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Journalism, 2014 (expected)

The Face of Joy

I couldn't get their faces out of my mind. The single mother's red-rimmed eyes, her baby just six pounds and eight days old. The young Hispanic man, maybe 14, his voice forced cheerful, his eyes downcast, translating for his mother. The little Indian girl dressed in yellow with the bright brown eyes who announced she wanted to be a mathematician.

When I began my series on youth homelessness during my internship at the Loudoun Times-Mirror I had reports and statistics. But reports and statistics don't tell stories.

"Five minutes to pick out clothes," the volunteers told them, as families crowded in the hall outside the room of donated supplies, babies cried and toddlers screamed. Five minutes turned to fifteen as each child dug through beanie babies, nurses sorted clothes, and diapers were lost and found. "We have to tell you to leave now," the volunteer woman said, but a little girl who barely spoke English lingered by the belts stacked on a hanger. I took them off one by one, men's and women's and boys', attempting to fit her little waist. As her mother began to leave, the girl looked pleadingly at a black faux alligator-print belt: "Please, please, please... one that doesn't cut." In the land of Lexuses, iPhones and nannies, this girl had to ask a stranger for a toothbrush and a belt big enough for her to grow into.

My internship with the Loudoun Times-Mirror, the summer between my sophomore and junior years, marked a dropping-off point in my life. I began to wrestle with the hardest question I had yet to answer—harder than any U.S. History paper or Freedom’s exam. *Can I believe God is good in a world with this much pain?*

I cried myself to sleep many nights that summer, alone in a dark basement, carrying the deep burden of love. When I returned to school that fall, I saw no visible change in those broken souls. My PHC friends felt like water on a parched desert. But as much as I tried to ignore it, the problem of pain hadn’t gone away.

After fall break, I opened an email with the subject header, “The late, beloved Bonnie Libby.” I held my friends as they cried during the memorial, but didn’t believe she was gone: for weeks, I kept thinking I saw her, only to remember and grieve. I heard of the sudden death of someone I profiled for World Magazine, a wide-hearted woman who adopted three Down Syndrome children. Then, the death of my roommates’ grandparents, the corporate mourning of the Newtown shootings and the Boston bombings, and the murder of my best friend’s pastor, wife and small children by their oldest son.

The pain became such a blur that I worried I was shutting myself off from feeling it. I lost count of the number of people I knew who were touched by death in the last six months. For the first time in 20 years, I was not sure I believed God was good. And that terrified me.

That spring, in Philosophy, the Stoics’ *amor fati* and Leibniz’s claim we lived in the “best of all possible worlds” felt like putting a Band-Aid on a ruptured artery. I wrote my précis in response to B.C. Johnson’s article, “Why Doesn’t God Intervene to Prevent

Evil?” In his essay, Johnson accuses, “A house catches fire and a six month old baby is painfully burned to death. Could we possibly describe as ‘good’ any person that had the power to save this child and yet refused to do so? God...has refused to help.” As I hoisted all my logic against Johnson’s arguments, I realized the problem of evil is ultimately beyond logic: it is the cry of a drowning soul.

The précis got submitted, but the answer came months later. I found it in John 11, the death of Jesus’ best friend. The text makes a point to say Christ loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—and because He loved them, He stayed away two days. He had said, “This illness does not lead to death,” and there Lazarus was, rotting in a tomb. And the same Jesus turns to Martha, His face at the point of weeping, and says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Martha, in the darkness without any glimmer of resurrection, looks into the face of her Redeemer and says, “Yes, Lord; I believe.” Martha believed through the pain because she knew Jesus.

I wish the solution to pain were easy, wish I could simply make hollow souls believe the truth and leave aside these clever-weaved spidery lies. I wish I knew just the right thing to say, or, sometimes, that I had courage to say anything. Yet at the end of those dead hopes, through that hollow summer and those homeless faces, I found joy. Not joy because it was “the right Christian answer,” but joy in believing without doubt that the God who delays is the same God who loves me.

The answer to the problem of pain will come on that Day, when corruptible is swallowed up by incorruptible, and the suffering in this world pales in comparison to the

glory set before us: “He will swallow up death forever, And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces” (Isaiah 25:8). Joy is longing for that Home.