’s death. She said she wanted to put more time between Rob’s death and hers. A mother’s love.

A Very Disturbing Postscript at Nine Months

I am seeking help on a personal issue.

As you know, my son Rob died on July 30. What you don’t know is that Martha and I have been subjects of anonymous harassment since then.

The case is being investigated by Lubbock and Texas Tech police and by the USPS postal inspector. If you have any information or thoughts that might help in the
investigation, please contact me or detective Tracy Taylor of the Lubbock Police Department (775-2413).

Here is some information about this situation. Within a week of Rob’s death, a letter in a plain business envelope addressed to me arrived at our house. The envelope had a fake name and a return address in Lubbock. The letter included a statement that I was responsible for Rob’s death and included the following: “You should be in your son’s place. You should burn in hell.”

A second letter arrived in October, addressed to Martha. It had a different phony name and a non-existent return address on Utica Drive, our own street. The letter said, “This is a message from your dead son.” It included a rhyming poem in two verses of almost a full page. The letter included the names of our two surviving sons, Christopher and Mark. The letter said that I was responsible for Rob’s death and that Martha should get away from me or I would kill our other two sons. One quote from the letter was, “One down and two to go.”

Last week, the situation escalated when a package arrived at our house. It included a return address and a partial name that were apparently selected to cause us to think that it came from a friend who lives near us, presumably to ensure that we would open the package. The package included a note to Martha stating, “Thought you would like this likeness of your DEAD SON to remember him by…We all know that if it were not for David he would still be alive.”

Inside the package was a novelty-shop, Halloween-style, life-sized head, designed to look like the result of decapitation, complete with jagged, bloody neckline and other dripping lines of fake blood. The police are testing the head as evidence, but I am attaching a photo.

It is highly, highly unlikely that Martha would have done anything to anyone to precipitate such behavior. Evidence suggests the perpetrator was not a friend or associate of Rob, Christopher, or Mark. Apparently, the real target of these attacks is me. He or she is simply using Rob and Martha as emotional levers to try to harass and intimidate me. Most likely, it is a current or former student or a current or former employee who is holding a grudge.

By the way, you needn’t be overly concerned about us. Martha, Christopher, Mark, and I are dealing with this bizarre episode as a family as well as can be expected. We are fine.
However, if you have any ideas about who might be responsible or if you have suggestions for leads, please let me know or contact Detective Taylor. It is highly probable that the perpetrator is someone I know through the university and, more specifically, through PFP. Whoever it is, he or she is willing to slash emotionally the mother of a deceased child just to get at the father.

Although this hostility is directed at me and there is no reason to think that anyone else would be a target, it does appear that a very disturbed individual is not far from any of us. In this post Virginia Tech world, I urge everyone to be on their guard.

A Postscript at 2½ Years

In June 2008, after five years in Lubbock, we moved to Plano, Texas, which is a large suburb of Dallas and borders Richardson, David’s hometown. David accepted a faculty position at The University of Texas at Dallas and Martha took a kindergarten position in the Plano Independent School District. Both changes were positive for career and financial reasons, and we are happy to be close to David’s sister and many old friends. We are also somewhat relieved at leaving a place that holds such bad memories.

Compared to two-and-a-half years ago, we feel better, but still not good. Any movie or television show that addresses a child’s death, or that shows CPR or even an ambulance, saddens me deeply. Every time I see a photo of Rob, my heart sinks. When Martha decorates for Christmas, she brings out many framed photos of the kids at Christmases through the years. Each photo resurrects a happy memory, and each photo generates a stabbing pain. Sometimes I think it would be easier if we destroyed all reminders of Rob’s life—every photo and memento. Of course, we would never do that.

When will we recover fully? I can’t help but think of Martha’s mother. Her first two children died when they were ages three weeks and six months respectively in the mid 1930s. She died in 2003 at age 96, but could never talk about the children she lost. At least we can talk about Rob.

One final coincidence. We have a long, covered back porch here in Plano. In early May, a bird started building a nest high up on a ledge in a corner. By coincidence, it is a mourning dove. Or maybe it isn’t really a coincidence.

Thank you for reading our story. Writing it was helpful to me, and I hope reading it proves helpful to you. Maybe you will hug your children just a little bit tighter next time. And maybe some of the minor day-to-day issues with your children will seem a bit less important.