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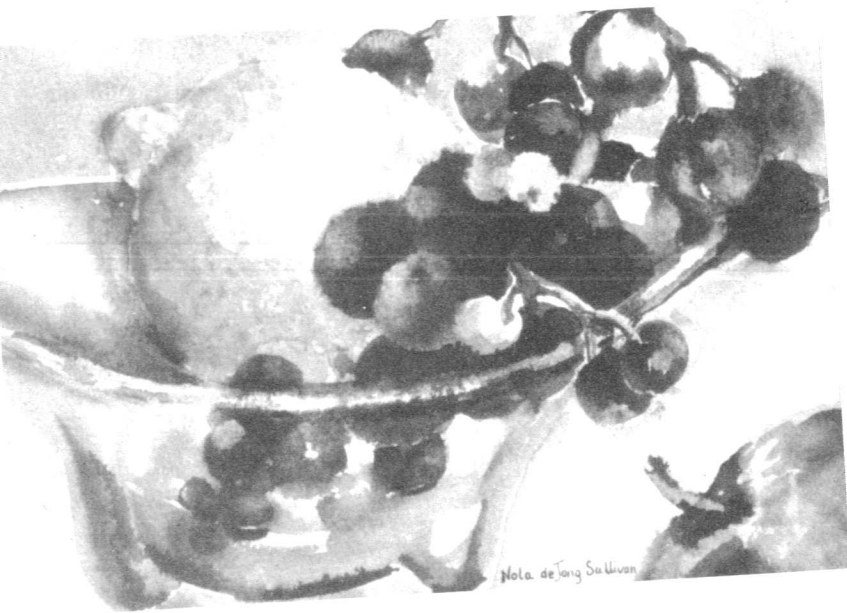
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Nola de Jong Sullivan, *In a Glass Bowl*,
watercolor, 11" x 14"

Like the Lilies of the Field

John Bennion

Buried in the Depths

I float in the corner of the university diving pool. My legs, which are more muscular and dense than my torso, pull me down. Closing my eyes, I'm rocked by the wake from a diver. Sound disappears with my ears under water. I arch my belly and lift my heavy legs higher. My body is buoyed up in a manner that feels like faith.

Another exercise: I imagine that I'm a pregnant woman. By the time labor starts, there's no backing out; I can't wrest control of my existence from my own body. I hang on, giving up my will to forces outside, or in this case, inside myself.

"Abandon yourself to experience," my therapist tells me. I am to swim with the current of my life instead of fighting it. "You have control issues. You try to manage events and people that you can't possibly be responsible for."

I'm in therapy because of a year-long depression, the worst since graduate school. It came after returning from a trip to England, where I led a group of students hiking across that "green and pleasant land."

Lost in England

Up to my thighs in a brook in the Yorkshire Dales, I was lost again—my shoes and the legs of my hiking shorts soaked. "There's no path over here either," I said, an astute observation, because I had just climbed over a barbed-wire fence and forced myself through waist-high stinging nettle to get to the brook. The students looked at me as if I were crazy. I didn't have a clue where we turned off the Pennine Way, and I was frantic inside, though it manifested itself in a forced and manic grin.

The worst part of getting lost when you're supposed to be the guide

is that it's undignified. When I lost my way, which was nearly every time I got behind the wheel of our luggage van and often when we set out on foot cross-country, the students laughed. It was always a sweet, you're-one-of-us kind of laughter, as if my failings endeared me to them. They teased that my blue GPS was nothing more than a pretty necklace. It stopped working whenever a cloud crossed the sun, common in England, or when we walked under a tree, also common. They busted a gut when they discovered that my compass had polarized, pointing faithfully south. "This is significant," Megan Whittaker said once. "Metaphorical of your life." I felt less like a teacher than a comic of the self-deprecating mode, Woody Allen in hiking shorts. I'm even skinny like him and starting to get near-sighted, although I refuse to wear my glasses when hiking.

I crawled out of the stream, drenched. "If we head north, we can't miss the highway."

"We don't mind, John," they said for the twentieth time. "We like it when we get lost." I led them over another barbed-wire fence, through a gap in a hedgerow, and across a pathless field. They returned to their conversations, following me as if I had good sense.

We came to the highway. Using my infamous pathfinding skills, I scanned the terrain. Our map showed the Pennine Way intersecting the road at a "double-arched bridge." I looked east, low in the valley, toward the lower reach of the stream I'd mired myself in. There would be no double-arched bridge for such a small watercourse. I looked west, toward the top of the ridge, where there also couldn't be a bridge, because no river or stream would flow along the highest ground in the area. This much I knew—streams make valleys, so if you want to find a stream, walk down. I forgot to remind myself that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

I always pray when I'm in a pickle, but that time it was not so much "Help us find the way," but "Help me not to look like a fool again." Too late.

Desperate, following instinct, I led the group westward up the verge of the highway. Cars whined past. Near the top of the hill, the road turned north, opposite the way we needed to go. Soon I saw the double-arched bridge, made of weathered red brick. It spanned a canal, which being manmade, could run wherever its builders wanted it to, even along the top of a ridge. We'd seen a stretch of it that morning, one of a network of canals that spreads outward from London. In eccentric and stubborn England, even waterways don't necessarily follow valleys.

The students, still in good cheer, went along with the detour, which cost us more than two hours on a tightly scheduled day. Since the beginning of the trip, I had found our way and lost it again, set hikes for us which were longer than we could accomplish, pushed the students out in cold weather, become confused because of the pressures of repeated decisions, and mismanaged the budget. When I made bad decisions, I tended to hole up like a badger, refusing help.

To my credit, most of the places we walked through were foreign to me; we were delayed but never so lost that we had to call in the police or other aid. Karla, my wife, often commented on my chutzpah for undertaking the trip in the first place. "You always rush in where angels fear to tread," she said, leaving out the operative word. Looking back, I admit I did all right. While every day something went wrong, every day also had ample good.

The students, most of whom were more trained to optimism than I, made a difficult experience into a positive one. "Lost again, are we?" They smiled and shrugged. That they still loved me made me feel that God might also.

Despite this constant reassurance, I wanted to be perfect, never getting lost and never making bad decisions. Not ever. When it happened again, I felt foolish. So what should have been momentary detours or lapses, I continually worried into what felt like major failures. I longed for an impeccable trip and mourned when it didn't happen.

Lost in the Desert

For me, being out of control is being swallowed by the world, becoming a child again. When I was five or six, my father and I spent much of the summer at his property in Utah's west desert, forty miles from home. Only greasewood, halogeton, and shadscale grow without irrigation, odd twisted plants, gray or gray-green in color.

One evening when the sun went down, my father sent me to our trailer to cook dinner. I opened a can of Spam, cut and fried it, and pried the lid off a bottle of peaches or pears. I remember standing above the stove as the meat grew hot and then cold. There was a small window in the kitchenette, and I watched for my father to come as dusk fell over the desert. The toads croaked in waves, an eerie chorus. He still didn't come. I started to cry. As I remember it, I was more lonely than afraid. The desert stretched forever around me. Strange creatures lived there: ragged jack

rabbits that shrieked when shot, coyotes that wailed in the night like tortured children. Rattlesnakes unwound and left their holes, slithering out to hunt.

I watched for my father and he didn't come and didn't come. I felt, without being able to articulate my fear, that my sanity and identity would soon slip away into the endless desert.

Finally Dad came back and wrapped his arms around me. "I'm sorry," he said. "It took longer than I wanted. I'm sorry." I'm sure he was mystified by my tears. He was only a half mile away, but I had felt unprotected, as if the universe was a place of danger and chaos instead of safety and order.

I probably wasn't scarred by this experience; it just feels typical. Whenever I lose control I think the world will swallow me.

The Sins of the Fathers

Introspection is peeling an onion. Remove one layer, then another. Soon there's nothing left of the self but a small white bulb. And then even that is gone.

I am the child of an alcoholic. When I was a teenager in a tight and repressive Mormon village, it felt like being abandoned in a private desert. I could control nothing, do nothing to keep me and my family from disappearing from before God's throne. My kind, taciturn father self-medicated his depression with cooking sherry. Because drinking any alcohol was against the Mormon commandments, I thought his sin was as evil as adultery. I was ashamed of him. Now that I'm more enlightened, I'm ashamed of being ashamed of him. This is what my therapist calls progress.

I have learned through therapy that my hunger for control—I must, at all costs, manage myself and those around me—could have come from my teenage years when I perceived that there was no father leading my family toward heaven. I believed I had to fill the void—an impossible job for a teenaged boy.

The problem with all this is that both my mother and father were there all the time. My father never missed work, teaching elementary school and running a ranch, each one a full-time job in itself, and my mother cooked for us, read in the kitchen, found sales to supply us with Christmas and birthday gifts. I'm sure they were both working through their own sorrows, his masked by staying busy and hers by obsessively

reading novels, but they were always with us. Still I learned the habit of mind that I was the one who needed to save my family. If I didn't do it, it wouldn't get done. Like every teenager, I knew better than they how to solve our problems.

I discovered my father's drinking early in my adolescence. I was racing horses with my friends when he drove past. After the race he praised, in a loud and emotional voice, my reckless efforts to win with Maggy, our mustang/Morgan mare. I still remember his crooked grin, his voice breaking. I had never noticed him so sloppy. Most of the time he was as closed as a clam. After a few minutes of watching, his behavior clicked for me. I knew he was like the drunks I saw on television or in the movies. "That's my son," he said, nearly weeping for joy. "That's my hard-riding son."

My new secret was as important to me as Cain's was to him. I knew not to talk about my discovery with my friends, my mother, certainly not with my father. I believed in repentance, that if he stopped, it would be as if it had never happened. He would never drink if I was there, so one way to help him was to stay with him. Luckily for me, he didn't drink all the time. With few exceptions, he indulged on weekend evenings when work was done. Like a detective, I always watched him, and I developed an infallible sense of when he wanted a drink, feeling the urge as soon as he did. We were like twins. He needed the pleasant slowing down, the release from dictator Duty in his head, like being bathed in pure emotion. I just wanted to make him stop.

I remember the feeling—as strong as my hunger for air—of needing him not to drink. Back then I thought obedience was the strongest law of God. All the others—agency, self-determination, love—were not as important to me as getting him to skip his evening bottle. If he stuffed his indulgence once, I could make him skip again, three times, four, until we were the perfect family in the photograph we hung in our house, a circle of bright faces. Not rotten with depression and alcoholism.

It went like this, dozens of times: We've just come back from a day working with the cattle. He parks the car and instead of going right in to dinner, he says, "I've got to water the cow, feed the cow, check the horse." All true. But I also know from long experience that, if I go in the house without him, he'll come in an hour later a different person, a grinning, sentimental caricature of himself. And I'll have lost.

So I say, "Let's eat dinner together. I'll help and then we'll go in together." We feed the cow, water the chickens, check the horse. Always

there is something else. An hour and still we haven't eaten. Weary, hopeless, I head back for the house. He has stashes everywhere—buried under the wheat in the tin granary, stuck above the door in the smokehouse where we hang our tack, pushed inside the double roof of the chicken coop, under newspapers in one of the row of broken-down cars, or poked between bales in the haystack. An hour later he comes inside lubricated, grinning unsteadily.

His drinking made him feel calm and happy, but I hated it. The idea that didn't occur to me was to talk to him—it was too frightening.

When I was eighteen, I prepared to go on a mission. A couple of weeks before I was to enter the temple to take out my endowments, we came back from working at our western farm late in the evening. As we unloaded the truck, I saw him walk around the side of the porch and return quickly. Following his steps after he disappeared inside the house, I found no hiding place except the dog house. I reached inside, touching the brown paper sack that he'd stashed there—a six-pack of beer. My heart beating fast, I put it back, determined this once to confront him. I thought that if he admitted his habit, it would be a first step to quitting. Once he knew I knew, he'd be too embarrassed to continue. I waited, more frightened and upset than I'd been since childhood. Finally he walked around the side of the house and pulled out his stash. I stepped out and caught him holding the bag, so to speak. "What's in there?" I said.

"Does it bother you?" The shame was so thick he couldn't say the words. I picture his face and body deep in shadow.

"Yes. I want you with me in the temple."

"I'll be there," he said. "I promise you."

What's odd is that I don't remember whether he actually made it. It's like I've had careful surgery on my memory, and I can picture myself in the locker room, after the washing and anointing, putting my own garments on for the first time. I remember sitting in the world room. My friend Erich, who had already been through the temple, was there escorting me, but I don't remember my father. I remember everyone eating in Dee's Family Restaurant, now closed, but the time in the temple is a blank. Logically I know he was there and that afterward he went back to his drinking, but I don't have a single image of his face with me inside the endowment rooms.

Years later I tried to rat on him to the stake president. "My father

drinks," I told him in private. "He has a temple recommend and is going to the temple for my sister's wedding. He's not worthy."

"Trust the interview," the stake president said. "Trust the process." He implied that what happened there was my father's business and not mine. Now, thirty years later, I agree, but at the time the idea was difficult to take in.

After leaving home, I stopped trying to save my father, except for a few bouts of pious indignation, when I tried to get the whole family to agree to a tough-love confrontation. My mother refused, and my plans went nowhere.

When I was thirty, I wrote Dad a note: "I am not keeping your drinking a secret between us anymore." I meant only that, when we were alone together, I wouldn't respect the code of silence. He wrote a note back: "You have the power to destroy me in this town." I guess he thought I was going to go public. As if after fifteen years of silence I could bear to say anything to our neighbors. As if they didn't know already. It's easier now that he's been dead for twenty years.

That misunderstanding was so drastic that communication seemed impossible, so I gave up. All the way to his deathbed his secret stayed safe. As you can see, I'm obsessively still not talking about it.

Instead of bothering him, I turned to writing—a master's thesis of stories about troubles between fathers and sons. In one story a boy ruins the father's pump engine by neglect, in another a Navajo boy is ashamed of his father's drunkenness, another retells the story of Abraham sacrificing his son. As I wrote all the stories I thought about my own father. The inscription is from "The Lost Son," by Theodore Roethke: "Ordnung! Ordnung! Papa is coming!" The quote is inaccurate because my father was never authoritarian. I was just rapt with attention on his comings and goings because I needed him to change. The stories were another way of trying to get a handle on my life. For my PhD I wrote a novel. The early drafts were about my father. The protagonist comes home from his mission to discover that his father is committing adultery with a woman he home teaches. Adultery is easier in some ways to repent of than an addiction to alcohol. So I wrote about adultery to manage my feelings about my father's drinking. I described the son sneaking after his father through the field, discovering him in the house of the woman, confronting him with his sin. The father was sorrowful and repentant. That kind of melodrama was a daydream, a fantasy for me.

Each of my siblings, all sisters, adapted to my father's alcoholism in a different way. It's not my business to talk about them here, except to say that we each took up roles we are still acting out. These patterns of behavior keep us stable.

"You Try Too Hard"

I became the one who tries to manage or mediate, not just in family matters. This desire may have led me to teaching. My first job was in a rural junior high—a place of nightmare. On the first day of my teaching career, I stood at the head of the class. I had the illusion that they would respect me, learn from me, simply because I stood in a position of authority. Moroni, Utah, is a town where people butcher turkeys, package them, and make fertilizer out of the waste—close to what their children did to me.

My illusion of control broke down the first week and I entered a five-year hell. Their small minds fermented with hormones; they were striking out on their own. They had an infallible sense of the weakness at the core of my authoritarian need. Like picking at a scab, they uncovered my fear of disruption and loss of control. We were perfectly unsuited for each other. They sang Christmas songs in the middle of grammar lessons. They called me a pig farmer, which now makes me laugh because it was true. For about four years, I raised pigs and tried to teach adolescents. Both groups gave me little respect. The sows chased me from their pens, and the students teased or disobeyed me. My classes fell into chaos. Even today if I walk into a junior high, my palms start to sweat and I have to get away from all the cocky faces, all the half-formed identities. It feels like being thrust into a thick stew of emotional disorder.

Once in Moroni a student punched me. If I'd known then what I know now, a physical instinct I've learned from playing aggressive basketball, I could have taken him down or, with that confidence, I could have dealt with him without being physical. Instead I walked, weeping, to the principal. I wanted a structure inside which my authority would be safe. He and the counselor, experienced at this kind of thing, put the fear of God into that boy. But at the same time they undermined my authority as they tried to support it.

That boy's best friend was an even worse devil. Once I had him in the hallway outside my door. I shook my finger in his face, telling him off. He was not impressed. "You know what your problem is?" he said, speaking slowly so I couldn't misunderstand. "You try too hard."

The truth of it struck me with more force than a fist. I didn't want to hear anything so profound come from his obnoxious mouth. Little did he know I was fighting for my life, desperate for control, when I knew, almost from the beginning, that I would fail.

A close friend, one who has struggled with depression much longer than I have, says that control is the wrong word. He says what I really wanted was to feel competent. He writes in a letter,

You wanted things in your childhood family to work. Maybe the immoral aspects of your father's drinking were just a rational dressing you came up with; the important fact was that your father wavered between competence and incompetence, and when he felt the most competent, you and everybody else could see he was drunk or nearly so. You sensed early on, age three or four or five, that group things weren't working in your home. So you can call it control . . . if you want, but it doesn't strike me as the kind of control that control freaks exercise . . . , which derives from a pleasure in limiting the agency of others. With you, it is the control that is required to make group things work, family, junior high class, a study abroad experience.

This makes sense. His letter revealed to me that, for much of my life, I've led people and taken control of projects to show myself I'm competent. A slave to duty, I pile more and more work on myself until I don't have room to think about what I had left undone—saving my father. When I am overwhelmed with writing projects, Church work, papers to grade, I get frantic from lack of time and begin snapping and nipping at the people closest to me like a shrewish dog. The cycles of overwork develop into depression. Still it's a pleasant kind of drowning. It feels as if I'm doing all I can.

Leading Study Abroad

I have a daydream which makes me laugh when I'm not half asleep. One of my university classes has been kidnapped and hidden in the hills around my home town. Or it's in the Uinta Mountains or on a tropical island or in Alaska. Often the president of the United States or the prophet of the Mormon Church is also abducted. I must lead the whole group to safety. In these dramas I'm more courageous than Pocahontas, stronger and more agile than Spiderman, and more inventive than MacGyver. Once, in my dreams, I duct-taped butter knives backward to my feet so that I could climb a brick wall and worm through a tiny window to free-

dom. Sitting in my office, those stories seem ridiculous, but still they're saturated with a feeling of glory.

Walking across England, at the head of a long line of students who followed me wherever I went, was the realization of a fantasy. Not once during our two-month journey did I have the dream.

So while the students on study abroad thought it funny that I kept getting lost, for me it was more serious. Getting lost, becoming disorganized, failing to arrange a part of our trip in time—all seemed significant. I would have gladly sacrificed that aspect of my personality.

At home, in my normal job, and at church, it's easy to keep relationships superficial enough that I can carry the illusion that people don't see my flaws. What was different on this trip is that we were together daily, and they knew me well, all of me—especially those who worked closest with me: Megan, Deja, Kerry, Steve, and Karla, my wife. As we traveled, they knew me more and more clearly, saw my fragmented, confused, and wayward nature, and still loved me. Their forgiveness felt so much like redemption that I could hardly bear it.

Can you see it now—the truth of my life? Slowly, gradually as those good people stayed friends with me, not exactly because of my successes and despite my failings, I came to feel again that God forgave my imperfections. And I wasn't alone.

I know from watching the others, talking to them, reading their journals, that they felt the same way. We re-learned that He loves us because we could see it in each other's eyes. More than any educational group I've been a part of, we loved each other. Of course we had squabbles, times when we hurt or offended each other, but in general it was one of the most carefully Christian groups I've been in.

Then at the end of the trip, our mutual trust was challenged again.

London's Dark Satanic Mills

The worst snafu I made on our trip manifested itself when we arrived in London. We unloaded from the coach and stood in front of the cobbled, arched alleyway that led to our hostel—the Generator, the last and most dismal hostel of our two-month tour of England. We would stay there for two weeks.

I had walked alone through the building before our tour started and found it to be dirty, loud, profane, and overcrowded. Several times since then I'd warned the others that our lodgings in London would be "Spar-

tan." It was a lie. I mean, doesn't that word imply clean and orderly? I knew that for the scrupulous members of our group, this hostel would be hell. Despite the practical repeated assurance on the trip that God cared for us like the lilies of the field, the feeling that we were peregrine Christians, I was sure that the Generator would destroy our harmony.

Anxious to get us checked in, I gripped my backpack in one hand and the bow and arrow set of my ten-year-old son Christopher in the other. Walking down the alley, I passed a poster of a cartoon woman engaged in an autoerotic act. College- and high school-aged students crowded the entryway. I imagined a sign above their heads: "Abandon hope all ye who enter." For once the saying didn't feel like a cliché. The place stank of cigarette smoke and bodies. With my button-down shirt and graying hair, I felt as out of place as Mr. Bennet at a rave.

And it happened again, the feeling of the ground crumbling under my feet, loss of control over my own fate and the fate of those following me. As I stood in the raucous hallway with the stench of stale beer and urine in my nostrils, time seemed to wind backward. I felt as exposed and insecure as I had when I stood in front of my junior high students in the late seventies—a naive, skinny hick.

The building had been a police training barracks; it could just as easily have been a jail, with rooms tiny as cells. We didn't have anyplace to sit except on the beds, which were so close together that our knees bumped if we faced each other. I couldn't sit upright on the bunkbed without bumping my head. The windows were narrow. A small sink. The doors had a punch code which some of us discovered was not changed by the management, so the last tenant of a room was not locked out. We didn't feel secure even inside our rooms. The group toilets generally had pee, vomit, and snarls of toilet paper on the floor.

There was a breakfast room where we swallowed our cornflakes in a non-smoking eating room, which had only slightly less smoke. A television blared at all times. Most of our cell mates loved to mouth one of the oldest Anglo-Saxon words, using it four or five times each sentence, as every part of speech except as a preposition. I'm fond of the earthy expressiveness of that word—my father used it when he was startled into fear—but in the mouths of these young people it seemed excessive. Next to the breakfast room was a bar where music played until early morning. The bartender's job was to sell the kids too much liquor, the bouncer's was to throw the drunk ones out into the street—a case of the left hand ignoring

what the right hand was doing. The women of our group, strong and self-sufficient, took care of themselves, but it wore them down to have these young drunks leering at them.

It was the most depressing place I've ever slept in, including mice-ridden shacks in the Utah desert and ruined trailers on the Navaho reservation. We couldn't move out, having spent all our money in advance. It and other places like it were the only lodging available for a group as large as ours by the time I'd made arrangements. We were stuck, so we spent as much time as we could at plays, churches, and museums, or wandering in the parks.

The students could have scattered in all directions, wandering the city in groups of two or three. After some tense times in the country, I thought they were tired of each other and would cherish being separate. The opposite happened. The members of our wandering group wanted even more to be together. We didn't have a good place for class, so we met in Tavistock Park, in the LDS meetinghouse, in Kew Gardens, in a corner of the plaza in front of the British Museum. Our last night in England, our friend Gary led the group in a long walk across Richmond Park, and we spent the evening at his and Helen's house. They served us by letting us relax together. We sat in a circle on their back lawn while Gary and Helen ferried food out to us: sliced steak on bread, a wonder of a salad, and roast chicken. They shared their home because they knew we had nowhere to go. It was an astonishing act of kindness. We talked, sang, and wept together.

It's probably clear from the shape of this scattered and unwieldy narrative that I'm working up to saying that the peace and mutual respect we'd gained as a group remained strong, that the healing that started in my soul as we walked across England continued. The story will be that we were like Zion's Camp, firm in our faith despite the challenges. Of course that happened, but I can't write the words without feeling I'm manipulating the truth, just as I did when I told the students our lodgings would be Spartan. It certainly was a hellish place, but looking back, I can hardly feel bad that we pampered and protected, middle-class, white Americans had to live in unpleasant lodgings for two weeks while we wandered one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Another problem with describing what happened as an epiphany after a trial was that some of the students continued to suffer from my carelessness. Because we had insufficient breakfasts and because the students

were on their own for food, those who were out of money suffered from hunger. The program coffer was empty, so I couldn't afford to give the whole group an allowance. We even had to cut back on some of the main tourist sites we'd planned on taking in—the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, and St. Paul's. The students could go on their own, but those who had no cash or credit were stuck. One woman wept when I announced the state of our budget. "What will I do?" she said under her breath. She and others had no reserves of money to fall back on. And after hearing me say that I had put into the program a thousand pounds of my own money, they were reluctant to ask for help.

In their journals and the final essay, nearly everyone wrote about how bad the Generator was, but they also wrote, which still astonishes me, that they treasure the experience. Many of them had nearly an identical experience as mine—learning to accept a spotted universe and to forgive their own inadequacies. Amanda wrote: "In losing myself, exposing myself to an uncontrollable environment I have found myself. My cycle is not over. I will never cease to find beauty and ugliness all around me and become lost again. . . ." Tawna wrote, "I have had a real struggle on this trip to get to that point of trusting my own views, and trusting in who I am. In many places I would feel almost less than everyone, because I wasn't seeing or enjoying what they were." Through reading John Ruskin and through talking with the other students she came to believe that "our experiences can be similar enough to teach us empathy and understanding, yet different enough to be of value. . . ." Elise wrote: ". . . as I have listened to people's stories and talked about their lives . . . , my feelings of intimidation have disappeared. My insecurities have dwindled, and I have been able to develop some of the strongest friendships I've ever made."

Again and again as I read their final essays, I felt a rush of recognition. They were feeling what I had felt, what I had thought I was alone in feeling. To my knowledge none of them had alcoholic fathers, but somehow they'd been made to think their lives were inadequate. The love of the transient, wandering group of Christian scholars helped them feel that even as strict a being as God might love them.

So we survived even the Generator, making our City of Enoch, our Zion, inside that hell. I was happier than I'd been for many, many years. Then the summer after we returned to Utah, no longer sustained by two dozen young and energetic students, no longer walking with these supportive friends, I plunged back into despair.

The Calculus of Redemption

Writing this, I'm back in the United States, I'm propped up by pillows in my bed in Provo, Utah. It's early morning and Karla sleeps next to me. My laptop makes a clatter in the half-dark room. The wooden slats of the blinds let in a pleasant, variegated light. Since returning from England, I've unlearned and relearned what I felt then. I've plunged into depression and, with the help of meds and therapy, pulled myself out again. Faith in others, God, and myself expands, but it's unsteady growth.

For as long as I can remember I've searched for a perfect day. A day during which my walk before God is spotless, without a single, wavering misstep. Maybe this desire is the worst kind of blasphemy, arising from the need, already described, to control my own destiny.

When I was in college, a freshman, it was my first time away from home; and while my mother and father weren't much in my mind, I was no longer propped up and comforted by our home life and traditions. In our house in Vernon, I was the oldest, the only boy, with five younger sisters. In a patriarchal society, I was a prince. I didn't have that context during my freshman year at school. But I didn't even think about them, the people who had been my emotional context my whole life. What I longed for, like the desire for water, was the affection of my girlfriend, a year younger than I, still in high school. Her white face and slender arms were before me every time I shut my eyes. I couldn't do homework, couldn't focus in my classes.

I tried to pray my way back to happiness. Because there was no place to be alone, I went to a corner outside the cafeteria wall, inside a small alcove of evergreens. I thought what I had to do was to give my whole being to God, every impulse, vestige of autonomy. My soul would be his. That's what devotionals in the Smith Fieldhouse told me to do. Give your will to God, and he will give it back. In my mind that would be a perfect act and after that all my days would unfold, smooth as vellum—no more feelings that I did not live in a righteous family. But I never could give all. Praying in the corner of a wall behind the tall shrubs, I always withheld a little of myself. I thought that treasuring my own identity was a sin. I don't think that now.

One problem was that God is named Father in Heaven, and I couldn't trust my earthly father. How could I give my soul to someone who might let me down? Of course, I didn't think this at the time. I was living in a fog of instinct. Or that's how it seems looking back. I was sure God

wanted to wrest control from me. He would make me give up my desire for that clear-faced girl, the silence over my father's sin, my longing for praise. How could I give God any of those?

I've never really railed at God or fate. But, as my therapist pointed out, I still resent any external control. Many of the protagonists of my favorite author, Thomas Hardy, shake their fists at God. Others, mostly women, abandon themselves to the ride. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* a woman is anxious about her husband, who is a very short man. She wonders whether she's made the right choice, but by then, for her in those times, it's already too late. She will be married. She clenches her teeth and says, "Let's go!" Tess's mother says after the rape, "Tis fate, what was meant to be." These rural women choose to be participants in their own destiny by abandoning control to accidental and purposive forces outside their own bodies. But I've always fought this realization. Passivity in the face of life has always seemed a little like taking pleasure resting in a river that is going to carry me over a waterfall.

Through therapy and on the walk across England, I solidified this second way of thinking as it applies to my relationships with people. Others don't love me for how well I manage projects for them. The students on this trip loved me for my complete self, including my lapses of competence. From this understanding I postulate that my Heavenly Parents and Christ, the son, could be the same. They might not be deities who love me only because my life is a well-tilled field.

The feeling is like a calculus of the soul.

My A. P. math teacher told us a story that explained how imprecise calculations could still be effective. I found out later it's one of Zeno's paradoxes. A boy and a girl sit on opposite ends of a park bench. He moves halfway to her and then he stops, bashful. She smiles coyly and slides halfway to him. Encouraged, he slides across half of the remaining space. Theoretically they will never reach each other because there is an infinity of halves in any space. But they get close enough. That's what happened to me in England. We had bad times, times when we nearly froze, times when we fought over writing assignments and personality differences. We were disorganized, lost until it seemed to be our natural state, sometimes irritated or angry with each other. But generally and incompletely we forgave each other. It was not perfection, but it was close enough for this life.

As I write this, I feel the confidence again. Many of the students have disappeared from my life, but I remember marching out ahead of them

and I remember that God loves me with and through and despite my flaws. How did Christ shine forth on us as we wandered England, and as I continue to wander the desert of my life? Not like a blinding light, but scattered and refracted, incomplete, a quiet light, still as the light of the moon.



Nola de Jong Sullivan, *Minnewanka Lake*, watercolor, 11" x 14", 1985, collection of the artist