**May 2008**

**Reflections from a Mother’s Heart**

Many precious memories of kind and caring staff are imprinted on my heart from our time at Riverside Hospital during the first five weeks after Seth’s accident. When we first numbly walked through the door to the unfamiliar facility and weren’t sure whether we should ask directions to the ICU or the morgue, a big, burly security guard met us, shook our hands, and told us that he had been praying for Seth all night long and directed us to his room. The security guards became our second family as they inquired about Seth each day and always added a word of encouragement. All these years later, one of them still calls us periodically to check up! And there was the sensitive nurse shortly after we arrived who just quietly walked into the room and asked if she could bring us some hot coffee. Her thoughtfulness amidst our shock of seeing Seth lying motionless, hooked to an array of tubes in a roomful of machines, brought tears to my eyes. And I remember the kind, soft-spoken, almost grandfatherly neurologist who kept asking us if we understood that we were in this “for the long haul.” We always nodded and solemnly told him we understood. But we had no frame of reference with which to compare our situation. We didn’t realize yet that we were entering an unfamiliar and unpredictable journey of traumatic brain injury. Therefore, the absolutely “longest haul” I could picture was possibly investing five years of my life to help Seth get through some anticipated therapy before having everything return to normal. I’m a mom; that didn’t seem like too big of a sacrifice to make for my only son.

This summer, as we’ll be hitting the five year mark, the true sacrifice required for the long haul has become part of who we are. The physical demands, during the day as well as the night, of being 24/7 care givers to someone who is 100% dependant, are often overwhelming, leaving us discouraged and drained of energy. Nevertheless, we persevere, every day wishing we had been able to do just a little more, knowing that a brain injury benefits by constant stimulation and therapy. As difficult as the physical demands are, we were probably most unprepared for the continuing sorrow that an ongoing, catastrophic loss brings. In the book A Grace Disguised, the author, Jerry Sittser, who lost his mother, wife and daughter when their car was hit by a drunk driver, explains, “I did not go through pain and come out the other side. I lived in it and found within that pain the grace to survive and eventually grow. I did not get over the loss of my loved ones; I absorbed the loss into my life, like soil receives decaying matter, until it became a part of who I am. Sorrow took up permanent residence in my soul and enlarged it.”

Although the question is usually left unasked, I think people tend to wonder, “When will the Esvelt’s ever *recover* and *move on?”* Firstof all, it is impossible to *recover* from a loss that stares you in the face each new day. It’s impossible to *move on* when your entire day, 365 days a year, is now focused on caring for a profoundly injured son. But sorrow has enlarged our souls as we’ve gained an increased capacity to emphasize with other’s pain. Also, we have a greater understanding of Philippines 2:3-4, “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*  Elisabeth Elliot, one of my spiritual heroes, described it in the phrase, “My life for yours.” It gives us a tiny glimpse of the sacrificial love that Jesus Christ displayed for us expressed in the next verses of Philippians (2:5-11), as He willingly chose to sacrifice His life on our behalf.

One of the biggest blessings for Seth this last month is that we were able to secure a new, custom-designed wheelchair (worth about $6,000 we were told!). The old, nursing-home-generic one is now a thing of the past. Not only does he sit straighter in the new chair, but it allows us to do a lot more work with his neck muscles. The benefit was proven in physical therapy this last week when he was able to hold his head up, by himself, a number of times for 30 seconds each. His former record was 3 seconds. He now smiles every couple of days, and always at appropriately humorous times. Besides his patterning and other ongoing home therapies, Seth has continued occupational and physical therapy at the local hospital twice a week and has impressed his therapists not only with the small but positive steps he is making, but with his overall physical condition as well. He is responding more to commands with his right hand as evidenced by his improving ability to grip your hand, give you a hand shake and release afterwards. Of course, in his former life these things would be so automatic, that they would be insignificant. But in the life of a brain injury, they are HUGE. And so we continue our journey and ask God to sanctify our sorrows for His Glory.

~Mary

**July 2008**

**Reflections from a Mother's Heart**

Seth has a small tattoo on the top of his left foot. Exactly when he got it we aren’t sure, because he covered it up with makeup for a year, knowing that his dad would not have been too hot on the idea. But, he reasoned, if the words were written in Greek, it would soften the impact since it was a biblical language that Craig had studied in preparation for ministry years before. When people ask what *‘teleia phile’* means, we jokingly tell them, “left foot,” but it actually reads, “perfect love.” Why would Seth have had that phrase permanently inked onto his foot? Evidently it was because he was impacted by a book entitled “A Severe Mercy,” about a young couple who thought that, because of their own goodness, they could create a relationship of perfect love, the ability to give to the other without expecting anything in return. But it didn’t take them long to realize that they both possessed an inborn, selfish nature and their love certainly was far from “perfect.” Through the guidance of a friend, the great Christian writer C. S. Lewis, they discovered that God was the first to share “perfect love” as He willingly gave His Son to die on our behalf, to allow us the opportunity to be made right with Him. And the more that they came to know and love this God, the more they had the ability to express this kind of love to each other. Then, as tragedy unexpectedly comes to many lives, shortly after their marriage the young wife lay dying of liver disease. In this sad time, their great suffering gave them clearer glimpses into what “perfect love” really was.

It’s ironic to me that Seth selected that phrase as being important enough to have tattooed on his foot, because now it is a poignant expression of so much that is happening in his life. Through the continual and often overwhelming responsibilities that Craig and I shoulder we have learned a lot about giving and not expecting anything in return. The dozens of volunteers who have come to our home every week for the past two and a half years to help with the patterning therapy are definitely gifted in extending “perfect love.” And this last week (in fact, Seth’s birthday weekend) we saw an unbelievable demonstration of such love by friends who rallied around our family as they sponsored or supported a benefit golf tournament, dinner and silent auction that raised over $27,000 for the purpose of purchasing a wheelchair van for Seth (most of the planning was done, and the date was scheduled, before we were even told of the idea!). “Perfect love.” It will be so nice not to have to rely on state-provided transportation to get Seth to therapy and doctor appointments each week, and we’re hoping that the increased stimulation afforded by other outings in our own vehicle will further Seth’s recovery. Keep watching Seth’s web site and we’ll post a picture once it’s purchased!

Seth continues to make slow, but continual, progress. One of his therapists wrote the following: “We have been working with Seth for about six months, and it has been an enlightening experience. The amount of progress he has made receiving rehabilitative therapies has surpassed our expectations. He is an amazing young man.” She goes on to add, “The love that surrounds Seth is inspiring.” Seth is responding more consistently now to YES and NO commands. For instance, a number of times this last week, I held two plastic bins in front of him with a big YES sign placed in one and a NO sign in the other. Then I would hand him a ball and ask him to drop it in a specific bin, periodically switching the signs around. Each time, he performed 12 out of 12 times correctly. But those were good days. Sometimes he is much more subdued and unresponsive, and those are the times it’s easy to become discouraged and feel like we’re struggling alone—until the Lord encourages us once more, through sacrificial people, reaching out in “perfect love.”

~Mary

**September 2008**

**Reflections from a Mother’s Heart**

Have you ever had the incredible experience of something happening that unexpectedly felt like it physically lifted a huge burden from your life, a burden that you didn’t even realize you were carrying? That’s how I felt this week as I drove our “new” 2006 Dodge Caravan wheelchair van, specially designed to accommodate Seth’s chair and entirely paid for to the penny by donations, out of the car lot. The feeling of freedom and gaining control of one small area of our lives, in a daily grind where we have so little control, was like being able to breathe deeply and relax.

I have been grateful for being able to transport Seth to doctor appointments and therapy by using state-provided transportation for the last three years, but for someone in Seth’s condition, it is far from ideal. This week, as I was telling our final “driver” about getting the van and being able to transport Seth myself from now on—not just to medical appointments but also now to “fun” places—he asked incredulously, “Who would just give you $31,350 to get a wheelchair van!?” It was a joy to explain that there had been a special invitational golf tournament and benefit evening planned, planned before we even knew about it, and the donations given were from many varied sources: California Baptist University (where Seth was attending when he was injured), an old friend of mine from grade school, the therapists that work with him each week, a girl I taught in a junior high class in 1980, people we didn’t know, old friends, neighborhood friends, church friends, and the list goes on. We are so humbled by people’s concern, which was evidenced in their extreme generosity.

My first solo trip out was to a therapy session at the hospital this week, and I was giddy and smiling as I chattered nonstop to Seth about each familiar landmark we were passing. When asked if he liked riding in the passenger area up in front next to me, the position where his wheel chair is secured, he responded with an enthusiastic lift of his eyebrows.

Sunday, we will take him to church with us, his first time back in a little over five years. The last time he was there, six days before the accident, he played his guitar with the other instrumentalists, and Craig delivered a message on the 23rd Psalm. Little did we know that later in that same week, we would be going “through the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4 ), a shadow that would continue on for many years and bring huge changes to our lives.

This last month Seth’s story was featured in the August issue of Renton Magazine, which goes out to 11,000 homes in our city. You can check out the article by going online to www.pugetsoundpublishing.com and clicking on Our Publications, then Renton Magazine, then the content/archives area and finally to page 18.

Seth has made slow, but continual progress with physical and occupation therapy. His neck and trunk muscles are getting stronger and we look forward to the day that he doesn’t have to use the headrest on his wheelchair and would be free to use his neck to look around. But currently, as I watch him struggling to try and *manage* his head so that it doesn’t flop over, I am acutely aware that we had thought by this time in his life he would instead be *managing* a business utilizing his double college major. We had thought, by age 28, he would have *chosen* a wife, but instead, he’s looking at objects on a table and slowly struggling to move his arm to *choose* the item that the therapist has requested. So, as we remember back and look to the future, a measure of grief and sadness still lingers over our lives. But we cling to the second part of Psalm 23:4, “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, You are with me, Your rod and staff, they comfort me,” and we recognize that God has used a host of people, through the provision of a special van, to show that He is still intimately involved in our lives.

~Mary

**December 2008**

**A Father’s Perspective**

I was rereading the update I wrote at the close of 2003, just 136 days after Seth’s accident. I could pen nearly the same words today as 2008 comes to a close. A portion read as follows:

“Psalm 90, written by Moses, offers this lament: *‘Relent, O LORD, how long will it be? Have compassion on your servants.’* (v. 13) We can relate to that! We ask ourselves: How long will we be in this "limbo?" Will our son ever get better? Will our faith come through this ordeal intact and undamaged? We, at least, can still cling to hope in a miraculous work of the Lord, but we nonetheless miss the son and brother who used to bring a lot of joy and laughter to our home; we are confronted face to face daily with our loss, and there is no closure. The psalmist goes on to pray, *‘Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.’* (v. 14) We hope and pray as well that we will one day be "satisfied" and "glad" with God's expression of His unfailing love, that we will again be able to sing for joy, but we also realize that He does not always promise his children an easy path. Sufficient only for the day is His grace.”

It is a good thing that we could not see, with only a day’s sufficient grace, how the next difficult five years were to unfold! Regrettably, with each passing year certain memories of times I shared with Seth and various nuances of his personality, movements, and expressions have faded, and what memories and impressions remain are—and will forever be—of a son frozen in time at 23 years of age. Adjustments have necessarily been made but it is nothing one really “gets over;” it is impossible not to continually measure his life by what might have been as we observe the activities and accomplishments of his former friends and peers, e.g., obtaining degrees, starting careers, marrying, having children, and so forth—what he’s missed out of life that others take for granted.

Seth has made progress, to be sure, and the therapists seemed pleased with the improvements he has shown during this past year, but for us things are painstaking and incredibly slow. Next month we hope to have Seth evaluated for an augmented communication device. We will be cutting back on the home patterning therapy that has been an almost daily routine for the past three years, having hosted 75 volunteers from as young as 14 and as elderly as 84. Those sacrifices of love have provided a wonderful foundation for the physical, occupational, and speech therapy that were added this past year at a nearby hospital. Friends have been there to lift our burden in so many ways, and undoubtedly the high point of 2008 for us was the invitational golf tournament and banquet that raised money for the purchase of a wheelchair accessible minivan to transport Seth whenever and for whatever purposes are needed or wanted.

We were blessed during the Christmas holidays that our eldest daughter, Holly, and her husband Matthew (an ICU nurse), were able to spend time with us and take care of Seth as Mary and I were finally able to get away for a couple of days to one of our favorite places, Victoria, B.C. What will the New Year hold? It’s just as well we don’t know, but sufficient for each day is the Lord’s grace, and who knows? Maybe He’ll surprise us!

~Craig