

THE GIFT OF A BONE

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Romans 8:32

The most memorable gift I received at High School graduation time was occasioned by one of the worst experiences of my life. The graduation exercises occurred on Sunday afternoon and that night I checked into Children's Hospital in Denver, scheduled for three major surgeries. It was not a pleasant way to enter into the next phase of life.

The medical plan called for a Monday operation on my left foot and the procedure repeated on Wednesday on my right foot. I was then placed in a full-body cast in order to straighten my spine as preparation for a spinal fusion. All of this was necessary to correct damage caused by polio.

After one week in the hospital I was almost totally encased in plaster, from my chin to my toes. The body cast was equipped with a hinge that allowed the doctor to bend my back a few inches each day. He intended to keep stretching me until it became very uncomfortable. At that point he would do the spinal fusion and make the straightened spine a permanent condition.

Because of my physical history, the hospital was not an unfamiliar place. However, familiarity does not mean appreciation. Although I think I did a good job of accepting the situation and maintaining a respectable attitude, it was not a good experience. There was no way to make an entire summer in the hospital palatable for a seventeen-year-old.

After the first two successful operations on my feet and several weeks of straightening in the body cast, the time of the spinal fusion was approaching. The plan was to chip some slivers from my thighbone and then place them in my spine. They would then grow together and make the backbone a solid piece. This stability would prevent the spine from curving any further.

The summer days in the hospital were beginning to get long and my family was also growing weary of the ordeal. We were within a week or so of the planned operation when my father was visiting me one afternoon. Dr. Matchett, who had been my orthopedic specialist for many years, came into the room.

He exchanged greetings with my father. They always got along well because they shared the common experience of World War II. After the small talk about my progress, Dr. Matchett raised a concern he had about the operation. He indicated that there was not enough bone in my small, underdeveloped thighs to do the spinal fusion.

My first reaction was confusion and despair. How could he put me through this long ordeal and then not be able to do the operation? It seemed like a waste of the summer and a loss of meaning for all the suffering.

However, my father was not so quick to give up hope. Without any hesitation he turned to Dr. Matchett and asked, "Can you take the bone from my leg?"

It was a fascinating suggestion and seemed to catch both the doctor and myself by surprise. In order to understand the magnitude of his offer, you must realize that my father only has one leg. His right leg was amputated because of shrapnel wounds in the war. In essence, this was a one-legged man offering to have that one leg incapacitated for a time.

Dr. Matchett seemed a little puzzled by the offer and said that he did not know of any reason why it could not work, although he had never performed such an operation. We later learned that it was a very rare procedure at that time to take bone chips from one person and put them into another.

After the doctor left the room, I tried to talk my father out of the plan. He was unwilling to listen to my arguments and insisted that it needed to be done and he wanted to follow through.

In a short time the arrangements were made. My father checked into a nearby hospital for a morning operation. Once the bone shavings were removed they were transported to my hospital and inserted in my back that afternoon. On top of the long ordeal of the summer, the spinal operation was really a simple process for me. It was not painful. The only problem was the long recovery which awaited.

On the other hand, my father's surgery was very painful for him. He spent some very sleepless nights and experienced a rather difficult few weeks of recovery. Because of the pain in his only leg, mobility became a major problem. I was told that he had to preach while standing on crutches for several weeks.

If there was any doubt that I was loved by my father it was forever settled in the hospital room when he offered his own body in order to make my life better. It has always amazed me that there was no hesitation when he made the offer and I do not believe that he has ever had any regrets. It was a sacrifice that I did not fully understand until I had a son of my own.