

NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS

The miraculous healing

Timothy W. Thomas

Man in the Arena "It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat." [1]

[1] "Citizenship in a Republic," Theodore Roosevelt Association, Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910.

The clock of my life struck fifty in 2009. I had an understanding of life. Blessed with a family and a job that kept me satisfied; I am happy. Shalom. Shalom is a Hebrew word meaning peace, completeness, and welfare. It can be used idiomatically to mean both hello and goodbye and it can mean peace. I was in Shalom. Seasoned by a few hardships through life's roller coaster of challenges and experiences, I considered myself prepared for most anything. Early in my adult life God had blessed me with a soul mate; the love of my life, Gwen. She is the wife that every man hopes to find; my best friend. Our marriage of twenty-six years is solid. Our lives are rich, happy, satisfied, and full. The kids are grown; two out of the three have already left home. Daughter Amanda is married and our oldest son Andrew is on his own. Austin, age sixteen, was in his junior year of high school.

On August 18, 2007 our family and relatives were at Lake Anna, Virginia. Our families had been invited by our daughter, Amanda, and her husband Danny Cox, to spend the weekend at his grandparent's lake house. Lake Anna is used to cool a nuclear reactor and is divided into two sections. One side of the lake is the public access commonly known as the "Cold side" and we were located on the private section known as the "Warm side." The water temperature is about ten degrees warmer than the cold side due to it being heated as it passes through the nuclear reactor cooling it. Our family and friends included Gwen, Andrew and Austin Thomas; Amanda and Danny Cox; Jamie, Marileigh, Adam and Mac Parrish. Austin's girlfriend, Calie Batchler, and Adam's girlfriend, Ann Leivonen, were also with the group. We had arrived at various times on the afternoon and evening the night before; with the exception of Andrew and Mac who drove down on Saturday morning.

The sky was clear and brilliant on Saturday morning and the day began with each of us making omelets in a bag. An interesting process of breaking eggs into a sealable plastic bag, adding everything you desire in an omelet and then boiling the plastic bag. Once everyone had eaten, we dressed for the lake and headed down to the water

expecting an enjoyable, uneventful, and relaxing day on the lake. The sky was clear, a beautiful navy blue. The air temperature was perfect; however, the water was not very refreshing being as warm as a bath.

By 11 a.m. we were taking turns on the three Jet Skies, the ski boat and a pontoon boat. The group traveled to the far side on the lake and anchored. Some of us played in the water while others left the immediate area on the jet skis. The lake, almost empty of water craft, was peaceful with quiet, relaxing-surroundings. We soaked in the warm, pleasant sunshine. The ski boat broke down; but, that was a minor inconvenience as we knew that we could easily tow it back. As some attempted to get it restarted, news came that the pontoon boat was now also disabled. The batteries for both boats were dead. Mac and Adam hooked up lines to both boats and pulled each boat and its passengers with Jet Skis; I road the third Jet Ski running circles around the flotilla. Of course, I was not exactly fashionable driving the Jet Ski while wearing swim fins with a SCUBA mask perched on top of my head. The mask felt like it might blow off my head so I slung it over my arm to keep it secure. At one point, I allowed the Jet Ski to slow to much as I attempted a turn and I fell over. Once back on, I realized that the SCUBA mask had been lost. This caused me a small amount of stress considering that a close friend had lent the mask to me and now I was wondering where to go to find a replacement and how much it would cost. Within a few moments I realized that that would be a small price to pay for the memories we were making as we enjoyed our families. We were blessed with this experience. I only wish that the loss of the mask would be the worst thing to have happened on that day! Once we were within a mile of the dock; we tethered the pontoon and ski boat together and anchored them. Everyone continued playing in the water near the boats and took turns riding the jet skis. The weather remained unchanged and perfect, not to warm with a clear, blue sky. The group ate lunch on the boat between 2 to 3 p.m., talking about the perfect weather and our surprise that there were still very few boats or people on the lake.

Adam got out the water skis and tied a line to a jet ski. My son Austin, sixteen years of age, got his first try at the sport. He had never water skied in his life. On his first attempt, he made it up and let go with one hand waving to everyone. He did not fall but chose when to release and go down. He got up a second time on his first attempt and rode around for a few minutes. Someone told him to simply let go and ski toward the boat. He had no problem doing what they had suggested. Ann made several attempts at skiing and Danny got up and slalomed. I made several attempts to get up, finally did. My shoulders would pay for this youthful stunt later. Gwen rode the jet ski, becoming more confident with Adam's coaching. Time past in a slow, relaxing way and eventually Jamie was on a jet ski.

A short time later, Adam was pulling Calie and Austin on two tubs behind his Jet Ski while Mac was riding the third Jet Ski. Marileigh and I sat next to each other on the pontoon boat and talked. I commented to her that I did not like jet skis compared to motorcycles because there were no marked lanes of travel on the water. Motorcycles, on the street and in parking lots, have the rules of the road and a better understanding of what to expect. Vehicular traffic moves in a more expected pattern. To me, jet skis were more forgiving on the water should you fall; however, if you are injured, when you go down, there is an excellent chance that you will drown. Just a few moments after making that comment, Adam pulled up to the pontoon boat, with Austin and Calie in tow, asking if anyone else wanted to ride the Jet Ski. No one did, so Austin told him that he and Calie wanted him to take them for one more ride. Adam agreed and they were off.

The group continued to swim, enjoying the day, until Adam suddenly rode up on a Jet Ski yelling my name. He was saying, "Hurry up! Get on! Austin's been hurt!" Because of the engine noise of the Jet Ski and Adam's distance from us as he pulled up to our boat, I was having difficulty understanding what was happening. I looked at Marileigh and asked, "Did he say Austin's hurt?" Adam continued to repeat his statement with urgency in his voice. Most of those on or around the boat began to pepper

Adam with questions; “Hit by what? Is he hurt?” I climbed onto the back of his jet ski as quickly as possible, not even considering the fact that I was not wearing a life jacket. Adam was visibly upset and was not acknowledging the barrage of questions. Now that I was seated behind him, I grabbed his shoulders and said, “Adam, we have to know, what hit Austin?” He cried out, “A JET SKI!” As he spoke those words he accelerated and we were moving at full speed. He drove a hundred yards to a boat. Adam, Mac, and Callie, being first hand witnesses to the event, knew what had happened. They knew the degree of trauma inflicted against Austin and they knew it was entirely directed to his head. I’m sure they were in shock and felt completely lost, unable to change what had happened. Helpless and powerless with a feeling of hopelessness was taking over their minds as they tried to grasp and understand the fact that they could do nothing to right this wrong.

What did they know? They knew that Austin and Callie had been on the tubes behind Adam’s Jet Ski. The boat we were now on, had been moving across the lake as the Jet Skis were playing in its wake. Moments prior to the accident, everyone had been on the left, rear side, in relation to the boat and its direction of travel. Adam had driven through the wake and as the tubes hit the wake, Callie fell off. Adam continued on and initiated a left turn to circle back and retrieve Callie. As Adam made this turn, Austin was thrown into the arc or apex of the curve so that he was accelerated to a much faster speed and was fighting to maintain his grip on the tube. Mac was still on the left side of the wake, approaching at a high speed so that he could jump and “catch air” as he passed over the wake. Due to the height of the wake, Mac was unable to see the low profile of Austin on the tube. As Mac was starting to rise onto the wake, he suddenly saw Austin slingshot toward him in the arc. There was no time to turn. His only option was to release the accelerator a moment before the impact.

Both Adam and Mac believe that Austin saw the Jet Ski just prior to contact and turned his head to the left. As the jet ski hit Austin; Mac, knowing that Austin would need immediate help, jumped off the back of the Jet Ski to render aid. The Jet Ski had driven

completely over Austin and the tube. After it passed, Austin's legs were still on the tube; however, his upper body was under water despite the life jacket he wore. Mac swam to Austin, reached under the water, grabbed his neck so that it would be protected and somewhat immobilized, bringing him to the surface. Austin being unconscious turned purple and then an ash color. Callie was in the water in the immediate area but due to the wake and waves had not witnessed the accident. She looked over and saw Mac holding Austin's neck. She swam over trying to help, but did not understand what has occurred. All she sees is Austin unconscious, not breathing and changing colors.

Right after the accident occurred, Adam looked up at the boat that is still driving away and yells for help. He does not know if they will hear him and he knew that even if they did, they might not come back. He also thinks that they will not likely know what to do to render aid so he jumps from the jet ski that had been pulling Austin and Callie and gets on the one that had hit Austin; the one driven by Mac that was not attached to two tubes. The only thing on Adam's mind was that he had to get to me because; hopefully, I would know what to do.

Adam pulled up next to this boat. We did not know the people. This boat was the one making the wake that the Jet Skis had been playing behind. As we pulled up, I could see people on the back of the boat, people in the water behind the boat and Austin was lying on his back on the boat's rear swim platform. Adam pulled up close enough to the side of the boat that I was able to climb onto the boat and over to Austin. I was aware that there were two unknown adults on the boat, a man and women, as well a young child who was crying. Austin was unconscious with no immediate visible signs of injury. His eyes were closed, so I opened each eye and found that they would not dilate or respond to the bright sun light. His breathing was labored and there were gurgling noises coming from his body and his lungs. I stood up and cried out, "Call 911." Having been a police officer for over twenty years, I was trained to respond that way in CPR classes. I found myself surprised that, given the seriousness of the event and my personal involvement with the patient, I remembered the training and was purposely fighting all emotions as I

dealt with the situation. As I knelt back down to continue to assess Austin, the unknown lady on the boat was dialing a cell phone and asking this question, “Where do we tell rescue to come to on the water?” I was unaware that Adam took off on the Jet Ski to find a phone at the boat docks to call 911.

As soon as the unknown lady on the boat asked the question about what to tell rescue, I knew that, despite Austin’s head injuries and the probable neck injuries, I had no choice but to move him into the boat and transport him to the shore so that rescue could treat him. From the swim platform on which he was laying there were three levels we would have to lift him over before we could place him in the rear seat of the boat. By this time Mac was standing on the swim platform at Austin’s feet. I told him to grab Austin's feet and I took control of his neck and head, trying to keep it stabilized. We lifted Austin to about waist level when I felt both of my feet sliding and slipping off the boat. There was nothing I could do to prevent this. I was bare foot, wearing only swim trunks. I didn’t even have my eye glasses. As I fell, I attempted to maintain control of Austin’s head, allowing my elbows and lower part of my arms to break his fall and soften his impact onto the boat. The sound of him hitting the boat made me sick. Frustrated and angry, my furry motivated me to fight through the problem. I pulled myself back up onto the boat and we moved Austin quickly into the boat without further incident. Standing inside the boat, I was facing aft and could see Callie floating, still crying in the water. I told her to get in the boat. I was now aware that my brother-in-law, Jamie, had responded to the scene on a jet ski and I remember seeing him, sitting on it next to the boat, with a concerned look on his face. He drove back to the pontoon boat to update everyone stranded there.

They were stranded out there because none of the boats had been repaired from the earlier breakdowns. There, Andrew, Gwen, Amanda, Danny and Anne were praying. They were upset and emotional, mainly because they had not seen Austin and did not know the extent of his injuries. When Jamie arrived, Gwen and the others asked if Austin

was going to be O.K.; but, Jamie would not or could not answer that question. He asked Gwen if she wanted him to take her to the accident. Gwen was in shock and couldn't decide if she should go or stay. Jamie left her and returned to try to catch up with the boat as we headed to shore. As the boat gently accelerated, it made a slow, cautious turn to the right while I continued to assess Austin. In the rear seat of the boat, Austin was barely able to breath from the liquid I could hear inside his lungs. He was making gurgling sounds. Fearing that he was about to drown, I stood directly over him, straddling his body. I supported his head and neck, while using my knees and elbows to turned him onto his left side. He began to choke. I spoke to him, controlling the inflection and tone of my voice; swallowing my emotions in an attempt to calm him. My voice was professional and supportive, telling him to spit and clear his airway. I continued to repeat this phrase, telling him that he was going to be alright and that we were taking him to get help. He began coughing up liquid. Wishing to continue assessing his injuries, I kept my right leg in the way so that all the liquid would run down my leg. He coughed up liquid three times. As I looked at my leg, I could see blood in the liquid, but not a large amount. This told me that there was a possibility that the blood could be from dental injuries and because there were no chunks or visible particles of food in the liquid, I felt confident that the liquid was coming from his lungs and not his stomach. I was remembering that he had recently eaten with us on the boat. Austin remained unconscious, but his breathing became very shallow. I could no longer see his chest move up or down. The gurgling noise in the lungs was gone; however, he continued to make faint groaning sounds. My mind was racing, spinning as it tried to process what was occurring so I started to take his pulse. I stopped when I realized that he was still breathing, although barely. I knew that he had to have a pulse because you can not breathe without one. Then, I processed the following steps in my mind. I could not start rescue breathing until he stopped breathing. I could not start CPR until his heart stops.

At that moment, I had what can only be described as an “out of body experience.” In my minds eye, I suddenly shot up about five hundred feet into the air, very high above

the boat. In my vision, I could see this small boat, surrounded by a huge expanse of water, encircled by a vast, unpopulated wooded area; for as far as I could see. In that instant, from this birds eye view, I came to the immediate, inescapable realization that there was nothing I could do now and that there was no one to help. In the next moment, I was on the boat, next to Austin. I looked to my left and saw Callie standing there shaking and crying. My first reaction was that it would be terrible for her to see her boy friend die. I told her that there was nothing we could do now, but pray. Time seemed to slow down or stand still.

I turned my attention back to Austin. I was holding his head in my hands and noticed how grown up he looked, realizing that he was a handsome looking young man. His hair was wet and pressed back in the way water combs your hair as you exit from being submerged. I was amazed to find no visible signs of injury on his head, other than an enormous contusion existed on the left side of his head, in the scalp, which was now resting in the palm my right hand. There were no abrasions, cuts or bruises. No blood other than what he had coughed up. Because I could not see his chest moving, it was necessary to lean down and put my right ear next to his mouth and nose so that I could hear him breathing. From this position, my head was turned and angled to my left so that I was looking into space at the most beautiful, clear, blue sky. At this point, I was almost certain that Austin was dieing. Calm swept over me and as I looked into the sky, I prayed. I thought that I was praying out load; but, Callie later told me that I was not. My prayer was not for healing. The prayer was very simple and unbelievable. It poured out of me without effort, as if it was God making me say these words. I felt that I spoke them in a “matter of fact” manner. I said, “God, You gave him to me and I willingly give him back to You. I hope You do not take him, but if You do, I will be O.K.”

Within what seemed to be a very short time the boat was pulling into a cove. There were a lot of people standing on the shore and we stopped several feet out because there was no dock. At some point, Adam had returned from trying to find a phone to call

911. He asked Jamie where Gwen was and he told her he couldn't get her to come. Adam jumped on one of the Jet Ski's drove to her location on the stranded boats and told her to come with him to the scene. Once she arrived, she climbed on the boat, looked at Austin and had a strange look on her face. I did not want to look her in the eye because I was afraid that she would know what I felt. What I knew was almost certain. She spoke a question which was delivered more as a statement, "He's going to be alright?" Gwen later told me that at this point in the event, she kept thinking that he was not seriously injured, that he would be taken to the hospital, wake up and they would tell us that he had a small concussion and that he would be O.K.

The sound of the rescue units could now be heard approaching and I told Gwen and Callie to get out of the boat so that rescue would have room to work. The first two paramedics waded over to the boat and climbed aboard. One of them told me to continue stabilizing Austin's neck. He reached under his back and carefully ran his hand up his spine to the base of his skull. The paramedic looked to his partner and said, "I don't feel a stair step." I had never heard that term before, but it seemed to mean that he had not found a broken back or neck. Austin was strapped onto a backboard and several of us carried him through the water and up to the ambulance. Someone relieved me before I got all the way to the ambulance and I turned to Gwen, telling her that he would be transported and Medevac'ed by helicopter. I knew that Austin would get to the hospital before us, so I wanted her to get back to the car and start driving there. I asked the ambulance driver where Austin would be taken and he said, UVA Medical Center. I told Gwen to go there and not worry about me; "I'll see if I can fly on the helicopter or find some other way there." Meanwhile, someone on the pontoon boat was able to flag down a passing boat to tow them into the boat dock. Mac went out with a jet ski to tow the ski boat. Gwen, Amanda, Andrew, Anne and Callie got in our car and started for the hospital. Marileigh, Danny, and Ann stayed at the boat dock waiting for everyone else.

From the shore location, an unknown citizen drove me up the hill to the area where the ambulance was awaiting the helicopter. I was still bare foot and only wearing my swim trunks and without my glasses. My leg was covered with the mess Austin had expelled. There were now two rescue units on the scene and I asked if they had something to clean my leg. Those that were standing there were not assigned to the empty rescue vehicle and were apologetic when they were unable to find anything to clean me with. Several times, rescue personnel from inside the vehicle treating Austin, came to me and told me that he was a fighter and was hanging on. At first, I thought they meant that he was conscious and combative. Then I realized that they meant that he was holding onto life and was not giving up. He remained unconscious.

Having been to a plethora of accident and emergency scenes as a police officer, I was reading the rescuers body language, expressions and how they carefully chose their words. I realized that my intuition and analysis of Austin's condition was correct and they knew that this was a life threatening injury. I asked about riding in the helicopter to the hospital and was informed that there was only enough room on board for the crew and one patient. It seemed as if it was a long wait for the helicopter to arrive; but it eventually did. The crew went in the ambulance and I would guess it took about twenty minutes or longer to prep him for flight. At one point, one of the crew came to me to ask questions and again used the same statement that Austin is a fighter and is hanging on. When they finally brought him out to move him to the helicopter, I briefly walked beside him, telling him that he was going to be alright and that I and mom would see him at the hospital.

Because I was barefoot, I was unable to walk through the sharp stickers and rocky field. I turned and with my head hanging low from sadness and because I was having trouble seeing anything other than the ground for lack of glasses. I started walking on the gravel shoulder of the paved road in an effort to return to the water and find a way to the hospital. Because of the painful rocks I was stepping on, I made my way down the hill at

what seemed a snails pace. Eventually, I heard the helicopter start its engines and the sound of the rotors beginning to turn. Soon, I could hear it lifting off so I stopped, turned in that direction and waited for it to come up over the forest of trees I was facing. As it came into view, I knew that this was probably the last time I would see Austin alive. Then the same voice of God came in my head and repeated this phrase, “No matter what happens, you are to be in Zambia next year.” (Don't feel lost at this statement. I will explain it later in the story.) Hearing this voice and these words again did not give me comfort that Austin would live. Instead, it was a message that I must hold on to my faith no matter how bad life becomes. I knew that should Austin live or die, God has a purpose and is in control of these events. My mind was accepting the fact that people die and tragedies occur. It was now my families turn to live with this tragedy. I was overwhelmed and wondering why God would grant me the honor of speaking directly and audible to me. My heart was not praying for Austin to be healed. Instead it was totally accepting what ever was God's will. Now I was pondering the question, “What would be our - new normal?”

I continued walking down the road until I found Jamie and Adam. A Game Warden was on scene demanding to speak to the driver of the Jet Ski that had hit Austin. They told him that he was towing one of the disabled boats with the Jet Ski and would be back shortly. We did not know the address of the lake house we were staying at and were asking people what would be the quickest way to get back there. We were told that the fastest way was by water.

Adam told me to come with him and he would take me there on the Jet Ski. Once again I was going for a ride without a life jacket because time was of the essence and at this point, I didn't know where to get one any way. We waded out to the Jet Ski and after falling over several times, we were successful in starting the journey. A sickening frustration was in my mind each time we fell over. Once we were moving, I told Adam to slow down so that we could make it all the way there without falling off. As we

approached the boat dock I could see Marileigh and Danny waiting for us. They asked where everyone was and we told them that they were involved in the investigation of the accident being done by the game warden. They asked what they should do and I told Marileigh to wait for them. Danny held up a bag containing dry clothes for me and I told him I wanted to go to the house and change so that I would be warm in the cold hospital; plus I needed to find my glasses. Danny drove me to the house in his white mustang. I changed into dry clothes, located my glasses, put on my gun and badge and returned to the car.

I told him that I was going to drive his car and that I would be driving it in a police emergency response mode. I gave him my cell phone and told him that I didn't know where I was going and that he would have to give me all the directions. I would give him my cell phone and have him call everyone on my cell phone that I could think of. I would also dictate what was to be said to those he called. UVA Medical Center is over an hour drive from this part of Lake Anna.

What we did not know at this point, was that Gwen and the rest of my family were not yet at the hospital. During this time, the Game Warden was raking Mac over the coals; a necessary, yet evil thing which is always required while investigating a serious accident. Jamie and Adam watched the interrogation and were helpless to give aid. This type of questioning is very difficult for Mac for several reasons. For one, he and Austin were very close friends and cousins. For another, he was also upset with himself for hitting Austin. This was an unintentional act, but he would continue to be hard on himself as the days, and weeks, would pass; always feeling guilty or responsible. He would want a "Re-do" and wish that he had done something differently to prevent the accident. Until Austin could tell him otherwise, he feared that Austin would hate and no longer want to have a relationship with him. Mac had to deal with so many questions for which there were no answers; "What if Austin died? What would life be like for him? How would this affect all the relatives? How would Tim and Gwen ever forgive him? He killed their son!

He killed Amanda and Andrew's younger brother! There were no answers; there never are in this type situation. Then there is the police investigation. Could he, would he, be charged in the accident?

Danny gave me directions and I started driving. This white mustang, a 2003 V8, was fast and powerful. I had not driven anything with a stick shift in years but it wasn't long before I was driving it like a race car. Using the headlights and horn to alert cars, I overtook and passed multiple vehicles. Most moved over without hesitation and allowed me by, others blocked my way. Initially, I was dealing with winding, two-lane roads. Even though I pushed the car to its limits, I maintained my wits and never exceeded my or the car's driving ability.

For twenty three years I have been a police officer and received over one hundred twenty hours of formal, police or emergency vehicle high speed driver training. I had completed the agencies police driver instructor course and had many years of practical response driving experience on my way to rapes, robberies and other emergencies. Remembering to maintain proper lane position was a must. Prior to entering a curve or turn, you must put the car in a certain position before arriving at the curve. If the curve goes to the right, then you need to be near the far left edge or "outside" of the lane; if it's a left turn, the far right side or "outside" of the lane. Be cognizant of your speed because the most common, deadly mistake is "too much speed going into the turn." Just before you reach the curve, properly judge the point when you need to engage the brakes so that you slow the vehicle while it is still traveling in a straight line. One of the keys to staying in control and not leaving the roadway is to understand the dynamics of the vehicle. By downshifting, you allow the transmission to slow the vehicle, reducing the heat build up on the brake pads. This also causes the vehicle's weight to transfer onto the front wheels. This is extremely helpful because the front wheels are responsible for the steering. By transferring the weight onto those wheels, the tires are better able to bite into the roadway and stay in contact with the pavement allowing you to maintain control. While engaged in

this activity, you must continue to watch and analyze the road. As you execute the turn, the steering wheel must be turned in a smooth motion, not jerking, so that a gentle transfer of a portion of the vehicle's weight will be forced toward the outside direction of the curve while the vehicle moves to the inside of the curve. The curve is divided not only with a center or second apex but also with a first and third apex. Which apex to hit in the curve is based on the type or firmness of the vehicle's suspension? I chose to take a point in the curve, shortly after the center or second apex. Once I hit the apex, I must quickly and gingerly finesse the throttle or gas pedal so that the vehicle begins to accelerate. Should you increase the acceleration to quickly, the wheels will break traction and you will spin out. Next, you allow the vehicle, as it passes the apex, to move or drift to the outside lane position again. In short, you remember proper lane position and "Outside / Inside / Outside." When properly executed, the driver begins to visually think the vehicle is standing still and the road is moving around it as all the various weight transfers occur.

Yes, this time I was over the line. I had no authority under the law, to drive a civilian car in such a dangerous manner; but, such is life when you know that you want to be present when a family member is about to die. Even if I arrived after he died, I needed and wanted to be there to support my family. Well, at least Danny gets to see his cars ability. No, he would never get to drive it this way but at least he is getting to experience it. As we traveled these country roads, Danny made the phone calls as I told him what to say, "This is Danny Cox, son-in-law of Tim and Gwen Thomas. Their son, Austin, has been hit in the head by a Jet Ski at Lake Anna and is being Medevac'ed to UVA Medical Center. Please start a prayer chain." I could hear Danny answer their questions by saying, "Tim's driving and can not talk." Danny would hang up and start calling the next person.

Since the accident, people have asked me, "Given the emotional situation; how were you able to think about starting a prayer chain?" All I can say is that it was completely natural for me to do that. Later in this story, we will talk about how important

it is to have a winning mindset, and although that is important; it is more important to have the mindset and dedication to properly prepare. As I review the story of my life, everything prior to this event prepared me for this moment in time.

At some point we got a phone call from Gwen and she told us that they had gone to the wrong hospital. I had Danny call 911 and ask for confirmation as to the hospital that Austin had been taken to. From my years in Law Enforcement, I know that emergency medical services sometimes must change treating hospitals while patients are in route. 911 confirmed that it was still UVA Medical Center. Danny called Gwen and she advised that they were arriving at the hospital at that time. Danny and I were now on a divided highway traveling at high speed. Traffic was light; however, I was concerned that I did not know the condition of the tires on Danny's car and if they were rated for high speed. As we topped a hill, I could see a state trooper on a traffic stop and realized that the car he had stopped was entering traffic. It was inevitable that this trooper would come after us so I let off the gas knowing that we would still pass him at high speed but I wanted to go ahead and pull over. As the trooper pulled into the traffic lane, we blew past him. He kept his emergency lights on and caught up to me as I was on the right shoulder of the road; attempting to bring the car to a quick stop without skidding. As soon as I came to a stop and before the trooper could exit his vehicle, I got out holding out my badge and identification. He quickly exited his car and I spoke very quickly and authoritatively telling him that, "I am Master Police Officer Tim Thomas, Fairfax County Police. My son has just been hit in the head by a Jet Ski and is being transported to UVA Medical Center and I'm headed there." The trooper waved me off and simply said, "Go!" It is unknown if the Trooper advised police in the area of what was occurring but you can not help but wonder since we saw no other Law Enforcement vehicle on our journey.

We were now entering Charlottesville but did not know the area or how to find the hospital. I instructed Danny to call 911 again, giving them our location and asking for the exit number and direction we needed to travel. He got the information and a short time

later we located the emergency room. As we approached the ambulance entrance, Danny told me to pull up and go inside; he would take care of parking. As I entered the lobby of the emergency room it was crowded and busy. At the information desk were three police officers who looked startled as I began speaking. At that moment they realized that I was a police officer wearing a gun and badge. My hair was a mess from the lake water and my face showed not only the sun burn of a day on the lake; but, also the stress from the accident, compounded by driving at high speeds for the last forty minutes. The drive would have taken a little over one hour under normal conditions. One of the officers took charge and handed me a security pass, telling me to follow him. We walked into the controlled access area of the actual ER where the officer was directed to take me to a “Quiet Family Waiting Room” where I was reunited with Gwen, Amanda, and Andrew. Callie and Anne were also present. Gwen told me that they had not been given any updates on Austin’s condition and they had not seen him. Now the waiting began. None of us had any concept of how much time passed as we awaited information. Jamie, Marilee, Adam and Mac eventually arrived. Everyone was so tired and still pumped emotionally from the traumatic events. We all knew this was bad. Then the questions start coming. Will he live? If so, how bad is he hurt? Will he recover...fully? Will he have physical or mental issues? There was no way to know and no one to tell us. Someone ordered pizza without my knowledge. When it arrived, I did not want to eat any of it; but, again my training told me that I should because I would need energy to continue to operate.

Suddenly two men appeared wearing surgical clothing. They identified themselves as Neurosurgeons and spoke very gently and clearly. They told us that Austin has suffered a traumatic head injury. There was injury to his brain. He has three bleeds occurring on the frontal lobes of his brain. A shock wave has been sent through the brain and he has a broken rib somewhere on his back, near his neck. They said the broken rib was a minor issue. They said that some swelling had already started to occur in the brain and that if it continues to swell; they may have to remove part of his skull. They said to prepare

ourselves for that possibility. They also said that they think that he would live and that he would most likely fully recover from his injuries in about a year. (To fully grasp the extent of Austin's injuries I will provide the medical terms that we were given on the Interdisciplinary Inpatient Discharge Summary. BRIEF HISTORY: Austin is a 16 year old Caucasian male who suffered a traumatic brain injury on 08/18/07. Pt was hit in the head by a jet ski; he sustained a posterior 1st rib fracture, skull fracture, an intracranial bleed, as well as left parietal and cerebellar bleeds. Pt was intubated on the scene and was reported to have LOC, emesis and posturing. Austin was transferred to the UVA Pediatric ER, where he was noted to be hemodynamically stable. Pt was later transferred to the PICU and was extubated successfully on 08/19/07.)

Back in the Quiet Family Waiting Room: Before the Neurosurgeons left, they asked if we had any questions; but, no one did. The doctors left the room. Everyone in the room was silent. At that moment, another amazing thing happened to both Gwen and I as a complete, full, warm feeling came over us. It can only be described as the presence of God. I broke the silence by saying, "That was good news." Someone questioned my statement asking, "It was?" I replied, "I don't know why; but, I feel like God is telling me that it could have been worse and that this is as bad as it is going to get." God had provided this "Peace that passes all understanding" to both Gwen and I at a moment that we really needed it. Now more support was starting to come in from our church family. All of those many prayers were being answered. Some of us made phone calls to update family and friends. John Kuzins, the Minister to Students from our church, showed up. He has always been very involved and supportive of Austin as was Chris Belson who traveled down with John. John was scheduled to leave on vacation that night or the next day but postponed the trip to check on Austin. Many friends drove the four plus hours round trip to visit and support us.

There came a point where the Game Warden showed up at the hospital to continue his investigation. I do not recall his name but he was professional. Jamie stood

near me during my interview, observing everything. As I provided the game warden with Austin's information for the report forms, he updated me on what his investigation had shown thus far. He basically told me things that I already knew with perhaps adding little more clarity. When he reached the point that I knew would be resulting in charges being placed, he told me that he would be presenting his findings to the prosecutor and the prosecutor would make that call. I told him that in my jurisdiction we have a form which a victim or parent of a victim may sign declaring that they do not wish prosecution to occur. He had not heard of such a form so one could not be provided. I requested that when he spoke with the prosecutor, that he convey to him that I did not want prosecution to go forward for two reasons. One, whether my son lives or dies, Austin would not want his cousin and buddy, Mac to be prosecuted. Austin was assuming and engaging in the same risky activity as Mac. They were both doing this for fun and would never intentionally harm each other. This was an accident; an unintentional act preventable only if one or the other of them had not been present. Secondly, I declared that should the prosecutor wish to go forward, against my will, I would resist and object in every way possible. Prosecution would serve no purpose other than to take an already bad situation and make it worse. If my son lives, the prosecutor would be in essence encouraging or enabling the further victimization of Austin by making him testify as a witness for Mac's prosecution. The Game Warden assured me that he would communicate and convey my statements to the prosecutor; but, in a more tactful manner. I thanked him and he left. Several days later, he called, telling me that there would be no prosecution.

Finally we were allowed to go in, a few at a time, to see Austin. He was asleep in the Intensive Care Unit and had been given something to keep him relaxed. The nurse told us that there was nothing that we could do tonight. Austin's hands and legs were restrained to each side of the bed. He had a catheter running to the edge of the bed and we were amazed to see that he had no visible cuts or bruises on his face or anywhere else on his body. The remainder of the evening passed as groups took turns going into the room to view him. Everyone gathered in the main Intensive Care waiting room, sitting and

talking; wondering what would happen next and how would he recover. I went to the restroom feeling fatigued and stressed. It was a small, one person restroom with a locking door. As the door closed behind me on my entry, I found myself looking into a mirror. Seeing the strained look on my face, I suddenly broke down with a cry that shook me to my core. I thought I would continue to cry but the urge disappeared or dissolved instantly. I knew that I needed to release the pent up, overwhelming sadness which my body was currently experiencing. But the urge to cry was gone. My training told me that eventually those feelings would come out and not to be concerned that they had not yet been released. I returned to the waiting room and continued to deal with the moment.

In the waiting room, there was a couple whose sixteen year old daughter had lost control of her car while in route to or from a church youth activity. This occurred a few days before Austin's accident. The vehicle had overturned and she had suffered massive head injuries. She had been sedated, in a drug induced comma and they were waiting for her to be brought out of the coma to see the degree of brain injury. Even though their daughter was worse off than Austin, they still spoke to us and voiced concern for his injuries. We would cross paths with them later in this journey. Also, the waiting room had a group of Christians who were signing songs and doing small group prayers for a very young child who had drowned in a swimming pool as the grandmother was baby sitting. The grandmother had been keeping the child and was unaware that this baby had fallen into the pool. When she found the body, the child was physically alive. This grandmother was in the waiting room from time to time and seemed in good spirit considering the situation. The child was not showing signs of brain activity and they were about to have to make the decision on life support. We all watched the mother and father of the child and listened to their prayers. The child did not live.

The nurse told us that there was no need for anyone to stay by Austin's bed overnight night because he would not be waking up. Troy and Debbie Batchler, the parents of Calie, had arrived earlier and everyone wanted to volunteer to stay at the bed

side. After checking with the nurse to clarify that she was sure we did not need to stay, I made the call and told everyone to leave and try to get some sleep. We all eventually moved outside the hospital and waited for the cars to be pulled around to pick everyone up. Jamie and his family as well as Danny were going back to the lake house for the night. Troy had come to me earlier in the evening, informing me not to worry about a place to stay because he had already used his travel points to get rooms for his and my family. That act alone made my legs weak. It is so amazing how people can think ahead and God allows them to minister to you. The knowledge that a burden had already been lifted from me that I had not even considered at this point, was marvelous. There would be many more such acts of kindness that would shortly occur. The Batcher's generosity would continue for many days, not just in hotel rooms; but, in remaining with us, providing support or relief as well as their friendship over many days.

Our group stood outside the hospital for what seemed like a long time as people said their goodbyes and prepared to leave. I remember talking to Jamie and telling him that I still felt like God was telling me that this was going to be all right. He seemed to reply that he wished he had the same assurance in his faith. He also thanked me for telling the Game Warden not to prosecute. I told him that that was the only option and he said that this is what he had expected me to do; but, that watching me in the process had helped him. We drove to the hotel and Troy got us checked in.

I recall walking into the hotel room with Gwen and Amanda. Gwen stepped into the bathroom, I carried luggage to some point in the room and Amanda sat on the edge of a bed. I turned around, seeing that she was starting to cry. Not being aware of what I was really saying, I responded in what would be a normal way, had this been a normal day. I said, "Amanda, what's wrong?" She responded in disbelief and frustration that I would be asking such a stupid question with all that was happening. I told her that I was sorry and hugged her. Unexpectedly, as I released her, I was overcome with the grief of thinking Austin had died on the boat and the emotional roller coaster from the rescue and response to the hospital and the briefings by the doctors. From deep within my soul I

cried in one sudden burst which was followed by sobs. As this release occurred, it was gone almost as quickly. Gwen and I held each other and I felt her tears and her body shaking as she cried. Aside from the earlier outburst in the hospital restroom, this was my only release. I felt I needed to cry more. I wanted to cry more, but could not.

That night, Gwen and Amanda went over to Debbie's room and stayed up a while, talking and decompressing through socialization. I tried to sleep but my mind could not slow down. It continually jumped from scenes spread throughout the day. Everything was so vivid, so clear. I was reliving each event. I tried to cry but could not. In my mind, I held to my faith, not that Austin would be healed; but, that God would be with us no matter the outcome; aware that I had not prayed for his healing or that he would live. It was as if God had already assured me that He knew my wants and needs and that I did not need to ask. My soul was praying for me, without ceasing.

Two days later, I was at a local hotel, one or two miles from the hospital. I did not have a car and didn't want to call anyone to pick me up. I needed the exercise and thought that a walk would be good to relieve some of the stress I was experiencing. As I started walking to the hospital, my mind was processing much of what had occurred. God placed in my mind, the song by Ray Boltz called The Anchor Holds. Having sung that song many times, I knew the words to every verse; as I walked and sang, I began to cry, realizing how true those words were to what was now a reality. When tragedy strikes, you need to be prepared both in terms of your personal spiritual relationship with God as well as in how to handle the emergency. When tragedy strikes, we already need to know God so that he is with us through the storm. We need to know Him so that we are founded in our faith and know our belief system is on solid ground, with core values and beliefs. Most of the time, because we live our lives in a state of denial, we seldom are. During Austin's traumatic accident recovery, I would begin to sing that song. I draw strength from the words of that song.

THE ANCHOR HOLDS

By Ray Boltz

I have journeyed through the long dark night; out on the open sea.

By faith alone, site unknown, and yet His eyes were watching me.

The Anchor holds, though the ship is battered.

The Anchor holds, though the sails are torn.

I have fallen on my knees as I faced the ragging sea.

The Anchor holds, in spite of the storm.

I've had visions, and I've had dreams, and I've even held them in my hands.

But I never knew, they could slip right through like they were only grains of sand.

The Anchor holds, though the ship is battered.

The Anchor holds, though the sails are torn.

I have fallen on my knees as I faced the ragging sea.

The Anchor holds, in spite of the storm.

I have been young, but I'm older now,

And there has been beauty these eyes have seen.

But it was in the night, through the storms of my life.

Oh, that's when God proved His love for me.

The Anchor holds, though the ship is battered.

The Anchor holds, though the sails are torn.

I have fallen on my knees as I faced the ragging sea.

The Anchor holds, in spite of the storm.

Over the next several days Austin would be completely out of his mind. At first he was tied or strapped into the bed. As he improved, the straps were removed and he was placed in a bed with a tent over it from which he could not escape. He only wanted to sleep, constantly complained and had a distant, lost expression on his face. One day, two medical professionals from the UVA Kluge Children's Research Center came to his room. They forced him out of bed and made him put on a shirt. Next, they got on each

side of him and forced him to try to walk. For the most part, they were carrying or dragging him down the hallway. Throughout the encounter, Austin was crying and complaining, wanting only to sleep. After moving him about fifty yards down the hall, they sat him in a chair and asked him questions while keeping him from falling over. A few minutes passed and they again pulled or drug him back to the room and put him in another chair. They told him to put a small puzzle together and then gave him a crayon and told him to write for them. He continued to cry and complain, demanding that he be left alone and bargaining with everyone, setting conditions of what he would do for them only if they promised him that he could get back in bed. They gave him a T-shirt and told him to put it on. He did, but did it in a violent, mad or angry way. He tried to write with the crayon and they put him in the bed. He instantly fell asleep. We looked at what he had tried to write but found it to be nothing more than scribble. As we spoke with the two therapists, a nurse kept looking at the crayon scribble. Suddenly, the nurse said, "I can see what he wrote." We looked at it and with her help we all saw it. He wrote, "I want to go to bed." The therapists told us that Austin was healing at a tremendous rate and that they were going to try to get the doctors to release and move him to KCRC because they thought they could start working with him.

The next day he was sent to KCRC. On the day of his arrival there, he was evaluated by Physical, Speech and Occupational Therapy as well as Education Services. I accompanied him on these visits and found him to be completely retarded. He was tired, agitated, and emotionally unstable; always wanted to go to bed or home and could not sustain attention to a task for more than a few minutes. There was difficulty with any academic activity that required processing information and providing an outcome. He could not do the simplest tasks, had to be tied into the wheel chair and would cry, looking back at me, telling me that if I loved him; I would make them stop.

Throughout the various evaluations, I was impressed at how the therapists seemed untroubled at his inabilities and constant complaining. You could see that they were

analyzing his every move and word. They knew how hard to push him. Throughout this, I had to fight my emotions and attempt to remain stoic. This took place on a Friday and no therapy occurred over the weekend. On Monday, Gwen and Amanda joined Austin in therapy. I peeked in the rooms from the hall now and then. When they returned, both Gwen and Amanda were in tears, horrified at seeing how retarded and mentally damaged Austin was. I told them that he had made marked improvements from what I had seen on Friday and that he was really improving. Each day he got better, but for each improvement, we realized how much further he needed to go to return to normal. When in this type situation, you are always wondering what normal will be. Will it be normal in the way it used to be or will there be a new normal. We didn't know if God planned for him to fully recover. How far would he make it? We wish now that we had taken video tapes and photographs of Austin throughout his recovery. We didn't bring out any cameras for fear that it would upset him. Much later we would learn that his mind was blanked out from about a half hour before the accident to almost two and half weeks later. He does not remember the accident or anything that happened in the hospital. To look back now, it would be entertaining for him to hear and see how he was talking and acting. There were so many stages that Austin transitioned through and the emotional roller coaster never ended. While in KCRC, Gwen and I took turns each night, sitting in a chair next to his bed to comfort him when he would wake up. He was like a caged animal inside this enclosed bed. It was very difficult to watch him wake up at night, looking so disoriented and mentally lost. He would cry, wanting to be out of the cage, wanting to be home and making the statements that if we loved him, we would let him out.

KCRC has purchased a very small, one level, extremely dated, hotel next door to the hospital to be used, free of charge, by the family members of their patients. This is a wonderful help to the families. It is very basic, nothing fancy, but something that every family encountering such a tragedy would be grateful to have. One night, while Gwen was staying in the room with Austin, I went to the room. I was exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually. I wanted to sleep, but could not relax. As I lay on the bed

feeling alone and grieving over my seriously injured son, I turned on the television. As I scrolled through the channels, I came to an episode of the show, Little House on the Prairie. Not having watched the show in years, I started to turn the channel; but, did not. It showed Charles Ingles' youngest boy being examined by the towns doctor. The doctor looked up to Charles and said that there had been no change in weeks and that there was nothing he could do. I could see that the boy's eyes were open; however, he could not move or speak. The doctor told Charles that for the sake of the rest of his family, he needed to let this go and get on with life. Charles was very angry and told the doctor that God would not do this to his son. The doctor said that it was not God that had pulled the trigger of the gun and accidentally sent the bullet into the boy during the bank robbery.

I was so tired and wanted to turn the television off and go to sleep but something drew me to the show and I could not leave it. As I watched, pictures of Austin in the hospital bed flashed through my mind.

Now, Charles was leaving his family with the injured boy and taking him away from the town with no destination in mind. The family and friends were so upset by the illogical behavior of Charles. He drove the wagon for a long time and came to a clearing. After traveling a distance, he looked at his son and said that he felt that God was telling him to camp here. He made a lean-to for the boy and then started reading the bible. He was in one of the books of the Old Testament reading a part where one of the 'patriarchs of the faith' were instructed to build an "alter." Charles didn't know why; but, said that he thought God was telling him to build a "alter." Charles propped his son up in a leaned-back position so that he could watch as he built the huge, narrow, cylindrical/triangular shaped stone alter. It was so high that he was forced to fashion a homemade ladder to reach the top. I would guess the structure was between fifteen to twenty feet high. On the top, he erected a cross he had constructed from two sticks. When he came down from the ladder, he went to his son and several days passed as he nurtured and tried

to feed his son through a straw. The boy could not eat and Charles was force feeding him liquid. There came a point were the boy would no longer accept or swallow the food and Charles knew that his son would soon die without divine intervention. He went to the “alter” and was crying, asking God to do something.

This was the best acting I have ever seen. The distress on his face was so real; the tears genuine. I was sobbing and my mind was continuing to flash a vision of Austin’s face as he lay in the enclosed bed.

Suddenly, a bearded man appeared behind Charles and asked who had built this and what it was. Charles was not shocked or surprised that this stranger had appeared and started talking to him. As a viewer, you instantly wondered if this man was an angel. Charles told him it was an “alter” and that he had built it. The bearded man asked him why. Charles, with disgust in his voice, told him he didn’t know why.

The man turned and looked at the boy and asked if that was his boy. Charles said it was and the man asked if he was sick. He responded that he was and that he would not eat. The angel walked to the boy telling Charles that he would try to feed him. Charles told him it was no use but the man continued to the boy, lifted him forward into a sitting position, grabbed a bowl of liquid and put it in the boy’s mouth. Charles objected, telling him that he can not...Charles stopped speaking as he saw his son drink from the bowl. Charles was dumbfounded as the man walked passed him commenting that sometimes a child will do something for a stranger that they will not do for their parents. Charles turned around just in time to see the stranger walk behind the “alter” and disappear.

A few more days pass and the boy’s condition continues to worsen. It is now night-time in the middle of a severe thunderstorm with a driving rain. Lightning is flashing and the scene shows Charles holding his son in his lap and crying. The scene changes to the same storm at the Ingle’s home and the burley man, who is a friend of

Charles, is about to take Charles' wife, on a carriage with a team of horses, to bring the boy back home. They must save the boy from his irrational father. As the burley man waits on his horse holding the reins of the carriage, several flashes of lighting occur and he sees the bearded old man, the angel, standing in front of the horses as they are rearing up. The angel speaks and orders him not to bring the wife tonight; but, to wait until morning.

Now the scene returns to Charles in the lean-to and the angel is standing in the rain in view of Charles, lightning flashing all around. Charles is crying and says, "Is it tonight?" The angel nods his head acknowledging in the affirmative. Charles makes a statement that he knew or had a feeling all day that it would be tonight. Through lamenting tears Charles, barley audible, bursts forth the question, "Will He save my son?" The old bearded angel sorrowfully shakes his head and replies that "Only He knows." And then adds, "Whether or not He saves your son, will you lose your faith?" Charles responds with a powerful, agonizing, heart felt "No!" The old man orders him to take the boy to the "alter" and he obeys. Standing in the rain, Charles is facing the alter. Charles' face looking up toward the sky, the boy held across his arms. Charles stands in the storm as lightning dances through the sky. A brilliant lightning bolt strikes the cross on top of the alter and it radiates through the alter, covering the ground and blowing Charles and his son into the air and they fall to the ground. This scene ends with a close up of the boy's face being pelted by the rain.

The next scene is of a crisp, clear, clean summer's day with Mrs. Ingles on the carriage and the burley friend riding beside her. They come up over a hill and she stops the wagon. The camera provides the viewer a shot of the lean-to and alters. Charles is carrying wood or chopping wood and stops to see his wife. Their eyes meet and time stands still as she looks for a reaction to know if the boy has lived or died. Very slowly she sees the boy step from behind the alter and all the tears and emotions that are possible, poured out of my soul. This was God's way of making me vent. What are the odds that this episode, one which I do not remember seeing, would be on this night, at

this moment of time in my life? It was another miracle. I could now relax and fade off into a deep, restful sleep.

A few days later during the healing process at the KCRC, when Austin first started sitting in a chair without support, we would get him what he thought was pumpkin pie. That was his favorite pie but he could not hold the plate level and the pie would be on the verge of falling off. The plate was constantly leaning, at points as far as 60 degrees. The slice of pie remained stuck to the plate and he would haphazardly stick his fork into it and put the bite into his mouth with an unstable, wobbling hand. It was entertaining to watch; but, at the same time we were grateful that God had healed him to this point. He refused any help and would awkwardly take forkfuls of the pie as we kept waiting for it to drop. It never did. He complained about the taste of the pie each time; but, we did not tell him until he was back home, that it was really sweet potato pie.

Austin is an artist, a graphic designer and computer wiz. Inside KCRC were paintings throughout the building that were painted and donated by one artist. We would try to get Austin to look at them in an effort to divert his attention from always wanting to get back in bed, but he thought they were bad or stupid. Andrew came to his room one day when Austin was especially agitated. Austin had repeatedly been asking when Andrew would be there. When he saw Andrew, he perked up and seemed happy that his brother was getting him out of the room and taking him for a ride in the wheel chair. This was also good for Andrew because he was having great difficulty in processing what had occurred. He did not want to share his feelings and was irritated when others who had not seen Austin's mental and physical condition would ask how he was doing. I think that he was frustrated by the well intended statements that friends made as they talked to him; but, he knew they were completely clueless and could not really empathize with him. Andrew would come through this and both he and his sister, Amanda, would come to better demonstrate their love and appreciation for their youngest sibling whom they almost lost.

Physical Therapy tested Austin shortly before being discharged on both bilateral coordination and balance. He performed WNL on bilateral coordination, but tested at 42% or a 7.5 year old level on balance. His Fine Motor Precision rated him at age 8-8.2 and Manual Dexterity, age 6.9-6.11. His speech and language skills were much more difficult to rate because he had a very strong vocabulary and could evade or side step the questions in a way that confused the therapists until they realized what he was doing. At one point, he was given a telephone book and they requested that he find the phone number for something. He told them that he didn't know how to do that. This concerned them, that he could not do this very basic task. He pointed out that he couldn't do that before the accident because people his age never grew up using a phone book. Give him a computer and he would Google it. They were amused at his response, realizing that they had never considered that task request was outdated and needed to be updated to a more realistic, present day form.

About a week before Austin was to be released, Gwen, Amanda and I attended a meeting with the doctors and therapists so they could tell us what to expect his condition to be when he was sent home. We were told that Austin would need twenty four hour supervision and ensure that he had no access to weapons. No unattended swimming as well as no off ground activity i.e. ladders and tree climbing. He could no longer ride a skate board, motorcycle or mountain bike because once a person has had a serious concussion, should he experience another, he will not normally recover as well, nor as quickly. He might be able to skim board on the beach one day or even ride a bicycle on level paved ground. But both of those activities could only be engaged in while wearing a helmet. We must be alert for signs of depression as well as changes in behavior. He could become violent and strike us and because his mind had no filters at this time, he may begin to use profanity. We should move his room at home, upstairs on the main floor; next to ours; because, he will have difficulty negotiating even a signal step and we can not allow him to cook without supervision. Then the worst news of all for a sixteen year

old who will shortly turn seventeen; no driving until he has been cleared by the Department of Motor Vehicles through specialized testing. His judgment is impaired so we need to keep him away from roads or any other high risk areas. They told us that they expected him to make a full recovery; but, that that would take about a year or more. He would need a lot of speech therapy, occupational therapy and physical therapy.

When we walked out of the briefing I felt very strange. Gwen and I spoke to each other and I told her that I expected to hear everything that we were told. None of it surprised me; however, I seemed to be shocked to have heard it. Gwen said that she felt strange too, almost in disbelief. I told her I was going to step outside while she returned to Austin's room.

Once outside, I sat down on a bench that was overshadowed by a huge tree. There was a light breeze blowing and while seated in the shade, I looked out on the perfectly manicured lawn, carved out of the side of a mountain. The grass was a rich green and one knew it was recently cut due to the clippings present on the cracked and time blackened concrete sidewalk. As I sat there trying to understand my emotions, the voice of God returned to my head. The same voice that had come to me as I almost fell asleep in a worship service a few weeks earlier.

Now, my eyes were open and darted around the area as I listened to His words. The words were rich, full of power and spoken with undeniable, unquestionable authority to my soul. There was no mistake that it was in fact the same voice I had first heard in the church service of my call to Zambia and the same one I had heard as I watched the helicopter lifting off with Austin from the lake. My heart felt overloaded by His great power and authority. God questioned me saying, "Why are you listening to them? (Meaning: the medical professionals.) As I told you in the emergency room, I will work a great miracle and heal this boy!" That was it, the message ended and I sprang to my feet to go back to the room and inform Gwen. I was filled with joy and excitement bubbling out of my being. As I entered Austin's room some medical procedure was occurring with

Austin and I became side tracked and forced to deal with something requiring immediate action so I was distracted; unable to tell Gwen about what had just happened. I would unintentionally keep this to myself until weeks later when Gwen heard me telling someone of the incident and she would inform me that I failed to tell her.

So many families like Frank and Terri Johnson, Bill and Janice Root as well as Dean and Crystal Lay came to visit the hospital. Other visitors were Jim Graham and Robert Clift. The list could go on and on; however, I am sure that I would leave someone out so I will not attempt to name them all as I would not want to offend. There are so many stories that developed as people came to visit Austin at KCRC. One was from Gail Deen. Gail had been Austin's Sunday school teacher when he was very young. I didn't remember her or her family. She came to KCRC and told me that on the day of the accident, she had walked over to a neighbor's house. On her return, as she entered her home, her husband, Scott, handed the phone to her saying that she had a call. When she answered the phone, the voice told her of the accident. She hung up, looked at her husband and said, Austin Thomas, a young boy we taught in Sunday school years ago, has been hit in the head by a Jet Ski and is being Medevac'ed to U.V.A. Medical Center. Gail says that her parents, who were visiting and who were not Christians, were standing in their living room with the rest of her family. She said that this news greatly burdened everyone and Scott's immediate response was that they needed to pray. Everyone dropped to their knees, where they stood, and began to pray. Hearing this story made me weep. As I am now writing it, I am crying. To think that these people, whom I don't ever remember knowing, would be so overcome by the Spirit of God that they would pray so earnestly for Austin's healing and then come down to visit him and share the story. Gail says that this event was a tremendous witness to her parents. They could not believe how caring the Christian community was. These Christians did not merely 'Talk the Talk'; they 'Walked the Walk.'

During Austin's final week at KCRC, the parents of the girl we had meet in the ICU waiting room, whose daughter had been in the serious car accident and was in a drug induced coma, was upgraded to KCRC. Gwen and I saw them arrive; but, there were a lot of family with them, so we did not get to talk to them. A day or two later, I had taken Austin for a walk outside. He was still moving very slow and not functioning very well socially or mentally. As we entered the building, we came to their room. The room was crowded with people standing inside with some encircling the girl's bed. She was in a much worse condition than Austin had been when he had arrived here. I told Austin that I wanted to stop in the room and entered with Austin directly behind me. The sounds of people crying and softly sobbing and whispering could be heard. The injured girl was crying and trying to speak; but, her words were very garbled. Her father's back was toward us and as he turned, seeing Austin, he spoke with joy in his voice as he put out his hand to welcome Austin and said, "You look great!" Austin moved very slowly as he entered the room. He looked around the room and spoke very clearly and confidently telling them, "I know you are sad; but, she is going to be O.K. I was like her." Someone let out a gasp and most of us started crying. Austin would return for a follow-up appointment at KCRC many months later and would find this girl had also recovered, just as he had. It's amazing!

Austin had been admitted to the hospital on August 23 and was discharged on September 4, 2007. No one in our neighborhood could understand where we had been or what had happened. My police car was in the drive way the entire time. Rumors were on the internet saying that Austin had died or some other serious thing had occurred. A week before our return, Amanda had gone to our house and a neighbor saw her and found out what was going on. The neighbors organized dinners to be brought over to us for several days upon our return. One of our neighbors had a seriously disabled child who had been treated several years ago at KCRC. She organized a basket of goods and well needed items to be brought to us while in KCRC. She had experienced this place first hand and knew how fabulous KCRC and all of UVA medical center was. The youth at First Baptist

Church, Woodbridge, made banners for Austin's return and hung them with balloons on our home.

On the day Austin was released and sent home, he could walk on his own and within three days could move up and down a flight of stairs; as long as we were next to him for support. In a few more days, he walked down a mountain path to a river and back up. He did not want to; but, did it at my request. Several weeks passed with a teacher responding to our home to keep up his schooling. He became a better student. The accident occurred in August and before Christmas of that year; we took him to the hospital for his first visit to physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy. Each Therapist performed a one hour examination of Austin and no one could find any defects. They said there was nothing they needed to do. He was fully recovered. We contacted a special driver evaluator to assess Austin for driving. She took him out for about one hour and also found no issues. He could drive again! Austin has no scars and no memory of the accident and only the last few days in the hospital. This is a blessing as he has no mental trauma to deal with. He never experienced depression.

Several months later, I stopped by one of the twenty-one elementary schools that I am charged with providing safety presentations to as a police officer. One of the male teachers came to me and asked how my son was doing. I told him that he had been healed and that this event had been a modern day miracle. He responded by asking what local medical service did we use. I told him that it was KAISER PERMANENTE. This teacher then asked if we used the Woodbridge, Virginia branch of this HMO. I acknowledged that we did and he wanted to know if we had taken Austin there for anything once he returned home. My answer was in the affirmative and he asked what the doctor's name was that examined Austin.

You see, Gwen had taken Austin to the Kaiser facility at the recommendation of the doctor at U.V.A. Medical Center. KCRC wanted Kaiser to examine him and be aware

of the trauma he had experienced should complications develop. On their return from that examination, I recalled that Gwen was upset and dissatisfied by the appointment. She was unhappy and had filed a complaint against the doctor. The reason for her dissatisfaction was that the doctor examined Austin and then made the statement that he did not understand why KCRC wanted him examined. To him, Austin looked fine. Gwen told the doctor that Austin had been hit in the head by a Jet Ski and that U.V.A. Medical Center was to have sent this doctor the medical record information. The doctor apologized to Gwen saying that he had been busy and that his 'In box' on his desk was full. He simply had not had time to look at anything. He told Austin that he was happy that he had recovered and then left the room.

I did not know the name of the doctor as I spoke with this teacher so I called my wife on a cell phone. Once Gwen provided that name, this teacher shared the following. He stated that he had taken his daughter to the same facility on the same date we took Austin. He said that once they were called back to the examine room; they waited for a very long time to see the doctor. When the doctor finally appeared at the door to the examine room, he seemed to be in a daze. He stood at the door, saying nothing and had a strange look on his face. Eventually he spoke and entered the room saying that they would have to give him a minute. The doctor sat down, not speaking or doing anything. A few moments passed and the doctor apologized, stating again that they would have to give him a minute. He explained that he had just examined a boy who had been struck in the head by a Jet Ski; that this boy had suffered sever head injuries within the last couple of months and that he could not find anything wrong with him. The doctor used the words that this boy had been healed. This teacher and I agreed that this had to be the doctor that saw Austin. Gwen and I speculate that after examining Austin, this doctor stopped by his office, located the medical records in his 'In box', reviewed them and was shocked by how serious the injuries had been and having found no visible signs from the incident on Austin.

Reflecting on the last few years of our lives, several things have happened which were a direct result of God and the story must be told. Telling the story of my “Calling” and more importantly, the true, modern day miracles we witnessed during the trials and events we encountered, may help some who are struggling through similar faith issues. Perhaps this story could better prepare others that have yet to have their Shalom shattered. In telling about what God has done for our family and through our friends and strangers, I also want to impart some of the basic truths and understandings about faith in Jesus Christ. Life is a series of stories and to become a story, our piece must be shattered. We will find Shalom over and over. It is life. My hope is that above anything else, God uses this book to convict those who have yet to give their allegiance to Him so that they too can know the love and peace that passes all understanding. It only comes through a personal relationship with the Son of God.

But there is much more to the story and you still have not heard about the first time God spoke to me in that church service. I was a member of the First Baptist Church of Woodbridge, Virginia. Throughout my life I have “felt led” by God to do certain things such as join a church, teach a Sunday school class or become a Deacon. That would not be the case this time. For the first time in my life, I received a “Calling from God”. “Being called” is totally different and extremely exhilarating. Why? God, Creator of the Universe, is speaking directly to YOU!

On August 5, 2007, I was sitting in a worship service. We had come to the point in the service where the pastor started his sermon. Almost any time I am in church and the sermon begins, I start to nod off; an embarrassment to my wife. Maybe I am never embarrassed because I am the one falling asleep. This time, as I began to nod off, God came to me as a voice in my mind and spoke to me with such clarity that I was shocked awake. God said, “You are to be in Zambia next year.” I responded “What?” and again I was told, “You are to be in Zambia next year.” My reactive thought was, “Do I need to pray about...” My thought was interrupted and I was emphatically told, “NO!” I

responded, “But I have to run the Fairfax County Police Department’s Safety Patrol Camp in July or August which is the same time that the church’s mission team normally travels to Zambia.” God continued, “No matter what happens, you are to be in Zambia next year and this may well cost you your life!”

Talk about a wakeup call. God had my attention. For me, the remainder of the service passed very quickly. Wide awake, almost ready to cry and feeling weak, my mind was turning, spinning. This was difficult to process. The difficulty was not in understanding the message or instructions I had been given. There was nothing left to doubt or to interpret. The hard part was coming to grips with the fact that God spoken directly to me. That had never happened before. There had been times in my life that I had truly sought to understand God’s will. This was not one of those. I was not seeking anything and was not deserving of this honor. In no way had I sought or earned this. After all, I was falling asleep. Our church had sent a team of short term missionaries to Zambia, Africa the last two summers. My oldest son, Andrew, had gone the first year. At the time, I was excited that he would have the opportunity to travel and experience a third world country. This would be a great way for him to discover what God might have planned for his life and help him to better appreciate what we have here in the United States. His trip would be dangerous, the risks were unknown and that was the first time our church had sent a team. My wife, Gwen and I, were worried for his safety but he felt “lead” to go and we wanted him to follow God’s will. Andrew’s trip was challenging; however, he returned safely and as a result was “lead” to be a full time missionary. The next year, my friend, Dean Lay, went to Zambia with the team. He had tried to get me to go but I told him I had no interest. Nothing was leading me to go nor did I want to do anymore traveling to places which could be hazardous. I had taken risks with my life by joining the U.S. Marine Corps. I had “bought that shirt” and had had my share of travel. For over twenty years I had been a police officer and encountered more excitement than most people ever know. No, Zambia was not for me and I would not consider going unless God directly told me to go. Besides, as the bread winner of our family, it would not be fare to

my wife. She had tolerated my adventurous life of rappelling from cliffs and buildings, ridding motorcycles, and shooting guns. Going to Zambia, five and on half hours into the bush, was not what a responsible person should be doing at this stage of their life.

We Christians have already been told by Christ to "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"- Matthew 28:19 NAS. Please realize that if you are a Christian, that was not a request; Christ Himself commissioned us. If you are unable to go, you are able to personally support those who are being sent, financially and prayerfully. And don't forget that you do not have to leave your hometown or country to spread the gospel. All of my logic seemed to tell me all the reasons why I should not go. Besides, I've experienced travel and other cultures. Wouldn't it be better to allow someone else the opportunity. Let someone else take the risk. And then there is the issue of raising the funds to go. I hate asking people to donate money for a trip or project that I am involved in; but, I have no problem asking people to help support other people who are going to do the work of God.

As I sat there in the church service trying to process what had just happened, I looked to my left and realized that my son Andrew was sitting next to me. Andrew is in his twenties and had moved out of our home a year or so earlier. He never sat next to us in church. It was staggering to consider that he was sitting next to me and even more so that he would be beside me when God called. I leaned over and asked him if he intended to go back to Zambia someday? He instantly replied in the affirmative. At this time, the pastor was starting to bring the sermon to the point of presenting an invitation. My wife seated to my right, leaned toward me and said, "You didn't fall asleep today." That is what she tells me that she said; however, I heard her ask, "Were you about to say something?" I replied that God has just told me to do something that I have not wanted to do and still don't want to do. My voice was cracking and I was about to burst into

confused tears, barely containing the basic expressions of both joy and fear. I declared that, “I have to be in Zambia next year!” She responded with a simply, knowing laugh.

You see, several years earlier I had been invited by a friend, Jim Graham, to attend a very spectacular, spirit filled event called the National Capital Area Walk to Emmaus. This had been one of those mountain top experiences with God. When I returned from the Emmaus event, I wanted Gwen to go. This was something that everyone should experience and my wife was outgoing, open minded and there was no doubt in my mind that she would even hesitate to do this. Have you ever been on a mountain top emotionally and spiritually and suddenly the real world slaps you upside the head. That is what occurred when I told her that I wanted her to go and that she would love it. She became defensive, defiant and a barrier the size of a brick wall was put up. Later, after several more attempts to approach the subject, she told me in a very defiant and absolute statement that she was not going and not to ask her about it again.

Perhaps a year passed when one evening we were standing inside a church when a friend, Frank Grand, who had “Walked to Emmaus”, asked Gwen when she was going to Emmaus. She simply responded that she was not going. Frank said, “Gwen, what are you afraid of?” Spontaneously and without thought, Gwen replied that she was afraid of what God might ask or want her to do. As she spoke those words God began to convict her. She could not believe the words she had spoken. My wife has been a Christian for a long time. She has been the perfect example of a supportive, loving, Christian wife and mother; always involved in church activities and ministries. When we arrived home that night, she became upset and we had a long, emotional discussion about God and how she was ashamed of her response. After a few tears and a lot of discussion, she suddenly told me that she was now ready and wanted to go to Emmaus. Once her application was turned in, she had to wait almost another year before she was able to attend. She had the time of her life but also learned that she was supposed to go to Emmaus at the time she went. It was God’s plan. He had to prepare her to go. Putting her there before she was

ready would not have helped her grow. Look at it from this perspective; the Israelites were encamped at Mt. Sinai. It was an eleven day journey from there to the land God had promised them. God was not going to put them there until he had molded them into the people they needed to be to claim the land. It would take forty years to make the eleven day journey. They were able to go there, not on their time table, but on God's.

Once the service ended on the day of my "calling", I told several people that I had been called to go. One of those was the leader of the Zambia Mission Team, Richard Wewerka. He told me that something similar had happened to him and that I needed to put in an application to join the team and that hopefully I would be selected. I didn't know if I would be selected but I told him that with or without the team I would be in Zambia the next year. I had no choice; God had commanded me to be there.

When I shared the calling with my wife and family, I left out the part where God told me that "this may well cost you your life." Why God had told me that, I still do not know; but, I was not going to burden my family with such a statement. I did share the information with a friend and former pastor, Mike Bradley. His response to the statement was that God knew my personality and knew that this was necessary to get my attention. Over the next year I prepared for the trip and never had any doubts that I was going. God had given me a confidence to know that regardless of the obstacles which I might have to overcome, I would be in Zambia in 2008. I also was confident that God would take care of me, whether or not I would return...it was up to Him. He was in control. Faith is the only way to describe it.

Eventually August 2008 would arrive and I would go to Zambia. But not before God prepared me and my family. I was not yet ready to go; but, God had a plan that would test our faith beyond anything we had ever experienced. The following is the letter I wrote to those who supported me through prayer and monetarily on the trip to Zambia. It will provide you a word picture that will take you there.

August 28, 2008

Dear Zambia Supporters,

The trip was more than words can explain. It was more challenging, more difficult and more than I could have hoped for. Africa was more than I ever visualized. The people were very friendly; the children were polite and respectful. They are so poor, it is beyond our understanding. Life is hard. Daily life, just to live, is a hardship that we do not know. As I lived with them for the two weeks, I realized that I would never be clean. We were always dirty. We worked physically harder than I ever remember. It was worth every drop of sweat!

The people may not be educated, they may have nothing, but they are not dumb. I met a native that spoke seven languages. The parents live in small, homemade brick houses about ten feet square with tin roofs. The children live in a hut about the same size made of wooden logs standing on end in the ground with a straw roof. Everything is dirt floors. If a building has a window, it is only a hole, no glass. Children in this society are left alone at very young ages. They walk by themselves over great distances. Younger siblings are carried for by their older sisters. Very young girls wear cloth raps to carry the babies. They were all very polite and strangely well behaved when compared to our culture.

The work on the orphanage was hard. Our original assignment was to put the roof on; however, when we got there the brick work was not yet completed and the lumber arrived three days late due to the truck breaking down and the truck company not being able to find replacement parts. The lumber arrived at 11:30p.m. We had to unload it in the darkness; the only light being that provided by the head lamps we all wore.

Speaking of darkness; if the moon is not out, it is very dark. But this darkness allowed us to see stars unlike any I have seen before. The brightest stars which dominated the sky were the four stars which make up “The Southern Cross.” Then there was this cloud-like thing that completely stretched across the sky from the South to the North. You felt like it was blocking your view of being able to see the stars clearly. Then you are told that what you are looking at is the Milky Way galaxy. It was hard to believe that you were actually looking at billions of stars so small that it appeared as a cloud across the sky.

We did get to work for two days starting the roof but most of the time was spent filling in the floors of this orphanage with this dirt type substance called Barash. This must be put down and leveled out before the concrete floors will be put in. Barash has to be picked and shoveled out of the ground. The barash is so hard that it would take about four or five swings of the pick to break one small chuck out. Our team exhausted itself day after day picking and shoveling this dirt. When there was nothing in us left to give...we were told that the floor was filled throughout the building. (Unfortunately, future teams will have to do much more of this as there is seven more orphanage building to be built at this compound). The need for the orphanage is immediate. It has taken 5 years of planning to get to where they are today. They need money, yes. But money will not buy labor. There is no one and no skills. Most material for building has to be hand made there. There is no Home Depot or anything like it anywhere.

We walked one mile on the two Sundays we were there to attend church. Their church has a dirt floor, dirt and stick walls up to about four feet high and a log ceiling with a straw roof about fifteen feet high. It was well attended starting at 9:30 and ending about 12:45-1:00. Some who attended walked 3-5 hours to attend. There was no social time during the continuous service which consisted of singing and preaching. The Tonga’s singing was mainly in repeat chants, sometimes with drums. Other than the bongos, the only musical instrument we saw and heard was a homemade, hand carved, extremely rustic, guitar. It had four strings and was finger picked as a lady sang. It was beautiful.

As we walked back to base camp, there were several children walking in the same direction. The road is dirt or sand and the silence of the land seemed unique. Several of the children were ahead of me trying to get the attention of one of our group's women who had done some things with them at church. There was a small boy about age 5 who could not keep up and couldn't get close to the women. He looked back at me two times and I put my hands out, clapped them together and made the motion for him to allow me to pick him up. He stopped walking and waited for me. As I lifted him up, I suddenly saw a young girl in the group ahead that looked back with fear. She instantly dropped back from the group and started watching me and my intentions with what I felt must be her little brother. She slowed until she was walking to my left about 5 feet away and slightly behind me. I felt that she wanted to be involved so I dropped my left hand and without looking over at her held it out to see if she would hold my hand. Very tenderly I felt her hand slide into mine and we walked without saying anything because we did not speak the same language.

I had to fight crying at this point as I took in the moment and the silence of the land. I was overcome with the fact that I was now in Africa, with these sweet children who had no shoes. The only clothes they have are what they now were wearing. I was overwhelmed with the thought that these children will never know what we know. They will never experience nor have the luxuries that we take for granted. They will not have the opportunity to be educated to our level, if at all. Everyday life for them is a hard struggle. But that is all they know. This was Zambia, 5 hours in the bush from Livingston. These are the people of the Tonga tribe.

Throughout the trip we journeyed and saw many other things. We experienced living among elephants, lions, warthogs, crocodiles, hippopotamus, giraffes, baboons, monkeys, zebras, leopards, hyenas, black mamba snakes, tiger snakes, very deadly scorpions. There were also Cape buffalo, thousands and thousands of impalas and I am sure many

other animals which I can not remember the names. These animals were all in a place called Chobe National Park in the country of Botswana. All the animals are here because they want to be. There is no fence around this park. We slept in a tent in this wilderness. It was more than I ever dreamed Africa could be! There were also thousands of birds.

I also ate goat and freshly killed chickens. They eat every part and I mean every part of what they kill. The main food the natives eat and which we did not enjoy was Shema. There is nothing in America like it. It is made from corn. It is a bright white, very thick like paste, tasteless, odorless food. It is like grits but very thick. You ball it up in your hand to eat. The locals love it and are offended if you do not serve it.

I want to keep writing but the readers will tire so let me finish with this. Before going on this trip, God came to me as a voice in my head, as I sat in church one Sunday, about one year ago. He said, "You are to be in Zambia next year. No matter what happens, you are to be in Zambia next year. This may well cost you your life."

Two weeks later my son Austin was almost killed as he was hit in the head by a Jet Ski at Lake Anna. He had three bleeds on the frontal lobes of his brain. As I watched the med-evac helicopter fly him away to UVA Medical Center, I thought he would be dead by the time I got there. Then God repeated these words in my mind, "No matter what happens, you are to be in Zambia next year."

I believe that this last year has been a test of my faith and obedience to God's call. I did not tell my wife or family about the part in the calling saying that this could cost me my life. I did share it with the Zambia team and with several close friends.

Throughout the year, my son was miraculously healed. I do not know why. Throughout the trip I kept wondering why God brought me to Zambia. I did not die. I never came to a clear understanding as to why I was there. But the missionaries, Amber and Jako, are

living there full time, in harsh conditions, may have partly answered the question. Amber is an American citizen; Jako, South African. Amber's father died when she was 14. Now her mother, here in America, has terminal cancer. Amber shared with us and cried about how hard it is to stay in this remote area and not spend the final time with her mom. Amber has no English speaking females to relate to. She is in her mid to late 20's. She is dedicated to God's calling and is committed to stay here until God tells them to leave.

I end this letter with her and Jako's letter which was emailed to me on August 27, 2008. Please read this and come to your own conclusion.

Thank all of you for making this happen,

Tim Thomas

P.S. On Sunday night, September 14, 2008, a presentation of the trip, by the Zambia team will be made at the First Baptist Church of Woodbridge. Everyone is invited to attend. I am sure there will be a slide show.

This is the letter from Jako and Amber. Amber is the writer:

Hi Tim - Jako and I wanted to write to say thanks so much for visiting us and for all your efforts with the team last month. It was a blast to get to know you and to be able to count you as a friend. Now I can see where Andrew gets some of his traits from ;) If you and he are any indication you got a great family there. Thanks for all your hard work with the barasch and for making it know who was boss. I know that that was not easy work by any standards and doing it day after day... we were quite impressed, especially since that wasn't the work that we had hoped you all to do. But God had other plans and your flexibleness to do whatever was needed at whatever time really blessed us. From working in the

fields, to digging barasch, to gathering firewood, to digging sand and stone, to starting fires and do anything else that needed doing, we can see your fingerprints everywhere we look. And the stories - thanks for the stories and for keeping everybody entertained no matter where we were or what we were doing. I don't know if I ever saw you without a group around you - either singing songs with the guitar in hand or with eager ears hanging on your every word of a story you were weaving. On a personal note you have no idea how much your guitar playing blessed me. It brought back such wonderful memories of my father who passed away from cancer when I 14. He loved playing just like you and even the song choices and style just blessed me in ways you wouldn't believe. true music to my soul. Thanks for lending your note to the team and your strengths as well - for helping to make it complete. I just wanted to make sure you knew how much we appreciated you and all your efforts while you were here. It was great getting to experience you.

And with all of your hard work you wouldn't believe the progress that is being made around here now. With the barasch now done and out of the way Jako was able to hire four locals (Ronald, Reagan his son, Cloud, and KB his brother) to work alongside him on various projects for a month. Jako wouldn't have been able to pay them enough had they had to dig barasch. They have already completed a very nice barbed wire fence around the whole orchard complete with three gates, poured the floor for the kitchen, made progress on the roofs and shelves in the kitchen store room and as I speak Fanwell and co are busy working on the Library. The one wall (the door side) should be complete today and I think by the end of the week all the brick work will be done for that. Also they have dug the footer for the orphanage kitchen (bigger than my kitchen) and dug a huge septic tank for the toilet system as well as gotten tons of loads of sand and stones and moving bricks etc... Lombie and co are just about done with all the flooring inside as well as all the plastering. Just a few detail jobs to do left and when they are done there than Jako and co can tackle the roof. How exciting!!! The orchard continues to look great and it is neat to see things starting

to be in bloom now that it has warmed up so much. We have had highs in the upper 90's here lately if you can believe that! And it seems like we are going to have a small harvest of strawberries, gooseberries, and mulberries this year since those have started flowering. I am so excited. We have also had quite a steady stream of locals helping lately which has been a big blessing. Lots of hard work and Jako just about works from sun up to sun down and then collapses in bed at night but at least our birthday gifts to each other was a satellite tv package for the month and so he has been enjoying that a bit in the evening when he gets the chance. But all this progress would not have been possible without all the hard work that the team did while here. Now it is just the rush to try and get everything completed before the rains come maybe late October this year. Things are getting exciting though and we are really looking forward to my mom and older brother, Terry, coming to visit us for 3 weeks here in October. Terry has never been to Zambia before so it should be lots of fun. Well take care Tim and give our love to your whole family (especially Andrew) with much appreciation and gratitude,
Amber and Jako Joubert

This is only one of many stories from the past and of those yet to be written or told.