2008 Second Place Personal Narrative

Footsteps in the Snow

As I step out into the bitter chill of the morning I catch a glimpse of my hot white breath spilling out of me and drifting away into the pale morning sky. The sun hasn’t yet risen over the mountains and the earth seems just as reluctant to wake up and start the day as I am. I glance across the quad and see a few scattered lights flickering on in neighboring buildings. Those guilty souls who have stolen thirty extra minutes of sleep from the retreating night, how I envy them. With a sigh of fatigue I tighten up my shoulder strap across my chest and set out toward campus.

I like being out in the still of the morning. There is something about the early hours of the day that causes reflection. Perhaps it is the subconscious of our minds still clinging to the sheets of our bed, holding on to the last bits of our dreams. But this morning I have no dreams to ponder. It had been a short black night for me, so I allow my eyes and my mind wander.

As I trace footsteps in the snow on my twenty minute journey to school, I glance off to the left and get a view of a squatty old apartment building. It is a building that means a great deal to me, though I have no recollection of ever going inside it. It was in that building that I spent the first three years of my life as my father finished his degree. I notice a light shining from one of the windows and imagine my mother coming in to wake up a sleepy toddler in Ninja Turtle jammies for another blissful day of make believe and Cheerios.

Most kids at least have an idea of what they want to be when they grow up. The typical answers are blurted out by small boys across America: a police man, a doctor, an astronaut, a baseball player. Some ideas change with time, but almost all little boys have at least some type of wish for the future. The problem with that is, I’m now twenty-three and I’m still unsure. If you had asked me when I was ten years old I wouldn’t have had
the slightest idea what to say. All I would be able to tell you was that I knew I would never want to be a businessman like my father. I would rather do just about anything than that.

Dad had hated his job for as long as I could remember. I think I would hate it too if I had to wake up at 4 AM every day to go stare at a computer screen and make calculations on other people’s money. I used to shy away from being home after eight o’clock at night. We would have to speak softly and walk lightly so as not to wake Dad. I never knew why he put up with it. Why would he choose to do something he hates day after day, year after year? I knew there was no way I would ever follow those footsteps no matter how expensive the shoes were that made them. I thought Dad was crazy to do what he did.

A titanic yawn tears at my chapped lips and pulls me from my thoughts to a higher level of wakefulness. I descend the icy staircase at the end of the sidewalk and decide to take a shortcut around the back of the chapel. The light in the Bishop’s office is glowing. He must have something important to do early this morning. Maybe he’s having an interview with someone I know?

“Matt!”

“Yeah Dad?”

“It’s time for your father and son interview.”

“Ok Dad.”

“Are you getting good grades so you can get into BYU?”

“I’m trying Dad.”

“So are you working hard to prepare for your mission?”

“Yeah Dad.”

“Good, keep it up.”

Every first Sunday of the month since I was eight it was the same thing. The two questions showed up every time, like flies at a picnic. What are you doing to prepare for BYU? I don’t know Dad, I’m only eleven. What are you doing to get ready for your mission? Well, I’m going to church, and I have one hundred and twenty-seven dollars and fifty-three cents saved up.

Why was it always the same two questions? Why couldn’t we just goof off and talk about whatever? I got so frustrated with his never ending obsession. I love my dad and we always had so much fun together
working in the yard, going to concerts and just being boys, but during our father and son interviews it seemed like those two questions were all he cared about.

As I cross the street, memories of my father’s drive for those two goals seem just as clear as the ice glazed over the approaching sidewalk. Seeing my reflection in the frozen concrete only drives my inner reflection deeper.

In my last year of high school his first dream came true. I was accepted into BYU. I hadn’t even applied to any other schools. I knew in my heart that if I didn’t get into BYU it wouldn’t really matter what I did with the rest of my life, I could never look my dad in the eyes again. One year later I was called on a mission and served for two years in Eastern Spain. My dad had never been so proud of me.

At the conclusion of my mission my parents came to pick me up and to see what the country had to offer. On the second day of their trip we took an eight hour train ride south to the city of Valencia. As we sped through the vineyards and past the hills with abandoned castles perched on top, I looked at my father across the little folding table between us and saw him from a distance of two years. He had the same soft facial features buried beneath his five-o’clock shadow. His hair was thinner but still combed carefully so as to cover any peeking skin. He still used phrases like “Jiminy Christmas” and “spit spot” and tucked his t-shirt into his jeans. But as I watched him, to my amazement, I could barely contain my eagerness to have a father and son interview. As we talked, I felt like I was moving faster than the train to make up for lost time. I went on and on about the glories of my two years in Spain and the miracles I had witnessed. I discussed with him the change of heart that had taken place in me as I watched others change their lives at my invitation. I eagerly laid out my plans for my return to BYU and how I was going to seize every opportunity available to me.

At one point on the train ride, as we passed a small village nestled snugly against the vast Mediterranean, I noticed a small grin spreading across my dad’s face. I figured he had to be laughing at something I’d said so I defensively asked him what was so funny. He turned to look out the window for a moment, or perhaps to look at my mother who was leaned up against the glass, gently put to sleep by the rocking of the train. I noticed a tear welling up in his eye and he pushed up his lower lip like he always does
when he gets emotional. He turned back to me and said, “Now you know why I always encouraged you to go on a mission, and to get into BYU.”

At that moment it hit me like a Euromed train. I finally understood what he had been trying to do all those years. As we rolled on through the countryside, past the pueblos that I had prayed for with all my heart, past the homes where I had borne out my soul in hope, and past the people that I call my brothers and sisters, my heart was overcome with love for the one person who, more than any other, had helped me to get there.

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6)

I am snapped back to the present by a cold rush of wind passing through the trees above, dropping snow on the top of my head and down my neck. As annoying as my dad’s monthly interrogations had been, I see the results now in my own life and am happy. A smile spreads across my face as I step onto BYU campus just as the clock tower begins its slightly out of tune version of *Come, Come ye Saints*.

After my mission I had returned to BYU in all my post mission glory and been immediately swept up in the excitement of it all. I found myself trying to do everything I could to make the most out of my time. I was enrolled in new and exciting classes that strained the limits of my abilities. I began working at the MTC, daring young missionaries to go out and have half the experience I had. I was volunteering as a youth mentor and regularly attending the temple. I signed up for the Honors program and began training to run a marathon. I was loving life and living the dream. But all that changed one freezing winter day when that question I had been avoiding for years finally cornered me.

I don’t remember the exact day, but I certainly remember the place. I was alone in my room sitting on top of my bed. My dark blue covers were dirty, but I knew it would probably be another month until I got around to washing them. I was staring up at the ceiling and could make out every footstep in the apartment above mine. The fan was spinning slowly, circulating the musky air from the heater and making its faint clicking sound that was only audible when I was lost in my own thoughts. And it hit me; my clock of
procrastination had at last struck midnight. I had finally come to the point in my life where I had to choose what path I was going to take. The only problem was, I was just as lost as ever.

I had always believed that I would figure it out on my mission, that somehow it would just come to me. But that time had come and gone, and amidst the priceless gems I had discovered during my mission, my future profession was nowhere to be found. The only lead that I had was that I knew I never wanted to be a businessman.

As I plow on through the snow I remember one night back home, sometime during my junior year of high school, tiptoeing into the kitchen to where my mom was putting some finishing touches on one of my little sister’s homework assignments. I hoisted myself into sitting position on one of the countertops and after a moment’s hesitation asked my mom, “Why does he put up with it if he hates it so much?”

My mother the student put down her glue stick and became my mother the teacher. “I’m surprised you haven’t discovered it by now Matthew. When your father started college he was deciding between two careers. One was a businessman, and the other was a forest ranger. Deep in his heart I think he has always wanted the latter, but he chose to get a business degree instead. He knew that it was the best way for him to provide the life he wanted to give to his children. He does it for you. He goes to work each morning for your guitar lessons. He goes for Jenny’s ballet lessons; he goes for Jon’s art supplies. He goes for your EFY trips and your scout camps. He goes so that we can stay here in Danville where your friends are. It’s not the best situation, but he feels it’s the best he can do for you.”

That night after my mom’s insightful lesson I lay in bed for a long time. The little red light on my stereo didn’t seem to annoy me like it usually did. I felt so guilty for complaining about not getting exactly what I had wanted for Christmas. And as my shame grew, my love for my father deepened. All that trouble, just for me and my siblings. It just blew my teenaged mind. But at the same time, part of me still didn’t understand him. It seemed so ludicrous. Why would anyone choose to live a life of perpetual sacrifice? Wasn’t there another way? Did he not care at all about what happened to himself?

As I approach the business school, nearing the end of my trek to class, I am filled with a mix of emotions at what I have done. I glance down at the dips in the stairs, worn deep by thousands of students in
their pursuit of the future. Worn deep by the steps my dad had taken on his way to class two decades ago. I don’t know if I am making the right choice. It so often feels like a terrible mistake, like contracting a debt I know I can never repay. Am I preparing myself for a life of suffering similar to my dad’s? Does it have to be this way? Is my life meant to be an unending sacrifice for the happiness of others? I have so many questions and none of the answers.

I reflected on these questions that had so disturbed me about my dad as I had filled out my own application to business school. Those questions had haunted me as I suffered through endless pages of accounting procedures, and statistical analysis, and this morning I can see them leering at me from the reflection of the glass doors as I approach the Tanner building. Every day I hesitate before I go in, searching my heart for another path. The boy in the window watches me, looking more like my dad every day, and I know what I have to do. So for today at least, I open the door and go inside.