April 2014

Update on Seth (and his dad)

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.”* (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

Here in the Pacific Northwest we are emerging from the wettest March on record, having received nearly nine and a half inches of rain when a typical March only drenches us with something less than four. This obviously factored in on the devastating mudslide that occurred a couple of weeks ago about an hour and a half north of us, which everyone has been kept abreast by the media. April promises to be warmer and drier, and I’m looking forward to getting Seth out in some sunshine, perhaps on one of the local paved walking trails.

Spring also means the proliferation of color popping out everywhere against the fading winter’s backdrop of evergreens and gray skies with the coming-in-bloom of cherry trees, rhododendrons, forsythias, azaleas, and the like. As a landscape architect, I enjoy working outside—in my own yard (for others, my landscaping is just designing on paper, where the dirtiest my hands get is from a little graphite under my fingernail). In years’ past, after the lean winter months, I always looked forward to spring when the calls would begin coming in from landscape clients and I could make up for lost time financially. But the increase in my design business and yard work this time of year is now added onto to the housework, pastoral responsibilities at my church and, of course, day to day sole care of Seth’s various needs. To put it in perspective, it’s like handing the roles of a part-time landscape designer and pastor to a single mother who has the care of a newborn, along with all the necessary housework and yard work, the only hitch being that a hundred and seventy-pound “child” is not quite as easy to take along on errands as a baby. It’s a trite but true statement that you tend to appreciate a person more once they are gone (and not just for the assistance they provide). “Seth, do you think about your mother a lot?” (rapid blinking of his eyes). “Me, too.”

Seth’s younger sister, Kirsten, will be married in September. She and her fiancé, Wes Ray, will be married in the backyard of Wes’ parents who, ironically, had me provide a landscape design plan for them about 15 years ago (they attend the same church that our kids grew up in and where I served as associate pastor for 20 years). I will officiate at the wedding and hope to provide some extra splashes of color with the flowers I am currently growing in my greenhouse. This time Seth will be present to watch the ceremony, whereas when Holly was married in April of 2005 Seth was still at the nursing care center. It saddens me that Mary is not here to do the motherly things she would have loved doing for and with our daughter in preparation for the event.

Both Kirsten and Wes purchased their own homes a few years back, and they will move into Kirsten’s place—only ten minutes from me—while Wes rents out his house. I am grateful that both of my daughters remain close by (along with my grandson, naturally) and have been enjoying watching those special years of courtship, early marriage, and the blessing of children, years of my own life that I now look back upon with particular fondness. May the Lord enrich these years for them as He did for Mary and me!

~Craig

**August 2014**

**A Father’s Perspective**

*“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”* (Psalm 42:11)

The message that I shared at my church this past Sunday focused on the above Psalm (42) in which the writer, curiously, appears to be speaking to himself or, as I’m inclined to believe, is having a personal conversation by which his spirit—that part of him that is in communion with God—is giving counsel to his soul, as if he is being pulled in two directions. Have you ever done that? I can certainly relate.

This past weekend was one of coincidences, or perhaps *ironies* would be a more accurate description. Not only was August 16th exactly eleven years to the day from Seth’s accident but, this year, it also fell on the same *day* of the week (Saturday). As I sat by Seth’s bed that evening, I relived with him an almost minute-by-minute account of that fateful evening that became a defining date for my family, a pivotal point in time from which our lives would never be the same. Not only so, but at the time of his accident eleven years ago, I was just beginning to preach through a series on the Psalms (though at a different church), just as I am doing now. This proved to be providential at the time, because in the Psalms one steps through a door and confronts the gamut of emotions that a believer may experience, praising God on the one hand and struggling with faith on the other, harbingers of a tumultuous journey that my family was soon to be embarking on back in 2003.

The lowest point in that journey came about a month and a half after the accident, when an MRI revealed the extent of Seth’s brain injury. For him, a continued existence would be a “living death,” as the doctors put it, and for us an unbearable load to carry. Odds were strong that, since he was breathing by means of a tracheotomy at that time, he would get an infection and develop pneumonia (which proved true later), and the doctors advised us that, when that occurred, we should not treat the disease but “let nature take its course” for the good of us all—just let him die. It was not only a parent’s love that constrained us not to pursue that course of action but, at the time, a wishful hope that God might yet work a miracle and heal our son. In either case, we felt such a decision would be interfering with whatever purpose the Lord had in mind. And how could we be so sure that that’s what Seth would have wanted?

I recall the awkwardness and chagrin of those early days, of being bothered by the stares of people passing by as I pushed Seth along in his wheelchair, or being embarrassed at his expressionless face or his drooling. I wanted to shout, “This isn’t the real Seth! . . . If you could have only known my son before this!—he was so vibrant, so smart (he *was* a good student), he loved life, he had an easy, engaging smile, etc., etc.” And the daily sacrifices that Mary made day after day and month after month to visit Seth, wash him, brush his hair, read to him, exercise his limbs, etc., did indeed become burdensome, particularly when we saw so little change in him. On one occasion, in exasperation, she (uncharacteristically) vented and exclaimed, “Are we just dressing up a manikin?!”

I have no idea of the degree of enjoyment Seth may or may not be getting out of life. Does he really wish he were dead? His smiles warm my heart. Being formerly such an active individual, he probably chafes at having to be confined to the house so much. I’m considering taking him to the State Fair in Puyallup next month, along with my daughter Holly and grandson, Andrew. Perhaps the familiar sights, smells and sounds would trigger memories of long ago when Mary used to take him and the girls to the Fair each year (regretfully, I was too often “too busy” to go along). The kids were allowed to bring home one souvenir from the Fair, and for several years Seth’s choice of purchase was a plastic sword (so typically boyish). In any event, after eleven years I’m more comfortable with the stares.

He missed his older sister’s wedding in 2005 but will be present when I officiate at the marriage of his little sister, Kirsten, in a few weeks, when she becomes Mrs. Charles Wesley Ray. In spite of the void that was left with Mary’s passing nearly 22 months ago, am so very thankful that my daughters’ families are to remain so close. My position at my church provides fulfillment and a wealth of friendships. My grandson, now two, is an ongoing occasion for joy. I’m sure he wonders why his Uncle Seth doesn’t talk to him or move out of that strange-looking chair with the big wheels.

Still, despondency nips at my heals like a relentless, nasty little dog as I look at my son’s face each day and remember who he was in light of his current condition and consider our respective futures in “the here and now.” That’s when my spirit often comes running to the rescue and begins to speak God’s truth to my downcast soul—that God *is*, that He is good in everything He does and that we will still “look upon His goodness in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:13) and afterward share a fantastic, everlasting future together that will make this life pale in comparison. So why has God allowed us to go through these past, difficult eleven years? Only He knows, and I can’t come up with any (personally) satisfying answers on my own. Phillip Keller, a pastor and author in New York notes that *“when we look at the cross of Jesus, we still do not know what the answer is. However, we now know what the answer isn’t. It can’t be that he doesn’t love us. It can’t be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering* ***so*** *seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.”*

~Craig

**Update on Seth (and his dad)**

**December 2014**

*“For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy.”* (Psalm 72:12-13)

Our little Christmas tree, masterfully decorated by my daughter Holly, stands in Seth’s room where he can observe it from his bed. I’ve always loved this time of year, and especially those Christmases of years’ gone by when my whole family was together. It didn’t matter that we usually purchased a cheap Douglas fir from the nearby hardware store and had little money to spend on the kids, my landscape design income typically falling off dramatically in the winter months. I recall the year that Mary, somewhat irked that the kids (on previous Christmases) continually rattled and shook their presents in hopes of discovering their contents, purposely mislabeled each child’s gifts. As Holly, Seth, and Kirsten were anxiously poised over their little pile of presents, ready to tear into them, she calmly instructed the children to pass their gifts to the sibling sitting to their right, so that they could unwrap the gifts actually meant for them. The look on their faces was priceless!

As I look back over this past year, I think the highlights, for me, were the two weddings at which I officiated, the first one (in June) being for my niece, Melissa, who was married to Christopher Kehr in Spokane. The other was for my own youngest, Kirsten, who wed Wes Ray at a beautiful September ceremony in the backyard of his parents’ place. I contributed to the decorations with many plant pots spilling over with flowers I had grown and propagated during the previous winter. Seth was able to attend his sister’s wedding, sitting in his wheelchair and clad in a special T-shirt printed to look like a tuxedo.

I’ve not much to report otherwise so far as Seth and I are concerned—life goes on without much change, having made adjustments to a world without Mary but still missing her deeply. As many of you know, if you have followed these updates for some time, Mary used to provide her own thoughts from time to time. Now, as a slight departure from the norm, I would like to offer some recent perspectives from my son-in-law, Matthew Rollosson, Holly’s husband, that I think you will find interesting. Matthew is a big, sensitive guy with a heart for people who are hurting—one of the qualities that attracted Holly and the rest of our family to him when he was caring for Seth in an intensive care unit eleven years ago. He has a particular burden for the underprivileged people of Africa and, with graduate training in public health and tropical medicine, spent the month of August in Tanzania training indigenous nurses in ICU techniques. More recently, he has been on the front lines in the battle with the deadly Ebola virus that has devastated several western African countries, having spent six weeks at a clinic in the interior of Sierra Leone. We, as a family, are proud of his sacrifice and courage. The following reflections are from his last blog entry (fullyvaccinated.blogspot.com).

***Will you come back?***

*Greetings, once again, from Freetown, Sierra Leone. I should be home in a couple of days.*

*The stories are heartbreaking. I saw people who had lost their spouses to Ebola virus disease (EVD), people who lost children, and children who had lost one or both parents. I saw people of every age die; the elderly, young adults, children, and, yes, infants. One woman, whose baby had died in the confirmed ward, complained that her breasts hurt. She was still producing milk.*

*I was prepared for the deaths. I came with the awareness that ebolaviruses are highly lethal pathogens and that the mortality of EVD is high. I was most affected by the survivors.*

*I transferred a three-year-old boy from the suspect ward to the confirmed ward after he had a positive* [*PCR*](http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/diagnosis) *for ebolavirus. Both of his parents had died. I stopped by his bed every time I went in the confirmed ward to get him to drink* [*oral rehydration solution (ORS)*](http://fullyvaccinated.blogspot.com/2014/11/ebola-oral-rehydration-solution-ors.html) *and talk to him. I didn't see him get out of bed for several days. I was pleased when I saw him outside playing with some of the other boys. A few days later, those boys were discharged and an older woman started looking after him. Not long after that, the woman taking care of him tested negative and was being discharged. I thanked her for looking after him, but I was afraid he would be left alone again. Fortunately, we received a negative test result for him the same day. I ran out to the street as he was being discharged to say goodbye to him and show him a picture of Andrew. I told the aunt who was there to pick him up that he was a brave little boy. I knew he was frightened, but I never saw him cry. Then I found a place where I could be alone, sat down, and cried.*

*There's a 9-year-old girl who was brought to the confirmed ward about two weeks ago. She had profound neurological symptoms;* [*nystagmus*](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003037.htm)*,* [*tremor*](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tremor.html)*, and* [*ataxia*](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/ataxia/ataxia.htm)*. For a while we thought she might be having* [*seizures*](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/seizures.html)*. We thought she was going to die. We spent a lot of time taking care of her – getting her to drink ORS and take a few bites of food, changing her urine- and diarrhea-soaked clothes, and washing her a couple of times a day. Her symptoms gradually improved. The nystagmus stopped, her tremor improved, and she started eating a little more. Thursday I made my last trip into the confirmed ward and saw her sitting up in bed feeding herself. I asked one of the local nurses to tell her that I was very happy to see her getting better. Then she turned and smiled at me. That was the best going-away gift anyone could have given me.*

*The work has been challenging. Working in full* [*personal protective equipment (PPE)*](http://www.who.int/csr/resources/publications/ebola/ppe-guideline/en) *in the heat and humidity of tropical Africa is uncomfortable. My scrubs were drenched with sweat when I left ward. Sometimes my* [*N95 respirator*](http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm049295.htm) *would become soaked with sweat, making breathing difficult. Working in PPE in an Ebola treatment unit (ETU) is not conducive to proper body mechanics, so my muscles often ached. The* [*chlorine solution*](http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/hcp/mixing-chlorine-solutions.html) *used to decontaminate our PPE irritated my lungs and occasionally gave me cough so severe that, the first time it happened, I thought I might have* [*pertussis*](http://fullyvaccinated.blogspot.com/2012/02/pertussis-whooping-cough.html)*.*

*In spite of all of the challenges, this has been one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. When we first arrived in Port Loko, no Ebola survivors had ever been discharged from the Maforki ETU. By the time I left, we had discharged 60 survivors.*

*I have been asked several times if I am coming back to continue working in the Ebola response. The answer is that I am going home to be with my wife and son. One of the doctors who recently arrived in Port Loko remarked that I am "outside of the demographic." It seems that most of the expatriates working in the Ebola response either have no children or have adult children. I am an outlier; the only expat with a young child.*

*I love Africa. I became a nurse to work in Africa and I plan to return to this continent whenever I am able to do so. For now, it's time for me to go home and be Holly's husband and Andrew's daddy.*

May our Lord richly bless you all this Christmas season as we remember the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ. May we offer praise to God the Father, Who bid farewell to the Son as he stepped across the stars to Bethlehem.

-Craig-