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The Accident

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The Accident

I have always believed in community, even when growing up in New Jersey suburbs largely devoid of any community spirit. It just seemed obvious that neighbors ignoring each other, competing fiercely and silently, even slamming doors and going back inside as one man did when I broke my leg in front of his house, was not the way things were supposed to be; that there was a bedrock of human connection that we needed to live on, and that this connection was what the humanness of the planet was really made of.

I always believed in prayer too, smugly reading about medical studies proving prayers' effectiveness and thinking, "well, of course!" And I knew prayer as a frequent guest in my own life, a way to strip off the heavy coat of the ego and search my heart for what it needed or what it needed to give, and more often, a way to simply stop and be in the pool of life.

And of course I believed in love. I mean, who wouldn't? If we're made of star dust, and that star dust is made of infinity, surely love is what holds that dust together in human form.

Yet what I believed – all the weight of it – now seems an abstraction when compared to what I started to see of community, prayer and love in our family's horrific auto accident and recovery. While there's nothing I point to, and say, "look, it's different," everything is different without having changed form. My son is alive. The rest of us are healing. Life goes on.

I think of Jane Hirshfield's poem "Three Times My Life Has Opened," in which she writes about the times her life opened,

Once, into darkness and rain.

Once, into what the body carries at all times within it and stars to remember each time it

enters the act of love.

Once, to the fire that holds all.

These three were not different.

You will recognize what I am saying or you will not.

I recognize what she's saying, but I'm not sure I can even explain why. I know that it comes from almost losing what I loved most, but somehow, by the grace of community, being saved.

What dazzles me still – and hopefully will always dazzle me – is the clarity of our real power in choral healing, and the certainty of that power. How people could think of us, pray, wish, imagine so deeply during the crisis, and how the energy of those intentions of love could be so visceral, a substance that wrapped around us, held us, carried us, and healed Forest. How the energy work done by Ursula Gilkeson with occasional help from other healers near and far could literally remove shock from Forest's body, and activate his healing system so quickly that it could mend bones and stop bleeding in his face and head. How so many could join us, taking their vigil on as their own, and in doing so, create a circle of healing, a circle of energy, that helped bring Forest back to recovery.

Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2001:

Many ice storms lately, but this morning seemed dry, out of that icy envelope that made driving tenuous. It was the usual “get-in-the-car-or-I’m-leaving-without-you” and “hurry-up-now” kind of morning. Natalie and Daniel in the middle seat of the van, Forest in the back, and we were off. A Tuesday, no exercise class, and I felt dull and depressed, not even able to entice myself with a promise of tea and bagel at Milton's. While just the night before, I had thought

about how the material is the spiritual, I was distant from feeling any connection to either that morning.

On Louisiana Street, after crossing the Wakarusa River, all well, and suddenly, a slide – ice – the van flying side to side, no traction, no connection to forward motion, no control. I knew not to slam on the brakes, but I didn't know what else to do. I felt the van nosing down, and so fast over, sliding on its roof a long distance. In that quick action, I went from thinking we might go off the road but be able to drive right back on, to we would get stuck but could get pulled out, to the van is going to be totaled but we'll all be okay, to maybe we won't all be okay.

I screamed. Natalie and Daniel screamed, and we careened off the road heading straight down into a stream bed, ten feet deep, flipped over and moving still, the ton of the van sliding on the ice and thin snow until it stopped. All of us, at least I thought all, screaming, and in that sound, I felt also relieved – that we were alive, intact enough to be totally freaked out.

“Everyone out!” I thought and yelled as I tried to undo my seatbelt with my right hand - something was wrong with my hand or the seat belt, then I found a way to use my left hand, but it was so hard to twist and get to the release. I don't know what happened next, but I must have crawled out the window – Natalie above me on the ground walking, crying, Daniel below me at the almost-bottom of the slope with Forest.

I rushed down, turned Forest over, and his left eye open, rolled back, blood from his mouth, he was unconscious. I thought, “Now it's happened, what you feared most but knew would happen. He's dead, and it's your fault.” Natalie told me days later that I kept screaming, “Oh my god!” Daniel, sitting so quiet by Forest, having known to climb out the open sliding door and go straight to his brother, also knew to put his hand on Forest's chest. I was surprised

by how number I felt now that my mind was telling me my life was over.

“His heart is beating,” he said.

Remembering and ignoring all I knew about not moving accident victims, I picked up Forest, and immediately, he started crying. I carried him up the slope, difficult with snow and his weight, screaming, “Somebody help us!,” and fearing that unless help came, I would lose my precious son.

While I wandered what was taking so long, actually help came fast – a woman in a S.U.V. who took Natalie and Daniel in to keep them warm; a woman paramedic who told me to hold him so he wouldn’t choke on his blood; a UPS man who approached with a cell phone, and dialed Ken’s work for me; Louie McElhaney who I asked to get my purse from the van and even though people advised him not to climb in a tenuously-positioned upside down vehicle, he did; a team of paramedics, one who brought Forest a teddy bear, and another who looked at the bear and said, “that isn’t going to help” while they checked his pulse, held me and him up; strangers who wrapped blankets around us as we sat in the snow.

Then ambulances – repeatedly I had to refuse being put on a board while Forest screamed and cried as they tied him on his board. I walked with him to the ambulance, my hands swollen from the injury and from holding him. I saw two other ambulances and was told Natalie and Daniel were in them. They helped me up steps, and I sat behind Forest’s head, telling him he would be okay. He cried and cried, and they tried to soothe him while cutting his clothing off and checking his vitals. News of a helicopter floated in, and I asked them to call Ken. Then a woman asked if I wanted to call anyone else, and I told her Ursula’s number while. Soon she put the phone to my ear, and Ursula was there. “There’s been a terrible accident,” I told her, and she

immediately replied that she would meet us at the hospital.

The paramedics explained carefully to me, with great compassion, that I would have to leave Forest for a while, that I couldn't go in the helicopter with him, that I needed to be with the other kids. I was so stunned and numb that I never felt even a twitch, possibly because they also assured me that Forest was doing great, that they saw accidents all the time and they felt confident he would pull through, that they were only taking him on the helicopter to another hospital as a precaution, something they always do in the case of head injuries. I said goodbye to Forest, who continued to cry, and I climbed out.

Once on the road, I saw seven, eight cars, the sun briefly out, and I was directed to an ambulance. Natalie and Daniel were each on board, Natalie crying, whimpering while the EMTs told her how pretty she was. Daniel was quiet and peaceful, shaking though. I sat behind his head and let them buckle me in, put ice on my hand and wrap it. I touched Daniel's head. He was terrified, open, still, awake. I kept telling Natalie she was okay, Forest was okay, it was going to be okay.

The buildings and roads went by, seemingly upside down. I couldn't tell where we were driving past for the whole trip, but then I didn't have my glasses, and I was watching out the back window of the ambulance.

Once there – Daniel's palatte out first, then Natalie's – I walked out. Ursula arrived at the same time, and I filled her in with what I knew as we went straight to a room where they directed us. Bob was tall and gentle. The doctor – MacLean – kept telling Natalie not to cry, that it would make her head hurt more, and both kids not to be upset. In time, Natalie was cleaned up a little, and she and I snuck off to the bathroom to take a homepathic formula Ursula slipped us.

Daniel was looked at briefly, Bob cleaned my left hand, police came in and had me sign things although I could barely hold the pen, people came discretely to pick up blankets lent to us, and the Doctor told Natalie about staples that would go in her head. She howled while Daniel remained quiet. “He’s in shock,” Ursula said, “and so are you.” I nodded.

In the interim, I called Cordley and spoke with Linda Gudenhoff. I called the Pelathe Center to tell Dave to get out the NEA grant on his own, and he kept saying, “Oh my god!” to the accident and the life flight. I asked the doctor to try to get information from Children’s Mercy, but no luck.

Daniel was taken to x-ray, then me. I was told to stand in a hall and wait. Left alone, I immediately started to crumble. A janitor, an old African-American man, came by and said, “would you like a chair?”

“No,” I replied, trying not to cry, but he could tell.

“Let me just get you a chair, and you can sit if you want.” He parked a chair beside me and went on.

“No, it’s okay,” I said quietly.

He looked at me with great compassion and went to get the chair, placing it gently beside me. “Here, you have this now if you need it.”

Eventually I brought into x-ray, Daniel still there too. They rolled him out, and a flamboyant blond man, someone who obviously loved acting out show tunes, perked up to me, “Oh now, what in the world happened to you?” he asked with great drama. “What have we here?”

I didn’t answer and let him pose my hand different ways and take four x-rays.

Back to the room with the kids, I was called to the desk where Dr. MacLean and a bunch of other people stared at me. “Children’s Mercy just called, Forest has a break in his upper jaw, probably his lower jaw, cheek, and a spleen injury.” She may have said more, but I only heard that everything was fixable although I started to worry about how much the fixing would hurt him.

Back to the room, all the x-ray results declared us unbroken, I found they had just given Natalie a shot of painkiller in her head. The staples didn’t hurt her much, and Nurse Bob showed her how the staples worked beforehand on a cloth. I told the kids a Ursula everything I knew while Nurse Bob cleaned my wounded hand with tenderness, and gave me a splint, wrapping my hand and arm.

Ursula took her out, but first we had to find her car. I felt frozen and wanted to be with Forest immediately. But first we had to stop at the Merc where Ursula got some smoothies to keep her going (she was fasting), and then to out house to get glasses and clothes. I felt broken off from Forest, crazy, tired.

Once home, climbing through mud and ice to the front door, I heard a message from Ken with a number to call, and a message from Sandy. I called Ken first while pacing through our bedroom, getting clothes. He came to the phone after a few minutes of me waiting, crying, telling me Forest’s head was bleeding in three places, all about the jaw and face breaks, bones chipped here and there, and that I should bring clothes for him. I called Shelley Vermilya from the basement while fishing out my old glasses, and I cried and tried to get out the word that there had been an accident and that Forest’s head was bleeding. I called back Sandy while finishing the packing, but I was crying so much that I could hardly talk. She was coming to Kansas City,

and would do anything to help. She said she loved me and I went back to packing while calling Mom and leaving a message, and soon apologizing to Ursula, who didn't mind at all, for taking so long to pack and call.

Finally we left the dog, outrageously dirty house made worse by my tossing of clothes here and there in the packing frenzy, and mud for the gray highway to Kansas City. Ursula urged me to drink, and finally I had some of the smoothie. The kids fell asleep in the backseat, and I felt hopeless, like Forest could be dying, and it was my fault. It was excruciating all the way to Kansas City, and it took so long. I told Ursula I couldn't stand it, that I was too scared but had to hold it together for the kids.

At the hospital, we made our way through many corridors and shining halls to the bathroom and elevators up to Pediatric ICU. I went straight back to Forest's room and saw Ken. We hugged, cried, and he gave me updates. Forest would have to be in this drug-induced coma for three days, and hopefully, just hopefully, there wouldn't be too much brain damage. I held Forest's hand as he lay sleeping, heavily sedated actually, on the bed, machines attached to him every which way, a tube down his throat, and a brace around his neck. Then Ken went out and let Ursula in. She told me he looked good, and she needed time to work on him to see how he was. I went out – there was Cliff and Annette, hugs, kids getting treats, talk, and the pay phone with a phone card the hospital gave us. I called Judy and left a message. I called Mom back, both of us crying, and she simply said, "I'm coming." I could tell she thought Forest might die, and this scared me more. I called Victoria and left a long message with Jesse, a teenager foster kid of hers who, although I didn't know it at the time, lost his mother and almost died himself in a brutal car crash and was shaken for days by my message. I called the Rabbi who said she was

coming right over.

When I left the phone machine, I went into see Forest again, this time with Natalie, who started crying as soon as she saw him all bloody, bandaged, and hooked up to so many beeping machines. Ursula told me she had to sit down because the shock in Forest was so overwhelming it took her breath away. Eventually, a social worker came who filled Ken in on all the details of getting a room at the Ronald McDonald house. In and out, and in and out again, and this time, into the Rabbi's arms. I started crying again and then led her into Forest, a child the same age as her youngest, lying there inert. We stood, each of us on one of his sides, and read aloud from a booklet of prayers.

After Cliff and Annette took Daniel and Natalie out shopping and for a snack, we sprung into a routine of making phone calls, picking up pink message slips from the I.C.U. receptionist, and standing by Forest's side, watching nothing happen other than his breathing. I camped by the phone for a long time – first Shelley V. to tell her all I knew and hear how she had lit a candle for us, and another one for our colleague Betsy Warland, who was having a mascetomy this day. And I reached Judy who cried with me on the phone and promised to call Victoria. Ursula urged her to get some sleep tonight, she would stay with Forest and we could rest up for a long vigil. Annette and Cliff returned with the kids, and everything seemed to be set for the long days ahead.

Our family, minus Forest, converged to go to the Ronald McDonald room in the hospital for dinner, but when we saw the big sausages and piles of cheese, Natalie and I opted for dinner in the less-vibrant-food-filled cafeteria.

She got a salad, I got an order of mashed potatoes, and she sat down. "I was so scared,"

she cried and so did I. “It could have been me. I keep seeing his little body there.” We cried more than we ate, then went back up to find Ursula returned with rations for the night. So we left – went to the Ronald McDonald house, the four of us oddly feeling our missing fifth. We got lost although the house was just a few blocks away, and eventually, we found the art deco mansion that looked old but was new. Once in the doors, we were given a tour by a clean-cut man who led us through a huge kitchen where a church group made dinner for families, then living rooms, and what the kids liked best: a basement rec room with VCR and nintendo. Our room, three beds and bath, was simple and kind.

I settled in while Ken took the kids to the rec room two stories below, and I called Dad and Virginia, went through the story again, and contemplated a bath. My body was still almost shaking so much that I couldn’t completely feel how I was hurt too. But before I could reach the bath tub faucet, a surprise: Athenasus and Victoria, and also Courtney and Denise all there at once to help us, with cookies and laughter and hugs. Everyone chatty, trying not to do harm, we sat on the beds and I told all I knew again. I was tired and wanted to be alone, but also so grateful for this: my best friend and her husband, both devout Orthodox followers; and closest friends of our kids, a Pagan lesbian couple. All of them said they had to come – it was automatic to jump in cars and drive like crazy from Topeka or Lawrence, and all got lost on the way. Courtney reported that as soon as she and Denise walked into Forest’s room, Denise burst into tears.

Eventually we made it down to the basement where Daniel, Natalie and Ken were watching the violent and rewarding ending of “The Mask.” Mike Rundle called, and I asked him if he could see if Carol would come to my house and clean it (we had hired her before) so that it

wouldn't be a complete pit when my mother arrived. Little did I know that such a call would lead to a team of people cleaning the house, hauling off recyclables, and trucking out all the clothes on all the floors to launder them and deliver them back in boxes decorated with animals drawn by 10-year-old Copper Ramberg. But it was hard to see where anything would travel at this point.

Back upstairs, I was amazed at the purple bruise on my left hip, big as my hand and spreading. Daniel got in one bed, Natalie in another, but she felt scared so she moved to my bed, and Ken moved to hers. It took me a long time to go to sleep, so long in fact that I gave up on sleep and went downstairs. There I met Scott at the breakfast table where I was purusing all sorts of cookies, candy, cereals, breads, anything any of us families wanted to eat day or night. Feeling too shaky to eat yet, I just purused, and visited with Scott, a man about my age who had lost his parents and almost lost his daughter in a wreck 15 days ago. His daughter Caroline had all of Forest's injuries plus a torn aeorta and other breaks. She wasn't expected to live and yet here she was, fully recovering. He told me of a nearby high school that held prayer circles for her although he and his daughter lived 60 miles away. He was blown away that high school kids, none of whom knew them, would do this, and he was stunned by the power of prayer and love. He kept reassuring me about the potential of kids to heal quicker than we could imagine.

I slept after that, waking often, flashing on that upside down slide into the bank, that moment of not knowing, hanging upside down in the van and trying to get out.

Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2001:

At 5 a.m., the alarm sounded, and Ken went back to the hospital while I slept a little

longer with the kids. When I awoke, there was incredible pain in my head, back and neck, but I downed two excedrin, took a hot bath, got dressed and got the kids up and out, all of us anxious to see Forest again.

Forest looked calmer, a bit less pale. Ursula had left at 3:30 a.m., and he had slept well all night. Now the trick was keeping him calm and quiet so that his brain wouldn't swell. I looked at his face taped across the chin, above and below swollen lips, his black left eye so swollen it was hard to see his long lashes, the neck brace, his bloodied cheek and face, his hands tied to the sides of the bed, mounted on little pallettes, i.v.'s everywhere, the two tubes into his mouth in case he stopped breathing, monitors churning and occasionally beeping.

Every so often his right eye lid would fly open, and there would be that shock of blue, his shock at being stuck here, marooned. He would look frantically about, catch on me or Ken, and we would soothe him. He didn't know why he was here so we would tell him, again and again.

The morning swept by, and then it was after lunch, and Mom and Henry were here, hanging out with Forest, Mom quiet and nervous. They took Daniel and Natalie out for a while, and somewhere in the hazy, Sandy came. Back and forth. With him, and then back to the phone, the waiting room, the cafeteria, the computer to send a plea for prayer out to KAW, bioregionalists, poetry therapy association members, the Pelathe Center, the Lassman family, the 59 group, the Jewish Community Center.

Sometime in the afternoon, Ursula and I sat face to face in the first waiting room. Having just consulted Audrey, who consulted Reatta, she told me that it was time to call Forest back. Something in me immediately knew this was true – that he was, as Ursula explained, too quiet, too far out there, and perhaps it was too comfortable a place for him to stay.

Now if you tell a parent you need to call her child back, that parent is going to automatically start to implode, and that's exactly what started to happen with me. I stood up, walked into the next waiting room, and before I could fall apart, I saw over 25 people from Lawrence, Topeka, Kansas City, and even New Jersey, there, some who had been there for hours and most who just arrived. I told them to go into Forest two by two (since only two people at a time were allowed in his room) and call him back.

A Zen master, Stan Lombardo, went and chanted over him; Tom, a Mneninee Indian, did special prayers and told him to come back, Diane and Sheldon told him he was doing great, others came and sang to him in Yiddish or German or English, or talked gently to him about what all was waiting for him here.

The backdrop around us was daunting as well: a young mother, perhaps still a teen, and her very sad husband, walked back and forth into the I.C.U., and out to the waiting room where a stand of her parents and grandparents waited and cried quietly. A nurse told me that children in lower number rooms usually were the most severe, and that mother's son was in room two, a long way from where Forest was in room 21. Unlike Forest, who shared a nurse with another patient, room two was attended by two or three nurses at all times. Eventually, about forty or so people, mostly teenagers, gathered to clutch one another. I heard the young mother, standing apart from her friends and family quietly by the phone, solemn with her long, straight blond hair and worn jeans, say into the receiver, "They're saying the best case is that he'll be paralyzed and be completely brain damaged." When that toddler died the next day, we moved quickly out of the waiting room to give space to the thickening crowd of weeping and shaking 18 and 19-year-olds and their older families.

But there was also a supreme winner in the waiting room, a small, slight man with dark hair who joked with Daniel and Natalie that the t.v. was his while they ignored him and rifled through the channels. His son had a rare virus and wasn't expected to survive, and although he had lost both his feet to this virus and had been in a coma for two months, suddenly, there had been a turn-around, and his 11-year-old boy who loved baseball and movies, came awake. "It's the first time I can talk to my boy in months," the man told Ken. No wonder father and son stayed up for four hours the night before gabbing about everything under the sun, how the baseball team did, how George Bush was now president but don't ask if the election was actually resolved, the weather, how much it snowed in the winter the son slept through, the names of the nurses, how mom was doing. Weeks later, that son went home with his parents to the small town that had rallied and raised money and prayed and hoped for months for his survival.

But back here and now, the second day of our vigil, the crowds going slowly into the ark of Forest's room, eventually thinned out, hugging us and leaving cookies in their wake. Ken left with Jerry to go back to Lawrence to get his dad's truck and some things at the house, and I left Forest in the hands of Sandy and Annette.

Stunned, I went to dinner with Judy and Stan, sat between them, all of us with our badly overcooked mashed potatoes and droopy spinach. I told them how scared I was, how reassured too, all of us saying he looked pretty good. I told them what I told everyone – that he seemed all there, and he responded to our voices and touch. Trish, a good friend I hadn't seen in months, walked into the cafeteria, and for a few seconds, I thought it was a wonderful coincidence that she was here visiting someone. Then I realized I was the someone.

Back in the ICU room, Judy stood on one side of him, and me on the other while a giant

sun balloon glowed in the distance tethered to a velvety walrus. “Whatever happens, you have to accept,” she, who had lost a child, said.

“No, not if he died, I can’t accept that.” I felt myself starting to crumble.

“Oh, he’s not going to die,” she said. “But whatever happens, you’ll find ways to live with it.” Weeks later she told me she thought he was going to live, but maybe be a basket case.

Then there was the visit with Dr. Chadinaud, a wonderful woman with high cheekbones and freckles who oversaw Forest’s care. She said the xrays showed no more bleeding and that the breaks weren’t as bad as anticipated. She was hopeful and informative, and Sandy sat beside me as the doctor talked, writing notes furiously to relay to relatives and to remind me if I forgot. But such good news is hard to forget.

We continued pouring ourselves over Forest, slipping homeopathic pellets in his mouth that Ursula prescribed, and trying to butter up the very uptight nurse who was rightly suspicious especially of Ursula and unnerved by us touching and holding and interacting with Forest.

That night, Sandy and Annette stayed with Ursula in and out doing energy work. Ken and I slept in that room together, hurting, exhausted. I took aspirin, melatonin too.

Thursday, Feb. 1, 2001:

Having hardly slept the night before, and knowing Forest had turned a corner, I let myself sleep until 8 or so although Ken left much earlier. I got up and dressed back and tried to get into the gold car, but the doors wouldn’t open so I walked to the hospital, the air fresh and sharp. As I moved through the elegant playground, I wondered if I would be back here playing with Forest at some point. If he could.

Once with him, he seemed more awake and alert. Another day or vigil, and on this one, Sue Elkins and Jack Weinrock came and did Reiki on Forest and, in the waiting room, on me while Sandy and Annette looked on, joking that the Reiki would go right through me and into them. With Forest, Jack worked on his spleen and Susan on his head. They were stunned weeks later, Jack told me over chocolate cake at the LJCC, at Forest's recovery, and Jack said that was heaven.

At some point in the afternoon, the visitors quiet or gone, I slumped into a chair in the main waiting room, but soon the elevator opened, and Michael Nelson emerged, saying he and Val had been on the phone back and forth repeatedly over all this. I tried to carry on a conversation with him coherently, telling him that every religion was probably invoked but perhaps Islam. He smiled and said he had been saying a Sufi prayer, an Islamic prayer, over and over for Forest, so if God is a Muslim, we're covered. Soon he went into the room where Ken was holding vigil, and he recited his sufi prayer to Forest. During this time the doctor came in and said, after reviewing the new catscans, "we don't know what happened. My whole staff can't figure it out. It's like he's a totally different kid than a few days ago." He told them that Forest only had a hairline fracture now and perhaps all he'd need was some light bedside surgery. Michael later said the doctor got ready to say, "it was a miracle," but stopped himself.

In the long afternoon, Ken and I spent time, each on one side of Forest, me reading aloud emails from the 70 or so that had arrived – friends and relatives from all over the planet. I could only read about two or three before we'd be interrupted by another visitor or phone call to distract us from crying over the love of our community. At once point, Ken returned from answering a call that he had visitor and he carried back a bunch of big envelopes. It was all from

K.N.I., and in one was a string of 20 or so phone cards, four computer-made cards signed by staff, and an enormously fat envelope with money, over \$200 or so collected from the 300 or so people who worked at KNI. We started crying again.

Jo Abbott came and stood there with tears in her eyes. Later she said that she had never been before in a room packed with so many angels. The kids returned home with Mom and Henry, and we ate in the cafeteria and went over and over all we knew.

The night was long. I sent Ken to the Ronald McDonald house to sleep, and Annette and I did the first shift, warming his feet, talking, singing. Annette said that the night before she and Sandy played cards over Forest, and Ursula, in and out, showed Annette ways to use color and sound to help heal Forest. Annette also told me of times she instinctively knew what to do to heal her children without knowing how she knew. She said her mother used her hands too for healing. The new nurse was into therapeutic touch and other alternatives, and she was also active in the same kind of church as Annette and Cliff, so there were connections all around. At one point, Ursula was explaining to the nurse and Annette how she used color and light in activating the healing system, and both were enthusiastic about the combination of all these medicines.

Every time Forest awoke, I would count backwards, just like Dixie taught me years before, telling him of 10 singing ducklings, 10 red balloons floating away, 10 foxes crossing the tall-grass field. Sometimes I would have to count off 300 or 400 animals and planets and spirits for him to calm back down. Eventually, about 1 a.m., I got too tired, so I called Ken who drove the truck back so I could climb into it in the cold dark and go to the room to sleep. I bathed, sat quietly, and eventually lay down, still suspended in another place and time than anything resembling normal life.

Friday, Jan. 2, 2001:

When I returned to the hospital, the day nurse wanted desperately to get the tubes out of Forest, who was waking more and more and had surely reached the end of his sleep time. I wanted them out too, and after a lot of waiting and hand-wringing, the technician, a tall, wide man with long pony tail, came and helped her remove each tube slowly before taking him off the breathing machine. They sat him up and tried to get him to breathe, but at first, he wouldn't. I could feel Ken starting to panic, but I also knew that Forest would come through here, that with some luck and hope, he would start breathing on his own. We had the cartoons up loud, and we cajoled him to wake up, Forest, come back. Finally, it took. And since he was activating again, the nurse let me stay during the shift change while Ken went back to the room to nap.

While he watched cartoons, I showed him the stuffed walrus, the pastic glass thing with colors falling through clear water. He liked it all, and started to giggle at the cartoons before pulling off his diaper indignantly, indicating that he needed help to the go to the bathroom to poop. He drank 7-up through a straw, occasionally using his very raspy, scratchy voice, holding my hand, quiet but happy, full there with his sore throat. He did have two constant questions though: "Where's Daniel?" and "Where's My Tooth?" Obviously, he returned to us just where he had been thrown from the car, on the snow and ice that morning 72 hours before.

Ken returned mid-morning, and we hugged, impressed with Forest's healing. Then I went to sleep on a couch in the Ronald McDonald room down the hall until 11 or so until I emerged to find Karen and Ujala. I took Ujala with me to lunch and got her some coloring books. Pam Morgan visited too, and Ursula came to did work on him before leaving.

Eventually, Mom and Henry brought Daniel and Natalie, who were delighted to see their cousin along with their brother up and awake. Karen said, when I was in the hall, that my father had called, and when she told him about Forest's progress, he said, "You just made me very happy." The rabbi came too, leaving after praying with us and talking a lot with me about how relieved she was. Sometime Reva showed up too, loaded with William Least Heat Moon tapes and wishes from the community.

Then it was time to move into Two East, so we made his bed into a parade float of balloons and stuffed animals, pushing him forth. "It's a miracle," Erin, our nurse, told us. But we already knew this.

Once in the new room, beautifully colored and vibrant, the nurses transferred Forest to a full size bed. One noticed he was naked and said, "Hey, you're a nude dude!" which made him giggle more. "He's emotionally labile," Ken reminded me, a state caused by drugs and trauma. Soon everyone converged in the room – Daniel and Natalie, Mom and Henry, Karen, Ujala, Judy back too. And he got very quiet and tired, his eyes glued to the t.v.

Mom and Henry stayed, and Karen took the kids back to Lawrence, while Ken and I went through the elevated tunnels and across the Hyatt Regency to ground and across street to eat at D'Bronx at Crown Center. We tried to act normal over matzoh ball soup, pizza, knish and tuna salad, tried to even read a newspaper. But all we could really talk about was the preciousness of this time, the need to take care.

On the way back, he got lost in the Hyatt and started to argue. Finally, we found our way out to the sidewalk and hill, back to the hospital. We relieved Mom and Henry and settled in with Forest before Sandy came, and soon after, Doug and Jon. All of us watched some cartoon

movie with Forest, talking to him, letting him get quieter and more tired. Sandy sent us to sleep at our room so we left.

That night, back at the room, we joked about the extremes we'd go to so that we could stay at a fancy bed and breakfast without the kids. My bruise on my hip spreading, Ken and I marveled at its colors. We slept gently, a sense of hope everywhere. The boy was coming back, all of him.

Saturday, Feb. 3, 2001:

When we woke, we rushed back to the ward. Sandy told us Forest had a good night, and Scott, a semi-strict nurse, faded out to Ann, who was loving and stern at once. Sandy was joined by Annette, and we all helped Forest to the bathroom. But he was wobbly on his feet, clingy, exhausted, and he just wanted to sleep. "Let him rest," I told Ken. "He's been through so much already." But Ken would have nothing of it and felt we had to push Forest hard now. The tensions piled, and Sandy soon cued Annette that it was time to get some breakfast. I was starting to feel overly crowded with people who had given so much, and yet I couldn't really let down with all of them here. And I wanted to protect Forest, to soothe him, let him have whatever comfort he needed while Ken's energy and frantic pushing felt intrusive and angular.

Once alone, Ken explained his position: years of working with brain injury people put too much knowledge into him. He was afraid that what we didn't recover right away could be forever lost. He also came from the model that viewed therapy as pushing against the natural grain of the body, the mind, the hibernate and slow to a still pond. After hearing each other out, I agreed we need to push him some, and Ken agreed he could rest too.

So we helped Forest to his feet and walked him to the playroom, each of us holding one hand. The nurses were enthusiastic, and once there, Forest sat on my lap, picked up a few toys, but mostly had little response and wanted refuge. We took him to the Nintendo, usually his favorite thing, and he agreed to sit in a chair and watch an older boy move the figures across the screen.

For his first bath apres-accident, something he desperately wanted to avoid, we had to carry-walk him into the water. He sat passively as Ken washed his hair. He sat still, like our dog would when trapped in the tub and forced to endure it. Then we lifted his shivering body out, wrapped him in a towel, and with the help of the nurse, got him some hospital pants and a gown to wear, some yellow footsies with tread on them too.

Back across the hall and to a small examining room around the corner where Nurse Ann had to draw blood, Forest walked steadily holding our hands. She explained it all to Forest, who asked if it would hurt. “Yes, but you’ll get to the go to the treasure box afterwards.” When she stuck the needle in him, he yelped-whimpered, and I longed to cover him in sweetness and protection. Back to bed, but this time, he proudly wore his new Digimon watch, a gift for his bravery.

Judy, who arrived sometime between his being led across the corridors, arrived, and later told me she was amazed to see him up and walking, intact, unsteady, but gaining momentum with each step.

That afternoon the doors of the community swung wide again with Susan and Russ Shafer-Landau along with Sofie, Hannahh, Sheldon Vile, Mom and Henry, and later the kids with Karen. Sue brought brownies, and when allowed to have solid food, they were first thing Forest

ate with any enthusiasm. Dr. Miller and her entourage herded in, exclaimed that Forest looked great, and moved on. Karen and Ken huddled with the visiting o.t. and p.t. and figured out how to assess Forest best. Sheldon and I talked about how to help Daniel over his fear of driving down Louisiana Street by moving in increments. And Sheldon took some digital pictures of Forest before the Lawrence visitors backed on out, pulling their kids in wagons.

At one point, I came back to the room after doing some errand, and I found Ken and Forest cuddled up together on the window seat bed. Karen had been leading Forest back from the bathroom when he saw his dad sleeping there, and she suggested he could go hug Ken. Instead, Ken lifted him up. Forest was lying there with his eyes open, calm and content. He looked like he was just born.

After most of the people left, we sat with Forest quietly, watching more movies of his choice, and dealing with bouts of bad diarrhea that had hit each of us. That's when Weedle and Paul showed up to sit and watch movies with us. "Not quite the way we usually do it," we joked. I kept having to excuse myself to run to the bathroom, and both of us were so exhausted we could hardly manage conversations with them.

That night, Forest snug and enchanted by the t.v., I left Ken and went to our room to sleep. I climbed into bed a little tired but hopeful after trying repeatedly to call Trish and eventually making contact long enough to ask her to bring Forest going-home clothes. I shut out the light.

But the family next door kept me up – a man yelling at his wife and his crying child to shut up. I got out of the bed, put on Enya, loud, and went to one of the little beds on the other side of the room, sleeping deep, I think.

Sunday, Feb. 4, 2001:

The next day, everything packed in the room, ready to go, I returned to the hospital. Ken and Forest had a good night, both rested well. The main thing Forest was interested in was what movie he would see, and after a little discussion, he chose “The Never-Ending Story,” delivered to us by Nurse Phil, a misplaced or very well-placed stand up comic, who earlier taught Forest tricks for splitting bananas.

While Forest was enthralled in the movie, a doctor casually signed Forest’s release forms, and the paperwork process began. Trish walked in with pants, socks and sneakers, and told me that Jeremy, her now-grown-up son, almost died at birth, but when he left the hospital, he left in a yellow baby outfit. “So shall Forest wear some yellow,” she announced while handing me gray pants with yellow trim. After she left, I helped Forest dress, and started loading two blue wagons with flowers, balloons, cards and bags, all while Ken was at the Ronald McDonald house cleaning our room and packing the car. I gathered the balloons in a bouquet, which took some doing since some balloons were committed to freelance flight. In the process, I glanced at Forest, who had forsaken his movie for a moment to follow the amusement of the balloons. He laughed.

Just before push-off, Kelly Barth and Lisa Grossman came, perfectly timed to help us load Forest into a wagon and pull the farewell parade down the hall. Nurse Phil sang, joked, danced a little and generally made Forest roll his eyes in disbelief a lot. Once we got to the star chamber, we realized the need to get the other car, so we left Forest with Kelly and Lisa to watch the changing colors of sky and occasional shooting star while we got the truck and car lined up.

Getting the bouquet of balloons, baskets, vases of flowers and forest of stuffed animals into the car and truck was tricky, and a few pissed off balloons wandered off in the process to explore hospital hill. But eventually I piled enough books and paper on the balloons to keep them low enough in the backseat of the Toyota so that I could drive. Ken loaded Forest into his seat in the red pick-up truck, and in the cold damp air, we eventually could hug Kelly and Lisa goodbye, and take off, down the hill, through the neighborhood, and down I-35, Hwy. 435 and K-10 toward home. A little sun broke through but I was exhausted, willing myself to stay awake and finding my eye landing in every ditch, evaluating how impending death would be if my hand slipped on the wheel.

Finally, at the house, I carried arm loads of air and fake fur. Greeting us were Mom, Henry, the kids, and also Craig Paul and Romi, who had just loaded our freezer full of pizzas, stir-fry mixes, and our refrigerator with three gallons of chocolate milk because Craig believed I loved chocolate milk. Actually, he was the great lover of chocolate milk, but it made for interesting visits for days with people who would enter our house and be cajoled into drinking a glass of chocolate milk before they left.

We entered, saw the clean, much-improved house with a glorious, large vase of sunflowers and other flowers in the center of the kitchen table. We hauled in things while telling Craig and Romi the story, starting to get old and shaky, but we were home, our exhaustion tempered by ecstasy over Forest's recovery. Ken set Forest on pillows, and assorted stuffed and live animals on the couch where Forest looked quietly bemused. The kids came to him, joyful and nervous, wanting to give him anything they could.

After Craig and Romi left, I put a pizza in the oven and went downstairs to download 232

messages on the computer. And then I took a nap while Mom and Henry took Natalie shopping and promised to fetch a few chickens. Dinner included these chickens, plus Courtney and Denise, a salad, some kind of pie, ice cream, and a lot of joy. Forest wanted to go back to the couch so we put them there, but he soon was picked up by Denise who held him while Henry and Natalie took turns reading him stories and showing him new toys. He remained quiet, sweet, gentle. By bedtime, after Mom and Henry left, he came back to himself, starting to talk again when Gene and Alice came calling at 10:30. Fresh from travel and aching to be with Forest, they looked at him and held him when he pointed and talked some. I told them of all the prayer and healing, and they told us that their tour bus, while charging to and fro Yellowstone, prayed regularly on the road and demanded daily updates on Forest's condition.

Finally it was bedtime. We carried Forest to the center of our bed with the high bouquet of balloons above us, Mariah dog (stuffed version) beside him, and Ken and I around him.

The Next Two Weeks:

The next week was a torrent of phone calls, meals, cards. The Jewish Community Center and the Merc teamed up to plot out meals to be delivered to us, a week at a time, every Monday for six weeks. Over and over, I felt like I had just given birth and was now returned home with my new baby. But what of the old one?

Ken took the other kids to school and came back with a rented t.v. and some movies for Forest. We set him up on the couch and he sunk his gaze into the screen. People came, often bearing gifts and food, at surprisingly frequent intervals. Karen Pomp showed up with all kinds of curry and scones, and so did Stan Zeramba with his sweet chili, in as much quantity as all that

chocolate milk. Susan Millstein came at twilight with hot macaroni and cheese, and Nancy Birt dropped in with lasagna and brownies. Eventually, Nancy O'Connor came, my old friend who had been so swallowed by her work at the co-op for years that I hardly ever saw her, with food for the week – Herb Friedson's chickens and tons of dishes from my exercise group – tofu cannolis, tuna casserole, pizza. The refrigerator bulged.

Some friends helped us out by watching our other kids or transporting them home for us. When Barb Dineen went to pick up Natalie and Daniel to drive them, along with her kids Xander, Briget and Mattie, to our house to help us out one foggy afternoon, she ended up calling us half-way between the school and our house with a flat tire. Ken went to help her, as did her husband Joe Casad, and everyone ended up at our house, sitting at the kitchen table where I told Barb more of the story than she knew, and she looked into our eyes undaunted and crying.

The week continued with visits of those close to us and those we hardly know. Diane Simpson showed up one shining Sunday afternoon with books and colors pencils, pizza, fruit and vegetables. Judy came with flowers and sat with me at the kitchen table, marveling at this miracle. At night, when Forest slept, Ursula would come and do healing work on him. I kept trying to shove piles of food onto her, but she was still fasting. Doug showed up, and behalf of all of Ken's cousins in Doug's family, along with Ken's aunt and uncle, he delivered a huge bag of toys, the dinosaur movie Forest liked and some puzzles and work books. Emails and phone calls poured in, a steady current.

All seemed sweet and easy, our only vague concern having to do with his pooplessness. The concern gathered force when a week later, he started pooping in his pants. Ken did enough research to throw us into fear, finding that the nerve of bowel sensation was also the nerve of

sexual sensation. I had flashes of Forest forced into Jewish priesthood once he hit adulthood, and this saddened me, and Ken, immensely. After a few nights' trepidation and a visit to the reassuring doctor, plus a homeopathic remedy, he started gaining the control he needed.

What was most remarkable was how his mind and words came back – slow at first – along with his walking beyond wobbliness. Every word book or maze book or puzzle he received was devoured in a flash. Perceptually, he came back so easily and fully, and his writing seemed to have improved.

The two weeks he was home went quickly, Ken and I both there the first week, and me the second. Forest and I would lie on the pulled-out futon bed, and I would doze as he watched Pokemon, that is, between waking to answer the phone and listened to people's great relief, tears and joy.

We also found out the wild trails that information about us, and the need for prayer, had traveled. Many in the community found out through the Merc, and how the Merc found out shows how few degrees of separation stand between us. When I had called Shelley in Vermont right after the accident, she contacted Margo, my boss, who was in Texas at the time. Margo called Bobby, my other boss, who lived in Vermont and with Suzanne, an old friend, who, in turn, called Dan and Kat in Lawrence, who then called the Merc, speaking to Mike and Nancy. After Mike and Nancy called around, they found Reva at home, who knew nothing, but called Judy right away. And what Judy communicated traveled the channels between her and Shelley, full circle.

The Jewish Community Center used its phone-calling system (which automatically dialed the homes of every member of the congregation) twice to send out detailed updated on Forest's

condition, including such information as how much he was eating and walking. The center also, through its president Lois and other friends, repeatedly let us know that if we needed any money for medical bills, it would all be taken care of. Many people told me that the week after the accident, you couldn't walk down any aisle in the Merc without running into people talking about the accident, passing on information, and true to form, the first time I went into the Merc, people I knew and didn't know regularly grabbed me and cried or sent wishes, and the whole store posted a giant greeting card for several week to send us "get well" signatures of dozens of friends and other shoppers.

On email, the trails out and beyond were astonishing. Some people, like Kat Green and Bayless Harsh, served as email central points for passing on information all directions to people who knew us all over town and all over the country. Shelley sent Goddard friends and colleagues regular updates, and Sandy did the same for the Lassman family. My mother zapped items to Aunt Rhoda, and to all my sisters and my brother. The bioregional network poured out and over the continent, and we found out, that among other, Zapatistas in Mexico were doing Buddhist chanting for Forest. The Highway 59 group jumped into action, and many were scrambling over who would care for our dog and home. In fact, people were so intent about doing yardwork for us or dogsitting that I almost wished we had more animals and more work at the moment. NAPT and Goddard people sent wishes and prayers. KAW Council, usually fairly low key, exuded information.

The emails continued to give us hope and elation, especially for our community as an intact, vibrant and beautifully shining entity. "That was the best email I ever got," Ozzie Backus wrote about our email out titled "Forest Out of the Woods." Diane Silver, an old friend and

editor of mine, wrote a description of how she leapt up from her desk, twirled around and yelled, “Yipee!” Bruce Plenk, the lawyer we worked with to fight the highway administration, just wrote, “YAAAAHOO!” Friends from Montreal to Mexico City wrote tender messages of how deeply we must be turning over and under in our hearts. Friends from Oregon shared prayers. Locals – Dixie, Thomas and Nancy – wrote about the little altars they were tending in Forest’s name, just as Tom kept offering tobacco daily to his altar. Shelley and Meridith told us about burning a candle for us all the day the day of the accident and wearing the Midnight Poetry League baseball caps I had given them for their civil union, although it was winter, all through our week if vigil.

One of the most touching series of emails came from Christy Kennedy, a woman whose kids also went to Cordley, and although she didn’t know me, had experienced plenty of hard near-misses with her children. We wrote back and forth about the difficulty of relating to world, the wonder of the healing, the fear inside us, and I was so grateful to have someone share so deeply with me when we didn’t even actually know, aside from a distant glance, one another.

The phone messages throughout the whole ordeal were incredible renderings of community. One night from the hospital, when I called home, Mike Rundle, then cleaning the house with Carol, played the messages for me. Saul Stahl, who I hadn’t been in touch with for years and who I figured never really liked me, offered to do anything he could. ETTY Ginsburg, the past principal of our kids’ Hebrew school from whom we were somewhat estranged after a long and arduous mess of school problems that forced her resignation, left a message so blurred by her tears and her Israeli accent that I could only make out how much she was shaken and how deeply she cared for the kids and us too, regardless of all our tangled strings. Barbara Mossberg,

president of Goddard, and a woman both broken and damaging to our college, called earlier, Mike said, crying on the phone about how concerned she was. Dozens of others, people we loved deeply, people we hardly spoke with, even people we didn't know, called. By time the messages finished, Mike asked, "Are you crying too?" Of course I was.

And there was the snail mail – full of cards from even the most unlikely sources: a Republican, Farm Bureau official from Ottawa who knew us from the highway fight; an older woman from the Jewish center who I had never really noticed before; a woman named Pam who had stopped speaking months ago with me after a highway fight strategy misunderstanding and now sent prayers and love; relatives on the west coast, relatives on the east coast, even Aunt Eleanor from Oklahoma who sent love and a \$50 bill.

We went through the mail, email, phone messages, casseroles and pies, visits, all surrounded by bundles of flowers, stuffed animals and balloons from the Pelathe Indian Center, the Housing Authority, the Jewish Community Center and Jewish Community Women, and dear friends such as the Field family now living in Liberal, Kansas after years of Abby Fields dating Forest occasionally in childcare center play; my sisters who sent a get-well bear that we decorated with additional bandages and i.v.'s; Carol, Judy and other friends who just had to keep bringing us flowers, and many others.

Out in the world, the universe opened wider.

The first day I took Forest back to his school to pick up his siblings, crowds gathered around us. Lois Orth-Lopes listened to the story of his recovery and stood quietly crying. Frank Hoffman, Daniel's teacher, wiped his brow, and said, "Whew!" Forest's teacher and parents of kids in Forest's kindegarten encircled us, and one parent, who I didn't even know, handed me a

bag of toys and puzzles and books for him to do while at home. Already, many of his teachers, from Hilltop (where he went to daycare for years) and from Cordley, including his past and present speech teachers and various paras, sent us books, special cards, little gifts, play-do to help him pass the time. “I knew he would survive,” said Mrs. B, Forest’s ultra-fired-up speech teacher, “because he’s a fighter.” She told me of crying all night after the accident. And the teachers we didn’t see had called and told us how they cried and prayed.

One of the hardest and most profound calls came from Christy Kelly, Forest’s regular teacher who was “maternity” leave since late December when she found out the baby, full term, inside her had died and she gave birth to this dead, beloved son. Ken spoke with her, and she cried on the phone, still in so much pain herself but also in great joy over Forest’s recovery. We knew the call was hard for her to make.

In the middle of this, the father of one of Daniel’s classmates (who was twin to a sixth grader in the other class) died in a car accident. Everyone we saw at Cordley whenever we dropped off or picked up kids repeated the same refrain after the loss of Christy Kelly’s baby, the death of the father of the 6th graders, and our nearly fatal accident: “this school has been through enough!” But everyone was grateful for, and is still grateful for, the marvelous way the principal handled these losses and fears: with complete openness and utter support. I found out that the day after our accident, Kim Bodensteiner (the principal) sent each teacher a note, telling them all she knew of the accident, and having grief counselors on tap in case Forest slipped away. She had each teacher tell their class that day, and many classes made cards for Forest, or even for Natalie, wishing us all well. The school even put a detailed report of the accident into the Wednesday notes sent out to each parent. Furthermore, this school principal, who hardly knew

us at the time, later told me she had jumped into her car and driven to Lawrence Memorial Hospital as soon as she heard about the accident, hoping to catch us and offer her help in any way.

Our story's happy ending made it clear to us that we needed to be there for stories without such endings. I picked Daniel up from school for the funeral of the boys' father, and we went to this lushly heartfelt event peopled by AME church-goers and NAACP advocates. People sang and cried, repeatedly said that Marcus was with God now and wasn't God lucky to have him? Afterwards, Daniel and I took lunch at Einstein's Bagel, then slipped and slid back to school in the fresh snow to get the other kids and a fresh fix of videos.

Back home after a terrifying and slow ride down the same snowy and icy road of our accident, we watched Lucy and the Marx Brothers, safe and full, while it snowed and raged.

Then there was Forest's first day, just for an hour or so, back in the classroom while I had a meeting with school officials about Daniel. Everyone was thrilled, stopping to greet him. In class, his teacher let him answer questions. Sitting in the square on the rug, the other 5-year-olds waited politely to ask, "were you wearing a seatbelt? What was the helicopter ride like? Were you afraid?"

To everything, Forest replied, "I don't know. I was a-sheep" or he deferred to me for an answer. He didn't remember anything but going to school and then waking three days later in the hospital. "It's because of the drug they gave him," Diane later explained to me. "It keeps the brain from laying down any new tracks of memory."

Weeks later, at the teacher-parent conferences, we went first to Forest's room. His substitute teacher, his regular teacher (back just for the conference before she would resume

teaching again in a few weeks), his speech teacher, his occupational therapist, and several others were there. We went over the customary artwork and writing and math he was doing, but mostly, we talked about the miracle of his survival and how moved we were that the school handled this in such a loving way. Christy Kelly talked about how blown away she was that the school embraced her loss, and that just a few weeks ago, gave her a hug pile of sympathy cards written by every child and adult in that school. We couldn't make eye contact, none of us seated at this low table in our little chairs, without crying.

From there, we went to Natalie's teacher, Beverly Hyde, a wonderful and gentle woman who had been with Natalie for almost two years, and Daniel many years before. Once through the required stuff, we moved into talking about head injuries, and she told her the story her son's horrible accident that left him brain-damaged for life but still able to just about function normally. We shared fears and stories, and again, we cried.

By the time we got to the third floor to meet with Daniel's teacher, we had to ask first if we would be crying through this conference too. In an unusual move for any meeting with teachers involving Daniel, no one cried.

We also trekked back into other parts of our world. The first day we stopped at Milton's, a coffee house I inhabit on a daily basis, everyone flooded our table to marvel at Forest. Already, all the "regulars," an odd group of fellow free-lancers and slackers and pre-business-hours downtown shop owners, had sent a card. Sitting there, we visited with waves of people, including a brigade of poets, including our beloved Stan and Judy, but also Ken Irby, my office-mate at KU for ten years, and the visiting famous poet Anne Waldman, who I'd met over a decade before. Each table of people, it seems, were our people, and they came over, two by two

so as not to distract Forest from his Italian soda too much, to say hi.

There were also the visits back to Merc, and Denise, who then worked at the credit union housed there, would leap over her stone counter to hug Forest while Carol would try to distract us from the giant greeting card being prepared for us and Nancy would hug us in the household and gifts aisle. Mike would wink, and we'd have to stop our shopping cart every few feet to hug someone or go over details of the story someone else had missed. Everywhere, we always seemed to run into Ursula, who was buying more smoothies for her 40 days of just drinking them to clear her system, and was surely bound in our energy as we were in hers in the long tunnel out of the accident.

But what was really confusing about going shopping was what to buy when we didn't ever know what food was coming. So we hit and missed, and often had to send home blocks of brownies or half containers of curried chicken with whoever happened to venture into our house. In fact, on Ken's birthday toward the end of the month, which happened to fall on a Monday night, we were just sitting down to dinner with Weedle and Paul when Mike and Carol showed up, and soon after, Denise and Courtney, and then Jerry Sipe, all in time to figure out what to do with the four sets of deluxe brownies that all arrived at once that night. "You eat it!" I'd say to anyone. "No, you eat it!" But usually I got my way and forced them to take home some heavy lump of chocolate.

Whatever gifts we received were shared, even without much effort on our part, with our community. I remember one night talking to Diane Whitten-Vile on the phone about the accident. "It changed my life," she said, explaining how it made it so clear how precious life was for her and for others. The miracle of one kid's survival, the miracle of community coming

together to help make this happen, tapped the shoulders of many in our circles.

The Whole Shebang

There was such intimacy out in the world, and that intimacy extended well beyond just the ordinary. With the opening of community locally and from all directions near and far from us, other things started to come to the surface. At home, some of our friends began dropping by more, and they began sharing near-misses of a much more private nature. One friend confessed that he had recently half-heartedly tried to kill himself; another shared the story of journey into psychiatric hell. We listened as best we could and tried to be as present as possible with these moments of such lost and confusing dives.

In the middle of this time, Denise, who had a lump in her throat, went in for an examination and biopsy, told by her doctor that the chance of cancer was minimal. That day, I came home to find a message from Ursula, who had been working to help Denise, on our machine, telling me what I already knew: it was cancer. Within a few days, Denise was in surgery, and we were bringing all the kids into the hospital to be with her, sit with her, giggle with her through her recovery. I was grateful that Ursula could do healing work on her the whole surgery day, before, during (from a distance) and after, and that Denise had other healers as well pouring their energy into her body.

As Daniel's best friend and our close friend too, as someone who loved our children and us so utterly, and as someone we loved unconditionally, we were shaken again, and I helped spark the Merc community to take some action to help Denise with all the unexpected expenses. Within a few months, the Merc, mainly through the efforts of Nancy, organized a huge

community dinner, complete with musicians Carol and Mike lined up, and an indoor yard sale where people donated all kinds of cool items to be sold for Denise. The result of all of this, plus an account I helped set up at the credit union for Denise brought in over \$4000, and in the weeks that followed Denise's treatment, and her planning of the wedding she and Courtney would share on our land, other benefits held in her honor raised more funds.

Meanwhile, there was the balancing of the good of the world around us, and the reality the accident trekked across our insides, the residue of the accident to reckon with, a thick substance devoid of humor and full of dramatics in the most stark way.

Every ditch I drove by called out to me, "hey, come on down here, and see if you can survive this one." I'd envision the tumble down, the flipping over, and eventually the stopping upsidedown or turned back up. I'd see the death emanating out – the losses that would crunch and swallow my life, the devastation. Finally, the clutching back to life, holding onto the dangerous wheel, aiming us safe toward the next risky destination.

Sometimes while sitting in the bathtub, I'd ask myself where I'd be if Forest died. Always, the same answer: devastated. I felt like I'd looked over that edge into hell. "How do parents survive this?" I asked Ken one day as we were driving home.

"It just becomes a very large mountain in the middle of their lives that they can never not have there after that."

Yet I felt like I had a shadow mountain, the glimpse of what could have been lost, looming large and unclimbable, before me all the time, right over the edge of normal life.

There were also the very physical reminders of what happened outside. I returned to the site a few days after being home, on my way back from a treatment by Ursula, who had, days

before, blessed and transformed the death energy of that site into something else. “It doesn’t look the same anymore,” she had told me. And it was true.

I stood there in the sunshine, most of the snow and ice gone, first finding three beautifully colored stones we carried with us in the van. Although I was tempted to take these home, I gave them instead to the bank of the stream, born of water, returning to water, as thanksgiving.

Stumbling, I was tempted to take some toys of the kids home, but I left them too, and instead focused on looking for Daniel and my glasses. Tripping, I put my hand on the ground to stop myself, and I found Daniel’s glasses right there, and soon after my own. Both amazingly intact. I was able to reach for the glasses and pick them up with my injured hand, still too sore to be of much help when loading the dishwasher or playing the piano.

I returned to the van a rainy afternoon, Daniel asleep in the backseat, Natalie at girl scouts, Forest with Grandma. It took me three tries to find Smith’s Motors, and when I did, swinging cautiously by 1950s cruising mobiles, I found the van easily. The devastation amazed me. I quickly parked behind it, woke Daniel enough to confirm that he didn’t want to see it, and then got out.

The van looked like a nightmare – the left side smashed in, the front smashed, tired dead on the left, driver’s side roof smashed down. Everywhere from head-on was askew and weird, tired and out of proportion, terrifying. Inside, it was remarkable intact. Forest’s seatbelt undone, but pulled out somewhat, school papers here and there, blood on the whole left ceiling from middle seat forward, air bags out and limp, seats upright. It looked like a place where a family had once lived but now they had moved to new territory.

I thanked the van for saving us, to holding its center so strong and upright in the midst of

its outside twisting and tearing. And I felt again like death had encircled us, and somehow, by the grace of grace, we had survived. But there was no “somehow” about it – while luck had a lot to do with how Forest flew into the ground, and where he injured his head, Ursula’s healing work, and her ability to funnel the prayers, which viscerally sustained and carried us through along with the love from our community, had given us every possible opening for miracles to flood through. And Forest had accepted these miracles of healing fully, strong enough to come back and not yet doubtful about the body’s ability to regenerate itself. His open heart prevailed.

Returning the Land:

Sometime in the middle of March, I drove our new old Mercury Villager van (sold to us by fellow Democrats Mike and Carol Henderson who gave us a great price and quick action to get us some wheels) to the accident site and parked. Laurie Ward was already there, with a big hunk of (what else?) brownies in her backpack. Jerry Sipe soon drove up and parked, as did Vicky Martin, and then Ken with the kids. We were here to clean the site, to help heal the part of the earth that we damaged in our crashing into it. The whole south side of the slope was covered in broken glass and small toys, crayons crushed everywhere.

We took plastic and paper bags and carefully crawled around and bent here and there to pick up what we could, trying to separate handfuls of grass from glass. Forest went down to the water, which was low and brown, and he walked through it and over it and generally explored the dimensions of the site. Natalie kept saying that it was a different place, that it couldn’t have been where the accident happened. Daniel, who had to be lulled into driving down this street again and was reluctant to see the site, quickly got into picking up glass and looking around at it.

It was the place where we almost died. It was the place that took the impact, took the hit, and let us live. It was mud and grass and slope and stretch of land. It was water and dirt, the eastern edge of the wetlands, all of which were so threatened by another highway that local native people and environmentalists had fended off thus far successfully for two years.

It was a beautiful place with great blue herons occasionally flying solo overhead.

We picked up all we could, gathered the trash in the back of our van, and then went to a somewhat flat part just west of the slope where we had the accident. You could still see the dents in the earth from the van. We gathered hands, the eight of us, and I thanked the earth for saving us, and so did Ken. We all thanked the earth and each other.

Then we hugged goodbye, and Laurie walked up the wetlands, around to her home while Jerry and Vicky returned with us to our house to eat the brownies, and other food too, and sit around the kitchen table, putting labels on the annual issue of our bioregional newsletter. Jerry told us the story of when he left the army, simply walked away, and how his life changed in that moment. Vicky spoke about the work she loved and the boss there who made staying with that work intolerable. Both of them told different stories, yet both stories were about leaving what wounds and seeking out what heals.

When I hugged them goodbye, and later, stepped outside on the deck alone to look at the cold stars, I thought about the place of the accident, and how what wounds it gave us were actually ways to heal much older, larger wounds, wounds that came from not being part of community, from not having access to the healing tools and energies needed. Wounds that came from being separate from love, not in the middle of it.

Then I went back inside to Forest's room and lifted, from the edge of his bed, the prayer

quilt, beautiful in its gold and orange and brown and green, made for him by the church of his great-cousin and name-sake, Ken's cousin Forrest. I put the quilt on his sleeping body and placed Mariah dog beside him. All of him had come back, and in the process, more of me, lost in ways I can't remember long ago, returned too.

“You two have suffered so much,” a lawyer friend said to me earlier that week. But that wasn't so true. We had been given this gift of love, this shining spirit of community. The gift of the accident that didn't take what we loved most but showed us, in stunning clarity, what love looks like as a verb.