



When Answers Aren't Enough
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Some details have been changed in order to protect the privacy of individuals whose stories are told here.

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About the Book

Likely, the title has given it away: this is not a book of answers. If you are seeking possible solutions to the troubling questions that arise in times of suffering, may I suggest Philip Yancey's works *Where Is God When It Hurts?* and *Disappointment with God*. I know of no better books on the problem of pain.

The book you now hold is a series of meditations, reflections on tragedy and on how we might experience God as good when answers fail to satisfy. You might think of what I've written as a private journal made public or as a letter from a friend.

From the beginning, I decided to write this book as a story, a personal journey, since this is, in fact, how life comes to each of us. Much of it is written in the present tense, as though it were happening now, so that you may join me on the road. Along the way, you may find at times that you disagree with something I've said. By all means, object. I welcome the interaction as we travel together.

In writing this book, one problem quickly arose with my approach

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to telling a story. What should I do with a conversation I had during the timeline of part 3 of the book when the content of that conversation fit more naturally in part 1? If I insisted on a perfectly linear telling of events, the book would state in one part what it had already said in an earlier part, and that would frustrate the reader: *Why does the author keep repeating himself?* At times, therefore, I have moved a story here or there to ensure a more acceptable pace to the book. The stories are, however, all true (if at times anachronistic).

Part 1 begins soon after the shootings at Virginia Tech and is, for that reason, the rawest and roughest around the edges. I have intentionally kept the early pages grim; too many Christian books skip too quickly to hope, leaping over thoughts and feelings germane to people in pain. The result is a work that may be true but doesn't sound real. My goal is to see how we might experience God as good when we are covered in sadness. To do so, things must seem truly bad before they can get better.

Part 2 is a call to remember the world as it was before grief and suffering marred it. If there is a good creation buried beneath the brokenness, then perhaps there is a good God who designed it. Can we find him? Can we taste and see that he is good?

Part 3 is the "Where to from here?" It seeks to imagine the world that will be when God's will on earth is done as it is in heaven. Consequently, and not surprisingly, this is the most hopeful portion of the book—though I think you'll find a good deal of joy throughout.

From start to finish, I have written with author Annie Dillard's exhortation in mind:

Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew

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you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?¹

Here is my attempt at answering Dillard's questions. Here is my journey. I hope you'll walk with me on the way.

Matt

Preface

I was waking up, lured out of sleep by a low and distant rumble and thud. My hazy, slumbering mind at first dismissed the sound as road construction, echoing up from the street outside my window. I rolled over, tried to ignore it, but it came closer, grew louder. As my mind surfaced from sleep, I picked up the perfectly timed repetition. *Rumble and thud. Pause. Rumble and thud. Pause. Rumble and thud.*

Had to be a drum. I pulled myself from under the covers and, rising, shuffled groggily to the window to open the blinds. Eyes adjusting to the light, I saw a seemingly endless stream of blue-and-white-clad cadets marching slowly, somberly, one after the other, into the cemetery across the street from my house. It looked like an invasion. But the stoic faces gave it away. I knew immediately what this must be.

A few days earlier, on the evening of April 16, 2007, Chris Hutto, a home group leader in the church I copastor at Virginia Tech, clung anxiously to a cell phone, waiting for word, for good news, about his

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friend Matt La Porte. All anyone knew was that thirty-three students and faculty were dead, and an undetermined number of others injured, in the worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history. Something was certainly wrong with Matt — he would have called by now — but perhaps he was only injured. Chris nervously fiddled and fumbled and held to the phone for good news that would never come. Matthew Joseph La Porte, just twenty years old, was gone.

The first days following the shootings were a blur. I got up early and stayed up late, talking with students, answering reporters' questions, and helping in whatever little ways I could. The days were exhaustingly long. I finally found a few minutes one afternoon to rest and lay down for a quick nap. I was out immediately. Only minutes later came the rumble and thud of that solemn drumbeat, dragging me back to the wakened world I wanted so badly to escape. *I cannot even hide from this in sleep.*

I was clinging, holding on, like Chris to his cell phone, to the dream that maybe life wasn't all that bad. But as I stood at the window, waking up, peering through the blinds and watching the mournful march, a heavy, sinking sadness set in. I thought of Matt La Porte the previous Monday, dressed in his Corps uniform, on his way to class in Norris Hall — Was he running late? Did he hurry to get there? — absolutely unaware. Unaware that he was breathing in his last crisp mountain air; feeling a final blast of Blacksburg wind; watching snowflakes flitter and fall, out of season — the last of a lingering winter, and the last of Matt's short life.

I watched from the window as long as I could. The entire Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets, some seven hundred strong, marched into the cemetery, up over a hill, and out of sight to say good-bye to Matt.

I was still waking up.

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It was not the Virginia Tech shootings alone that set me on my journey this summer. I received a call late one night, nearly a month afterward. The caller ID on my cell phone read “Mom and Dad.” I knew instantly that something was wrong. They were usually in bed by ten o’clock, and it was almost midnight. I answered the phone, and a shaken voice answered back.

“Matt, it’s Mom.”

My face flushed, and my heart began racing as I waited to hear what had happened.

“I’m at the hospital with your dad. He fell off the roof cleaning gutters tonight.” Interrupting herself, and sounding as if she were trying to convince herself more than me, Mom interjected, “He’s okay though. He has a broken arm and his face is pretty banged up—his jaw is broken—but he’s awake.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

There was a long pause, and then a wavering response. “Yes,” Mom said, obviously crying. “I’m fine. I didn’t want to call, but your dad keeps saying he wants you to come home.”

I held back the fear of the “what if” questions long enough to pack. What if he *wasn’t* okay? What if he wasn’t going to be okay? *You can think about that in the car.* I threw a few shirts and some jeans in a bag. *How long will I be there? Do I need a suit? Am I going to a funeral?*

It’s the waiting that is hard, waiting to learn the fate of a loved one, like Chris had waited in vain for good news about his friend Matt. I waited for three hours on the drive down to North Carolina, wondering whether Mom had been totally truthful about Dad’s condition. Dad had fallen off the roof that evening at seven, but no one

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called until midnight. Had things taken a turn for the worse? Why was Dad asking for me to come?

The situation was, more or less, as Mom had described when I arrived at the hospital in Charlotte. Dad was awake and talking, though mostly nonsensically due to heavy medication and the trauma of the impact. He had landed face-first on the wooden deck behind the house, bracing himself only slightly with his left arm, now broken in several spots. His head on one side was swollen to what seemed twice its size, and a steady trickle of blood ran from his right ear, staining the starchy white pillow beneath.

The sight sickened me. I am not usually bothered by blood or needles or hospitals, but the image of my dad, mumbling through a fractured jaw, grimacing now and then in pain, was nauseating. I tried to lighten the mood: "Took a little fall, did we?" I said, smiling to hide the shock of seeing Dad broken for the first time in my life.

Over the next couple of days, Dad drifted in and out of lucidity. At moments, he was hysterically funny from morphine; at others, he was vulgar and crass. He couldn't help any of it, of course; he couldn't choose his demeanor. The drugs did that for him. The hours when he was especially distant and foggy, I had the awful sense that I was glimpsing the future when my parents would be old. And it was as if, in his drug-induced state, my dad somehow knew this. He seemed to read my thoughts, and lacking any filter for his own, he said with a wry smile, "This is just the start of what you have to look forward to, Son, the older your mom and I get."

I had to leave the room. Strange how, at age thirty, in an instant of blinding clarity, I could learn what I had known all my life. That my parents are not immune to death was obvious, but I do not believe I had ever come so close to imagining what that inevitable day might be like as I did standing over my father's hospital bed, watching him

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come and go from reality. For all its high tragedy, its terrible death toll, its dizzying media blitz, and its sweetly somber vigils, April 16 was unable to do what this one simple moment did in bringing my childish hopes down around me. *We will not avoid finality. None of us will. Not even . . .*

My dad is fifty-eight. Average life expectancy in the United States is about seventy-eight years. *If my dad is average . . .* I began to do the math. *Twenty Christmases left, if we're lucky.* Reality came sharply, screamingly into focus, as if for three decades I'd lived under anesthesia and was just waking up and coming to, finding out what the real world was all about. What thirty-three families found out a month ago. What we all must eventually find out, whether death comes by tragedy or simply by old age. Suddenly I hated hospitals, everything about them, what they represented, that people are (that my dad is) temporary, finite, leaving. I have never been naive, so the eventuality of death did not catch me by surprise. What stunned me that day, in words from a father drugged out of his mind, was how fast the end was gaining on us.

I tried for two days to lull myself back to sleep, back under the anesthesia, but I was wide awake now. Dad came through surgery on his arm fine, and afterward, as soon as I could, I got on the road, got away, and headed home to Virginia. I felt guilty for leaving so soon, Dad still recovering, but everyone acknowledged there was nothing more for me to do, that I had a job to get back to. Much of the way home, I was like a man holding his breath, badly needing to exhale, to let it all out.

Just before the Virginia border, I passed a patch of brightly colored wildflowers dancing in the breeze, showing off their brilliant shades of red, purple, and gold. After a week of nothing beautiful, of days spent staring at the off-white sterility of hospital walls and

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hallways, flowers looked out of place in the world, as if they all should have died with that phone call from Mom at midnight.

As the flowers flew by in a blur and then faded from sight in my rearview mirror, I wondered, How can this world be, in the same instant, so beautiful and yet so awful? I thought of what Jesus said one day on a hillside, how if God clothes the lilies so extravagantly, how much more will he care for us? “Look at the birds of the air,” he said. “They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”¹ *One would have thought.*

“Not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it.”² *Really? What about my dad? What about Matt La Porte? Or the thirty-two others? Or the two hundred Iraqis who died the same day but barely got a mention in the news because the focus was on my school? Or how about the six million Jews who fell to the ground in the Holocaust? Did the Father see them?*

Tears blurred the road in front of me as the pressure in my chest built toward eruption. The grief of the past week—of the past month—had finally come calling, rising up, until at last I slammed my fist on the steering wheel, looked toward heaven, and exploded. “God, I am not okay with this! I’m not okay with this world! I’m not okay with death, with my dad’s mortality! I cannot understand how you can let this world go on and on and on like it is, year after year. I know you are good. I know none of this is your fault. But knowing that doesn’t make it any better. I’m not okay with this, God.”

—

I’m still not.

I do believe God is good. Remember, I’m a pastor. I affirmed that belief to my congregation after the April 16 shootings. I affirm

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it now. And I know how to work out in my head the familiar “why” questions people ask after tragedy.

If God is good, why is there so much suffering in the world? It’s simple, really. One doesn’t need even a paragraph to explain it; a couple of sentences will do. God made people to walk in love toward him and toward each other. Man rebelled against God, walked away from that most essential of relationships, and the result has been the suffering and evil and war and death that we see every day.

Why doesn’t God just stop it? Again, simple. Scripture says God made humans in his image. Whatever else that means, it at least means we, like God, have a will, the ability to choose our actions. We can choose to love goodness or to love evil. Some people sadly opt for evil, and the result is suffering. But if God ever took from us that choice, he would be taking from us his image. We would be animals, not humans.

See, I know the answers. I know them by heart and can even recite them in my sleep. But what I’ve learned this spring is that sometimes answers aren’t enough. They can carry us far, but only so far. Then what? When we can answer our own questions but our hearts still ache, then what? When we can outwit and outdebate every atheist objection to the reality and goodness of God, yet our dad still lays bruised, bloodied, and broken—then what?

We’ve dodged a bullet with Dad. The doctors say he will be fine. He’ll need more surgery and then therapy for his arm, but his jaw should heal on its own. And once he is off the pain medication, his normal demeanor will return. It could have been a lot worse.

It will be one day. Dad will not dodge the bullet of death forever, as thirty-three others did not this spring. Nor will I dodge the bullet of dealing with his death. Then what?

I believe God is good, but how do I *experience* him as good when

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life isn't? There must be a way. The psalmist says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good."³ "Go beyond the intellect, beyond mere knowledge," he says. "Taste it. See it. *Experience* it!" But how can I when the world is dark and grief is raining down?

Spring this year has been a season of waking up, of coming to see the world as it truly is, the blinders off. And I do not want to run any longer from what I've found, despite the horror and sadness and the innocence lost. I do not want to hide from it, not even for a second. To hide is to live a lie, a fantasy. Ours is a real world, and I want to find a way of embracing it, as Jesus did. I want to remember what it was he intended for this world, his original dream, for surely what I've seen this spring is not it. And I want to live as he did—joyfully, expectantly—as if that dream were still a possibility.

Jesus lived fully aware of the darkness yet not overcome by it at all. I am not sure yet how one does that, but I want to find a way. (Again, there has to be a way.) But I know simple answers will not—*cannot*—get me there. Peace lies along a different path, and so I begin a journey to find it.

This will be a time of discovery.

Part 1

*A Heavy,
Sinking Sadness*

Embracing the World That Is

One

Lately I've been walking in the evenings. I tend to do that when stuck on a question. Maybe I'm trying to walk it off. On days when I have time, I drive out to Pandapas Pond in Jefferson National Forest to be in nature. Once there, I set off through the woods or slowly stroll along the water's edge, deep in thought or prayer.

Most days, because of time, I have to settle for the streets around my home. I can quickly climb to the top of Lee Street, turn around, and look out over Blacksburg, the Blue Ridge backlit by the setting sun. From there, I can see much of Virginia Tech. The stately bell tower of Burruss Hall rises proudly above the rest.

On nights like tonight, when I get a late start and the sun is already down, I head for campus. At its center, separating the academic and residential sides of the school, sits the Drill Field, a wide-open grassy space named for the exercises that the Corps of Cadets practices to perfection there. After dark, old iron lampposts, painted black, blanket the ground in overlapping circles of light.

A Heavy, Sinking Sadness

It was here on the Drill Field, the day after the shootings, that students placed thirty-two slabs of gray limestone rock—Hokie stones, as they're called—in a semicircle in front of Burruss Hall, to commemorate the lives of loved ones lost. Thousands of mourners descended on the place, bearing with them a flood of condolences, a mix of bouquets, balloons, and poster-board sympathies. They came sniffing, clinging to tissues and to one another, and lifting their sunglasses to wipe tears from their tired, red eyes. The world came as well, vicariously through television, watching us, kneeling with us in grief.

I also came, revisiting the stones day after day, and sometimes at night, drawn to them by a need to connect with the dead whom I never knew. Always there was something new here, some trinket that had been added. At times the items seemed odd: a baseball for every victim, an American flag by every stone, though some of the dead were international students.

People took their time passing by this spot. There was no need to rush; there were no classes to attend. It would be days, dark and long, before there would be any distractions from the pain. For a time, there was no world beyond this place.

By day, soft chatter could be heard around the memorial. After sunset, no one spoke a word. During daylight, masses huddled near the stones, peering over shoulders to read the notes left there. At night, however, mourners passed by in a single-file line, waiting their turn, patient with the people in front who wished to pause at every name.

The masses have since receded. The Drill Field now is vacant (except for these stones) and silent. The semester has ended, most of the students are gone, and only the sounds of insects disturb the

stillness of the summer evening air. If I close my eyes and take in the quiet, I can almost imagine nothing happened here.

Almost. Except for the stone reminders that lie at my feet. On one is written a simple, anguished note.

Jeremy,
We love you.
Mom and Dad

These stones are more than rocks. Each is all that remains of a son, a daughter, a husband who will never come home again. I picture my mom and dad, heartbroken, kneeling by a stone for me, had I been among the dead. Moreover, I imagine myself by a stone for my dad, had he not survived his fall.

This is a summer of mourning. I am grieving the world as it is. And I am asking, “If I embrace the world as it is, in all its sadness—if I refuse to bury my head in the sand, pretending all is well, but rather think and speak of the world as it actually is—can I, then, still know God as good? Can my experience of him be more consistent than my circumstances, which alternate between good and bad?”

Is this too much to expect?

Before I can know, I must face the world at its worst.