**March 2007**

**A Father’s Perspective**

*“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”* (Psalm 127:1)

I turned into the pleasant neighborhood and drove slowly by the house, almost missing it because it is difficult to recognize with paint and landscaping. My mind drifted back to a few years ago when I had stood alongside my son in front of this very structure, newly framed and sheathed. Of the scores of homes that he and his co-workers erected, he had wanted his dad to see this particular house, the first one that he had been the lead framer on. He and I were both rightly proud of his accomplishment and the skill he had developed working with his hands, with an assortment of tools, during those years he worked in construction while attending a nearby community college. We even entertained the notion that he would build us a new home someday. Now, seeing that same house was bittersweet, a memory to cling to of happier times. I wondered about the family who now lived there, and part of me wished I could personally tell them about its builder, why their beloved home also holds a special significance for me: *The house that Seth built*.

Today I hold his DeWalt power drill above him as he lies in his bed and ask him to grab it. He clumsily reaches up, but once his hand comes in contact with one of his old, familiar tools, that hand quickly adjusts to its proper position and he begins squeezing the trigger. Apparently, like riding a bike, there are some things you just never forget, even after sustaining a severe brain injury. Nor does he need to relearn such things as how to make a fist or give me a “high five” or touch his chin; I just ask him to do it and he frequently does so. Seth’s hand and eye coordination are improving to the point where he now holds a cardboard bat in his right hand and swings away at a tennis ball or balloon suspended above him. His left hand and foot, so long immobile, are beginning to see some slight movement, and his right arm and leg are progressing to the point where he sometimes takes over the motion from those who apply the patterning therapy. These and other movements, largely stimulated by a dose of Ambien, are more small steps forward.

One of Seth’s biggest hurdles is becoming consistent. We hold large “YES” and “NO” signs in front of him and ask him to respond to questions, and often (but not always) he will unsteadily point to an answer.

“Do you live in a yellow house?” NO

“Did you used to own a white Honda sports car?” YES

“Did you go to college at Washington State (his parents’ alma mater)?” NO

“Did you attend college in southern California?” YES

One time he got ten out of ten right, but on other days there is no response at all

During the year he attended college at Cal Baptist, Seth received a call from a company he had formerly worked for here in the Puget Sound area and was offered a job as a construction superintendent, with a good wage, company truck and all. He opted to stay for summer school in Riverside and pick up a few credits, and that was the summer when and where he was hurt. Seth and his two other fellow framers had earlier impressed this company for being both thorough and fast at construction. We can only wish that the rebuilding of his own life could be done in a similar fashion!

~Craig

**May 2007**

**From Seth’s sister Holly**

My husband and I moved to New Orleans in December. As I was able to make a visit home for a week in April, I had the opportunity to see Seth after several months’ absence. From the perspective of no longer seeing him day-to-day, but rather after a long interval, his progress seems more marked to me than it did when I had the chance to observe him all of the time. One of the first things I noticed was the slightly more alert look in his eyes.

I am also amazed at the difference in Seth when he is given the drug Ambien (explained in a previous update). Even though his increased awareness and mobility only lasts for a short period of time, what a joy it is for that short time! To receive an awkward one-armed hug, or to have him reach up and grab your hand after three long years of seeing almost no movement at all, is truly thrilling.

When I arrived, Seth was sitting in his wheelchair in the living room. He had not yet been given his dose of the drug, but to those who know him well, there are subtle body signs that sometimes faintly demonstrate his emotions, in spite of his silent prison. A slight bounce of the foot and increased alertness in his eyes showed me that he was excited to see me, and when I asked him to raise his eyebrows if he knew that it was me, they immediately shot straight up. After he received his Ambien a few minutes later, I brought out some colorful Mardi Gras beads I had brought for him (a souvenir of this remarkable city, complete with plastic crawfish and alligators to show what we’re famous for). I held the beads up in front of him and asked if he would like to have them. He instantly reached out and grabbed them and then wouldn’t let go. He wanted those beads!

Before arriving, I had finished reading a remarkable book, “Fighting for David” by Leone Nunley. For those of you who wish to better understand those with traumatic brain injury, or to appreciate the day-to-day struggles of their families, I highly recommend this book, with its passionate perspective on what a meaningful life truly is. David’s story, told by his mother and primary caregiver Leone, gripped my heart in a way that few books have ever done, perhaps because it felt like reading *our* story. (And since the Nunley’s live in Washington State, it was even ‘closer to home’).

This dedicated mother’s familiarity with brain injury so perfectly described what we ourselves have worked through and the reality of what my parents deal with on a daily basis. In her words: “We were each coming to terms in our own way with the harsh reality of what a head injury does to a family. There would be no going back to previous times. The future would be massively different. Not a single day or week, not a single plan or dream would go untouched. Nothing lay beyond the gravitational pull of David’s vast set of needs.”

It is difficult to see your parents live something like this. Unless you have yourself lived with the aftermath of a profound head injury, it is hard to understand the daily strain of caring for an injured child, the “uphill push against the ravages of brain damage.” There is not only the physical care, which is a demanding 24/7 responsibility, but there is also the extensive efforts at therapy and rehabilitation, to try to reclaim some of what has been lost, to perhaps re-train the brain to perform some basic functions. So, my parents keep doing what parents do, which is to get up morning after morning and care for their children, except that most “children” do not weigh 165 lbs. and at least are able to reward their parents efforts with smiles, communication, and anticipated progress.

There are many popular misconceptions in society regarding head injury. Movies and television often employ the “coma” plot for dramatic effect, with an attractive person lying in a bed and then—of course—waking up at the end of the story. (You should hear what my husband, whose clinical specialty is neuro trauma, has to say when we watch a show like that!) By the same token, there are always the items in the news about “the man who woke up after 30 years.” Those are nice stories… butin real life, it very rarely works out that cleanly. As Leone describes it, “Most people cannot comprehend the permanent change brain injury brings to a family’s life. They cannot know that it’s a long, hard, painful road, and families seldom get their loved ones back in original form… When you’re living it day after day, month after month, year after year, it’s a whole different experience. It’s not the normal way for a family to function… One is consumed with the work at hand, to the point of exhaustion.”

Many people in Seth’s condition are isolated in a care center with no meaningful interaction of any kind, essentially exiled from the world. Sadly, not every family is able (or willing) to give their injured loved one what my parents have been able to give Seth: the opportunity to live and possibly regain some measure of a meaningful existence at home, in a loving environment. But that opportunity comes at great cost to the caregiver.

As Leone pointed out in an interview, “If we could have chosen our path, we probably wouldn’t have chosen this one. We do know that we’ll never have the old David back. But the Lord has given us a new David, and that’s the one we encourage and support. ”And so our family continues to miss the old Seth, while we shower love on the new Seth, celebrating every small improvement: While I was home, for example, while lying on his stomach, he lifted his head without assistance for the first time ever, raising and lowering it for about ten seconds (and then promptly threw up from the effort). You should have heard my mom screaming, “Get in here and see what Seth is doing!”

I believe Mrs. Nunley had incredible insight when she observed, “Disability is intimidating. Our culture wants a perfect person. If somebody is profoundly imperfect, it makes the rest of the population a tad uncomfortable. They glance at the rolling eyes or the drool, and it gives them the creeps. They’d rather not watch… Many school friends of our son simply could not handle a broken David; that’s why they never came to visit… The drive for physical perfection is, if anything, getting stronger in our culture. The coin of the realm is outward beauty… In the face of all this, I simply want to affirm that God sees no difference between the perfectly fit and the dreadfully disabled. David appears no less valuable in His eyes now that he was before the accident. God’s love, grace, and compassion have stayed the same throughout all these years. He created my son’s life in the first place, and he cherishes it to the present day… When, from a human perspective, you find yourself looking at a child who is now only one-third of what he or she used to be, you can throw up your hands and run—or you can get to work with the one-third that’s left. Every time the person makes the tiniest step of progress, it is a precious moment.

“About 1.4 million Americans sustain a traumatic brain injury each year, most of them young people. Every one of these is devastating, spawning a flurry of difficult questions. Somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand of these sons and daughters are left in a ‘vegetative state.’ Shall we just give up and turn our attention instead to those who are whole in body and mind? No, a thousand times, no.”

In the words of the inimitable Apostle Paul: *“…being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 1:6) God has not finished Seth’s story yet.

~Holly

**June 2007**

**Reflections from a Mother’s Heart**

Recently, when Craig was cleaning out his bookshelves, we came across Seth’s old Bible that he used until he was in high school. It was fun to look through the front of it because the kids always had visiting guest speakers at church sign their Bibles and include their favorite verse, and many of those people were invited over to our house for dinner. It was encouraging to remember all the godly individuals that had passed through their lives during those years. Seth also used the blank front pages of his Bible to record quotes he liked. I had to smile when I read the first one because I can remember when he heard it and thought it was so funny, he had to write it down: “To live above with the saints I love; oh that will be glory. But to live below with the saints I know; that’s another story!” I can still hear him laughing, as he repeated it over and over, and I suppose for a junior high kid that’s kind of where you’re at! Then, next to that, he had a more thoughtful quote: “Once the missiles of Satan are allowed to penetrate God’s protection, they no longer are the fiery darts of Satan, but the refining fire of God.” I think that would describe our last month.

Early in May, during a transfer to his wheelchair, a sling support strap slipped and Seth fell backward five feet to the wood floor, landing with the full impact on the back of his head. He seemed to be OK at first, but then started seizuring, so we gave him a shot of Valium (the first line of defense) and called 911. His doctor wanted him transported to the hospital to do a CT scan and he ended up having to stay three days until he was stabilized. He sustained four small hemorrhages on his brain which, fortunately, showed no increase after a few days, and the neurologist guessed they would probably dissolve in six weeks. But, after having him home three days, he again began having seizures, so we made yet another trip to the ER, followed by another three day hospital stay. For the next two weeks, he didn’t move or respond in any way. Likely, part of the reason was because he was put on an additional anti-seizure medicine, and the typical side effect of the drug is that it makes one lethargic, like being in a fog. The other possibility we had to deal with during that time was whether Seth would ever be able to recover to the point he was at before the fall. The neurologists told us it would be a waiting game and no one could predict the outcome. It was a heart-wrenching time, watching him lie so still, and I realized how encouraging it had become to see Seth move a foot or hand, or to blink his eyes or lift his eyebrows on command. Gradually, some of his responsive movements have returned, but it could be months, or even up to a year, before the doctors are comfortable enough to wean him off of the new medication. So, we wait, and we continue to grieve over the fact that life is passing our son by. On July 11, Seth will turn 27, his fourth birthday since the accident.

Honestly, on this side of eternity, the fiery darts of the evil one and the refining fire of God are difficult to tell apart, because they both burn and hurt. Only as we look at the situation with the eyes of faith do we have any hope that God has not finished His desired purpose in this ongoing, difficult trial, but is still doing His work in each of us toward a greater end.

~Mary

**August 2007**

**Reflections from a Mother’s Heart**

Because of our situation, snapshot memories of “last things” with Seth are clearly impressed on my mind, things small and insignificant but held tightly in a mother’s heart. His last visit home, during a summer break from Cal Baptist University four years ago (five days before the accident), contains many of those precious pictures firmly printed and filed in my memory, e.g., little things such as watching him get out the car from the airport, excited to be home, striding up to the porch with his usual casual gait and engaging smile, a backpack thrown over one shoulder and a tux for his cousin’s wedding over the other, or the joy of watching him back on the music team at church, even if just for a Sunday, playing guitar along with his sisters who manned the keyboard and piano, or listening to the hilarious story about a roommate who was on a men’s school dance team, getting sick and Seth having to fill in for him at the last minute. We laughed uncontrollably as he showed us his “moves!” And then, the last letter he wrote during that week to his Dad for Craig’s birthday (a good gift alternative when you’re a poor college student!) gives a glimpse into his heart:

*"I wanted to start this letter by saying that you are the greatest dad in the world. From the day I was born until today when I stepped off the plane, you have been a model of integrity, unconditional love, and spiritual guidance. The beliefs, ideas and necessities of living that you have passed on will carry on through me to my children and grandchildren. I look back over the years and see some of the times we disagreed, only to see the wisdom you gave through loving discipline and direction. Rest assured that your hard work is continuing to move in my life. I am so sad sometimes to know that I am missing life with my family, but at the same time I can see myself turning into the man I am going to be for the rest of my life. I cannot say thank you enough for all the hard work and effort you put forth. Even across 1,000 miles, I can feel your unwavering love, prayers, and hand of guidance touching my life. Another lifelong goal which you have passed on to me is the striving and hunger for wisdom and knowledge. I am a thinker, like you, and I am forever grateful that you have shown me the path of God that leads to life. So on your birthday, with tears in my eyes, I say thank you, and I love you". - Seth*

But there are other memories, too . . . of the last time we heard his voice on the morning of the accident when he called during his break at Home Depot with his usual, upbeat “Hey, what’s up!” There is no way we could have even comprehended that just hours later, life as Seth and we had known it, would abruptly end. The snapshots after that take on a different pose: Seth laying comatose in the ICU, hooked up to machines and tubes, hovering between life and death . . . our family standing over his bed, praying and crying out to God to spare his life. And the four years hence, as he functions at a minimally conscious level and is 100% dependant. We realize that outside of a direct intervention of God, the scrapbook of the first segment of his life was completed on August 16, 2003, and now we struggle to see how the pictures in this new chapter fit together.

Since this week marks the four-year anniversary of Seth’s accident, Craig shared a message at church, entitled “When There Is No End In Sight,” and subtitled, “What to Do When You’re Stuck in the Middle of the Book of Job.” He gave a very honest evaluation of where we are at right now, physically, emotionally and spiritually, as he covered three basic thoughts using the book of Job as his text, i.e., “What do you do when you’re in the middle of a trial?,” “Is it okay to complain to God?,” and “What do you say to someone who is suffering?” We’d like to make the CD available to anyone who is interested. Just send me an email at mesvelt@juno.com with your name and address, and I’ll be sure you get a copy (no charge).

We have an appointment today with a new neurologist at the University of Washington Medical Center. Our biggest concern is getting Seth off the additional anti-seizure medicine he’s had to be on since his fall in May, in hope that he becomes more responsive. Our second goal is for Seth’s medical team to outline some proactive ideas that possibly might help him progress further. But everything is difficult and seems like baby steps. As Craig observed in his message, faith is sometimes like straddling a crevasse, with one foot on the side of the positive statements in God’s Word and the other on our daily experiences, hoping that the gap will eventually close.

~Mary

**October 2007**

**Reflections from a Mother’s Heart**

Over the past 12 weeks, we have been able to get Seth off the strong anti-seizure medicine he was put on after his fall in May. These made him extremely drowsy. We see the neurologist in several weeks and his hope is to take Seth off some of the other anti-seizure meds that he’s been on for four years. They all have the side effect of drowsiness. We have noticed the gradual return of most of Seth’s responses. One of the fun things we’ve done is to use the manual hydraulic lift to lower Seth into the padded rocking chair in the living room. The old, familiar sensation of carpet must feel good on his feet. He immediately uses his right leg to get himself rocking. Truthfully, it’s an eerie feeling looking at him because he looks so much like the old Seth, sitting in front of the fire rocking away.

**October 2007**

**From Seth’s sister Kirsten:**

As the “little sister” I wanted to take a turn to share about Seth and our family. It’s been over four years since Seth’s accident left him in a minimally conscious state.

My parents, because they are ten times more amazing than anyone I know, chose to take care of him at home. I hear footsteps going past my bedroom during the night and I know that they’re up to turn or check on Seth. By the time I get up, Dad has already completed his first round of therapy and also had devotions with him. Meanwhile, Mom has divided up his blended, homemade food and meds into six portions to be given slowly, at different times, through his stomach tube. With over 40 different medicines or nutritional supplements going into the separate containers, our counter looks like a chemistry lab. Then comes his bed bath, tactile therapy, exercise in the Quadriciser which helps keep his joints limber (see picture on the web site) followed by the arrival of five volunteers for his patterning therapy. Late afternoon might include working with Seth’s swallowing reflex, slowly feeding him ice chips or ice cream. After dinner, Seth might be back on the patterning table for more work before bed and, finally, he gets to relax as Dad finishes his day by reading to him. As you can see, it’s a 24/7 a day job. Holly describes our parents as “perpetual motion!”

I know that God is in control, and that "bad things happen to good people" simply because life on earth isn’t perfect, as heaven will be. I know that life isn't necessarily fair but that God is just. I even know that God has done amazing work in people's lives through this ordeal—we continually hear from people who are touched by our story. But when I look at my parents' difficult schedule and I watch my brother lying there expressionless, I think that it's a very, very high price to pay.

I often hear people say that when a person goes through trials, they feel God’s presence in a special way. From experience, let me tell you that is not always true. With so many hundreds of people praying for Seth and my family and still not seeing his healing, God has very often seemed silent to me the last few years. Even Job from the Bible said, "But if I go to the East, He is not there; if I go to the West, I do not find Him..." (Job 23:8)

I don’t think God blames us for questioning "WHY?" I ask Him why He lets my brother waste the best years of his life lying in a bed and why He lets my parents pour hours of their day into something with such small results and why He took my closest confidant.

My Dad and I were recently sharing memories of Seth... like the micro-machine car town we built in the garage rafters; or our "junior Olympics," where we had hurdling competitions, racing, marathons, Frisbee throws and bike jumps; the various forts we built in the forest across the street; the little blue scooter he and I rode around on together; the garter snakes we were always catching, trying to keep as pets... when we got older, memories of running errands together, playing on our guitars and helping him write lyrics, singing duets for church and staying up into the wee hours of the morning talking. Seth could make me laugh more than anyone else. He had the rare ability to take a simple occurrence and turn it into a hilarious story. I thank God for the 19 years He gave me with my brother to store up memories.

Ravi Zacharias has a quote that says, “Faith is a confidence in the person of Jesus Christ and in His power, so that even when His power does not serve my end, my confidence in Him remains because of Who He is.” Similarly, I have heard my Dad say, "I don't know why God allowed this to happen, but I DO know I'd rather believe there's a God up there controlling this situation than that it was a chance of fate and just *happened*, for no reason." It's true—whatever God's plan may be, He is there. He is HERE.

A powerful song in my life is by Casting Crowns, called "I Will Praise You In This Storm." It reminds me to praise God whether I feel like it or not. He's promised us grace for the day and He's promised never to abandon us. And that's the most comforting thing I know.

*I was sure by now  
That You would have reached down  
And wiped our tears away  
Stepped in and saved the day  
But once again, I say Amen, and its still raining*

*As the thunder rolls  
I barely hear You whisper through the rain  
I'm with you  
And as Your mercy falls  
I raise my hands and praise the God who gives  
And takes away*

*I'll praise You in this storm  
And I will lift my hands  
For You are who You are  
No matter where I am  
Every tear I've cried  
You hold in Your hand  
You never left my side  
And though my heart is torn  
I will praise You in this storm*

*I remember when  
I stumbled in the wind  
You heard my cry  
You raised me up again  
My strength is almost gone  
How can I carry on  
If I can't find You*

*As the thunder rolls  
I barely hear You whisper through the rain  
I'm with you  
And as Your mercy falls  
I raise my hands and praise the God who gives  
And takes away*

*I lift my eyes unto the hills  
Where does my help come from?  
My help comes from the Lord  
The Maker of Heaven and Earth*

*I'll praise You in this storm  
And I will lift my hands  
For You are who You are  
No matter where I am  
Every tear I've cried  
You hold in Your hand  
You never left my side  
And though my heart is torn  
I will praise You in this storm*

~Kirsten

**December 2007**

**A Father’s Perspective**

I don’t know about you, but the Christmas season is a time that especially evokes in me memories of special family times together, triggered, I’m sure in part, by the perennial presence of a Christmas tree in the living room. Like most kids, our three children loved to examine, hold, and shake the presents under the tree, and I smile as I recall the year that Mary purposely switched their names on the gifts to throw them off. I am reminded of reading the Christmas story each year from Matthew and Luke before we opened gifts, of Holly, Seth, Kirsten, along with our schnauzer “camping out” on the living room rug in front of our wood-burning stove on the eve of our annual departure to the eastern side of the state, of nervous drives over Snoqualmie Pass during heavy snowfalls, and visits to the Grandparents and other relatives. It seems so unreal that the last such Christmas Seth *actively* enjoyed with our family was five years ago.

This Christmas Kirsten gave us a scrapbook of family photos she had collected. On the last page was what has become our favorite picture, a spur-of-the-moment snapshot I took of our three children sitting on the front porch in June of 2003, just a couple of months before Seth’s accident. Under the picture is a quote by Robert Brault: *“Enjoy the little things, for one day you may look back and realize they were the big things.”* I hate the fact that with each passing year, certain memories I have of Seth fade away despite my tenacious efforts to hold onto them. It is the simple things, the little things that were repeated over and over, that are the clearest. One that stands out is of my strapping son, not so many years ago, getting ready to head out the front door each morning, to classes at the community college and afterward to his construction site saying, “Pray for me, Dad!” I would stretch my arm around his shoulders and ask the Lord to help him excel in his studies, to give him skill with his building, to help him to “walk in a manner worthy of his high calling,” and to protect him from harm that day. After all, when one works in construction, accidents are unavoidable. After slicing his hand on scrap metal, falling 12 feet onto a concrete floor (and landing on his feet without breaking anything), or driving a nail through his heel with his nail gun, to name a few, he probably figured he needed a little extra help.

If memories are locked in by repetition, surely the present routines of caring for our stricken son will be recalled in days yet to come, albeit without the same fondness of those of yesteryear. Will we remember the small gains he has made, gains not so much seen over the past year but of some made recently? We have noticed increased movements with his right arm and leg lately; in fact, one night the noise over the bedroom monitor of Seth repeatedly kicking his leg was loud enough to wake us up. Also, we are observing the same small movements with his left hand and foot that began on his right side, early on. We can put a shower curtain rod across his doorway, have him grab it, and he will push and pull himself forward and back in his wheelchair. Currently we are looking into outpatient therapy at one of the nearby hospitals. One therapist who examined Seth remarked that his overall physical condition and range of motion in his joints was “incredible,” a tribute to his Quadriciser machine and the tireless efforts of his mother and of the 30 or so volunteers who regularly work with him in patterning therapy.

We still wonder how much he comprehends of the world around him. Does he take everything in despite being locked in a largely unresponsive body, or does his consciousness exist in some sort of dreamlike, semi-awake condition, with communications garbled through the damaged filter of an injured brain? Not really knowing the level of “where he is at” is probably the most frustrating thing we endure, but we continue to operate on the assumption that he does understand what is said and what is going on around him. If he could, I’m sure he would still say to me, “Pray for me, Dad!” So, each night before retiring, I still lay my hand on his shoulder and pray for his protection (from seizures and illnesses), for progress and his will to persevere, for the Lord’s special communications with him, that hope for better days ahead will not die, that one day he will be able to express with his own lips the testimony of the psalmist:

*“I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.”* (Psalm 40:1-3)

~Craig