

Still We Rise

Todd Simmons

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2015

Committee:  
Rebecca Brown  
Jeanne Heuving

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences - Bothell  
Creative Writing and Poetics

©Copyright 2015  
Todd Simmons

University of Washington

**Abstract**

*Still We Rise*

Todd Simmons

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Writer-in-Residence, Rebecca Brown  
Creative Writing and Poetics

*Still We Rise* is the story of a Special Olympics basketball team and all of the people connected to the team. It follows the team as they pursue their second straight high school State Championship.

# Still We Rise

by Todd Simmons

This book is dedicated to my parents: Their love has always been unconditional.

This book is also dedicated to Linda Smith: Thank you for teaching me how to teach and encouraging me to write.

A special thank you to Rebecca Brown for pointing me in the right direction.

A special thank you to Amber Martinez for looking at me, seeing me, and still hanging around. I love you.

## *Table of Contents*

Part One: <i>A Basketball Story</i>	8-105
Part Two: Artist's Statement: <i>An Exposition of the Poetics of Service</i>	106-140
Bibliography	141

“Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us!”

—Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

“You must never feel badly about making mistakes...as long as you learn from them. For you often learn more by being wrong for the right reasons than you do by being right for the wrong reasons.”

“The most important reason for going from one place to another is to see what’s in between.”

—Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*

“Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I’ll rise.”

—Maya Angelou

## **A Basketball Story**

This is the story of a high school in Seattle and of the students, staff, and families connected to its Special Olympics basketball team.

### **Introducing Your Ingraham Grays!**

**Shamus (The Beast)** - He walks with an air of confidence and is adored by every student and teacher. He is kind, works hard, inspires, and helps those around him. He is a rock climber and can do one-fingered chin-ups. He also lives with autism. He was one of two players voted by his teammates to be captain. He plays basketball with such tenacity. He is called The Beast.

**Stevie (Wunderbar 75)** - He is tall and lanky. His long, black hair is always in a mess and defies gravity. His humor can disarm even the sternest teachers. His humor is gentle, but he never makes fun of others. He welcomes anyone, but beneath his smile, is a fierce determination to improve. He works hard at practice, in games, and in the classroom. I don't know why Stevie is in Special Ed. He lives with a disability, but I don't know its name and have not cared to look it up in his file.

**Dionte (Showtime)** - Showtime boasts. He is flamboyant. His eyes shine with anger from his past, and tenderness from somewhere else inside. At any given moment one of these extremes will overflow and change him. He is one of three African-Americans on our basketball team and the only one born in America. His two teammates from Somalia follow him in the cultural footsteps of what it can be like to be a young African-American male.

**Ali (Rumble in the Jungle)** - Ali is from Somalia. No one knows much of his childhood. Some of the teachers speak of dark stories. *A mother murdered before his eyes during a civil conflict in Somalia.* His history is well-documented in his file. I don't have a desire to read it. He has a leadership which draws everyone to him, but it was not always this way. During his first year at the high school, he was angry. He lowered his head into his folded arms and ignored everything that was going on in class. No one could reach him. We had to wait until he was ready. Over the years, his anger has left him. In its place is some positive force which pours forth from him like sun light. Ali has difficulty processing and retaining information learned in the classroom.

**Mohamed (Mo Mo)** - There is a patch of gray hair on my head I call my "Mo Mo Patch." As I continue to work with Mohamed, these hairs continue to emerge. He laughs, good-naturedly, when I point out this patch to him and tell him he is adding to the "Mo Mo Patch." Mohamed always knows exactly which words to use to ignite a fire in the classroom or on the court. He also burns with an exuberance for life. He can't channel his energy. He is also from Somalia. He always watches groups of African-American boys and is always a few steps behind his peers in assimilation. Like Ali, he has difficulty processing and retaining information. I don't know what academic success he could have if he could leave most of what he says unsaid.

**Jordan (Zoom)** - It's rare for Jordan to work hard during practice. But, he gives everything he has during a game. When we have lost games in the past, it was as if the world, just for a moment, had ended for him. Thankfully, we've always been able to play another game. When I need him to work hard in practice, I turn the drills or conditioning sessions into a competition to win a Gatorade. Jordan almost always wins the Gatorade. Jordan has three loves in life: basketball, the Seahawks, and girls. He does not fully understand his strength. He is best friends

with Shamus. He is absolutely loyal to Shamus. He might be autistic, but I'm not sure. He struggles processing certain information.

**Johnson (Dragon Warrior)** - Johnson is the least athletic of the guys. He can't keep up with his teammates as they fly up and down the court. He lives with autism and battles a weight problem.

He is anxious, so he finds loose threads on his T-shirt and pulls them until his shirt unravels.

Johnson is one of the most loved members of the team. There does not appear to be any hate in him. His teammates are continually giving him hugs and jumping on his back. He knows all of the important dates of things like people's birthdays and school dances. He is big and strong and gentle.

**Liam (Bulldozer)** - The Bulldozer is big, strong, fast, loud, boisterous, and he loves the Seahawks, Scooby Doo, and basketball. On the court he will doubt himself until he is reminded of who he is and then he will let loose, and compete fiercely with anyone. I remind him that he is "not the kitty-cat dozer, not the puppy-dog dozer, but the Bulldozer." He jumps up and pounds his chest at this, ready to play. He's easily motivated. He wants to succeed. He knows what it means to win and to lose. He knows what it means to be on a team. He also lives with autism.

## Aspiration

Mo Mo asked me, "Are we going back to Wenatchee?"

"That's a good goal to have," I said. "There's a lot of work to be done if you guys want to win again."

The 2011-2012 season had ended with the team winning our first Division One Special Olympics State Championship. The season itself came straight from a Hollywood script. Having never won a game against them before, we beat our rivals in the regional tournament. We then moved on to the State tournament and lost big in our first game of a best-of-three against the Spanaway Spartans. After this defeat, there seemed little hope for victory. The team came back and won the final two games. We won the state championship. That season was magical—it seemed as if no moment could reach that height again. The players could only dream of doing this.

It was the first day of school, basketball season was months away, but Mo Mo wanted to know: *Are we going back?*

During the 2011-2012 season, I'd been an assistant coach. The coach that season, Coach Calvin, had started the program years before, and developed the strongest Special Olympics program in Seattle. When I began coaching with him, he felt his own knowledge of the game was inadequate, but over the years, he had learned more about the game. I knew a lot because I had grown up playing basketball and had coached basketball at high school and junior high school.

After winning Ingraham's first Division One State Championship, Coach Calvin decided to retire and asked me if I would take over. Of course I would. As I started the 2012-2013 school year, I felt different. I thought of the State Championship I'd helped win and how I would

take the program even further. I thought I'd be great. I was still only an Instructional Assistant. I gave myself the title, "Special Olympics Coordinator." No one else called me this. When I walked down the halls, I felt important.

## Speed Racer

It was the first day of school. At 7:40 a.m., I walked to the bus to meet Amber. She had Cerebral Palsy. We had our routine. I walked up the steps of her bus and smiled when I saw her. She smiled too and said, "I know who we need to go see."

"Who *do* you know that I *do* know that we *do* need to go see?" Amber always loved the goofy way I said this.

Her walker was secured to the floor of the bus. I bent down to unfasten it. As I struggled with the latches, I thought, *I shouldn't be doing this; this is beneath me; this is the driver's job.*

"Can you give me a hint?" Amber said.

"Does she have a birthday the day after Einstein?"

Amber looked at me and laughed.

"Does she click when she should chomp at lunch?"

Amber laughed more.

I raised my fingers in the air and pretended to type on a keyboard while also chomping my teeth together as if I were eating.

Amber stood, holding the back of the bus's seat and laughed. "Is it my La Maestra Favorita?" she said.

"You know it is. You ready Speed Racer? I'm feeling fast today." I clapped my hands together and rubbed them back and forth.

"I know who you're talking to!" She pointed to herself.

I opened Amber's walker and set it at the bottom step of the bus. She made her way down and took hold of the walker. Holding on to the handles of the walker, she turned herself around and then turned herself and the walker around to get to the sidewalk.

The sun shined brightly. It was a beautiful morning. The air still held the warmth of summer. The lawns of the school had been recently cut and gleamed with dew drops.

I stayed behind her for a moment, looked at the bus driver, and said, "In the future I need her walker to be ready to go by the time I get here."

"Okay," he said. He had an accent. I didn't ask from where.

Amber went in the side door of the school and began to walk down the hallway leading to the elevator. A couple steps through the door the Bulldozer spotted us.

"Broncos suck, dude," he yelled. I could see him jumping up and down. By his side, the Rocket, laughing also jumped up and down.

With Amber's pink backpack slung over my shoulder, we walked straight for the Bulldozer. Every couple of steps we heard his war-cry, "Broncos suck! Broncos suck!"

Lockers creaked open and slammed shut. Students looked over their shoulders and up and down the hallway with each of Bulldozer's cries. Some of them may have remembered this from last year—to some it was new.

As we drew closer to the Bulldozer and the Rocket, I looked up and said, "Go Seachickens." This sent the Bulldozer into a pretend rage. He lowered his Seahawks hat over his eyes and beat upon his chest with closed fists. "Broncos suck, dude. Broncos suck!" In the shadow cast by the brim of his hat, I could see his smile. Rocket continued to laugh as Amber

and I turned the corner and headed to the elevator. The ‘Dozer’s cries continued; we stepped toward the elevator.

I turned to Amber, “We’d better hurry. We can't have our straight A student be late to class.”

"I know who you're talking to," Amber said. She stopped walking and pointed to herself with her right hand.

“Come on, Speed. You can’t let me beat you.”

## **La Maestra Favorita**

I was at my desk looking through my emails when Ms. Smith walked in with her cup of coffee. She was the lead teacher for this classroom, and I was her assistant. She smiled at Amber as she walked by and said, “Good morning. How are you?” She smiled at me. I said, “Good morning.”

Ms. Smith had blonde, shoulder length hair and bangs. She dressed conservatively and was always well put together. She was shorter. I’m 6 feet 4 inches tall, and she came up to my shoulders. I always leaned down when I hugged her, but when we walked down the halls together, I had to work to keep up with her.

Amber sat at her desk with her “Life Skills” binder. She was the only student in the room. Eli had not shown up yet. A blank sheet of paper and a pencil sat next to her binder. Ms. Smith had placed them there at the end of the previous school year so everything would be ready for first period. They had been on her desk all summer, waiting.

Amber was prepared to write the “Quote of the Day.” Each morning during her first period Life Skills class, Ms. Smith had the students write a quote to practice their handwriting. Ms. Smith had also written the quote on the last day of the previous school year. It, too, had been on the white board over the summer waiting for the students to arrive on the first day of school. “‘A sense of humor is needed armor. Joy in one’s heart and some laughter is a sign that the person down deep has a pretty good grasp of life.’ -Hugh Sidney (9/3/1927-11/21/2005)” The quotations were always from somebody who had been born that day.

Ms. Smith also started the class with “The Attitude of Gratitude.” Each student shared something for which she or he felt gratitude.

I needed to leave the room to get to basketball practice. I walked up to Speed Racer and looking at Ms. Smith said, "Today I'm grateful to be back at school and around people I like spending time with."

\* \* \*

Second period was our preparation period. I had two math books and a book of daily readings on my desk. I grabbed them and walked over to Ms. Smith's desk. "Do you want me to get these copies done first? Or is there something else you'd like me to do?"

"We'll need the first section from the *Everyday Math* today. Can you make sure to get this week's daily readings ready, too?"

"Do you want them stapled and holed?" There was a sticky note on the books saying how many copies and that she wanted them hole punched and stapled, I was just double checking.

"Yes, thank you."

I grabbed my water bottle and headed to the teachers' lounge. As I walked down the hall, I thought of how my valuable time was being wasted making copies. I flipped page after page, made copy after copy, and watched minute after minute.

\* \* \*

At lunchtime Ms. Smith ate at her desk and worked. Eli ate at his computer in the back and watched YouTube videos about Transformers and Legos. Amber ate at her desk and watched Ms. Smith for any cue that might allow for a conversation. Conversation helped Amber process the world. It brought her comfort.

Ms. Smith was serious and focused. She expected the best from her students and tirelessly pushed them to do better. People had said that Eli would never be able to write. Ms.

Smith had shown me early examples of his writing, enormous letters on oversized paper. Not even as single sentence could fit on a regular page. He brought rolled up scrolls of paper to class. But after working with Ms. Smith for two years, Eli learned to write on college ruled paper. He writes between the lines now, and his writing is clear and legible. He still, at times, as she said, “crashes through the floor” or “breaks through the window,” but he can write.

## **The Classroom that was a Hallway**

Room 115 B was maybe 8 feet by 30 feet. When I first came to IHS in January of the 2010-2011 school year, this was Ms. Smith's classroom. It had eight desks, four in the first row and four in the second. When she taught at the front of the room, students were only a foot away. She covered the walls with works of art. There was a poster of the Dali with three melted clocks. She also had Picasso's *Don Quixote* and posters with: "Ten Ways to be a Good Student." Bookshelves lined the back of the room—chest high. Most of the books were never moved from the shelves.

In the middle of the 2012-2013 academic year, the school expanded, and just before winter break Ms. Smith moved into a bigger classroom. The new semester began in January and our basketball season was about to take off. We might even win our second state championship.

In the "hallway that was a classroom," we had made it through art activities like melting wax and dripping it on a cloth to make a design. I guarded the pot of hot wax, making sure the students kept their distance. This was hard in the smaller class. The classroom was not large enough to escape the smell of the wax. At the beginning of class, it was hard from cooling from the previous day. The heat from the burner rose and the wax began to melt. Its smell filled the small room like stale breath.

It was in this room Ms. Smith strengths began to complement my weaknesses as I did hers. She created wonderfully engaging and seemingly impossible projects. I helped to devise a logistical plan which would help achieve her goals. At the beginning of each of these projects, I was certain we'd never be able to finish them.

“As we are becoming an international school next year, I’d like our class to create all of the flags from the different countries around the world.” She showed us an example of an American flag she’d made using construction paper. It looked perfect. I wondered how we’d accomplish this as a class. I was certain we’d fail. We began.

The students swarmed around their desks like worker bees, choosing different flags and the sheets of construction paper which corresponded in color to the flag. I moved in between the rows of desks, many times bumping into the corner of a desk, feeling a twinge of pain run up my leg. Ms. Smith had stayed late the previous night and printed all of the flags using her color printer. We began to help the students measure and cut. Ms. Smith encouraged me to be precise in all of my measurements and cuts. We were not a classroom of just good enough.

We worked for weeks on the flags. Every art class was a bustling subway terminal in New York City. I had moments of feeling dizzy as I went from one student to the next, trying to stay ahead of any mistake they might accidentally make. Ms. Smith did the same. She stepped to the side to help; I stepped back and around. We moved. It was as if we were dancing to a rhythm only we heard. After class, we’d joke about this.

We created over 100 flags. What I’d had seen as a certain failure turned into a resounding success. The students were impressed with this significant body of work. We hung the flags in the classroom and outside on the hallway walls. General education students stopped and asked if we had created certain flags. I’d point them to the asked about flag.

Now when Ms. Smith comes up with what appears to be an impossible project for the students, I smile and know that the two of us will be able to help the students accomplish the task

## Skate Night

By the end of the first month of school, the students and staff had found the routine, new friendships had been formed during passing periods and over lunch, which most students ate sitting beneath lockers in the hallways. No one seemed to eat in the cafeteria.

I was testing the keys Coach Calvin had given to me on different doors in the gym and came across two enormous shelves full of roller skates and a bin full of old helmets. They were brown, faded leather with orange wheels and an orange toe stopper. They looked fun and usable.

I knew that some of the students hung out on Friday nights at a middle school down the road and roller skated in their gym. I wondered if we could do the same thing in our lower gym. I'd never have dreamt of roller skating in our upper gym. The floors were new and shiny and I secretly considered the upper gym my private sanctuary. When I stood there alone, I felt a quiet I wanted to have in my life.

"What do you think about letting me turn the lower gyms into a skating rink on a Friday night?" I asked Principal Floe.

"Sure. Who'll be in charge of making sure the students will wear helmets?"

"I got that all day, Floe."

Principal Floe leaned back in his chair. "Okay. Go ahead."

As I stood to leave, I noticed his calendar was a month behind. "Do you want me to change this for you?"

"Get going, Over-Achiever," he smiled. "I leave it like that to bother people like you."

\* \* \*

Ali and Mo Mo stayed after school to help me set up the gym. Skate Night started at 6:30. Parents were to bring pizza, pop, and snacks. We would provide music.

“Hey Coach,” said Sophia as she walked into the gym. She was carrying three large pizza boxes. Her mom, Kai, followed her with three more. Sophia was a sophomore, a very small girl, maybe 4 feet 8 inches tall, and one of the hardest working and most tenacious people I knew. She wore her dark brown hair cut short so it framed her face. Sophia had her Red Belt in Karate. She also lived with autism.

“Do you guys mind helping James? He has more pizzas and drinks in the car,” said Kai.

Ali and I walked out to the parking lot to bring in the rest of the food and drinks. Mo Mo was in the other gym shooting baskets.

As we returned carrying the rest of the pizza boxes and 2 liter bottles of pop, Sophia ran up to me with her iPod. “Can we plug this into the stereo?”

“I don't know,” I said with a grin. “Are all the songs school appropriate?”

“There aren't any bad words on the songs.”

“Are the songs about a student's love of homework?”

“Coach! It's Friday night! Don't talk about homework.”

I put the pizzas on the table, took Sophia's iPod, plugged it in, and turned on the music. She started dancing immediately.

Fast Laine and his dad, Craig, showed up. They were carrying their own roller skates—polished black leather with bright orange wheels. My mom and dad walked in, pushing my grandma in her wheel chair. Sophia ran over to my grandma. I went and hugged my mom.

Other families and students began trickling in and I handed out roller skates and helmets. We lined folding chairs up along the wall. Some students went straight for the pizza. Some parents went straight for the skates.

The gym filled with the sounds of the wheels rolling on old ballbearings. The scent of pizza mingled with the perspiration of those skating.

There were two lower gyms separated by a wall with a door that allows passage between them. There was a full basketball court in each gym. Tonight we filled up both gyms. On one court students and parents roller skated to music while Sophia danced and my grandma sat next to her; on the other side the Bulldozer, Rocket, Ali, and Mo Mo played two-on-two. By the end of the night, there were only grease stained pizza boxes laying across the table like fallen playing cards.

## Rise Up: Blues and Grays

When I was hired in January of the 2010-2011 school year, it wasn't to coach Special Olympics basketball. On my first day, Ms. Smith gave me a tour of the school. As we walked down the hallway by the auditorium, we passed Coach Calvin. I had not yet met him.

"You're quite tall. Did you play basketball?" he asked.

"I played in high school. I also coached a freshman girls' team in Colorado, and I was an assistant coach for an eighth grade girls' team. We won our league, too."

"We have a Special Olympics basketball team here if you'd like to help out. We practice during first period. Would you like to come work with us tomorrow?"

"He should have a chance to get settled into his position and the school first," said Ms. Smith.

We finished the tour and I began to wonder what a Special Olympics basketball team was.

By the end of the week, Ms. Smith sent me to help out during a first period practice. I walked into the gym. The floor looked like murky water that was more mud than water. *How could anyone play ball on this?* I wondered. There was one section which had been rubbed away and was lower than the rest of the floor. It seemed like a spot prone to cause injuries. The overhead lights looked as if they got barely enough electricity and only glowed dimly. The whole gym felt depressing. I felt bad for anyone who had to play basketball there.

Within a month, I began to help out more at practice. Coach Calvin invited me to a game. I came and ended up sitting on the bench with the team. I felt awkward as I wasn't yet an official coach; although, I did help the athletes out and they seemed to enjoy my presence.

IHS had two Special Olympics basketball teams: The Grays and The Blues. The Grays were a more skilled team and had played together longer. The Blues were a younger team with players still developing their skills.

Coach Calvin asked me to work mainly with The Grays as I had a lot of experience with basketball.

In March of 2011 our whole school got a surprise. We were called into the gym for an assembly. There was a professional camera crew on the floor.

“We have been chosen, Rams,” said the athletic director. “This crew is from ESPN. They have searched out high schools in need of a little lift. I’d like to introduce Joe Vaughn.”

We applauded.

“Thank you for having me. Take a look at this gym. Take a real and a lasting look. This is not what you’ll soon see. These walls, these bleachers, this *floor* will all be changed. A new weight room is coming. Ingraham, by next year, you’ll have the facilities you need to compete athletically at the level you desire. Ingraham, it’s time you rise up.”

With that, we all stood and cheered. There was a thunderous roar of excitement throughout the crowd. I couldn’t wait to see what the basketball floor would look like.

When we came back to school after summer break, I went to the gym. There was going to be a special unveiling for the whole school. I couldn’t wait and I had my coach’s keys. I opened the gym doors

The lights were off and still the floor shined. It reflected the light coming in from the windows high above. The walls had been painted blue and gray to match our school colors. A ram’s head was painted at center court with our school slogan beneath it: *It’s a matter of pride.*

I breathed deeply. The smell of the gym made me feel at peace. It was quiet. I walked out to the center of the court and imagined the students flying up and down on a fast break. I saw myself on the sideline—my arms crossed with nervousness even if we led by 10. This was the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year. I was supposed to be here.

## Happy Monday

7:30 on a Monday morning can be miserable. I've heard of people who fall asleep on Sunday night and dread Monday, but I don't mind Mondays. After two days away, I'm ready to return to the students' enthusiasm.

As I entered the school, I thought about organizing the parent phone numbers for Special Olympics, but I knew there'd be other tasks from Ms. Smith to do. I knew I'd need to stay with the students during class time to help them. Yet, I hoped that through it all, I'd be able to compile a binder of contact information. I wanted to be able to have this and the paperwork for the team rosters done before the season began. I wanted a good foundation before I got too focused on the basketball season itself.

As I walked toward the classroom, I heard, "Good morning, Coach. Happy Monday." Bella bounded toward me down the hall—unaware of the glances she was getting from students leaning against the walls, previously engrossed in their cell phones. She was smiling and her black, Italian, curly, full head of hair was bouncing along. She leapt down the hallway like a gazelle. "Happy Monday," she called again.

"Happy Monday," I said as I extended my hand to dap.

I'd never heard anyone ever say this before. "Happy Friday," but never "Happy Monday." Bella smiled next to me. She meant it.

Since then I've heard Bella say, "Happy Tuesday." "Happy Wednesday." "Happy Thursday." And, of course, "Happy Friday."

Now, each morning Bella and some other students stand outside the classroom door and wait. The moment Bella sees me round the corner, she yells, "Good morning, Coach" and

bounds down the hall toward me. If Emilia is there, Emilia will run with her and greet me, too. At times, I feel embarrassed by this. But why would I want to diminish such enthusiasm due to my embarrassment? The energy I get from the students inspires me to do better; I know that as one of their teachers, I'm supposed to be inspiring to them. But really we lift each other up.

Now when Bella says, "Happy Monday," I say, "Happy Monday, too."

## Self-Destruction

I became consumed. The thing that had been chasing me, had always been with me took me lower than before. It nearly destroyed me. It was in 2005, when I was living and teaching in Colorado.

I had been sent to a treatment center for alcoholism when I was a teenager. Since leaving there, I went back and forth between being sober and not.

One day, I was driving home from the middle school. Thinking I was far enough away, I pulled out my weed pipe, loaded a bowl, stopped at the light and took a hit. The next day, I learned that one of my students and his dad were in the car next to me and I lost my job.

I have never known which student it was, but I've always imagined that it was Dalton. He used to wait outside the school for me in the mornings and run across the courtyard and yell, "Mr. Simmons. Good morning, Mr. Simmons." He ran and we high-fived or shook hands. Sometimes other students ran with him.

One day he'd come to my office to tell me about a detective club he and his friends had started and showed me the detective badges they had made. They were laminated and looked very official. He gave me a badge he'd made just for me.

I moved back home to Seattle after that job. Each day in the afternoon, I returned home from the pet store where I worked and lay on the floor of my room and cried. I still couldn't believe what I'd done. I had become a person who wanted to be a good example, a person who wanted to help, but had used drugs in front of a student who looked up to me. How had I become such a failure?

Three years later, in April of 2008, I moved to Taiwan and taught junior high school English. When I moved there, I was sober, but after a few months, I began to drink. On Friday afternoons, when school was over, I'd stay late and go play basketball with students. I'm tall, so many of the students came to join and play. Soon we had a regular staff versus students game. When I subbed out of the main game, I joined smaller games of two-on-two and three-on-three with students who weren't skilled enough to play in the main game. It was hard to leave these Friday games because I knew I would go home and drink—even though I didn't want to.

I left Taiwan after spending Christmas alone in a hospital. I had been swimming in a government reservoir on Christmas Eve and caught hypothermia. I gave no gifts that year. I lost my job again due to my drinking and couldn't say goodbye to any of the students I taught for a year and a half.

At the end of 2009, I moved home to Seattle to get sober again. I started at Ingraham in January, 2011. Since then, I have remained active in a 12-step recovery group and stayed sober.

I once asked a dear friend from this group, "How do I ever make right all of the wrong I've created?"

"You focus on the students you have now and give them the teacher and coach your previous students deserved."

## Names & High Fives

There were close to 1,000 students at Ingraham, freshman through seniors, from forty different countries.

One freshman was from Mexico and named Luis. He was 15, tall with dark brown hair and slightly overweight. I knew he had cognitive processing difficulties, I'm not sure what else.

Luis got teased for being a big fan of Justin Bieber. He wrote on his school folders: "I 'heart' Justin Bieber." He also sang along to songs with earbuds in each ear. We heard his voice as he tried to keep up with the song only he could hear.

Many students thought he shouldn't like Justin Bieber because he was in high school and male. Luis didn't seem to care. He smiled and laughed all day, and often broke out in laughter in class for no apparent reason.

One day in the middle of October, I saw Luis up ahead in the hallway. As he walked, he said, "hello" to nearly almost every student, and greeted each by name. I couldn't believe he had met so many people in just over a month and knew their names. He raised his hand and offered high-fives to students. Some of the students seemed unsure but most returned his high-five.

The day before Halloween, I was walking through the hallway before school. Out of the corner of my eye I saw very bright colors at the end of the hallway. As I looked closer, I saw that a clown was walking toward me. Bright red hair, white painted face, an enormous grin, and a yellow suit with multicolored polkadots.

It was Luis.

"Good morning, Coach."

"Good morning. Luis, do you know you're a day early for Halloween?"

"Today's not Halloween?"

"Tomorrow. You look great, though." I extended my hand to give Luis a dap.

"Oh. Thank you. See you later, Coach."

Luis stayed in the clown outfit all day, walking down the hallways during passing periods, saying hello to students and handing out high-fives.

## Pie in the Eye

The girls' basketball practice was about to start. I came to the gym to talk with Coach Kirklin. The boys team was on the far side. Coach Chin walked up and down the court, speaking with his players. Coach Kirklin stood in the alcove by the training room, talking to her assistant coach.

"Hey, coach," I said.

"Hey."

"I have an idea for a fundraiser."

"Let me get practice started first."

Coach Kirklin blew her whistle. "Here we go. Two laps. Then captains run through our warm-up stretches." She blew her whistle again and turned to me. "Okay, what's up?"

"I have a friend who teaches high school in Colorado. She's done this fundraiser the last couple of years and has made a lot of money. It's called 'Pie in the Eye.' We'd pair up one of your players with one of mine. That team of two challenges a staff member to raise more money over the next month. Whichever side has raised the least amount of money at the end, gets a whipped cream pie in the face during the Winter Assembly. We split whatever money we raise.

What do you think?"

"Let's do it."

\* \* \*

Coach Kirklin opened the door of her apartment. She was tall and wore a brown, zip-up hoodie. "Did you find it alright?"

“Yeah. I don’t know this neighborhood, though.” Coach Kirklin lived on lower Queen Anne near Seattle Pacific University where she’d attended school.

“Is Short Stack around?” I asked.

“She’s somewhere.” Coach Kirklin led me into the kitchen. “This is what I’m proud of.” She pointed to a door with windows turned into a table. The windows were lower than the wood. The table was red and seemed somewhat impractical.

“That looks cool,” I said. “So, I printed up a rough draft of the receipt form.”

“That’s more than I did.”

“I got your email with the Excel sheet with your players’ names. It’ll be easy to write the names of my team once they pair up.”

“How are we going to present this to the team?”

“I’ll send an email out to parents so our kids can stay after school and go to your practice. We’ll tell them about the fundraiser and launch it that day.”

“When do you want to do this?”

“How about Wednesday. I’ll send the email out Monday. We have ASB approval, so we’re *Thunder Cats Go!* from here on out.”

“I’m glad you’re so organized,” said Coach Kirklin.

\* \* \*

The kids sat in the circle at half-court in their uniforms. The members of the girls’ team were interspersed throughout. Everyone was quiet. Coach Kirklin and I huddled a few feet away.

“Would you like to fire it up, Coach?” I asked.

“Oh, go ahead...by all means.” She took a small step back, extended her hands in the direction of the teams.

I stepped forward. “Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I’m glad we’re here. Coach Kirklin and I have an idea which will be a lot of fun and will raise money for both of our programs. For those of you whom I’ve not yet met, I’m Coach Todd. I coach our Ingraham Gray’s Special Olympics team. This is Coach Kirklin...a.k.a Varsity Girls’ coach...a.k.a Get It Done Under the Sun...a.k.a...I should probably move on. Here’s how this will play out...”

The girls’ basketball team walked around and began introducing themselves, and asked our players if they’d like to pair up to compete together. We played an inner-squad scrimmage to help everyone get to know each other better. The parents of our team stood along the wall and watched.

I sent out an email, letting staff know that pairs of students were coming to challenge them—pies would be thrown. *Which side were they to be on?*

Over the next month, our players raised money, went Christmas caroling together, and hung out in the hallways. We raised over \$4,000.

The Winter Assembly was wild. Every player from every winter sport was acknowledged by being called unto the gym floor over the P.A. system. The staff team won the staff versus students basketball game for the second year in a row. I scored two of my points with a reverse layup. Later a student congratulated me on how “awesome” the move was. We lined up chairs on a tarp. Every staff member who played Pie in the Eye had lost. Coach Kirklin handed out whipped cream pies. Mo Mo held a whipped cream pie and smiled at an assistant principal, then threw his pie. It landed on the side of his face. Mo Mo handed him a towel while continuing to

smile. Favorite teachers were pied. One assistant principal, a good sport, was pied twice. I, too, had lost in the fundraiser, but the students who beat me were absent so I was not pied.

After school that day, I stood out at the busses with the students. We joked around. Ms. Paige, who had been pied earlier, and some students came out carrying a sheet cake.

“It’s your turn,” the Rocket said.

I smiled and hung my head. Sheet cake was smashed against the side of my face. I felt the frosting oozing into my ear and smeared throughout my hair. I had made sure to design the whipped cream pies so they’d be easy to clean up: Whipped cream in a tin dish. Only a damp towel was needed to clean up. The sheet cake sat on the side of my head like an askew and ill-fitting hat. Frosting lined my ear, making its way to my canal as if it had been sent on an expedition. I felt it beginning to harden in my hair. The students stood in a semi-circle in front of me. They laughed. Ms. Paige laughed. I laughed.

“We have to get a picture,” said Ms. Paige.

“At this point, I’m pretty much open to anything.” I kept my left eye closed. Some frosting had been smeared inside and I didn’t want more to get in. It was starting to burn. I hung my head and smiled. I looked at my shoes and saw a dollop of frosting laying there like it had found the best possible place to rest after a long day at work.

The Rocket came and stood next to me. I grabbed some frosting from my hair. It had hardened completely, and I was unable to run my hands through my hair. It felt like concrete which had been poured beneath a blazing sun. I broke a piece off and pretended to toss it to Red.

“Don’t you dare,” she yelled.

I smile and tossed the frosting into the grass.

After the students went home, I went to the bathroom to look at myself. In the mirror, I saw lines of red, yellow, and blue frosting streaking down my face all connected with thin lines of white. My hair was matted in places and sticking straight up in places, all of it frozen by the frosting as if it had looked into Medusa's eyes. I washed up the best I could and was left with remnants of frosting in my hair and ears.

## The Boy Who was Taught not to Smile

"You can't catch the Mustang," said the Mustang. "You blink and I am gone. Remember when you and Coach John tried to catch the Mustang and I made you run into each other?"

"Yeah, you're too fast for me Mustang," I said. I had no recollection of this memory.

"VVVAAAAARRRRRRROOOOMMMM. VVVVVVAAAAARRRRRRROOOOM," revved the Mustang. Moises dragged his feet across the carpet as if he were a bull preparing to charge a matador. He held his hands up, clutching invisible handles on a fast motorcycle, drawing back on the accelerator. "VVVVVVVAAAAARRRRRRROOOOMMMM... You guys cannot catch the Mustang." He charged forward into my chest. I braced myself and caught him easily.

"Whoa, whoa, Mustang. You know I can't handle the Mustang. You gotta take it easy, my man."

"Okay, Mr. Todd," he said, slowly backing away.

I made my index and middle finger into a "V" and raised them to my eyes before turning them on him. "I'm watching you, Mustang. I'm watching you."

Mustang laughed and walked away.

\* \* \*

He came back to school this year wearing black jeans, black teeshirts, and a black jacket zipped almost all the way to the top. He wore a thin mustache. He was from Colombia and now fit the stereotype of "tall, dark, and handsome." His black eyes blazed when he sat in class wanting not to do anything.

Mustang sat next to his girlfriend, Sophia, in math class. They had been dating since freshman year. She helped him. His binder was an explosion of disarrayed papers, which had become frail from sticking out and being crammed into the shelf Ms. Smith provided. Her binder was perfect, full of homework with 100% on each page.

“Mustang, will you please use a pencil in math class?” asked Ms. Smith.

"I can use a pen if I want to. I don't have to listen you!"

I was helping TJ with his graph and stood up. I knew Mustang was about to go to battle. Sophia gently put her hand on his back. Ms. Smith stood in front of his desk, looking at his paper. Mustang looked down.

"In math it's important to use a pencil so we can erase our mistakes. Please follow my direction," said Ms. Smith.

"I can do whatever I want! I don't have to listen to you." Mustang slammed the cover of this math binder shut and stood up. "I'm going to tell Ms. Thomas," he said and walked out of the room.

I followed.

The Mustang rapidly walked down the hall, chattering to himself about how we'd been wrong and what he was going to do. I caught up with him and walked alongside, saying nothing.

## Job Sight of Chips

Eli and I walked the four blocks from IHS to Albertson's in the November rain of Seattle. A cold chill nipped the space between our jackets and necks.

Eli and I had been coming here for two years on Thursdays during 5th period. Sometimes another student was signed up for the job-site as well. But Eli and I were the constants.

Eli's job was to walk the aisles "facing" all of the products outward. We also replaced items which were out of place.

As we walked there we rapped.

"It's like it's always been, put a record on and watch it spin," I free-styled.

"Like win, in, and thin."

"Whoa, Walsh, that's three. Let's spit some more and do it quickly. When it comes to the game, you never leave it the same."

"Like tame, fame, aim."

"Whew, three more indeed. You're a rhyming P - R - O."

"Like slow, Joe, and go."

"Goodness, gracious, he's got rhymes oh so spacious. This kid is straight up capacious in thought look how much he's got."

"Like pot, sought, and ought."

I clapped my hands together and gave Eli a dap. When we dap, we draw our fingers back away from each other and wiggle them. It's a handshake we made up.

When we got to Albertson's, we went straight to aisle 9, where we always start. Aisle 9 is the toy aisle. Eli straightens this section up first before moving on to the rest of the store.

“Maybe Ms. Smith can buy this one for the prize bag,” he said, holding up Bumblebee.

“Yeah, we can tell her about it. Let’s keep straightening. This place needs Eagle Eye Eli.”

Eli knelt down rearranging the toy bin of plastic animals. He put all of the Barbie dolls into rows, leaving even spaces.

Eli stopped to look at the food and told me when he ate it last and how much he likes it. As we went down the chip aisle, he suggested what we should buy for our next school party.

## Loathing that was Love

Third period was Art History. Ms. Smith started with the art of animals painted in caves in France. This is some of the oldest art in the world. In the caves are black line drawings of animals. Ms. Smith started there and moved on through years and periods of art.

In class we watched videos about artists—one DVD for each artist. Ms. Smith stopped the videos often so we could copy the notes she'd written. Sometimes we didn't even make it a minute before we had to write more notes.

I sat next to Eli and reminded him to put spaces between his words and not “crash through the floor with his letters,” as Ms. Smith would say.

I wrote down the notes so Eli could copy them if Ms. Smith needed to start the video. I hated writing these notes. I hated having to copy them. It was tedious and my hand cramped. I smiled and tried to tell jokes to lighten the boredom.

Students grumbled, wanting to watch the video.

When I couldn't quiet the grumbling in time, Ms. Smith reminded them, “This is school. We're not here to just watch movies. *See, Say, Do.*”

Mo Mo had the most difficulty in this class. “This shit is boring,” he said, and we took a walk to the assistant principal's office. I was relieved because it meant no more writing notes.

I have taken these notes for years. I wrote them on loose leaf pieces of paper and stored them in manila folders. I have no idea what has become of them. I saved them, before I put them in the recycling bin. I loved throwing them away. It felt like time reclaimed.

During a summer break, I went to the Seattle Art Museum with a friend who knows a lot about art. He asked me about Morris Grave's “Morning.” I answered. I spoke of art past and

present, of movements and influences. I spoke intelligently and passionately about art I had seen in Ms. Smith's class. I read the descriptions on the walls. I caught myself and took a breath, remembering taking notes. This was where my love and knowledge came from.

In Art History, we covered the Renaissance, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism. After finishing the Impressionists, Ms. Smith informed us that the students would select a painting and reproduce it using acrylic paints on a canvas. By this time we were in our new classroom. I groaned internally. This project meant meticulous reproductions requiring a high level of focus and attention to detail. It meant students with art smocks and dripping paintbrushes. It meant Ms. Smith and me circulating between six students, never quickly enough to stave off disaster.

Tony chose a painting by Monet.

TJ chose a painting of an English government building on fire.

Saron chose a Van Gogh with cypress trees.

Alison chose "Starry Night."

Eli chose a Matisse with a foot and a bird on it. His love of birds showed up in any activity.

Christian chose Van Gogh's "Sunflowers."

Jermaine chose a self-portrait by Van Gogh. I wondered how Jermaine would finish his painting as he was only in class once every two weeks. When he did show up, usually late, Ms. Smith and I always asked, "Why are you late?" He always replied, "Because I was sleeping." After school we said that we appreciated his honesty.

Joseph chose a picture with five trees on it.

Ms. Smith had the students trace the original painting using charcoal. Then the charcoal lines were transferred to the canvas. Then the painting began. Ms. Smith did not let the students just slop paint on canvas. She has a Master's in Fine Arts, painting in particular. She worked with the students on shade, tint, tone, and lines. I followed her lead hoping I didn't cause a student to redo a section.

After three weeks of painting, we had all done remarkably similar reproductions of the artwork. We displayed them in the school showcase by the main office. General Ed students stopped and stared at them. Without them saying anything, watching them stand frozen in front of the display case, I knew they understood something worthwhile had been accomplished.

## Seeing Your Breath

“Down and back, down and back,” I called. “On the whistle. Ready. Set. Go.”

Some of them jumped off of the line. Others did not. The ones who did looked unsure glancing from side to side.

“Remember, the fourth quarter is coming, gentlemen. We’re going to be tired. We must stay focused. On the whistle. On the whistle. Ready. Set.” I blew the whistle.

The team ran from the baseline to the far baseline and back again. They did this twice then stood on the baseline breathing heavily.

As they ran, I called to them, “I’m sure the teams we’ll play this year aren’t practicing right now. It’s Winter Break. It’s cold. It’s eight o’clock on a Thursday night. They’re at home resting, but we’re here working. This gives us an advantage, gentlemen. This gets us Peyton Manning Prepared. P.M.P.”

“Broncos suck, dude!”

I smiled and looked over at The Bulldozer. “Let’s get another one. When the fourth quarter comes, the other team will be tired. We won’t be. They will huff. We will puff. We’ll be the ones blowing their house down. Let’s get it. Down and back, down and back. On the whistle.” I blew the whistle. The team ran.

It was the day after Christmas. This was our second practice of the Winter Break. We had two more practices before school started back up. Practice was from 7 to 9 p.m. We had to run practice late so we could get help from the parents to drive.

There was no heat in the gym. I wore my Broncos beanie, a long sleeve shirt, and a thick hoodie with sweatpants. I saw my breath when I exhaled. The kids didn’t seem to mind at all.

They joked with each other, ran drills, scrimmaged, and smiled. I was freezing. My nose began to run.

## My Mom and the Hug

I walked into Auburn's gym. The Grays were warming up, shooting baskets on the far side of the court. My mind raced with thoughts: *Fear for you are a failure; the team will find fault in cracks of you; the weight of the upcoming unknown felt oppressive. Embarrassment would follow. Heads would hang low wearing, doubt. Oppressive to the point of exhaustion, no reason to go on.*

The game had not begun. The referee had not been seen. The team smiled, joked around, and needed to be reminded to calm down, "There's still a game to play." And yet, my mind was a gray cloud telling me we will lose. I've had too much coffee. I can't coach this game right. I'm going to let them down.

My mom walked behind me. She'd ridden with me from Kirkland to Auburn to watch us play our rivals. We beat them last year at the regional tournament. We were unbeatable, I remembered. I felt a momentary rush of confidence. *We can win*, I thought. How many parts of my mind are back there?

Red approached. As she neared, I raised my hand for dap. "Good to see you, Red," I said.

"I see you every day," she said as she walked by me without returning my dap. She was smiling.

I looked over my shoulder as she walked up to my mom and hugged her.

We lost the game. We were outmatched. We were a high school team and we played a team of adults...guys who had graduated and moved on. I drove my mom home. I felt like a loser, a horrible coach. I wanted out of myself. Away.

## **It Could Happen to Anyone**

There was one week left in the first semester. Our sixth period drama class had been busy finishing rehearsals for the class play.

At the beginning of the semester, Ms. Smith had the idea to write and perform a class play, as we had done the year before—*Escape from Bubble City* was a class original set in space about students escaping from an evil principal who ran Bubble City. *Escape from Bubble City* was the first school play created by the special education department. It had been Ms. Smith's idea. She spent her own money on the costumes and had stayed late to guarantee it would be a success. And it had been.

This year she wanted to set the bar even higher. A more elaborate script, costumes, and performance. We studied films to get ideas. We chose the movie *50 First Dates*.

IHS is an international school. Ms. Smith felt we should have the setting of the play in-line with this. The class voted for the play to take place in Japan.

*It Could Happen to Anybody* was a high school romantic comedy. The premise was simple: A group of American students come to study at a high school in Japan. One of the American boys falls in love with one of the Japanese students: Sakura. The two are surrounded by their friends and have a wonderful time. Unfortunately, Sakura is in an accident and loses her memory. She forgets that she'd ever loved or even met the American boy. He vows to return the love they shared. The play follows the two on their journey back to love. It ends happily.

On the day of the performance, one of our actors got nervous and refused to perform. His role was minor, so I said I could step in for him. The student playing the lead male part also got stage fright and said he wouldn't perform. I was able to convince the lead male to act the smaller

role and I would act the lead role. As we read from scripts, it was logistically possible to make the switches.

It worked out well. The play was difficult to act and we hadn't had enough time to practice. I was able to improv a lot and help keep the scenes moving.

The female lead, Sakura, played by Raechel, was the highlight of the show. She lacked confidence going into the performance. She had three scenes where she sang a solo. She didn't think she was good enough, but during all three of her songs, she held the crowd rapt. She sang with tender grace like a fall breeze dancing with fragile leaves instead of trying to sever them from the branch.

## The Light

I graduated from high school in 1997. A week later, I drove from Spokane to Colorado with my girlfriend. I have vague memories of this time. I spent most of it in a blackout. When we returned to Spokane weeks later, I went back to my job at a discount greeting card store and a “finish it yourself” furniture store and my light went out.

For most of my youth I believed there was a beautiful light shining inside of me—a light which would one day overflow and bring joy to those around me. I do not know where or why this feeling originated. I just knew it was there, and it was a special and real part of myself that for most of my life I’d believed would be permanent. It felt like such a strong force within me. I believed this to be the immortal part of myself.

This light had gone out. All I could do was drink, so I would no longer remember I had once a light in me. I kept myself in a blackout.

Jamie Lynn picked me up most nights from the bar and made sure I got home safely. She would either drop me off at my parents’ house or walk me all the way inside depending on how drunk I was. I do not remember much of this time. Most of this has been told to me.

One night after she dropped me off, I called her and told her I was going to kill myself. She called my parents and raced back over to my house. She ran down to my room. She saw me laying on the floor with my head in my mother's lap. A leather belt was still attached to the dowel rod in my closet; it just hung there. I was unconscious and my mom cried as she held me. My dad ran all over the house frantically waiting for the paramedics. I do not know where my brother and sister were. A Flight for Life helicopter showed up and took me to Sacred Heart.

While I lay unconscious in the ICU, the doctors told my parents to prepare themselves. They said my brain had been without oxygen for so long that there was a good chance I suffered brain damage, that my personality would be significantly altered, and that the son they knew would no longer be.

## Space Jam

"I really need permission to show the movie?" I said.

"Since you're using school property and equipment, you need permission from the studio. Here are the forms. It'll cost \$75." Kim was the school's fiscal manager.

I wanted to show *Space Jam* movie-theater-style on the wall of the forum. I'd use the school's popcorn maker and invite the basketball teams, parents, and anyone else in the department. I had no idea a giant Hollywood movie studio would charge us.

I called Joe, the treasurer for our parent group, that funded our program.

"I wanted to have a movie night for the team. Universal Studios wants me to pay \$75 to show *Space Jam*. I'd also like pizza and popcorn for them, too."

"How many pizzas?"

"Five or six maybe."

"Send me the paperwork, and I'll take care of it for you."

"Great. Thanks, Joe."

"It's what the money's for."

Within ten minutes, I went from feeling defeated to elated. I began to imagine the upcoming night. The students would make a memory they would carry with them for the rest of their lives. This was going to be something special.

\* \* \*

After school I drove with Viper to order the pizzas from Sam's club. A parent would pick them up 30 minutes before the start of movie night at 6:30.

Ms. Paige was in her room separating popcorn from a big 10 pound bag into little paper sacks. There was a varsity basketball game that night at the school for the general education team and they needed the popcorn machine for their concession stand.

When Viper and I got back to school, we went to the library to get a projector. Betty, the librarian, had gone home. We tracked down the custodian.

"I got the new WWE game," John said as we wheeled the projector through the hallway.

"That's cool," I said.

"I made a character with my name. He's champion and undefeated."

"That's only because he hasn't faced me."

"Yeah right. Remember the last potluck?"

I did. John had destroyed me. I'd pushed buttons in random combinations while he picked my character up and tossed him around the ring.

Viper and I hooked the projector up. Viper ran down the stairs to the switch on the wall and lowered the screen. The light from the projector hit the top of the screen and fell on the ceiling. I went to Ms. Smith's classroom. She was still working.

"I just need to borrow a couple of books," I said.

"Hmmm." She was deep in thought.

Viper was fiddling with the projector. He had withdrawn two screws from the bottom section and raised the picture even higher on the ceiling. "I think I fixed it," he said.

"Cool," I said and placed the books under the back of the projector. The light lowered but not enough. "Will you go find the custodian, so we can turn off the lights? People should be showing up in about 30 minutes," I said.

" Okay." Viper walked off down the hall.

I returned the screws to their original place. By the time Viper returned, I had the picture and sound system working. With the lights off, the place looked like a movie theater. Black screens had been lowered over the windows. Only the green glow of the "exit" light was illuminated. I held a wireless microphone, wondering if I should use it to give the movie a formal introduction.

"Is this thing on? Can I see it?" Viper asked, reaching for the microphone. He spoke into the microphone like an announcer, "And now, for your main event. We have wrestling's greatest warrior...The Viiiiiiiiippppppeeeerrrrr." The sound blared from speakers in the ceiling. Viper raised his arms, triumphantly. It was so loud I wondered if the teachers still working in their classrooms heard us.

Kai and James arrived, carrying pizzas. Sophia followed.

"Do you need a hand?" I asked Kai.

"We have more pizzas in the car. Thank you."

Ms. Paige came down from her room with bags and bags of popcorn.

*Space Jam* was displayed on the screen. All we needed were students.

Fast Laine and his dad showed up and Laine went right to the pizza. Red showed up with friends from Nathan Hale. Joe, the Bulldozer, and Jordan showed up. My mom and dad showed up. Nate and his dad showed up. Nate ran down the hall and wasn't seen until the end of the night. That was it. The forum was not full. *More students would show up*, I thought. *How could they miss this?* I waited a few minutes and then hit play. The people here seemed to be getting restless.

I sat by my mom and dad.

“Would you like some popcorn?” my mom asked, handing me a bag.

The students there had fun watching *Space Jam* projected on the big screen, but I felt sad that more students hadn’t shown up. Where were the Rocket and Anna Banana? Where were the Beast and Ali? Where was everyone? What happened? I had been organized. There was even going to be left-over pizza. *Where had I gone wrong?*

After the movie was over, the parents and students helped clean up. I locked the projector in the classroom. I felt like a loser and didn’t want to talk to anyone. I kept smiling so no one would guess how I felt. I couldn’t believe I’d failed in creating a wonderful experience for all of the students.

As we left, I gave my mom a hug.

“Thank you for inviting us, sweetie. We had fun. This was a great idea.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you had fun. Thank you for coming.” My stomach felt hollow. I kept smiling.

There were only a few popcorn crumbs left on the ground. Other than those, our movie night would go unnoticed like an old and crumpled newspaper in the alley of a city street.

## Where We Came From

The state basketball tournament was a new experience for most of us. The Beast, Bulldozer, Zoom, and Coach Calvin had won the Division II State Championship in 2009. It was a sweet memory for them; although, it increased their appetite to win a Division I championship.

We had just beaten our rivals, Auburn, at the 2011-2012 King County Regional Basketball Tournament. We'd spent mid-winter break in the gym preparing to win our first Division I State Championship.

It was Friday at lunchtime. It was time to go.

"Are you guys ready?" asked the athletic director.

"Yeah, should be fun," I said.

"Have your team walk down the senior hallway in about five minutes. Okay?"

"Will do."

Coach Calvin I checked the luggage to make sure we had the basketballs, jerseys, and other gear.

"Alright, guys, bring it in," I said. I raised my arms and called the team in. "Before we leave, the ASB would like to send us off in style. We're going to walk down the senior hallway and head out to the parking lot," I said.

"Are the cheerleaders going to be there?" Jordan asked.

"Beats me. Let's go find out."

We grabbed our gear and walked down the hallway. From the far end of the hall, I saw the crowd. There was a large poster hanging from the ceiling. We would have to walk under it on

our way out. The clapping and cheers grew louder. The poster came into view. It read: "Go Grays! Good Luck at State!" Below this line were the nicknames of all of the guys.

The Bulldozer beat on his chest as he walked beneath it. Ali high-fived his fellow students. Mo Mo kept his head lowered. He still had to defend himself to some of his peers in the hallways when this happened. Stevie wore his oversized headphones and a huge smile. Johnson beamed at everyone he passed with both arms raised, receiving high-fives. The Beast followed behind the team, he stood tall.

Coach Calvin held his head high and smiled.

We walked out the door into the chill February air.

"We need to get a team picture," said Marci.

Showtime and Mo Mo groaned.

"Let's go, gents. Line it up. Shoulder to shoulder and smile," I said, drawing Mo Mo next to me.

"Smile soon-to-be-state-champs," said Marci.

\* \* \*

"Can we go swimming?" Stevie asked.

We walked into the lobby of the Holiday Inn. We'd been in the cars for over two hours driving over the mountains. I was ready to relax in the hotel room before our team dinner. "Yeah. Let's get checked in, put our stuff away, and have a brief team meeting," I said. "We've got a couple of hours to kill before we need to head over to the opening ceremonies."

I went to the counter and checked us in. I was so excited. Coach Calvin stayed with the team to keep them from running around the hotel before we even got our room keys.

“Coach, Mo Mo and I aren't sharing a bed," said Showtime.

"Yes, I know. I ordered a cot. You too can sort out who's sleeping on it.”

I volunteered to have Showtime and Mo Mo in my room. Coach Calvin and I feared they posed the biggest chance of creating trouble, and both their parents said they could only go because I'd be with them.

Showtime walked over to Mo Mo. "Coach got you a cot. Now you won't have to sleep on the ground.”

I went straight to the dresser and put my clothes away. I put them in the order I'd wear them—tomorrow's outfit on top. Showtime and Mo Mo threw their bags in the corner. Showtime hooked his PlayStation up to the TV.

"I brought my boxing game," I said.

"You ain't ready for me," boasted Showtime.

"On your games, probably not, but I don't lose with boxing. Pop, pop, pop, drop." I shadow-boxed the air.

"Whatever. You're soft.”

"Set ‘em up, so I can knock ‘em down like bowling pins.”

The room phone rang.

"Got it," yelled Mo Mo. He jumped on the bed to get to the phone. "Hello. Yeah. Coach. It's Jordan.”

I grabbed the phone. "Hey, Jordan. What's up?" I said.

"Tomorrow's my birthday.”

"I know.”

"What are you going to get me?"

"Same thing I get for every student...A Gatorade. What color do you want?"

"Purple. Okay. Bye." He hung up.

I'd starting buying the guys Gatorade a year before. I didn't have much money but still wanted to show them I cared about their birthday.

The phone rang again.

"Hello."

"What are you doing, old man?" said Jordan.

"You mean in the five seconds since you last called?"

"If we win state, can we celebrate by burning your Broncos jacket?"

"Well, no, that was a gift, but we can do something fun."

"Like what?" Jordan asked.

"I don't know. Something."

"Can we dump a bucket of Gatorade on you?"

"We'll be in a gym, so that might not work too well."

"How about you buy us all Seahawks tickets?"

"Yeah, I don't have the money," I laughed.

"Come on, old man. We need to do something."

"How about this? If we win, I'll let the team cut my hair any way you all want. I'll wear it like that for a week. Sound good?"

"Sure," said Jordan. "We're going swimming. Bye." He hung up the phone.

"Do you guys want to go swimming?" I asked.

Showtime played his video game. Mo Mo was texting. They didn't look up.

"Yo, guys. You with me?"

"I'm good here," said Showtime.

"Mo Mo. You in?" I asked.

"Huh?" He said without looking up, his thumbs continuing to move.

I walked over to him and leaned down. "Would you like to go swimming?"

"Yeah. When?"

"Right now. Stevie and Johnson are already down there. I think Dozer's going too.

Showtime, I'm going to the pool. You good up here?"

"Yeah."

"Come down if you need anything and close the door if you leave."

"Can I get a key?"

I set a key on the TV.

Stevie and Dragon Warrior were already in the pool splashing around when we got there.

Joe sat in the deck chair, monitoring. The Bulldozer soaked in the hot tub.

"Are you swimming?" Stevie asked.

"For sure," I said. I had my swim trunks on and a long sleeve swim shirt that I wore whenever I swam with students or kids. There are scars on my arms I didn't want the kids to ask about.

Mo Mo took off his shirt, threw it on a table, and jumped in. He swam over to Stevie and climbed on his back. Stevie grabbed him, flipped him, and dumped him under the water.

I jumped in.

"What up, Dragon Warrior?" I asked.

"Hi, Todd. Tomorrow. First game. 11 AM."

"Yes, sir. We'll play the first game tomorrow at 11 AM. Are you excited?"

"Yes."

Mo Mo jumped on my back. I dropped beneath the water, grabbed him, and lifted him into the air. I counted, "One, two, three." I tossed him into the water. He emerged, wiped water out of his eyes, and smiled under squinting eyes.

Jordan and the Beast entered.

"What's up, grandpa?" Jordan said, looking at me.

"What's up, Bronco buddy?" I said.

"Broncos suck!" yelled the Dozer from the hot tub.

Jordan and the Beast jumped in.

"Do you guys want to have a chicken fight?" I asked.

"What's that?" asked Mo Mo.

"You team up with someone, jump on his back, and try to knock the other people off.

Last pair standing wins and we need to be careful. Stay away from the walls. We came here to play basketball."

"I'm with Shamus," said Jordan.

"Dozer, you want in?" I called.

He got out of the hot tub. Stevie got on his back. Mo Mo jumped on my back. The Dragon Warrior waded around in the shallow end.

We all took a couple of steps back and evaluated each other by surmising strengths and weaknesses. I knew Jordan and Shamus would be nearly impossible to defeat.

"Ready? Go!" I called out.

Dozer and Stevie went right after Shamus and Jordan. I sidestepped with Mo Mo and prepared to attack Shamus and Jordan while they were grappling.

Jordan grabbed Stevie's shoulder, pulled him backwards. Stevie, with his arms wrapped around Dozer's neck, held tightly. The Dozer walked unsteadily. Stevie reached with his right arm and grabbed Jordan's hand. He pulled it free, tried to bring Jordan toward him, hoping to topple Shamus.

"Grab Jordan's shoulders," I quietly said to Mo Mo.

I stepped closer and Mo Mo lunged for Jordan. He latched on. Jordan was being pulled in two directions. I turned my shoulder into him, trying to destabilize the pair. Jordan held strong. Shamus seemed unmovable.

Even though we were in the pool, it felt like I was beginning to sweat. This felt like a workout. Water splashed about like white capped waves. The taste of chlorine grew in my mouth. I tried not to swallow any of the water. I wondered if my eyes would burn later.

Jordan looked at me, his eyes burning with energy. He and Shamus turned toward Mo Mo and me. He launched himself straight past Mo Mo, latching onto my neck. Mo Mo and I were dragged down. Shamus and Jordan turned back to the Dozer and Stevie, and dragged them beneath the water with ease.

Ali entered. "What are you guys doing?"

"Chicken fights. You want in?" I asked.

Ali jumped in and got on Johnson's back.

"Remember, stay away from the walls," I said. "Alright, go!"

As we battled, hotel guests walked by, looked through the window, and got a perplexed look on their faces, seemingly to say that if they'd thought about coming to the pool, they'd now decided upon another activity for a time, hoping for peace later.

\* \* \*

We arrived at the Wenatchee Arena at 7 PM for opening ceremonies. All of the basketball teams from around the state filled the corridor of the arena. Special Olympics vendors sold sweatshirts reading "2012 Winter Games."

We found our place in the procession and checked in.

I saw the coach from Issaquah. "How are you all doing?" I asked, shaking hands with him.

"We're ready," he said.

I looked their team over. They were rivals of The Blues, our Special Olympics junior varsity team. Some of the kids on the Blues hoped to move up play with the Grays. The two teams had a thrilling midseason game against each other, ending in a very rare basketball tie of 30-30. They were here to compete for the Division 4 State Championship.

"Hi, Todd."

I looked back and saw their guard, Kendall, who I knew from a summer camp I directed. His mom came over and we chatted for a few minutes. When I worked at the summer camp in Bellevue, I had no idea that I'd be delving deeper into the Special Olympics community. It became rare for me to go a basketball game and not see a kid or parent from camp. Each time I

met someone, I felt a moment of gratitude. I remembered how I used to spend my summer breaks when I taught in Colorado: a bathtub full of ice and Pabst Blue Ribbon watching stand-up comedy. Now I spent them working with kids living with disabilities. It felt I had become more consistent, living with integrity and not just the hope of it.

I gave Kendall a dap and wished him luck in his games.

"It was nice chatting with you. I should get back to my team," I said to his mom.

Mo Mo jumped on Johnson's back.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Johnson said.

"Hey, hey." I said gently. I put my hand on Mo Mo's shoulder. "Remember, we're representing Ingraham here. Let's keep us looking good."

Mo Mo walked over and hung out with Showtime. Stevie, Jordan, and Shamus stood in line together. Jordan scanned the crowd for girls. Shamus and Stevie talked about the upcoming The Avengers Marvel movie. Coach Calvin stood at the front of the line with his hands behind his back. He smiled, looked around. I walked over him.

"This is pretty cool, coach," I said.

"Yeah. They've done a real nice job. Tomorrow night there will be a spaghetti dinner before the dance. I wonder how long our guys will want to stay at the dance."

"If there are girls there, Jordan won't want to leave. What time do you think we should leave the hotel tomorrow for the game?" I asked.

"If we change into our uniforms in the hotel, we can leave at 10:20 and get there by 10:30. There probably won't be much room to warm up. Games will be going continuously."

"That's good to know. We can run dynamics in the hallway."

\* \* \*

The torch was lit for the Winter Games. It would burn all weekend long, representing the persistent spirits of the Special Olympians assembled to compete. The Special Olympics slogan was read and each member of the crowd recited it back.

“Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.”

We sat through long speeches from various sponsors and local politicians, the people who funded this weekend and paid for our hotel. I sat upright and smiled. I was incredibly bored. I looked down the aisle and saw the guys were just as bored but lacked the ability to hide it.

I leaned over to Coach Calvin. "How much longer do you think?"

It was already 8:45.

"Last time this went on for a while.”

“We need to get these guys some food and get them to bed. No junk food. Whole wheat and protein.”

"We can leave.”

I leaned over to Shamus, "After this speech is over, we're going to quietly get up, leave, and go get some food. Spread the word.”

Shamus whispered the message to the next guy. As the message spread, so to did their smiles.

\* \* \*

The hotel phone rang. I looked at the clock. 5:30 AM.

"Is your fridge running?"

"Huh?" I said, blearily.

"Is your fridge running 'cause you better go catch it."

Jordan hung up. I rolled over and went back to sleep.

By 6:30 everybody except Mo Mo, Showtime, and I were up and fed. I was shocked. I figured high school kids would sleep in.

I knocked on Joe's door.

"Good morning, coach."

"How long have you been up?"

"Oh, we got up around six, went for a walk, had some breakfast."

I looked at the Dozer. He was at the table arranging little, plastic NFL helmets.

"Good morning, Dozer."

He looked up and smiled.

"Wow. I thought these guys would've slept in."

"Oh, no. Not this group. First rodeo?"

"Yeah, I guess so. When we went to tournaments as kids, the coaches had to drag us out of bed. I just prepared myself for that."

I went down and got my coffee and breakfast. I was starting to get excited for the game. I felt unbeatable. I imagined how much we'd win by. If we won our first two games, we could win the State Championship by the end of the day. This was the only possible outcome.

I went back up to the room to make sure the guys were on track to leave in the hour.

Showtime was playing a video game, but at least he was in his uniform. Mo Mo lay on the bed, texting. He was in a sweat pants and a hoodie.

"Yo, Mo Mo. Train's leaving, buddy. Gear up?"

"What's up?"

"We're going to leave in 20 minutes. Please go get your uniform on."

He slowly raised himself from the bed. "Do you know where it's at?"

"Coach Calvin has them laid out on his bed."

Mo Mo left the room.

\* \* \*

The Spanaway Spartans had taken second place at state the year before, losing to Auburn in the finals by one point. We'd never played them before. Prior to leaving Seattle, I researched and tried to find everything I could about them. I knew that if we were going to win state, we'd have to go through them. To have come so close to winning and then to have lost meant this year they were hungry. I didn't know how hungry.

Our first game was against Marysville. By halftime the score was 13 to 13. I was a little worried. The team seemed too excited. They missed easy baskets. In the middle of the second-quarter, the Beast got sick and had to leave the game.

Something changed in the third-quarter. Our fast-break was fierce—the guys flew up and down the court. We added point after point. Our defense was stingy, allowing them only one point in eight minutes. The score was 26 to 14 at the start of the fourth quarter. The final score was 36 to 18.

After the game, I brought the team in and reminded them we came here to do more than win just one game. I asked them to rest, hydrate, and prepare for the next game at two. We would play the winner of Spanaway and Marysville.

"We're going to win state," said Jordan. He jumped up and down, slapping my back.

*My thoughts and words were not the same. I thought we were invincible.*

“That’s right,” said Showtime.

“Guys, come on. Slow down,” said the Beast. “You heard coach. There’s a lot of tournament to play.”

We went and grabbed lunch and came back at 1:30 and learned that Spanaway had won by seven points. I got excited thinking about being a State Champion. I thought about returning to IHS as champions.

We warmed up and looked good. The Beast said he still felt dizzy but good enough to play. I knew it would be difficult to keep him out of the game.

Spanaway looked fast. They had two guards who could really handle the ball. I still thought we were better.

The game began. Usually I paced up and down the side of the court like a tiger while Coach Calvin sat on the bench recording notes. For this game though, I sat next to him. I felt comfortable that the team would walk out there and take what was meant to be ours.

By the second quarter, we were down by eight. Number 32 on their team drove the ball and scored easily. If he missed, number 33 got the rebound and the quick put-back. I felt like I was sinking in soft, muddy ground. I paced the sideline. I called in directions to the players, “Hands up on defense.” “Move the ball.”

Our group of parents, mine included, cheered loudly behind us. They sounded encouraging and never seemed to waiver in doubt. I didn’t know what basketball strategy I could implement to match their faith. I felt lost.

The ground continued to soften. By halftime, we were down 12 points. No matter what we did, nothing worked. We ended up losing by 19 points. After the game, Jordan looked at me and said, "Why did we come to lose?" and walked out of the gym.

With one more loss, we would be out of the tournament. I didn't know what to do. Spanaway seemed like the better team, and we had to play them again at 6 PM. If they won, they would be State Champions.

The Bulldozer, the Beast, Stevie, Showtime, Mo Mo, Ali, the Dragon Warrior looked like they were ready to go home.

I prayed for strength to be the best example I could be to our team. I went and spoke with Coach Calvin.

"Coach, number 32 and 33 are scoring their points. We need to stop them," I said to him. We were sitting with our backs against the wall under the far court which wasn't being used.

"What do you think?"

"What if we go man-on-man on 32 and 33 and keep our forwards in a triangle under the basket with a guard at the free-throw line. We'll have Ali pick up 32 the second he crosses half court, keep Showtime on 33 at all times, have the Beast on the block and Stevie on the other block. We have Jordan stay in the middle of the key. What do you think?"

We called the team over and explained the new defense. I took Ali to half court and showed him where I wanted him to stand. We put the Beast on the right block as 32 was left handed and drove to that side almost every time. Showtime had not started any games that season, even though before each game he'd come up to me and ask to start. I walked over to him

and said, "Showtime, you're starting. I need you to guard 33, be so close to him at all times you can tell me what flavor of gum he's chewing. I need you to be the smiling Showtime that can lead. When you smile and play, these guys will follow you anywhere." Showtime smiled in agreement.

Jordan was talking to me by this time, but only about basketball strategy and what he needed to do while in the middle of the key. He didn't seem convinced about our game plan but was willing to try it.

The ball was thrown up. Tip off. The game began.

"Hands up. Ali pick him up. Get him." I hollered from the sideline.

Ali attached himself to 32. Ali was quicker. 32 tried to drive. He couldn't get by. He passed. Jordan stepped into the lane, stole the ball, and began to dribble up the court. 32 tried to stop him. Jordan passed the ball around him to Ali who took it in for a fast-break lay-up.

32 brought the ball up the court.

"Ali, pick him up at half-court, please," I called.

Ali met him at half court all game. Ali was faster all game. 32 only drove the ball to the left. Shamus was on the right block. Whenever 32 got close to the rim, he had to shoot over Ali and the Beast. He rarely made it. I'd put Showtime on number 33. "Stay between him and the basket at all times," I said. Showtime boxed 33 out and brought down rebound after rebound.

We continued to press. We never let up all game.

We won the second game 26 to 25.

We left the gym that night with hope. It was the most exciting game any of us had ever been a part of. I had no idea how we could focus on the dance; however, the team went anyway.

Jordan spoke to one of the cheerleaders from the Seahawks, and spoke of only this for the rest of the night. Stevie helped Ali get a kiss on the cheek from a girl. They told me this the next morning at breakfast. It was his first kiss. Showtime, Dragon Warrior, Shamus, and Bulldozer, and Joe left early and went back to the hot tub. Mo Mo danced most of the night. He tried to see how many phone numbers from girls he could get. As we drove back to hotel, he texted a girl from the dance to say good night.

On Sunday we played the third and final game. We used the same game plan and won 36 to 17. We won state.

The following Monday morning, I let the guys cut my hair as I'd told them I would. I walked away with a Mohawk which wasn't straight. For the whole week people asked what was up with my hair, and I got to tell them of the success of the team. At the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> period, the school held a parade for us. The drum line, followed by the cheerleaders, followed by us, followed by the ASB walked through every hallway in the school. We were accompanied by the applause of the student body as they filled the sides of the hallways, making room for us.

## **Wear Your Heart on Your Sleeve Dance**

The cafeteria was red and pink with streamers and balloons. A photo booth was set up near the back with a sign, “Friends Forever.”

I sat with Viper, playing video games, waiting for the Valentine’s dance to start. He was, as usual, destroying me at WWE. He played as himself and I was “The Rock,” one of the few wrestlers I was aware of.

Our slurpees and an open bag of Fritos sat on the table. After school we drove to 7-11 to grab some junk food. It was one of the few times I didn’t feel too bad about eating junk food. But Viper lived with a weight problem so I wondered how I was contributing to it. Was having fun worth it? Could we have fun without it? But junk food and video games seemed to go together.

\* \* \*

Sara and her mom were the first to show up. They did so at 5:30—an hour before the event actually began.

“Hi, Todd,” Sara said, waving to me.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine. Are you excited for the dance?”

“You know I am.” I walked over to her and gave her dap. “What have you been up to? Are you going to do track this spring?”

“Yeah. I’ll play with the Eagles. What’s that poster for.”

I turned and looked. “We’re going to set up a photo booth later for students to take pictures.”

“Will you take a picture with me, Todd?”

“Of course. Wanna join us and play some video games?”

“I’ll watch you guys play.”

At 6:15 we put the PS3 and TV in a classroom, and I changed into my slacks and dress shirt.

A line had already formed for the food when I came back. The cafeteria was filling up with students, parents, and alumni quickly. I said the serenity prayer and turned my mind to how I could be helpful. I walked into the cafeteria.

Michaela sat at a table with her dad. Her walker was just off to her left. I stopped to say hello.

“Quick question,” I began. “If I don’t get a plate of food, will you share some of yours with me.”

“No. No. No,” said Michaela. “You’re crazy, Todd.”

Almost every day I went up to Michaela and asked if she’d share her snack with me. She always laughed and said “no.” After school, I always asked if she would have her bus driver give me a ride to Kirkland. She always laughed and said, “no.” She swirled her index finger around her ear and said, “You’re crazy, Todd. You’re crazy.” She laughed the whole time she did this.

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know.” I shook hands with her dad and walked to the back of the food line.

Eli stood there with his parents, Tim and Sarah.

Eli raised his left arm gently and said, “Hi, Todd.”

“What’s up Mr. Wheezy? Movin’ so fast through the trees we call him breezy.”

“Whoa, that’s pretty good.”

I extended my fist for dap. Eli extended his. We dapped and wiggled our fingers as we drew back. He’d come up with our hand shake last year.

“How are you all doing tonight?” I asked, looking at Tim and Sarah.

“We’re fine. Sarah just flew back from Geneva.”

“Yeah, she was there all week,” said Eli in his muffled voice.

“Oh, how was that?” I asked.

“Pretty usual. I have to fly there frequently for work.”

“Eli always tells me when you’re away. That’s pretty cool. Mr. Wheezy, I’m going to go say hi to Coach John. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Okay.”

I walked over to Coach John. “What’s going down, Coach?” I asked.

“Not much. This all looks well done.”

“Ms. Paige and Cathy did a great job decorating. I’m glad we don’t have to do too much tonight.”

“We’ll get a script for the next one. Will that be the basketball awards banquet?”

“I think so,” I said. “It’ll be in May and will cover basketball, track, and unified soccer.”

“I’ll write a skit.”

“Sounds good, bro. Another John and Todd comedy production. Keep ‘em laughing. Keep ‘em guessing. We always be impressin’.”

Coach John chuckled. “I’m going to grab some food. Do you want anything?”

“Nah, I’ll wait. Thank you, though.”

\* \* \*

“Good evening,” said Ms. D. As the department chair, she always had a few introductory remarks. “I’d like to thank everyone for coming and thank our wonderful staff for setting up. Thank you.” The crowd of 100 or so applauded. “We should have a lot of fun tonight. In the back, Mary Smith’s daughter will be taking pictures at our ‘Friends Forever’ photo booth. In just a minute we’ll start the dance. Before we do, though, Lawrie Williams would like to say a few things on behalf of our parent group. Lawrie.”

Lawrie walked to the podium. “Thank you, Ms. D. And thank you to all of the staff who put so much time and effort into making this a great experience for our kids. I am so grateful for you all. Rocket comes home each day saying how much fun she has at school and how meaningful this place is to her. That is due to all of your hard work. On behalf of the parent group, I’d like to say thank you.” The crowd gave a round of applause. “We have gift certificates for each of the coaches and staff as a small token of our gratitude. These cards will never fully be able to express how thankful, we as parents, are for the amount of time and energy you so willingly give to our kids. Thank you.” The crowd gave another round of applause. Lawrie walked away from the microphone and handed out the gift cards. Ms. D. looked at me and whispered, “Do you want to say a few words?” I walked to the microphone.

“I just want to thank everyone for coming. Hopefully, we’ll get a lot of dancing in. We’ve got regionals coming up in a week. We’ve set a team goal for the Blues and Grays to both make it to State this year. We’ll keep practicing for that and go from there. Thank you. Shall we dance?”

## **Jordan Michael—Born for Basketball**

The buzzer sounded. I walked onto the court, calling, “Sub. Sub. Ali. Jordan.” There were three minutes left in the game. We were beating the Seattle Sharks by 17 points. It’s common to pull the staters in basketball with a couple minutes left in the game. It shows respect to the opponents and for the “stars” of the game to receive recognition from the crowd. Ali and Jordan had played great and were the reason we were about to collect a win against a very tough opponent.

I went up to Ali and shook his hand. “Great game. Thank you for the hard work.” I walked over to Jordan to say the same thing.

I extended my hand.

“Asshole,” said Jordan. He looked at me with hate, didn’t take my hand, and walked to the bench.

I continued to smile but I felt hurt. Why’d he say this? But now wasn’t the time to talk to him about it. I finished coaching the game and led the team to cheer and shake hands with the Seattle Sharks.

I asked him about it the next day.

“I had 18 points. You took me out before I could score 20.”

“I see why you’d want that. That’s understandable. Do you know why I took you out?”

“No.”

“We were winning by a lot. They hadn’t been able to stop you all game. You’d played some great basketball. I wanted the crowd to have a chance to recognize you before the end of the game and show the other team respect by taking you off the floor. It’s a tradition in

basketball. Getting 20 points would have been cool. During games I never know how many points each individual player has scored; I only look at the scoreboard to see how many the team has scored. You did enough that game for the team to win. Any thoughts?"

"I understand. I'm sorry I said that."

"We're cool. It's all part of a process."

I extended my hand and we dapped.

\* \* \*

"You said you'd throw a team pizza party if we won state," Jordan said. "We want pizza." He'd been saying this to me ever since we returned from the 2011-2012 state tournament.

We were five games into our season and had a 4-1 record. The only loss to Auburn, who was no longer in our division. We had a difficult game against Decatur High School coming up. They were a Unified team and hadn't lost a game in quite some time. I decided to schedule the pizza party two weeks out from that game. We'd have the party one week before the regional tournament.

"You're right. I did," I said. "Let me talk to Joe and we'll schedule it."

"You better, Old Man," Jordan said with a smile. "Oh, yeah, I saw your wife, the cheerleader coach." Jordan walked down the hall. He stopped at the locker of some students and started talking.

\* \* \*

Jordan and I drove to Big Five Sporting goods. He needed a new pair of shoes for the upcoming game. I'd been telling him for about a week that we'd go one day after school and then I'd drop him off at home. He asked me every day.

I was an assistant coach and in my first year with the team. This was during the 2010-2011 school year. I had not meet Jordan's parents and wanted to make sure they knew where his son was at. I gave them a call as we drove down I-5.

"Hello." It was a gruff and curt sounding hello.

"Hi. This is Coach Todd with Ingraham High School Special Olympics basketball. I'm calling for Jordan's father."

"Hold on," said an older man.

I continued to hold the phone to my ear as we drove. I began to hear yelling in the background. I couldn't make out what was being said. All I could hear was anger.

"This is Frank, Jordan's dad."

"Hello, sir. We've yet to meet. I am Todd Simmons. I am an assistant coach with the Ingraham High School Special Olympics basketball team. I just wanted to call and make sure it's okay for our program to purchase a pair of basketball shoes for Jordan. He's here with me. If it's okay with you, we'd like to stop by Big Five and pick up a pair of shoes. I can drop him off at home when we're done."

"That's fine."

I heard more angry yelling in the background. Jordan's dad lowered the phone and yelled a response. The only words I could distinguish were, "I'm on the phone."

“I should be able to have him home around 5. Would you like my number in case you need to get ahold of him or me?”

“No, I don’t need it. The shoe part is fine with me.”

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

He hung up the phone.

I said, “Goodbye” out of habit but it was to a dead line.

\* \* \*

“You’re name’s really Jordan Michael?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I’m sure he’d been asked before. “Wow, I guess you were destined to play basketball... and win championships.”

“Whatever, old man.”

## Long Sleeves and Ladders

In 2005, months after having moved back from Colorado, I was stuck in my room. I walked through the day feeling disconnected from other people and life. I was still devastated with the memories of what happened in Colorado. I was a shell of a person, feeling nothing. I was living with my family and did not feel connected to them. I spent time with my sister and her husband and felt nothing. When I hung out with my nephew, I went through the motions and was their uncle but I felt no love nor any other emotion.

I didn't see how I could continue this much longer. One night, while sitting on my bed side, I thought of my brother. Years ago he had shown me scars on his arm from where he'd cut himself. He'd done so to remove small cysts. What would I feel if I did the same? I wondered.

I took a razor blade and slowly dragged it across my forearm. The skin separated. I felt something. A sensation of life ran through my body. I inhaled deeply and let the breath go. I felt at peace. I felt.

I cleaned the cut and put a bandage on it. I went to sleep easily that night and slept the whole night. The next morning when I awoke, I felt empty again. I went down to get coffee and sit on the front porch to smoke. While sitting out there, I saw a stellar blue jay at the foot of one of our evergreen trees. It was cold and the sky was a light gray, overcast with clouds. I looked to see if I could spot a second jay, remembering reading somewhere that they always traveled in pairs. I didn't see the second one.

I raised up the long sleeve of my sweater and looked at the bandage. It was winter time and I'd be wearing long sleeves for months. It hadn't yet occurred to me what it would be like in

the summer time. Nothing much was occurring to me. I drank my coffee and smoked a cigarette, looking at the sky.

Later that day I went to my brother-in-law's to freestyle. I didn't want to go but knew I'd raise suspicion with the family if I did what I wanted to do which was stay in my room away from everyone. I wanted my body to be where the rest of me felt; however, I didn't want to talk about anything with anyone, and I knew if I just disappeared this is exactly what I'd have to do. I went and free-styled. I spit verse after verse about any subject I could, hoping my brother-in-law wouldn't want to have a serious chat. Later that night, we went to his family's house for dinner. All the while, I could only think about getting back to my room and seeing if a second cut would have the same effect. Just thinking about this possibility brought a feeling of excitement. A feeling.

When I got home that night, I went straight to my room, quickly saying goodnight to my parents who were in the family room watching television.

I closed my bedroom door and listened. The hall was quiet. I took out the razor blade, cleaned it, and set out materials to tend to my cut.

I slowly dragged the blade across my forearm and felt a sensation. And felt. A sense of peace washed over me, a sense that I was still human and could feel and experience. I felt grateful for this. I cleaned the cut and went to sleep peacefully.

After two weeks of this, my arms were laced with cuts. There was a ladder of scabs going up both of my forearms. I was growing tired of slowly dragging the blade across my forearms. The sensation was lessening. My feeling of being connected was lessening.

I took out my blade and cleaning materials. I held it in my left hand. I lowered the blade to the top of my right forearm. I pressed down hard and quickly sliced it across my arm. The skin opened up and filled with blood. I saw white on the inside of the cut. I quickly began to clean the cut and bandage it. I did not feel a sense of peace. I felt I had gone too far, cut too deep. I bandaged the cut and called a friend.

“How are you doing, bro?” I asked when Lucarelli answered the phone.

“I’m good. You?”

“I’m fine. Just bored. What are you up to?”

“Nothing. Was going to watch a movie and go to bed.”

“Do you want to play some heads up hold ‘em?” I asked.

“Sure. Want to play for five or ten?”

“Oh, I don’t care. I’m just down to play. I’ll head over.”

I put on a long sleeve shirt and a jacket before leaving. I grabbed my poker chips from the hall closet. My parents were in the family room watching a movie.

“I’m going to head over to Mike’s house to play some cards,” I said.

“Okay. Have fun,” said my dad.

“Come give me a hug first,” said my mom.

I gave her and hug and left.

\* \* \*

“Cut ‘em,” I said, pushing the cards toward Mike.

“What did you get into today?”

“Not much. Woke up, wrote some, and just hung out. How about you?”

“I had to work. I’ve been hanging out at home since 3. I was pretty bored until you called. Do you want to go smoke first?”

“Sure. Can I bum a smoke?”

As we stood up to go outside, some blood dropped onto the floor. Mike looked at it and then at me. He looked very puzzled. Another couple of drops fell from beneath my sleeve.

“I’m so sorry, bro. Do you have a paper towel? I’ll clean that up. I was playing with Tulip earlier and she scratched me. She got me good.” I went to the bathroom, grabbed some tissue, and quickly cleaned up the blood.

Mike and I went out to smoke. I held the cigarette in my right arm and kept it elevated. After we finished, I told him I was feeling tired and thought it best that I went home.

“Alright. Hit me up tomorrow,” he said. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine. Just tired. Will do, bro. Have a good night.”

“You, too.”

I got back in the car and drove down the block. Once I was out of sight, I raised my sleeve and saw that I was bleeding out of my bandage. I wasn’t sure what to do but figured I needed stitches. The hospital was only a couple of blocks away. I didn’t want to go but knew I needed to. I knew what they’d try to do, so I prepared myself.

After checking in, I sat in the chair instead of the hospital bed. A nurse came in.

“How did you get this cut?” she asked.

“I cut myself with a razor.”

She looked up and down my arms. Some of the earlier ones had scabbed over. She dabbed the most recent one, as she pulled the gauze away it filled back up with blood. It was beginning to clot.

“The doctor will be in and we’ll get you stitched up.” She left.

A doctor wearing a collared shirt and tie came in. I knew him immediately. I’d seen him before. He wasn’t the same person just the same type. He didn’t have a white coat. He was about to ask me questions about my mental health. I’d first met him in Colorado when I was 12 and then years later in Seattle when I was hospitalized while dealing with a bout of mania. Each time it was a different man but always the same one. He was the one I needed to watch my words around if I wanted to walk out of here and keep this a secret.

“Hello. I’m doctor Flanagan. I’ve got a few questions I’d like to ask you if that’s okay.”

“Sure. Go ahead. How can I help?”

“Are you having any thoughts of harming yourself?”

“No. I do not. I did these to release some tension. I don’t want to hurt myself. I made sure to clean them after each one. I just put too much pressure on this one. It was an accident.”

“Are you having thoughts of committing suicide?”

“No. I don’t want to die.”

“Do you have thoughts of harming others?”

“No. I never want to be harmful to other people.”

“Do you have a plan to commit suicide?”

“Not at all. I don’t want to die.”

“These don’t look good. These really look like you were trying to harm yourself. We can offer you help.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need help. I just tried this to see if it would make me feel better. I made a mistake with this one and won’t do it again. I just need to be cleaned up so I can go home and get some sleep.”

“Okay. Well, if you change your mind, please let one of the nurses know.”

“Thank you, sir.” He left the room. I stood up to see him off.

The doctor came and cleaned the cut. He put in 13 stitches. After he stitched it up, he looked at the other ones and said some of them could use stitches, too, but it was too late as they’d already closed over. I left the hospital and went home. As I began to drive away, I saw a small smear of blood on the steering wheel. I licked my sleeve and wiped it away. My dad would be driving the car in the morning.

I didn’t cut anymore after that for years. The next time came when I lived in Taiwan. Again the feeling of emptiness came over me. This time I broke bottles and used the glass. I was very careful and cleaned each cut. Having run out of room on my forearms, I began to cut on my upper arms and legs. I cut “Veritas” into my left leg, hoping the truth would set me free. It didn’t.

## The Ascension of Viper

"I've been here longer than you or anybody," John said.

It was true. I had asked John to stop by my room. He stood in front of me. I sat in my chair. He had been wearing the same clothes for the last three days. I thought of his life. As a teenager he took care of his disabled mom. He'd done this for years. She went through caretakers very quickly and it seemed that only her son was able to maintain and help her. Yet, I wondered at what cost as he usually showed up to school unfed, unwashed, and sharing how tired he was at having had to stay up all night to help her.

I looked at him and said, "John you've really come a long way these last couple of years. You've definitely become a leader on the court for the Blues. Your own skill level has improved. I'd like you to play with the Grays this year. What do you think?"

John balled up his fist and punched his open palm. He was excited, but as he did with most things, he tried to hide how excited he was, fearing that to show emotion would show weakness.

"All right," he said. "I'll play. Just remind the Grays that I've been a part of this program the longest. Even longer than Ali."

"This will definitely be a change. We run a different offense than the Blues and the speed of the game is quicker; although, if you're willing to work hard and see what you can contribute to the team, you'll do a good job and hopefully have some fun, too."

Anna and Shamus walked into the room. Shamus had his arm draped around Anna.

John looked at them and walked over. "What now?" he said. "I'm on the Grays." He puffed out his chest and flexed toward Shamus before walking out of the room.

Shamus came over to me. “Is that true? Will he be playing with us this year?”

“Yeah. I think he's ready. He needs to continue to improve, but so do we all. It'll be a bit bumpy at times. I'd be grateful if you could continue to set a good example for him and help him get adjusted to the team. He'll never say it, but I know he looks up to you. You've got lots of friends; you're big, strong, and fast. I'll take care of his mouth, just try and help him out. What do you think?”

“Sure, coach. Can I let the other guys know?”

“Absolutely. Oh, Anna, Quick question: Have you become a Broncos fan yet?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Darn it. I thought maybe you had. Well, maybe next time.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

\* \* \*

The Ballard High School team was running late. There was a horrible snow storm going on. It had been snowing for days. They must have been stuck on some of the side streets. I hoped they'd still make it. The Grays were already warmed up and I began to fear that they'd get cold before we could start the game.

It was January and very cold outside. When I put in the school permits so we could have the gym reserved, I always checked the “no” boxes for use of the custodian and heating system. Our program did not have enough money to fund this. Some of the parents kept their winter coats on during the games.

I walked over to the team. "Take some game shots, stay loose, but save your energy." I thought about how our bodies use up energy to keep us warm and feared Ballard wouldn't arrive soon enough.

"Coach, am I starting?" asked John.

"Not today. I'm going to have you come in at the 4 minute mark for Dozer. Cool?"

"Yeah. When you announce us, don't say my last name."

Other teams loved coming to play at IHS as we always introduced all of the players from both teams over the P.A. system.

"That's fine. What would you like me to say?"

"Number 54. John the Viper."

\* \* \*

"Hands up on defense," I called from the sideline.

Four minutes into the 3rd quarter, we led Ballard by five. We'd held a small lead throughout the game; yet, I knew Ballard's players very well. Some of them had joined us for our summer practices. At any moment, they could get hot and put up points quickly.

Their point guard made an inlet pass, Jordan tried to step in front of it but was a moment behind. They scored an easy two points off a layup. Jordan grabbed the ball and went to throw it in.

The ref blew his whistle, Jordan's toe was on the line. We turned the ball back over to Ballard. On their in-bound pass, they lobbed the ball to Sean. He stood at least two feet behind the three point line. He caught the ball and shot. And with that, Ballard had tied the game at 17 to 17 and took any momentum we had held.

I thought about calling a time out but let the game go on.

Jordan passed the ball into Ali. He brought the ball up the court. As he crossed the three-point line, he called "Play 1." His right arm was raised with his index finger extended. "Go," he said again. As he said this, he made a move to cross-over his defender. The ball went off his foot and rolled out of bounds. The ref blew the whistle. Another turnover. Ballard flew down the court and scored another easy two.

By the end of the third quarter, Ballard led by 7 points. The team walked with their heads down to the bench.

I walked out on the court, trying to give each player a handshake saying, "One more quarter to play. We're fine."

The team took a seat on the bench and looked at me.

"That was a bumpy quarter but it's over. We've been in this position before where we've been down and came back to win. We can do this. We gotta let that quarter go, though. Move on with me."

Shamus leaned forward and slapped Ali on the knee and nodded. I knew they were with me.

"Ali I need you to play man-on-man on Sean. Cut off passes to him. No 3's for him. The rest of you stay in a box defense. Jordan, I need you to move down low with Stevie. Beast can I have you up top? Try and stay on your feet and look for the steal to fast break. Ali, when we steal the ball, release from Sean and fly down the court for the outlet pass."

The buzzer sounded.

"Alright. Bring it in. Grays on three. One. Two. Three."

“GRAYS!” shouted the team.

The team went and got set up in the box defense. Ali roamed around Sean, beginning to circle him like a shark. The Beast slapped the court with both hands; he seemed to be overflowing with energy. Jordan and Stevie gave each other a low five and settled into their positions.

Ballard passed the ball in and the first seconds of the fourth quarter fell from the clock. Their point guard passed the ball to Sean. Ali jumped in the way, stole the ball. Jordan released and ran down the court. Ali lobbed him the ball. Jordan collected it by the basket and made a layup.

Ballard led by 5.

As they threw the ball in, Ali quickly turned and stole it, took one dribble and scored.

Ballard led by 3. There was still six minutes and 45 seconds left on the clock.

I saw it in the eyes of every Gray on the court. They knew this game was ours to win. In just a minute, we'd taken the momentum back from Ballard. They looked unsure. Sean loomed around the 3-point line, unable to shed Ali from him. Their point guard looked to Sean and wouldn't pass him the ball. When he tried to drive the lane, he was met and stopped by the Beast and Stevie. The Grays had taken control.

For the next 3 minutes of the game we traded basket for basket with Ballard. They still led, but we still had control.

Ali intercepted a pass and looked down the court. The Beast ran down the sideline. Ali threw the ball down the court. The Beast's feet got tangled up and he went down. From the sideline, I saw his head slam against the hardwood floor. He stayed down.

I ran across the court to him.

“Take a knee guys, “ I said to the team, waving my hand gently for them to kneel.

Shamus rolled over on his back and looked at me.

“You alright?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m a bit dizzy.” He began to get up.

“Hold on, Beast. Just stay down for a moment. Take a rest. There’s no rush.”

Shamus stayed sitting on the court. The gym was silent. As I knelt next to Shamus, I looked around the stands and at all the players who had also taken a knee.

“Take a deep, slow breath,” I said. I inhaled slowly, hoping he would match my rhythm. I exhaled slowly. He stayed in rhythm with me. “How are you feeling?” I asked after a couple of deep breaths.

“I feel like I can play.”

I stood up and extended my hand to help him up. The crowd and players clapped.

“Let me have you take a rest,” I said, putting my arm around his shoulders, leading him to the bench. “We’ll go ahead and win this game for you. Don’t worry. Get some air and water.”

There was one minute and fifty-two seconds on the clock, and we were down by three.

I raised my arms and waved the team in. “I’m going to have Shamus rest. Viper, I’d like you to go in at forward.”

Jordan groaned disapprovingly.

“Let’s focus. If we go out there and do our job, we’ll be fine. Three points is nothing to come back from. We’ve got this. Grays on three.”

We layered our hands on each other. “One, two, three.”

“GRAYS!”

Ali walked over to Viper and pointed to the blocks. “We got this,” he said and gave the Viper a low-five.

John looked startled. After years of playing with the Blues, he was finally on the court as a Gray, for years he’d wanted to be here.

Ballard threw the ball in as both teams were transitioning back into the game. Sean got the ball and began to bring it up the court.

Seconds began to disappear.

Ali lunged at the ball as Sean tried to cross Ali over. Ali shot his hand out and grabbed the ball. He took two quick dribbles and was by Sean. Viper, who had been at half court, turned and ran down the court.

Ali had an open lane to make a layup. Viper stood at the top of the key, unguarded. Ali looked up, pulled up, and passed the ball to the Viper.

John caught the ball, looked behind him to see who was coming, looked back at the basket, and shot the ball. It went through the hoop.

John tied the game with his 3-pointer.

There was a minute left.

Ballard passed the ball into Sean. Ali immediately swarmed him. Sean lobbed the ball to half-court, just wanting to be rid of it. Zoom stepped in front of his man and stole it. He began to dribble up court.

Viper stood on the top of the key. He clapped his hands. “Jordan.”

Zoom looked up and saw Sean coming at him. He looked to Viper and passed him the ball.

John caught it, set himself, and shot. He made it. We were up three points with twenty-seven seconds left in the game.

Ballard turned the ball over one more time before the game ended.

Viper raised his arms. “What now?” He looked around at the crowd and walked to the bench. The Grays brought him into the circle and we cheered for Ballard before lining up and shaking hands.

## **Sober Frat House**

I had been back from Taiwan for two years. During that time, I'd been living with my parents; however, circumstances had changed and living there was no longer an option if I wanted to continue to grow in my recovery. I searched for places to go. I had been working at IHS for a year. It was the beginning of January, and we were into our pursuit of our first state title.

I found a sober living environment a couple of blocks away from my parents' house. I liked the idea of being close to them so we could still participate in each other's lives. I went to this house, interviewed with my potential roommates, and was accepted to live there. Within a couple days of looking for a place to live, I was now living with seven other guys who were also recovering from drugs and alcohol. I wasn't sure about living here, but I didn't have any other options, so I trusted and made the move.

By March I had seen two roommates relapse and have to move out. One of them had shown me the track marks on his arm from injecting heroin. I had never seen track marks before, so I didn't know what I was looking at. He'd said the bruise on his arm was from bumping into a wall; after he'd been kicked out, another roommate (an ex-heroin addict) told me what I'd really been shown. One day I had come home and the coffee table was littered with syringes and empty heroin bags. Two roommates had searched another roommate's room and found the paraphernalia. He was kicked out because it is a strict rule that anyone using has to move out in fifteen minutes.

Guys came and went. They tried to stay sober and relapsed. Some of them had become friends, and it was tough to watch them go back to addiction. They reminded me what awaited me if I should stray from the path.

There was one roommate who was so excited for me when we won our first state championship. Every afternoon when I came home, he called out and said, “Here comes the coach.” He was a nice, older man. He was friendly and taught me how to fry pork chops. Every Sunday morning he played a Marvin Gaye record and walked about the house in his bathrobe, seemingly content with his life.

One night he came home drunk and got into a fight with another roommate, fell down the stairs, and hit his head against the door. He was taken to the hospital and his mind has never fully recovered. He had to move out. He called about two months after moving and spoke to Justin.

“How’s he doing?” I asked.

“He’s living in Tacoma. He sounded drunk.”

“That’s a shame. He was such a good guy.”

“Yeah, I feel bad about how it all went down.”

I had helped box up his stuff while he was in the hospital. While cleaning out one of his drawers, I found a picture him as a younger man with his son. They both looked happy. His boy was wearing a football uniform. Reggie stood by his side—a proud father.

## **Wunderbar Means Wonderful in German**

“We’re leaving our apartment. Do you know where I can get boxes?” asked Stevie.

“Give Albertson’s a call. Sometimes they have boxes to give away,” I said.

“Nah, that’s too much work,” laughed Stevie. He waved his hand toward me. I knew he’d call if pressed, but this was his way of trying to come off as a slacker.

“We can also check with the custodian to see if they have extra boxes. Maybe the copy paper boxes can be used.”

“Can we go do that?”

“Sure. Let’s go at break.”

Stevie and I walked down the hall toward the custodian. He led us to the storage room where there was a pile of flattened out boxes and told us we could take however many we needed. After school, I gave Stevie a ride home with the trunk of my car loaded up with boxes. I helped him carry them up to his apartment. I had dropped him off here after games but had never seen the inside of his place.

Dogs barked from the other side of the closed door. Their barks were high pitched. They sounded small. The walls were so thin, I could hear them clearly.

“That’s just Mimi and Cadet,” he said. He put a key into the door and opened it.

I stepped across the threshold and froze. Two white poodles jumped against my legs, barking. I barely noticed them. The apartment stank and looked like a landfill surrounded by walls and a ceiling. There were piles of stuff everywhere. It smelled of dog poop. I took another step in and saw a pile of dog poop in the corner. It looked fresh. Behind it was some that had dried and hardened. It had turned white at the edges.

I asked Stevie where I should set the boxes. He took them from me and leaned them against the kitchen cabinets. I couldn't wait to get out of there to be able to breathe again, as the air was thick with foul odors. Only the smell of the dogs' poop was distinguishable; all the other scents mingled and had the effect of catching my breath and holding it. I didn't want him to see that I didn't want to touch anything. I kept smiling.

"My mom's sleeping, so she can't come out," said Stevie.

I wasn't sure how he knew this as we'd both just walked in, but I figured he was embarrassed to have me there and didn't want me to see any more of the apartment.

"Do you need anything else?" I asked.

"I think this is good. I'm going to start packing things up."

"All right. Let me know if you need more boxes. I'm sure we can make another box run."

"Do you think we can bring some more tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'm sure that will work."

"Cool. Thanks, coach."

"No worries, Stevie. That's cool that you're getting this started for your mom and taking the responsibility to get done what needs to be done. I'll see you tomorrow."

I extended my hand and we dapped.

As I walked down the hallway back to my car, I felt horrible for Stevie and where he had to live. He was such a nice kid, so positive, and shouldn't have to live like that.

\* \* \*

“I tried to give Stevie's mom a call to set up the IEP meeting but haven't heard back from her. Did you get a chance to speak with her when you were there?” asked Ms. Smith.

“I did not. I guess she was sleeping. Have you been to his place and seen it.”

“I dropped off a box of food there once but didn't go inside.”

“I feel so bad for Stevie. It's such an unhealthy place. There was dog poop on the floor. I think the dogs just go inside whenever they need to.”

“If he weren't 18, we could call CPS, but he's too old for that now.”

“Yeah, that's what I was thinking. What can we do to help out, though? He's such a good kid and to have to live like that is horrible.”

Weeks later, some of my friends came over to Stevie and his mother's to help them move. They showed no sign while we worked of how they felt about being in that apartment. They moved box after box until the place was clear. Everything was loaded into a storage unit down the road. I secretly hoped it would stay there, so Stevie would not be surrounded by it again.

## **A Brother to Remember**

We rode the bus home then Chris, Justin, and I always walked the same route. We grew up on the same block. Chris was a ninth grader. I was an eighth grader. Justin was a seventh grader. We went to Drake Junior High. We were Dragons.

The whole bus ride home, José and Billy kept talking trash to Chris from the back of the bus. They were both ninth graders. José was big and tough. I was afraid of him. José, for reasons unknown, kept telling Chris he was going to beat him up once we got off the bus. José and Billy didn't usually get off at our stop.

Chris was the popular guy, played sports, adored by girls, and was genuinely nice to everybody. He was who I wanted to be. Why José would want to fight him was beyond me. Chris was also big and tough. He was the only younger brother who I've seen beat up his older brother. This defies the laws of the universe. I'm an older brother. My younger brother, who is bigger than me, has never beat me up. And so I wonder.

The three of us got off the bus and started walking home. I heard Billy and José get off. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw José running at Chris with his fist raised. He was going to punch him in the back of the head. I don't remember if I yelled out or not. I like to think I did as I always saw Chris as the older brother I'd wanted and never had. What happened next is frozen into my memory.

Chris ducked just in time, grabbed José's arm and rolled him over his back, brought him to the ground, and pinned him against a fence. With one arm and his body, Chris had immobilized José's entire body. Their eyes were inches from each other. Chris had a free hand.

José had no defense.

Chris just held him, looking in his eyes. José said nothing. Chris kept him pinned. Billy, Justin, and I froze at this sight. In all of our junior high experiences, we had never seen a fight like this before. Chris could have wrecked José. He had strength, position, and time.

The owner of the house came out, yelled at us, and we all ran away. The three of us cut through the park and hopped a fence into my backyard. Moments later we saw José and Billy raise their heads above my fence. They were going to jump into my backyard to fight. My German Shepherd, Lady, tore to the fence, barking and baring her teeth. She jumped at them.

They withdrew.

"You guys can come over if you want," I said and laughed.

They dropped down and disappeared. Nothing more ever came of this day between José and Chris.

Just before his senior year, Chris took his own life. It happened suddenly when everything outside appeared to be going well in his life. I know there will never be an answer for this. All I can do is wonder.

Before his death, he had protected me at high school, made me feel welcome during homecoming, saw me dunk a small basketball for the first time, gave me rides to school in his truck. He was like an older brother.

And that day, he taught me mercy. But it feels as if he has taught me far more. I have carried him with me in his absence. I've always wondered if his mom knows how much her son influenced me to be a better person.

## Going Back...to Back?

We took first place at the King County Regional Basketball tournament. We defeated the Woodinville Wranglers, Eastside Catholic Crusaders, Seattle Sharks, and Auburn Thunder. We were on our way to the 2012-2013 Washington State Special Olympics Basketball Championships. We had worked all year for this and now the time had come to defend our Division I State Championship. *We were going back.*

I thought back to the previous year's tournament. I feared I wouldn't be able to help the team win a second year in a row. What if we lost?

The way the seeding worked out, I was able to scout our opponents. Their game was early, and I thought the team would rather sleep in than come to the gym at 8:30 with me to watch a basketball game. I was wrong. The moment I told them my plans, they wanted to go.

We went as a team to watch our opponents. Two minutes into the first game, it was clear the tournament was ours.

We won all of our games by 15 to 20 points and cruised to our second state championship. I felt conflicted with the way we won. It was as if we were unstoppable giants in a small village at the foot of *our* mountain. Sports stories were supposed to be different. *Where was the tension? The drama?*

Even though we'd won each game easily, we were complemented by the other coaches and parents for our sportsmanship. Even though we could have, they thanked us for never running up the score. In every game, near middle of the third quarter, I made the guys pass the ball 5 to 10 times before they could shoot. No more fast breaks, I told them. They didn't grumble. They understood: We came to win a basketball tournament and we came to do so with

class. I loved the feeling of winning. But being a part of a group which understood the more important aspects of sports felt even better.

We celebrated with our second parade. In the hallways, the athletes were recognized for being a part of a “dynasty.” I reminded them that we’d need a third state championship for that.

Mo Mo chuckled and asked, “Can we go back next year?”

## The Viper Painted a Picture

“Can you give me a ride home? I have something for you that I can’t carry to school,” said The Viper.

“We can try to work that out,” I replied. I had no idea what he was talking about and felt way too busy to give him a ride home. I didn’t want to tell him this, so I just kept pushing it back in hopes he’d forget.

School day after school day went by. The Viper stopped by on the days he came to school. Some days he asked about the ride home and other days he did not. When he asked, I said I would and deflected with a joke. I don’t know why I didn’t want to give him a ride home and pick up whatever gift he kept telling me about. I couldn’t imagine it would be anything I’d want. I still felt overwhelmed by work.

Weeks later I walked into the classroom, and the Viper stood by my desk, holding a painting.

“This is for you,” he said and beamed.

I took the painting.

My breath caught. I held a beautiful painting. I couldn’t believe that John had painted this. It was on a square 20x20 inch canvas. He used blue and orange for the Broncos. “Todd” was painted at the top. The number 18 below for my favorite player, Payton Manning, a player who represents hard work, preparation, and service to others. Beneath this there was a basketball and football painted. He had painted three horses on the left side. The painting was both abstract and representational. I was moved. How did he do this? I immediately felt bad for not giving him a ride home to pick it up. He had ended up carrying it to school with him that

morning. I felt my eyes begin to well with tears of gratitude. He had signed his name on the bottom with a Sharpie and also written his mother's name. At the top he wrote, also with a Sharpie, "Todd, you're # 1."

This was the greatest gift I've ever received. I hung it on the wall of my bedroom. I see it every day. It is a reminder of the best version of myself. A version I cannot achieve without help from others.

## **Award Winning**

We went back. And we went back. The IHS Grays Special Olympics basketball team won Division I State Championships in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015. I now let the players use the term “dynasty.” Recently I was the master of ceremonies for the event where our players received their state championship awards. I opened by saying, “Four years ago, after we’d won our first state championship, my mom asked me if in my wildest imagination I ever thought I’d win a state championship. As she’s my mom, I smiled and said, ‘This is wonderful. Thank you for being here.’ And I hugged her. Yet, I thought, ‘I am an athlete and a coach with high expectations of myself and those around me. Of course, I thought about winning a state championship. Part of me felt as if I always knew I would.’ I must say, though, that I never dreamed of winning four in a row. Nothing in my life has brought me such clarity and meaning as this team has. And so to my mom and all of you I say, Thank you.”

## ***Part Two—Artist’s Statement: An Exposition of the Poetics of Service***

### **Section 1: I Want to be a Writer?**

I don’t know when I first wanted to write. As a small child, I wanted to write a novel. My understanding of novels was simple: a story written over many pages. So, I counted out one-hundred pieces of paper and wrote a sentence on each one. I don’t remember if I got to the hundredth page or not. I vaguely recall it being about a knight saving a princess from a castle tower and slaying a dragon. I also included drawings.

As a sixth grader, I wrote a short story about a friend. By the end of the story, he was riddled with holes in his skin and needed some help because all of the air inside him had escaped and he lay as a deflated mass of skin upon the ground. I (as the narrator and hero of the story) proceeded to plug up the holes with pieces of wood then tried to re-inflate him with a tire-pump. Unfortunately I pushed down on the pump one too many times and my friend exploded. *The End.* After reading this story in class, my friend was angry at me. That’s how I learned the power of story.

As I grew, I wanted to write even more. When I was an undergraduate, I wanted to write because if I wrote something so beautiful that it demanded the attention of people and received their accolades, then I might feel I meant something, that my life was worthy, and that I did not merely exist; and made a contribution to life and that after I died, I would be remembered as one of the “Greats.” So I wrote. I feverishly wrote trying to validate my existence. With each new story and poem, I felt myself closer to immortality.

But the recognition from others did not come. After attempting to publish a novel I wrote in my mid-twenties, and receiving standard rejection slips and one personally hand written rejection slip that said, “This novel is not written at a professional level,” I continued to write to prove myself. I also began to drink...and drink. I began to lose my already weak grip upon the world. I slipped further away from people and into the muddy trenches of my troubled mind.

Alas, something changed. I say “alas” because it seems like a writerly word to use. I am still trying to prove to myself that I am a writer. I still think, “I want to be a writer.” Is it not being published that keeps me thinking this? Is it publishing that creates the writer? I fear that even if I were published, I would still question the authenticity of my being a writer. *What do my readers really think of me?* There seems no real end to the amount of doubt I can shed on the “Who are you?” question posed by the caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland. Who am I? Am I a writer? I was in a club in college called “Writers on the Storm,” a variation on a song by The Doors.

But now, as I think back over the course of my writing “career,” the doubt of me being a “real writer” lessens. I just gave myself cause to smile. As I sat down to continue to write this, I happened to glance at the hand towel I sat my computer on. It is white and made of cotton, a common, ribbed hand towel. It is my mother’s. On the towel is an embroidered lighthouse. A coincidence? I choose not to believe in coincidences because I feel such a belief robs meaning from a life I struggle to make meaning in. The lighthouse is there as symbol, as guide, as giver of solace, saying to me, “Yes, you are on the path you need to be.”

I have fallen in love with the words Virginia Woolf has combined and placed upon the page. I cannot take you into myself in the moment when I am in their presence and the peace

they bring me. That moment is absolute, unbendable, undeniable, yet fleeting. But, in that moment, I am okay with existence. There are only some times in life when I feel this way. I am trying to record all of them so I might foster environments where they are able to show up more and be developed. Reading Woolf and Beckett are two of them.

And so, I look to the lighthouse and move. I stay on my ship and drift. I see the rocks of my mind that could dash me to pieces, that seem, at times, to do this. Working with kids is another time when I feel as if I'm with Woolf and Beckett—at peace with my existence.

## Section 2: Worthy Subject Material to Write About

*The Teacher in Study* and *The Seven Arts* are two novels I wrote in my mid-twenties. (I always use the word “novel” because it has a certain weight to it. They are both around 60,000 words, so I guess that’s what they technically would be called. But that’s not the reason I call them that. Nope; that goes back to self-worthy). Both of these novels are “fictional.” I have to put this in quotes because there are elements of fiction in both of them, but all I really did was change names of some people and places; I really just told the story of me as a drunk. Have I overvalued my own story and thought it so important to tell? I don’t lack imagination. I’ve told enough bed time stories to my nephews to know that. What has kept me in this rut of self?

When I mailed out the manuscript of my first novel, I really believed that the publisher would accept my book. I was ready to become a world renowned author. I did not.

When I began this MFA program, I still clung to notions of what I needed and how I needed to write. It wasn't until having a meeting in my first quarter with Rebecca Brown that I got the proper guidance to focus on the type of writing that I have henceforth focused on since. It is not writing as I used to see it. Nor is my reason for writing the same. Of course, there are flashes of my old mentality, of my need to prove my self-worth ( I use the word “henceforth”). But there is a new level to my writing which shows me the connections possible in this life, connections I have in my life.

I have the type of sight which is initially blind to the reality of my life. It is only with effort that I see how much my life has changed for the better since I put down the bottle and tried to help other people. When I recount the stories of my time at school, when I put them on paper to share with others, I see who I've become, how I got there, and the important people I've met.

My writing may go no further than this. There may not be a photo of me on a book jacket. I may never be placed among the pantheon of great writers like Virginia Woolf or Samuel Beckett. But I do have my memories and can turn those into stories. Most of the time I can let the rest go and find some rest of my own.

During the course of my pursuit to become a writer, I have questioned if I have anything of value to offer. What could a story scrawled by me add to this world?

If I am writing to prove to myself and you that I am intellectually worthy, I have nothing to offer.

If I am writing to connect with you, share my experience with you, I have something to offer.

Whether I am able to do this will depend upon the words I select. Should I combine them as to create the experience, I will have accomplished enough. All I can really do is try in earnest.

Virginia Woolf wrote this:

Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow worker and accomplice. If you hang back, and reserve and criticize at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read. But if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other. Steep yourself in this, acquaint yourself with this, and soon you will find that your author is giving you, or attempting to give you, something far more definite [...] Perhaps the quickest way to understand the elements of what a novelist is doing is not to read but to write; to make your own experiment with the dangers and difficulties of words.

This MFA program has offered me the opportunity to experiment with different types of writing with teachers who continue to write. With their leadership, I have been moved in the right direction for me. I call it the Poetics of Service.

The concept of service I follow is not groundbreaking or original to me. For centuries people have tried to do good for the sake of doing good. By focusing my life in this way, I can stay away from drinking. As a result, I get a pretty good life.

### **Section 3- The Burden of Existence as the Foundational Necessity to the Poetics of Service for My Being**

Look at all of this! The sea. The sea of students I see, weaving and wandering between clanging bells—the hallway full. Maybe chaos. Maybe order so elegant my finite mind cannot grasp it. And yet I try. I awkwardly lunge at ideas, propelled by concern and wonder.

Look at all of this! The sky. The skyline of Seattle separated by I-5 with Mount Rainier punctuating the left side as I drive south.

How do I not always walk with such wonder? With so much experience of what life can be when it is lived to help others, why do I close the door, feeling as if I know and need to learn nothing further? I feel as if I have been given everything. I become the Absolute.

Look at all of this and discern! Look at all, and this ability we will develop.

With all of this, why would I withdraw? My mind's eye is flawed and perceives inaccurately. My hand has been burnt by the fire. My mind's eye tells me, "This time it is not so hot." I am burned again. This is, in part, the Burden of my Existence. Awareness, too, shares its part. It is not tragic nor to be pitied even if, at times, I wish it were. It is to be understood and accepted. As "Dasein," I am capable of doing so and not following my thoughts back into the fire. In fact, the fire can lose its glow and still I can find my life illuminated and bright—radiant and full of warmth.

*How do I get here?*

First through understanding and then through acceptance and then into action that is "repeatable and self-reinforcing."

I exist and take issue with my existence; however, only I, with my individual being, can work out whether I should continue to exist in my present form and level. As I am only aware of this level of existence, this is all I will consider. To consider anything post, lacks the proper means with which to do the considering. Therefore, I find it most helpful to cease considerations of “*what comes next?*” and turn my attention to “*what is now?*”

What is now? What comprises this moment? Can I outline it, codify it, quantify it? How do I examine and verify it? The use of the pronoun “it” seems to place it somewhere, even if only in the grasp of language with a vague feeling of understanding because it is in language and we use language.

I do have an understanding and awareness of my experience. I do so with the “ordinary” understanding of time as the connected and continuing sequence of events that I keep in my memory, share with others, and continue to experience “moment to moment.” What am I to make of these? How can the examination of these lead to an understanding of the Burden of Existence? I feel Heidegger answers this nicely with his usage of “phenomenon.” “Thus we must keep in mind that the expression ‘phenomenon’ signifies that which shows itself in itself, the manifest” (Heidegger p. 51). Now I will endeavor to show how the Burden of Existence manifests itself for me by lending a tale where it will begin to “show itself in itself.”

For many years I have seen myself like Sisyphus—pushing the Boulder up the hill forever. The only variations of life are the changing color of the sky as the sun rises and sets and the variations of the moon’s glow as she dances in and out *between* the clouds.

\* \* \*

*The alarm clock screams. It is time to go and teach.* My head pounds with the alcohol from the previous evening still in my blood. I did it again. Last night I'd stopped at the June bar to get a sandwich and a beer after work. I had stopped to have one drink and relax. When I walked in, I really believed I'd have just one, leave, and go home. There is nothing from my past suggesting that I could do that. I truly believed I could be different.

I push the Boulder upward.

Hours passed. I did not leave the bar. I went across the street to the ATM and came back to the bar. My mom called and pleaded with me to go home and be safe. I hung up the phone on her. I am in Taiwan; she is in Seattle. She is powerlessness. I neared the state of oblivion. I neared that point where I am not burdened by my existence, where I am a self that no longer feels the ligatures of self, no longer takes account of anything. I can't. I'm drunk. I am no longer a being with concern or wonder. I am a force of biology and chemistry set in motion with ruinous outcomes for any in my path. I am Absolute.

The Boulder has crested the hill. I must teach a full day of junior high school English to Taiwanese students. I believe today will be different. The Boulder begins to descend.

\* \* \*

Ah, it seems I have skipped ahead and begun to talk about how to touch on a means of alleviating the Burden of Existence brought on by the absence of self through external chemical alterations. And yet, I stay, in part, the course as there has yet to be a horizon set for the Burden of Existence. There have yet to be categories created into which it can be said, "Yes, this" or "No, that does not fit." Can a horizon be delineated? Can categories be created for the Burden of Existence? If the Burden of Existence is to be understood as a "phenomenon" then as it shows

itself, we should only need to identify a horizon and categories—assuming we see them as they (if they do) emerge.

To “feel burdened” can be understood in the mode of examining mood. Yet, in doing this, will we come to the totality of the Burden of Existence? To adequately answer this, I have the intuition of the necessity of confining this examination to myself. As a Dasein, I am capable of doing so. Therefore, I will continue to proceed in this fashion with the hope that the Burden of Existence will show itself as a phenomenon and in doing so, show us that the continued weight of this Burden is not a sustainable means for continued existence. This then gives us the platform of the need to find a means of sustainable existence once we have determined existence is worth sustaining. Where do we wonder to wander now?

Let's examine the relational qualities of the Burden of Existence. That there are relational qualities may or may not seem self-evident; either way some of these characteristics should be drawn out for the importance of seeing what we will see.

The Poetics of Service can, for a time, alleviate the Burden of Existence; yet, it will never fully eradicate it.

What does this look like?

\* \* \*

"Will you copy the notes for Eli?" asked Ms. Smith.

I heard, “Will you move this pile of sand to the left by 10 feet and do it one granule at a time?”

How helpful will what I'm being asked to do be? I am closing off. The Absolute approaches.

We were studying the Renaissance painters in third period art history class. In 2011 this class bored me because we watched really slow videos with narrators who droned on, sucking the life out of the great works of art. Every minute or so Ms. Smith paused the video for students to write notes. Now I was being asked to write with them.

I smiled and said, "Of course." I seethed inside. I began to copy notes. I did this for months. I dreaded third period and the hand cramp.

I checked in with a friend. "This is a waste of my talents and time. The kids aren't going to remember any of this. What is the point?"

"That's not for you to decide, is it?" he said.

"I guess not."

"What's your job?"

"To help the head teacher with instruction."

"What's her job?"

"To instruct the kids," I said.

"How can you help?"

"By staying in the moment, not judging, and doing the best job I can with what I'm asked to do regardless of whether I agree or not."

"Yeah, that seems about all that's in your control."

I continued to write notes. I filled pages. They sat in a folder on my desk until the end of the year. I tossed them into the recycling bin.

During a summer break, I went to the Seattle Art Museum with a friend who is quite knowledgeable about art. He had just been diagnosed with a serious medical ailment. He was feeling low. I thought I could help distract his thoughts with art.

We walked the exhibit together. He wondered about Morris Grave's "Morning." I spoke and accurate information about artists came out. I spoke intelligently and passionately about the art we were experiencing and art that had come before. I read the descriptions on the walls about various art movements and artists. *I understood.* I caught myself and took a breath. I knew where this love and knowledge came from.

\* \* \*

When I'm consumed by myself (which seems to have been revealed as the most defining characteristic of the Burden of Existence), I am hyper-aware of negative possibilities in the future. Each possibility is a losing of something I have or a not getting something I want. (These "wants" and "losing" are not confined to the material world. Such thoughts as recognition for actions, pride, and societal appearance must also be considered.) The identification of this is vital if there is to be an alteration to occur for my state-of-mind. "In a state-of-mind Dasein is always brought before itself, and has always found itself, not in the sense of coming across itself by perceiving itself, but in the sense of finding itself in the mood that has it"(Heidegger p.174). Identification seems to proceed understanding which precedes acceptance—each playing a key role in the alteration of this, or any, state-of-mind.

I have shown that chemical alterations can be made which create the required change of perspective to occur for the alleviation of the Burden; however, these have been shown to be unsustainable if I so choose to continue to exist. The Poetics of Service offers a non-chemical,

sustainable, self-reinforcing, and repeatable means of existing without the Burden being present. Have we reached a point where the Burden of Existence has shown “itself in itself”?

If I am not burdened by my existence, what motivation for alleviation do I need? It would seem none. It would seem that, in this case, as I am would be enough. And the Poetics of Service would seem to have no need to be in my life. Is this actually the case?

This might be, and yet, I am still forced to (or should) consider if the continued act of living is worth it. That I exist is not enough of a motivating factor for me to desire to continue to exist. I am given pause though by an idea expressed by Camus. “In a man’s attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world. The body’s judgement is as good as the mind’s, and the body shrinks from annihilation”(Camus p.8). My body, without consent from the conscious and discerning part of my mind, has not only “decided” to live for a time, it actively engages in activities which (for a time) will perpetuate my life. Should I get sick, my body will begin to generate the necessary defense (if it can) to defeat the sickness. Biologically this is well-known; therefore, more examination on it is not needed. What does need further examination is the discrepancy between my body which declares, “Live!” And my mind which declares, “Hold on, let’s see if this is really worth it.”

Am I an utter fool if I completely disregard this natural function of my body and choose this cessation of existence? I think so. This is not to say that choosing the cessation of existence is foolish, merely to choose so without consideration is.

My body has been designed, or evolved, or designed to evolve and work the way it does. Is my mind (the conscious and discerning part) the same? Is my questioning the worth of actively choosing to maintain my existence a natural one with the intended outcome being the choosing

to continue to exist? If so, what can I do to tip the scales in favor of staying alive as opposed to the cessation of existence? If I believe my mind has been designed to do this, the act of actively seeking to find sufficient meaning for the continuation of existence will be a natural one. I will actively seek to “tip the scales.”

Again, I confine my examination to myself and allude to a previous story to help illustrate this. Yet, before doing so, what can I look at? By confining my examination to myself, it would follow that the heart of the examination is the way in which I relate. I am able to relate in the following forms: Self-to-Self, Self-to-Other, Self-to-Thing, and Self-to-Idea. If I am not mistaken, those categories comprise the limits of my relations within this world.

\* \* \*

The story “A Brother to Remember” has a lot of tension for me, and not only because of the loss of a loved one. But also, it is an example of a Self-to-Other relationship which helped to answer the question of suicide for me. In this story, a person who committed suicide was unable to use experiences and information to help decide to continue to exist. Also, the story shows an example of the relationship of Self-to-Idea (mercy, kindness, anger, etcetera) and the impact therein. This story does not appear to show anything about the relationship of Self-to-Thing. What needs to be said of this? How does this relationship help me to answer the question of suicide? Certainly convenience and comfort come into view very quickly as some “things” are designed for the sole purpose of developing these attributes. However, there are “things” which certainly act as the body does and prolongs life. What am I to make of these? Will the continued examination of this be beneficial to the direction we are wandering in? Or as we wander, does the area in which we find ourselves become the direction?

To begin with, it seems that a definition of “Service” is needed. This may require some wandering to adequately explicate as there are a multitude of questions which will arise and certain tensions which will either break these ideas apart or possibly help hold them in the balance of what it means to be human and have to operate within certain paradoxes and without the full answers to certain questions.

I will define “Service” as actions which add value to a person, persons, situation, and/or environment, with no expectation of reciprocity from those being helped; it is coupled with a willingness to surrender one’s time, energy, and talents to help people.

We will operate with this as our working definition of “Service” and begin to examine it to see what is revealed.

Obviously “value,” “reciprocity,” and “willingness to surrender” are elements which need to be examined (among others), and in doing so, I feel will guide us further in the direction of understanding, acceptance, and action.

How is “value” to be defined? How is “adding value to” determined? What is value? With a cursory glance, it would seem the case that “value” must be paired with “detrimental.” It would be hard to imagine this to be otherwise. How could value be added if what was being shared was, in fact, detrimental to the person? With the pairing of value and detriment, the issue of perspective seems to come into play. And, furthermore, if we are writing on perspective, is there an overarching, objective perspective we are attempting to get at which will have the authority to determine if something is found to be “valuable” or “detrimental”? This does not seem as if it will be the case nor necessary. If this is not needed, how then are we to reconcile what needs to be reconciled and do so with the authority which will allow us to proceed?

The only way in which I have been able to answer these questions is on a case-by-case basis. Each day, I look to see where I was selfish, forceful with my will, judgmental, fearful, angry, and so forth. Doing this helps me see if I did, in fact, add value that day and what needs to be done if I did not. I proceed with the hope, that much like the Burden of Existence, “value” will reveal itself in itself.

It would appear to be contradictory to be able to add value if I were acting from a state of being which is detrimental to myself. How can I start from anger and help you?

Yet, here too, I run into a paradox. For, as I am starting from the Burden of Existence, which is a space of detriment, how can I add value? Is this a paradox which can exist and still be operated within? This does not seem to lend itself to the case-by-case mentality as the Burden of Existence has been shown as foundational. Does the foundational necessity of the Burden of Existence allow for the reconciling of this paradox?

This might be a good time to turn our attention to defining “reciprocity.” Not in the sleight-of-hand sense of the magician so as to keep us from looking closer at “value” and the previous paradox, but rather in the hope of continuing to wander with the thought that more will be revealed on the previous subject.

Certainly there is something of a reciprocal nature with the Poetics of Service. The usage of “alleviation” would seem to indicate this. If I am participating in the Poetics of Service as a way of alleviating my Burden, then I am getting something in return for my actions of service. Ah, look at this! Another paradox.

It should be noted quickly when being of service to someone, no reciprocity is to be expected past the alleviation of the Burden—the loosening of the ligatures.

Not to move too swiftly but we should wander toward “willingness to surrender.” What is this? What are the origins and necessity to do this?

Surrender can have the feel of giving up, of losing, of defeat. One surrenders in war to the more forceful side. One is crushed and pushed to the breaking point. One must surrender, wave a white flag, yield to the certainty of what is coming. Yet, can surrender also be connotative of joining the winning side? Must it be thought of in terms of a battle and waged war?

When I surrender in the face of the Burden of Existence, what am I giving up and what am I getting? Was the answer to this seen in my art history class? I laid down my way. I laid down my judgment and anger. I went about my job and tried to add value. Without any expectation, I received peace and a high level of knowledge about art—a new found love of art.

When I stopped fighting the current of Self, I flowed in an unknown direction.

As I Wonder, this direction can be seen in the story which appears to have similar ingredients yet vastly different outcomes. Herein lies the Burden of Existence and the Poetics of Service.

\* \* \*

While living in Taiwan, I got a lot of attention because I'm 6'4" tall. There were times strangers came up to me and asked to take a picture with me. While sitting on a park bench, a car stopped and its occupants were very excited to chat with me. What an opportunity I had been presented with to add value.

I began to help coach the junior high school basketball team. Most of the kids understood very little English; yet, with the movement of my body, I was able to show them what to do. I practiced with them after school.

The basketball court felt like my sanctuary. The basketball court was outside and the sun was our referee, deciding how long we practiced. We finished with the setting of the sun—its rays of light filtering through the cloud of smog from all the factories. I thought of how often I read “Made in Taiwan” on products while in America. The sky turned blood red as did the sun as it slunk behind the smog cloud.

I did not want practice to end. My thoughts were starting to turn to the after—becoming Absolute. I tried not to think about drinking. I began to try to not think about drinking. I walked around the court, picking up basketballs, helping the head coach put them away. He didn't speak English. I spoke very little Mandarin. At some point I would have to leave.

What always happened happened.

I pushed the boulder.

Today I help coach a Special Olympics high school basketball team. I still use my body as an example when crossing over, posting up, and boxing out. I still walk around the court after practice picking up basketballs. And, yet, my mind is not gripped with the same thoughts, does not try and escape from itself the way it once did.

What makes this so?

“Can you come check in with me later?” Coach Calvin asked.

We had a disagreement during practice. He wanted to run a 3-2 defense. I was pushing for a 2-1-2 defense. He had previously said that he didn't know much about basketball. I had played the game all my life. I didn't know why he didn't readily agree with my defensive suggestion.

During my second period prep class, I walked to his room. He was an instructional assistant, too, and worked with the department head of Special Education.

I thought to myself, “If he says anything more about the 3-2 defense, I'm quitting.” I felt myself becoming angry that he had defied my basketball knowledge. I was becoming the Absolute.

Before I knocked on the door, I told myself, “Bite your tongue. Smile. Do not open your mouth.” Each of these actions is of the Poetics of Service—for each can add value.

I knocked and entered.

The department head and Coach Calvin asked me to sit down. I became afraid. What had I done wrong? I shouldn't have argued with the coach earlier.

“We would like to know something,” the department head began.

I interlaced my fingers and tried to sit up straight.

“We feel you've been a good addition to our program,” said Coach Calvin. “The kids really like you and work well with you.”

I glanced at the floor and looked between them.

“The two of us are retiring at the end of the year. We would like you to take over the Special Olympics program.”

\* \* \*

I have been a part of three consecutive state championships with the IHS Special Olympics basketball team. I have seen kids full of joy at being part of the continued success of the program. I've gotten to participate in this. I am not a driving force; rather, I try to show up each day with the mindset of Wonder and ask, “How can I be of help?”

Where I go from here really isn't up to me. I look for where I am now and what can be done.

“Understanding constitutes rather the Being of the ‘there’ in such a way that, on the basis of such understanding, a Dasein can, in existing, develop the different possibilities of sight, of looking around, and of just looking”(Heidegger p. 385). To understand the Burden of Existence, I had to have first been there. I am lucky to have been able to leave. However, as it has been shown, it is not simply a state-of-mind which I can say goodbye to forever, unless I should choose to cease to exist. However, with the Poetics of Service, I have been granted a means of alleviating this burden all the while getting to participate in a wonderful life.

The means to do this seems to have connection with Heidegger's thoughts on resoluteness. "Resoluteness, which we have characterized with regard to its temporal meaning, represents an authentic disclosedness of Dasein—a disclosedness which constitutes an entity of such a kind that in existing, it can be its very ‘there’”(Heidegger p.384). As I read these words, I feel they are connected with the way in which I exist while participating in the Poetics of Service. This “version” of me which is present as a result seems to be the one which was intended all along; however, it must be noted that even now (as has been shown) the Absolute takes hold...or better yet, emerges. Here, my understanding must save me, lead me to acceptance, and back into action.

Over the years, I have seen how this operates for myself and others. Although, I am left with questions of ways in which I can develop this, direct it, and guide it to other areas. What would a Poetics of Service look like in writing? Is “A Basketball Story” an example of this? In

the story I shared my weaknesses, the bits of me best left unsaid. I've shown them turned into strengths to benefit others, and I've shown how this was done and continues to be done.

I know helping others must be my focus. I know I will step falteringly and need forgiveness. I do not know what is to come.

## Section 4 - The Poetics of Service

A Poetics of Service is not about changing the world, but creating something that can be of value to someone else. By value I am not speaking about fame or money. What I write may be left unread; yet, I am sure the actual process of writing, with my mind turned toward others, will keep me from self and allow me to live in society in a peaceful fashion.

How do I know if I am helping others?

Benedict de Spinoza described two passions: The Sad Passions and the Joyful Passions. These are not limited to the feelings of sadness and joy. Within these two passions, there is a power dynamic which Spinoza would argue that the body is affected as such by these passions to the point that it either becomes more active or less active. “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections”(Spinoza p. 154). I will show later, by giving examples of my students’ lives, how this transpires and how the students become more active through the Joyful Passions.

The passions are fueled by “adequate ideas” which either diminish or increase a person’s ability to act. Spinoza defines “adequate ideas” as that “whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call it partial, or inadequate, if its effect cannot be understood through it alone” (Spinoza p. 153). In regard to the classroom setting and interactions with students, how does it become evident if my actions are influencing the students and leading them to either Joyful Passions or Sad Passions? How did the students develop to see how the ideas I shared and the environment I helped create in class have shaped them and the results the students have been able to produce. The use of “results” is not about what grades the

students got, but rather, how they connected with the ideas presented in class (not only content of the class, but also the ways in which ideas are presented), how has the students' understanding of themselves in relation to others been effected? Have they increased their ability to release the power which resides in them (in all of us)? By "power which resides in them," I mean that intangible (and somewhat elusive) quality that allows us to shine and helps us genuinely connect with other people. This helps develop healthy relationships and gives meaning to existence.

The Sad and Joyful Passions can be transmitted. The Passions are infectious. Through enthusiasm and the desire to add value to the lives of those with whom I come in contact, I can effectively participate in what Marianne Williamson describes when she writes, "And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." Being able to inhabit this space gives me the ability to guide students toward the Joyful Passions and a more active life.

Because the Sad Passions diminish a person's ability to act, they can be used as a means of controlling a person or group. These are ideas which, at their core, create feelings of fear and greed within the recipient. In writing these could manifest in many forms. Any writing which leaves a person thinking of him or herself worthless due to the lack of a material possession is an example of this. And, if this writing led the person to act under this idea, that person would be inhabiting the Sad Passions. The person's power to act and choose for him or herself has been diminished because he or she has had imposed upon her/himself the idea that property needs to be acquired to be a worthy person.

The Joyful Passions, on the other hand, elevate a person's power to choose. Spinoza defines joy as, "man's passage from a lesser to a greater perfection" (Spinoza p. 188). Again, this is not just tied to the feelings of happiness or joy. The state of joyfulness, as Spinoza defines it, is one in which a person is developing in a positive direction toward perfection. In this case, it is the continued positive progression which is paramount rather than the need to achieve perfection. In terms of students, this would look like the continuing process of empowering themselves. Hopefully, they will also see that the more they can help others, they will be in a state of Joyfulness.

While I was stuck in myself, I guided my students toward the Sad Passions; my actions in the classroom did nothing to help them make of themselves what they could. (They may have been bettering themselves on their own; I write of this in terms only of my actions.) While teaching in Las Vegas, I developed very creative and engaging lesson plans for the students. But, these plans never saw the light of day. I spent my nights in drunken stupors. When my alarm clock screamed in the morning, I was hungover lacking the enthusiasm the lesson plans needed. On my way to school, I stopped at 7-11 and bought all of the newspapers. Once class started, I handed out the newspapers, told the students to read two articles, and write two summaries which we would share at the end of class then I would take a seat at my desk, keep them quiet, and wait for my hangover to pass. These are not actions which create an environment where students will be led toward the Joyful Passions.

What steps could I take to create an environment where the Joyful passions could emerge? What tools are available to me? Can technology help? What is this technology?

Two technologies can do this, and also be used to usher in the Sad Passions. Fire can both cook the food and burn the hand.

And, honestly, would this life be at all meaningful without a little tension?

I'll focus on the technologies of language, the World Wide Web, and how these impact the students and me in our pursuit of developing an environment where the Joyful passions will flourish.

My introduction to the words of language came when I touched a lit stove and yelled, "hot." My introduction to the World Wide Web came on an AOL CD with 10 free hours of use. Over time, I have changed the way I use language and the web. So much information can be accessed in a moment on the web. Yet, being able to do this allows for more than just the opportunity for us to become sponges and fill ourselves with information. The web can assist in the development of ideas and the ways they are put into action. This can generate an environment in the classroom where students can be led to the Joyful Passions.

The classroom is the platform from which my writing takes off. This is the environment when I feel most free of self and able to contribute positively to those around me. For me there is a connection between the flourishing in the classroom and writing. However, this does not work in a reverse direction. Writing more does not mean my classroom self will develop in a healthy fashion, as I can get in the way and block out the service to others.

Martin Heidegger talked about the essence of technology and how it can work in our lives as "enframing." I can see this in the classroom and as a way of guiding the students toward the Joyful Passions.

Heidegger explains the saving power and the danger of enframing:

“But if this destining, Enframing, is the extreme danger, not only for man’s coming to presence, but for all revealing as such, should this destining still be called a granting? Yes, most emphatically, if in this destining the saving power is said to grow. Every destining of revealing comes to pass from out of a granting and as such a granting. For it is granting that first conveys to man that share in revealing which the coming-to-pass of revealing needs. As the one so needed and used, man is given to belong to the coming-to-pass of truth. The granting that sends in one way or another into revealing is as such the saving power. For the saving power lets man see and enter into the highest dignity of his essence.” (Heidegger p.31-32)

That last sentence is most significant to the Poetics of Service. I see “the highest dignity of his essence” as being fully enveloped in the Joyful Passions. This is power over one’s self, not being under the control of others who would seek to use a person as a commodity or a means to their own end.

For Heidegger this essence is closely tied to art. He connects the two through the Greek word “techne” which means “that revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearing” (Heidegger p. 34). While he connects essence to art, I will connect it to learning and the learning environment. At the heart of teaching is “revealing” and at the heart of learning is that which-is-revealed.

At the beginning of this school year, I met a freshman whose heart I believe is a basketball. I watched him walk down the hallways dribbling an invisible basketball. We spoke about his favorite player, Derek Rose, often. He told me he wanted to play on the varsity basketball team. I wanted to help him do this. What a great accomplishment this would be for him. But, had I, for the moment, become blind to reality? Had I allowed his exuberance to cloud my judgment and position as his teacher to guide him on a proper and safe path? After

speaking with the school nurse, I saw that, yes I had. This student has certain medical conditions which would make it unsafe for him to play at that level. After having a conference with the school nurse, I realized that to have encouraged him to pursue playing on the varsity team, would have been to lead him down a path where he was not empowered and was further excluded.

Fortunately, while this student is not a good candidate for the varsity basketball team at the school, he was a great one to play on our Special Olympics basketball team, an environment designed to accommodate athletes who may have medical situations that require a high level of attentiveness to ensure their safety.

As we began the process to get him on the Special Olympics basketball team, his father was concerned, rightfully so for his son's safety. It took a focused and concerted effort by members of our staff to convince the father that his son would be placed in a position of success which could further help his physical and mental development.

Like any good sporting event, the process came down to a last second shot. The student missed the first game of the season but was able to play every game thereafter. He helped lead the team to win the state championship.

He flourished throughout the season and by the fifth game became a starter. This student's own power increased. As a result of his participation in this environment, he moved from a "lesser to a greater perfection." He now also takes active steps to encourage and help others.

The web allowed me to access information which I would not have been unable to do otherwise. I was able to compile articles about with a Louisville basketball player, Peyton Siva,

who used equipment which helped keep him safe. The articles helped get this student to play on the team.

The world wide web allowed for a greater connection between us all.

The primary language of this student's father is Arabic. I do not speak Arabic. The father also knows some English. As I began speaking with him, I realized I needed to adjust how quickly I spoke and what words I used. The boy's varsity basketball coach was also a friend of the father. My connection to him through school allowed him to communicate with the father in a way that I could not.

This worked out well in the one-on-one setting of me working with the father; although how does this present itself in a classroom setting with room full of teenagers?

To begin, the students are presented with the option of participation. This is important especially as it relates to leading the students toward the Joyful passions. Although, as it is readily known by anyone who has ever met (or been) a teenager that in being presented with the option to participate, one is also presented with the option to not participate, and this is a rather appealing option to a teenager...and even more so in the classroom full of them. There are certainly students who seize the latter. I believe, given the power of choice, and to have it clearly explained and to understand what is at stake, the students will take the actions to participate as doing so increases and elevates themselves. Sometimes these actions are not taken in the moment and bloom later in the student's life.

I think back to all of the teachers who took this approach with me. There are many. They have not seen how their influence has guided me to become a better person. Maybe they (like

me) tried to set up this type of environment where the only motivation was the hope that one day the seed would finally push through the dirt and reach upward toward the sun.

There are other elements to consider here, too. Some of the students I work with arrive at school without having had their basic needs met first. Even given the power of choice in regard to participation, how can any classroom activity or learning goal stand up and surpass a basic life need that has not been met? Some students also show up to class so consumed by Facebook or other social media that while their physical self is situated in a seat, their presence of mind is traveling between servers as they connect with friends. In these situations, both in unmet basic needs and consumption by social media, embedded education can play a vital role in the development of the student as seen through the activation in the way in which he or she makes positive progress in his or her life.

Embedded education occurs when that which is to be learned is presented to the student in a manner where he or she is directly unaware of the desired learning goal as the material has been formatted to resemble something else which is much more appealing to the student. This type of educational means is only achievable when a solid rapport has been developed with the student. While building this rapport, elements are learned as to how material can be presented which will act as a conduit for the student to help him or her come to understand the actual learning goals which have been set-forth.

I work with a student I will refer to as "T." I have worked with this student since his freshman year. He is now a senior. Over time, I have built a strong rapport with him. I have done so as I help coach him in Special Olympics basketball and track. Recently, he competed in the Special Olympics State track tournament in the 400 meter dash, the shot put, 200 meter dash,

and the 4 X 400 meter dash. He had a break out year this season and was the fastest runner on the team. How did I use embedded education to help T continue to improve? How was the technology of language used in this case?

I developed a rapport with T by learning his interests and ways in which I could use language to communicate with T. This took time. But, we now have a positive flow of communication. He has recently had success in both athletics and academics.

T and I communicate by speaking in movie lines and characters voices. To a passerby, it would appear that no “real” communication is occurring, only movie lines and character voices like Yoda’s. Communicating with T like this allows him to take an active role in his education; he is excited about participating in an environment where movies and character voices are allowed. He willingly participates in other activities with enthusiasm.

There is an element of control—of trying to express ideas and their importance to students by using misdirection (in a sense). Important in this, in what is embedded, is the message and how the message is presented.

“Information does not determine affect, since something immaterial cannot account for a material consequence. Yet to produce any response at all, information, it seems, must carry some affective force or charge. That force is its message. When information conveys a message, when it communicates something, then it does indeed have a determined, if not exactly determinate, relation to affect. This influence can extend even over one’s power to act. Who has not felt empowered or disempowered by the force of a message? The problem is how this works.” (Bogard p. 3)

In the thoughts of “force of a message,” there also seems to be a relationship to the motivation to share this message and a desire for a preconceived outcome (even only if it is partially conceived).

It’s important that when teaching and writing, my motivations are in line the Joyful Passions.

Having an example in place for what embedded education looks like, let’s turn to what embedded writing looks like and see if there are examples in existence for which we can examine.

To do this, we will operate under the previously given definition of embedded education; however, instead of it occurring within an educational environment such as a classroom, it will transpire on the page (be that paper or electronic).

When thinking about who has created a text which displays embedded writing, my first thought of inspiration came while swimming laps. Somehow, Kathy Acker’s *My Mother: Demonology* emerged in my mind as an example of a text which I would classify as having the beginning elements of embedded writing. (I am unsure if Acker herself would classify this as embedded writing. Although, it certainly had the full effect of embedded writing on me when I read this book, as my power was increased, and I was further activated to a greater degree of perfection by pursuing to improve my own writing skills due to the example she put forth.) Why is this? What qualities which are in line with the definition of embedded writing make me believe this is the case?

In class, Dr. Jeanne Heuving taught me about a term she had coined: “inceptive speech.” This is language in which the actual act is being created on page. It is not language which

represents something which might have occurred or could occur, but rather the experience itself. To develop this concept, we read Acker. In this text, she presents not the representation of dreams but rather that state of being immersed in a dream. This is the first step in creating embedded writing. This environment on the page becomes the conduit which activates the mind of the reader and opens up the gate for a message to be transmitted. What is this message? In regard to what has been written, it would need to be one of such force which would guide the reader to the Joyful Passions to increase his or her power as a means of elevating him or her to a higher degree of perfection. However, the opposite approach could also be taken. It is again important to monitor, at all times, the motivations for participating and creating such a writing as here, too, there is a level of deception at work, which if misused, would diminish and take away a person's power.

Have I just replaced the term "inceptive speech" with "embedded writing"? I don't think so. Inceptive speech describes a type of writing that is not representational. Dr. Heuving described it as a "this is this" style of writing. Embedded writing begins here; yet, it diverges and continues on as what is also of great importance is the message contained therein and its desired effect on the recipient. The goal being to inspire activation in the lives of those who read the material, so they may be elevated to a greater level of perfection. It must be noted, that I am writing about this as a way of further developing the Poetics of Service I am interested in. I am not some master of embedded writing, capable of inspiring others at all times. However, it is a goal of mine to participate in the classroom and on the basketball court with my students to use this as a platform to generate embedded writing which would have a positive impact on those around me and would, also importantly, keep me from my destructive self-nature. Whether this

is achievable or not will be seen as time continues to unfold. What is of greater importance is striving to answer the question: “What am I doing for other people?”

## **Section 5 - “A Basketball Story” as a Poetics of Service and the Means to See Myself**

I have written something which I don't desire many people to read. Mainly due to the very personal nature of the story. I don't know if I really want people walking around in the rooms of my house and looking at everything on my shelves. Although, I am quite moved by what I have written. I am not moved due to the words I've combined in a certain way to create a certain sense of being. I am moved because I have chronicled that which has happened. I have chronicled that in which I have participated. In doing this, I see how blessed I am. I am able to see, with gratitude, the type of life I have led and the direction I'd like to see it continue to move it.

I want to write something poetic and moving here. That desire to impress and seek your validation may always be a part of me. I don't know. Although, I have already put forth enough of my story to see that I need seek no further validation from anyone on the worth of my being. I am human and alive. That alone is cause to celebrate and see worth. What a change in my mind it is for me to say that. Where is this “Burden of Existence”? It's still here, roaming in my mind like a tiger pacing in his cage, waiting for the moment I leave the latch undone.

Why did I write “A Basketball Story”? As I have mentioned, it was a direction pointed out to me by someone I trust. The actual process of writing this has given me cause to reflect on my life and my writing—reflect on what is important, what gives meaning to my life.

While there is so much of my story which is personal, I am okay if someone were to read it and find something in the pages which was useful...find something in the pages which allowed for a deeper and stronger connection with others. I am finding nothing to be more important in life. I have also seen that it must be with this motivation and mindset that I write. It is not up to

me to forge new paths for humanity. Those grooves were well defined long ago. It is not up to me to create some new human emotion or experience. Those, too, were well defined long ago. I can share openly about my experience in the effort to be with someone else...to merely walk along side (maybe all that is really possible).

As I wrote this piece, I came to see and understand myself better. I came to understand my writing better. Writing this was akin to standing naked in front of a mirror with powerful lights shining all about. There is no flaw nor gleam of beauty which went unnoticed. It did take the perspectives of others for me to fully see. And with that, I am comfortable what has been shown to me.

## Bibliography

Bogard, W. (2010). *Code Drift: Essays in Critical Digital Studies*: “Digital Resisto(e)rs.” Found at: [www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=636](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=636)

Heidegger, M. (1977). *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York City, NY: Harper Perennial, Modern Thought

McLuhan, M. (2003). *Understanding Media*. Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, Inc. Material for this paper found at: <http://beforebefore.net/80f/s11/media/mcluhan.pdf>

Spinoza, B. (1994). *A Spinoza Reader, The Ethics and Other Works of Benedict de Spinoza*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Williamson, M. (1992). *A Return to Love*. New York City, NY: Harper Collins.

“A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down” is a lyric from a song composed by the Sherman Brothers in 1964. It was made famous by Mary Poppins

Woolf, V. (1932). *The Second Common Reader: “How Should One Read a Book?”* Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.: Harvest Books

Camus, A. (1983). *The Myth of Sisyphus, “An Absurd Reasoning”*; Vintage. New York, NY

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*; Harper & Row. New York, NY.