

Out of the Ashes

By Benjamin Scott Allen

The swollen sea tossed the dilapidated fishing boat like a cork in a hurricane. The captain, lathered in grease and the smell of old fish, gripped the wheel as the wooden vessel sputtered forward to the crest of the swell and descended into a collision course with the liquid valley. The rain swirled in all directions on the whim of the angry wind. I sat in the cabin waiting, too sick to be sick. The captain shouted, “Do what you need to do here. This is as far as we go.”

Thirteen years of laughter, slumber parties, movies, bedtime stories, hugs and kisses compacted into a Ziploc bag. I reached with my right hand in and pulled out a handful of my child. The rain slammed against my clenched fist and the ash was ungratefully devoured by the salt-water swell. With my left hand, I repeated the ritual with my eight-month old, a life denied laughter, slumber parties, movies... but full of hugs and kisses.

The captain poured all the weight of the engines toward land. I sat in the cabin, drenched with salt water, cold rain and warm tears. A film of wet ash covered each hand and I stared into the lives of my children. I stared into the dream. The storm still cried its indignation as I walked to the end of the pier and dipped my hands into the cold, cold sea. It was my last act as a father.

Part 1

“Hello, This is Papa”

What was my first act as a father? When does a relationship with a child really begin? When does it end? The relationship with my unknown child solidified long before his body entered the world. Many times I would rub Lydia’s stomach and in a soft, singing cadence say to our child, “Hello, this is Papa, and I love you.”

Just weeks before, Lydia and I sat on the steps of the small, red brick parsonage. We had worked hard that day decorating our child’s bedroom, masking the white concrete walls with brightly colored hot air balloons. It was our first real home, even though it still belonged to the church I had just started to pastor. She sat on the first step and I rested on the last of the three, close to her stomach, close to our child. The moon was full that night. It hung over the hill that

separated Pacifica from the rest of the San Francisco Bay Area. We shared the dream of our coming days, laughed and joked at our good fortune to find this church, this home, this child.

It was not unlike the first time Lydia and I sat together on the front lawn of her apartment in Ft. Worth, Texas in 1978; the first night we knew we'd be spending other nights together. She was in theological training at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. She was already a nurse, but she had decided to go overseas as a medical missionary. I was in my junior year at Baylor University. I was in Ft. Worth to attend a student convention; and since she was like a big sister to me, she offered me a place to spend the night.

Lydia and I first met when I was eleven. She, being three years older, only gave me the courtesy of friendship. Not that I was in love with her then. I fell in love with Lydia the night we shared our laughter on her front lawn. We laughed and laughed that night. Not just giggles, but real belly laughs that leave warm embers on a memory. We were married a year later and set our sights on California, seminary and then only God knew.

And only God did know under the California night of that full moon. I stroked her stomach and sang in a familiar cadence, "Hello, this is Papa, and I love you." Every morning I sang, "Hello, this is Papa, and I love you." Coming home after work I would repeat our ritual. This night was no different from other nights, or at least that is what we thought. Only God knew, but we laughed and talked as if we knew too.

It was a Sunday, three weeks before due date. I taught a Sunday school class in the small church and preached the morning sermon. Lydia taught a Sunday school class. Lydia and I went home that Sunday afternoon. She wasn't feeling well. She had scaled back her work at St. Mary's Hospital to half time, but she was getting more tired as the birth approached. She stayed home that night when I returned to the church to teach a training class and preach the Sunday night sermon.

It was about ten when her headache started. At eleven thirty she began to vomit. By midnight we were heading for Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco, the hospital we had carefully selected in our search for the best place to have our child.

Her attending physician didn't come to the hospital to meet us. Instead, a resident checked her over. Around two in the morning we were sent home, medication in hand.

My eyes locked onto the broken white lines. We entered a tunnel on the highway home. Intermittent lights flashed in sporadic rhythms to illumine the cab. Still my eyes measured the edge of the hood to the white line leading home.

I felt Lydia's hand slap me across the face. I jerked my head in her direction. Her eyes were rolled back. Blood dripped from her mouth. Her hands curled as they flailed against the window and the dashboard. I pressed her back against the seat with one hand, holding the wheel with the other. The lights of the tunnel quickly flashed - light, dark, light, dark. I screamed her name. No response. The exit on the other side of the tunnel did not smoothly u-turn back to the hospital we had left twenty minutes earlier. But laid out before us was Mary's Help Hospital in Daly City. I held her with one hand and sped the car to the front door of the emergency room, nearly crashing into glass. Attendants burst out the sliding doors. She was still convulsing when they strapped her on the gurney and whisked her away.

I could see her in the other room as they tried to control her flailing arms. She catapulted off the bed and landed hard against the mattress. They wouldn't let me in the room and ultimately closed the door.

The waiting room was empty. I paced the cold white florescent hallway. Alone. I hugged my chest, slid down the hallway wall and prayed, "God, don't let her die. Please, don't let her die."

In that moment, I felt it wasn't just up to God. Lydia, deep within the multi-layers of life, beyond the surface of consciousness, had a choice to make. She was standing on a precipice undetectable to the human eye. My prayer turned to her, "Please, Lydia, please don't die."

Does God answer prayer? Was I even a player that night or in the days that lay ahead? I sat on the cold tiles in that empty hallway, waiting.

Lydia and I stood, a room apart, her life shredded in layers, our child's life in the balance. I stood at the edge of where I'd been, but could not go that night. This was her journey.

My prayers may have echoed into the inner chambers, but even to this day I do not know why what happened happened, nor can I begin to comprehend the interplay of destiny and desire. To this day I wonder what part Lydia played just one room away.

Her physician entered the waiting room. He said he wanted to take her back to Mt. Zion.

The seizures had stopped. They said they wanted to induce labor rather than perform a caesarean. Hours of waiting ensued. Her dilation was slow, but she remained in a stable condition.

On October 4, 1982, just this side of midnight, our son, Matthew Benjamin Allen slid down the birth canal, the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck three times. The attendants unwrapped Lydia and Matt and rushed him to the corner of the room to check his vitals. He was alive. Weak, but alive. They said they would have to take him down to the intensive care for a routine check.

I held Lydia's hand. Was I to go with Matt? Was I to stay with Lydia? I had not slept in over twenty-four hours, but I was clearly awake to the measure of that moment. I looked at Lydia. She was stable. I squeezed her hand, kissed her cheek and followed the tiny gurney that carried our child to the infant intensive care. Once Matt had stabilized I returned to Lydia's room and waited.

They brought our baby to the room. Wrapped snugly in a blanket he descended to his mother's side. His mouth pressed against her nipple in the dance of mother and child. It took only a minute or two before Matt took his first swallows of his mother's milk. It could have been that moment, or maybe another moment when in the womb, which took his life thirteen years later.

Matt went back to the regular nursery after the feeding and I stayed with Lydia. Later, the pediatrician entered Lydia's room and said Matt had to be taken back to the intensive care. He said Matt might not make it through the night, and added: "We are not sure what he has, but I need to tell you he is probably one of the sickest babies in there."

I sat next to our son under the lights of the intensive care. Lydia was too weak to join us. He was covered with sticky plastic circles that held the various monitors on his chest. The ventilator pushed air into his lungs, but still he heaved for every breath. I matched the rhythm of his short breaths, and prayed. His left hand gripped my index finger. I leaned close to his ear and softly sang, "Hello, this is Papa, and I love you."

Matt squeezed my finger. This was the final key that unlocked all of me, leaving me utterly defenseless. It was the first of many lessons Matt gave me in the brevity of thirteen years.

Up until then, there was never a time when I let myself completely love. There was always a part of me that held back, safe from complete annihilation, just in case the love I gave

was to be lost. With the squeeze of my son's hand I was undone, frighteningly free to love another unconditionally. The only way I can describe it, rather awkwardly, is "I was unable not to love".

Matt fought to live through the night. His bowel wall had broken, probably due to feeding too early after the traumatic birth. He would need an operation to remove three quarters of his bowel and he would have a stoma, a hole in his side, where he would excrete his stools.

Seven days after Matt entered the world, a knife entered him. Lydia was back in the hospital. She came home for a day, continued to bleed and had to return to the hospital for a DNC. I sat by her hospital bed and we waited to know if our son was going to live. The doctor entered with the news. The operation was a success. Hopefully, the remaining bowel would heal enough that in seven months the doctor could reconnect the two sides and he would no longer need the stoma.

The doctor left the room. I hugged Lydia and jubilantly said, "We get to keep him." That was my mantra for the rest of the day. Over and over I thanked God and muttered to myself, "we get to keep him." What I didn't know was how long that would be.

A Knowing in the Unknown

Tomorrow was a long time ago. Linear motion began to erode. The definition of 'moment' now was a day, a year, a lifetime, and a breath, anything that leaves a shadow or a mark on time.

Matthew filled our moments. One of us tried to be with him at all times during his first month of life in the intensive care. We were taught how to care for the stoma, how to work with his intolerance to protein and his 'failure to thrive'. Matt was always hungry. Due to the lack of bowel he needed food practically every hour, on the hour. The food traveled so fast that thirty minutes after eating he had had a stool. The acid from the stool broke down the skin around his side. He cried from the pain; the crying made him hungry again. Day and night the cycle of food, pain, waking, brief intervals of sleep ruled our home. We hung on, hoping the next operation would change the sleepless shifts we shared.

Lydia returned home after her second trip to the hospital and was not much better. She was constantly weary. We put it down to sleepless nights and the intensity of Matt's needs. But

Lydia knew. She was deeply in touch with her body and could feel something within her was different and ominous. Her weariness was too weary, her lack of strength too obvious. She told me how, when taking Matt for his regular checkups, she would have to leave an hour early, just so she could find a parking place close enough to the doctor on the crowded streets of San Francisco. Lydia began to measure time by the energy it took.

She leaned against the kitchen counter one day. Her arms folded, knees locked for support. She wore her thick brown hair shoulder length in those days. Her small frame had already returned to her pre-pregnant days. Deep brown eyes, usually rich in expression, were dull with weariness. She said, “I feel like something has died inside of me. Something has happened.”

Something had happened. A knowing always shadowed our uncertainty.

I never forgot that moment when she spoke those words. Nor did I forget the moment in her long labor when the obstetrician asked me to come into the hallway. She said to me, “We want to give Lydia some platelets. It is just a precaution. She has lost a lot of blood and if we need to do an emergency caesarean she will need them.”

I didn’t even know what platelets were. The doctor explained the blood clotting effect of platelets. “She could bleed to death without them.” I nodded and said, “Do whatever you need to do.”

I don’t know why I would specifically remember that conversation over the other medical jargon I heard in the hours before Matt’s birth. But I do.

Before Lydia and I left for California, in the first year of our marriage, Lydia had a dream. This, too, I remember. It was a dream that shook her to the core. She said, “I was in a large room, like a theater. It was crowded with people. The show ended and we were led to one particular exit. We moved, close together, down this long corridor. I don’t know how I know, but I realized we were moving to our deaths. Like we were being led to a gas chamber or something.”

I never forgot her dream. Nor did she.

Lydia was strong, powerful in her self and her beliefs. Her wisdom was like her life, not flashy, not pretentious. When she spoke, she had something to say. But she didn’t need to speak for those in her presence to experience her depth of spirit. When the “something had died” in her began to take her life, from the first moment to the last, Lydia stood grounded in a serene strength. Even when she cried, her tears ran from deep, still waters. She was, above all, a realist,

but during that period we were missing the one piece of reality that carved our lives for the rest of our lives.

We didn't know that on October 4, 1982 Lydia had received a transfusion of platelets that carried HIV. We didn't know that the reason Matt's 'failure to thrive' was not because he was unable to absorb nutrients. The true reason was that he too was infected by HIV, possibly from the milk that broke through his bowel wall and entered his bloodstream. And we didn't know that destiny was to take the life of one more before it was through.

But we knew something had died; we just didn't know what. Astronomers look into the far reaches of space and detect an imploded star by the orbits of the planets in its gravitational pull. From October 4, 1982 we lived in the gravitational pull of an unknown disease.

We did not miss the signs; we misread the signs. We listened to the multitude of experts. One 'expert' literally laughed at Lydia when she told him how many vitamin supplements she was giving Matt. He said, "Matt's urine could care for half of Africa with that amount of vitamins."

But Lydia knew. She had thrown herself headlong into the care of her child. She knew something was wrong. When she asked Matt's pediatrician if Matt could have been infected with this new virus going around San Francisco in 1982, he said, "It is highly unlikely. Practically impossible." But she knew, not that it was HIV, but "something had died" inside her, and something was killing our son.

There are two things I would never do – stand in between a grizzly bear and her cub, and get in the way of Lydia when she was on a mission. The care of Matt was Lydia's mission. She studied medical journals, checked into alternative health and toured the 'experts' looking for answers to Matt's physical fragility. Apparently, doctors have to earn the respect of nurses, and this was certainly the case with Lydia. She didn't roll over and give way to the experts. We may not have known what Matt had, but Lydia knew the limitations of doctors. And when it came to the medical world, not one of my favorite terrains to begin with, I stayed out of Lydia's laser-like path.

My path was to sit under the tutelage of this infant that was my son. The nights in the intensive care brought my early lessons. He was strapped to machines and monitors, but the wires stretched to the rocking chair and to the beating of my heart. I would rock him, sing softly in the crowded room, and talk to him of the days I thought lay ahead of us. "We got to keep

him.” The night he lived through, the operation that was a success, the steadying of his breath and his slow recovery was my gift. And that gift was never lost on me. Never.

The day we were able to bring him home I carried him to his room, the tiny bedroom full of hot air balloons. A balloon mobile drifted over his second hand crib as I lowered him down on his bed for the first time. His dark brown eyes briefly strolled the room before closing.

That night, Lydia insisted we read him a book. “Read him a book?” I said. “He’s only a month old!”

She picked a book with thick pages. “It doesn’t matter. We are going to read to him every night.”

We read the book, sharing every other page.

Born of Spirit into the Unknowable

The movement of spirit takes its own course. Spirit has always been a part of my life. I was taught from an early age that spirit was as real as my body. It was simply part of the landscape. No matter what the scenery, it was through the lens of spirit that I was taught to see life’s unfolding mysteries.

My earliest lesson in spirit clothed an ominous foreboding that spoke of the years to come. I wonder sometimes whether the mysteries that stream through the present tense are simply an understanding of the past.

I was four. My two older brothers had already moved into the academic realm of first and third grade. I spent most of my days alone without other children. In the backyard next to the garage wall was a long pile of wood, four stacks high. That woodpile was my battleship; my stagecoach, my rocket ship, anything and everything my little imagination could fantasize. For hours on end I would travel the high seas in search of pirates, soar into space to do battle with aliens, and ride my stagecoach through desert plains fighting bad guys. My sidekick, first mate and all around best friend, was Little Bit, our Boston Terrier dog. We were inseparable. The Lone Ranger had Tonto. I had Little Bit.

One day I heard a fire engine siren out in front of our little suburban street. I rushed to the high wooden gate, undid the latch and hurried to the front yard to watch this big red truck soar pass. I was captivated by the sounds, the size of the machine, the speed. After the fire truck

dipped down the hill and out of sight, I turned to Little Bit to speak of our latest adventure. No doubt the woodpile was about to be transformed into the biggest, brightest fire engine in the world.

Little Bit was gone. It had to be the noise that scared him. He had never left my side before.

For three days my family and I looked for my dog. I had left the gate open. It was my fault. I felt the weight of what I had done.

On the third day, my older brother, Skip, aged six, came running up to me. Skip was the protector of the family. The middle of three boys, he was the one that ran interference, watched out for me and carried the weight of light and shadow that all families seem to collect along the way. Skip, in his usual dramatic fashion, said, “Scotty, whatever you do don’t look in the box in the garage.”

Compliance has never been one of my stronger qualities. I heeded his warning long enough to see him run off to his next urgent responsibility.

The brown cardboard box was in the corner of the garage, pushed against a few rakes and the lawnmower. I truly did not know what I was to find. Innocence has its advantages.

It was Little Bit’s open eyes I saw first. To a four-year-old, open eyes means awake, but these eyes were empty. Even before I scanned her crushed body I knew. For the first time I saw eyes devoid of spirit. All I could see was that my dog was dead. And the eyes, those empty eyes weren’t the eyes of my constant companion that licked my face every morning, ate half my sandwiches and fought the forces of evil from our woodpile in the backyard. Those weren’t her eyes.

I buried my tears in my pillow for three days, not leaving my room. I had killed my dog.

Skip kept a vigil over me. Even though it was his dog, too, he stood watch over me. It was my next lesson in spirit. No spirit travels this dream alone. Interwoven in the layers of moment is spirit’s collectiveness. My father, the Southern Baptist minister, performed the service. The neighbors next door laughed as the family stood around the broken ground in the backyard. Prayers were said to Jesus. Scriptures read. The Gates of Heaven invoked to comfort. But heaven was someplace else. Somewhere Little Bit was, and I wasn’t.

We covered Little Bit with fresh dirt. It was my first funeral. The lesson that has lingered long into this dream I live today is that, for me, funerals don’t help.

Empty and Full

Our youngest child, Bryan Caleb Allen, was born on May 13, 1985. We had moved to Colorado the year before. Lydia was working part-time as a psychiatric nurse and I was the youth minister at First Christian Church, Colorado Springs.

Bryan was a fighter. He had to be. He was three months premature. Lydia had major complications and needed a caesarean. I held her hand, but I chose not to look over the sheet into her torn womb.

Bryan spent the first three weeks of his life in the intensive care. There were complications, unknown complications. His heart pulsated in irregular rhythms. It was touch and go. Lydia was again physically decimated.

Bryan's eyes were deep blue and reflected an aged wisdom. He was beautifully proportioned from head to toe. That's what I counted first – his toes. I just wanted normalcy.

When they said he was going to have to go to the intensive care my heart crumbled. Someone wiser than me once said, "It is not the future we fear the most. Our greatest fear is that the past will repeat itself."

It was the smell of the antiseptic soap that took me back two years earlier. It was the coarseness of the brush that we used to scrub our fingers before we could touch our child that catapulted me back there again. It was the paper mask that collected the sweat and recycled my breaths that left me only one step away from what I so desperately never wanted to experience again.

Again I held the small hand of another son. I watched him heave for every breath. Again there were the smells of the ICU, of children struggling to live. Parents waiting on the precipice of life and death praying for miracles filled me, emptied me, and ripped me to shreds.

Bryan's eyes were empty and full at the same time. There was something already lost in him. We believed that if we could get him through the first days, he would make it, just like Matt made it. Again, Lydia and I took turns in our familiar vigil.

Lydia bonded with Bryan in the way I had bonded with Matt. Maybe it was the unconscious common path that drew them into that layer of life, a layer deep and still. I saw immediately the uniqueness of their interwoven spirits. Bryan had the same tenacity as Lydia, the

inner strength to do what was necessary. He was calm and determined. His breaths were not desperate and driven like Matt's first days. Bryan's breath was steady and rhythmic, strong and defiant. I knew from the first, this child was Lydia's child. And I believed he would live because he was Lydia's child.

It was ironic. Bryan physically looked like me. Matt physically looked like Lydia. But the reflection of Matt's spirit was more of me, and Bryan's spirit was to Lydia like the reflection of the moon on a still pond.

We all collected wisdom from Bryan's short life, but it was Lydia that reached the furthest into the presence of Bryan. Lydia's inner knowing met Bryan's inner being in a place where spirit moves deepest in the mysteries.

We took Bryan home with a heart monitor. Lydia laid Bryan in his bed as I placed the monitor in the corner of the crib. Bryan's room was dressed in bright, colorful rainbows. His eyes surveyed the room, but whenever he saw his big brother, Bryan stopped and locked his strong gaze on Matt.

We were told his heart would grow stronger. It did and the monitor was abandoned after three or four weeks. But Bryan did not grow stronger. He, too, had this strange phenomenon of 'failure to thrive'. He, like Matt, made the rounds of experts.

Lydia's recovery was slow. No one on the outside really knew the degree of her deterioration. She never complained and when anyone entered our world she would rise to the occasion. If asked, she downplayed her condition. Her focus was on Bryan.

Matt still wasn't sleeping through the night. This was at two and half years. Bryan slept more out of exhaustion, and so did Lydia and I.

We braced ourselves every morning for the day ahead. But we were unable to brace ourselves for the call.

I picked up the phone. The woman on the other end asked for Lydia. She said she was with the blood bank in San Francisco. I handed Lydia the phone. She sat down on the couch. I stood next to her and watched. Lydia asked questions. "What do you mean? What kind of tests? What's it for?"

I don't remember the length of the conversation. I do remember the length of the moment when Lydia said, "The donor that gave me the blood at Matt's birth has died of AIDS. They want us all to be tested."