

I have a couple of Martin guitars hanging on my cabin wall, and a handmade frailing banjo, and even a pretty sweet hollow-body Gibson electric guitar. I'm not an amazing player. The last time I made any progress with the guitar was thirty-two years ago during the recording sessions on my first album. I played the basic acoustic guitar for that album, but the producer had hired this wizard studio player to supply the fancy stuff. He seemed to be finger-picking and flat-picking back and forth in the same song, or even in the same phrase. I asked him how he did it. He showed me, and that's the last time I improved as a guitar player. I've played a lot since, made lots of albums, but never got any better at it.

One of the many times I decided that being a song-and-dance man wasn't ever going to work for me, I went down to Job Service and asked if they had some kind of test I could take to find out if maybe there was some job I didn't know about that I'd be good at and enjoy a lot, and make something like a regular paycheck. They sent me up to BYU to take an exhaustive batch of tests that revealed some alarming stuff--like I have virtually no left brain and that I have no particular aptitude for anything but what I was already doing--tough luck about the pay scale.

There was another test of mechanical and conceptual talents. Of a possible fourteen, I scored a twelve on spatial perception, a ten on pattern recognition, an eleven on something else that I forget, and an astounding fourteen on something you'd think for sure I'd remember, but I don't (except I think it probably wasn't memory). But on manual dexterity (something you might think would be fairly basic to a guitar player) I scored a whopping two. I was appalled! But then when I thought about it, it sort of figured. And I had to admit that even a two was a pretty good gift, really. Sort of like breathing is, which doesn't take any talent at all.

So I play pretty simply. And one of the things I look for in an instrument is a sweet enough sound that playing really simply sounds really good. I love a guitar that sounds good enough that a single strum on a G chord is satisfying. Old Martin guitars tend to sound like that, and from when I was a kid I wanted to find one. At age forty-one I finally thought, "Hey, I'll just buy me a new one and keep it 'til it's old!" Seems to be working.

LOVE AT HOME / 25 JANUARY 2004

Is there really beauty all around, when there's love at home? Roses blooming beneath our feet? We're having an "inversion." Not what I think of as "a bliss complete." It's not entirely safe to breathe outside. If there weren't so much fog mixed with the pollution, it wouldn't be safe to strike a match out there--the pollution would ignite.

I love my Utah mountains. They bring me joy. They bring me more joy when I can see them. I love the broad Utah sky. I think it was blue.

I remember the coming of snow, softening the fence tops, nestling in the evergreens, thickening the roof, blanketing the streets, curtaining the streetlights in diamond gauze. I dragged the kids' plastic slide up a little incline in our yard, then banked it with snow, piling on foot-deep shovelful of snow, building a mountain to slide down. They played like wild people, but all their happy shouts were muted by the white.

The snow is still here. You can see the ground through the inversion, if you're not up a tree, or getting out of a tall pickup truck. But the fluff has vanished, and the January thaw peeled back the white to where the dirt was suspended in ice by the snowplows and even by my innocent shovel. Then the grey, the black, and the dirty brown were sealed by the inversion, held up where we have to see it, and dirtier by contrast with the icy crust that holds it up.

We live in a cabin that wears snow well enough, but during inversions I'd rather look at the logs from the inside. When I first moved in, my grown son gave me a dart board and some darts. It was really quite thoughtful of him. He knew I had no particular interest in that sport, but he figured, "Hey, it won't matter if you miss!" If we don't like where we've just hung a picture in our cabin, we just move it a foot to the left. No place to hang your muffler? Drive a nail.

I don't know if there's beauty all around when there's love at home, but I know there's beauty all around home when there's love there. I guess it just doesn't sound as good to sing it that way.

A DAY WITHOUT YOUR LOVE / 18 JANUARY 2004

My favorite meeting in the church? Temple weddings. I don't much like receptions. I keep remembering my own, and how sore my face was from smiling at everybody all evening. It ached. But I love it when someone getting married honors me enough to let me eavesdrop on their promises to God.

I hate to admit it, but my second favorite meeting is funerals. I don't go out of my way to attend them. I don't pull into a church parking lot whenever I see a hearse and sneak in and stand in the back of the chapel. But when I have to go to one, I always feel closer to the other side, which I somehow expect to be brighter, sweeter, for sure more fair than this side. All the cares and demands of the world, all those material expectations, and measuring people by their income and looks, and pride-driven politics and even the perplexities of nations seem to shrink. All those things that try so desperately to be real and important, when all they are, really, is housekeeping. Nobody out there among the creditors and predators seems to know that in the quiet chapel a life is being liberated, and reborn into breathtaking flight.

And weddings are the same. Powers bigger than bombers are unleashed, and a new family takes wing. Maybe that's why the word they use to describe a family that's a mom and a dad and at least one kid is "nuclear."

I love my nuclear family. I can't imagine being without them. I can imagine being without nuclear weapons, nuclear power plants, nuclear submarines (in fact, I can't actually imagine being with nuclear submarines). I can imagine being without any number of things nuclear. But I can't imagine being without my nuclear family. Nuclear mom, nuclear grown-up kids, nuclear little daughter, and extra-nuclear little son.

And maybe I don't have to imagine being without them. I don't really understand the idea of being sealed together forever as a family, but I can easily understand the idea that my wife and children and I were good friends before we came here to this divisive and separating sort of planet. Sealing involves individuals making friends with the Lord, and in the eternities, any friend of the Lord's is a friend of mine.

HOW PALE THE WIND / 14 DECEMBER 2003

Sometime this evening my son will welcome into his family his first child. That son of mine is a big guy now, but I remember vividly when we sat in church on the Sunday he was blessed and he sucked on my finger as though it meant something to him. He and his mother and I slept in a loft in those days, and I remember putting him to sleep every night by patting him on the back until he drifted off. I remember lots of things about his childhood that only a father (well, really only his father) would find interesting. But what I don't remember is having any clear vision of what he would become.

I didn't see him then as the man I would have to reach up to to get a hug. I didn't see him then as the guy who would come and get me out of technical jams in the recording studio. I didn't see him then as the maker of all the magic sounds people would someday hear breathing through the shows on professional stages around the country in Tony-award winning theatres. I didn't see him then as the guy I would choose first to help me survive a cataclysmic disaster that dumped us on a desert island. I only saw the baby.

Tonight he'll see his own baby, and he'll love what he sees, and he'll gaze into her future and see the same intriguing, tantalizing, hopeful nothing I saw.

I'm dead positive that when my parents looked at baby me they didn't have the wildest notion I'd grow up to be a banjo slapper and a drama geek and be talking to you right now with radio sponsors on both ends of our moments together hoping you'll like what I say enough to hang around and listen to them sell you something. (I know how those advertisers feel--I'm one of them.)

It's coming on Christmas, and we see the baby Jesus in places not connected with anything municipal, and wish we could see more of him and less of Santa. But when we are lucky enough to find him, what do we see? Do we see what my son will see tonight? Or what I saw at his birth thirty years ago? Or what my parents saw at my birth? Or will we see the man you have to reach up to hug, or, in Jesus' case, the man who leans down to hug you?

It's awesome and sweet to worship the baby in the manger. But he wasn't a baby for very long.

I have a daughter, newly six years old, and a son who is nearly three. They love each other. My son has just learned to make peanut butter sandwiches, but he never makes one just for himself. An essential part of this exciting new process is to cut it down the middle and give half to his sister.

The most disappointing moment in any day for her is when he piggy-backs off to bed on Dad and doesn't hug her goodnight first.

She is all dolls and ball gowns. He is trucks and Spiderman. But every day she slings a few webs, and today he found his summer swimming diaper and said to his mom, "I'm going at the ball and show the girls my goggles."

It started early. She was so excited to have a little brother that it nearly killed her when she got a cold the very afternoon of the day he was born, and had to keep arms-length for his first week here. She's more than made up for it since.

I try to understand God. I am asked over the pulpit and by my own conscience if I love Him. But I close my eyes and I don't even see Him, even if I'm closing my eyes because I'm talking to Him. It seems I have to feel something that's moving around in someone else's heart before the love kicks in. But He has said that His ways are not my ways, nor His thoughts my thoughts. As the heavens are higher than the earth are His ways than my ways, and His thoughts than my thoughts. How do you love someone like that?

Then I come into the kitchen and see my children playing with each another, laughing and sharing and taking honest joy in each other's goodness. And suddenly theological knots I could never untie just melt--before I even had a moment to see the solution, they are dissolved. And I know more of God's heart than all the learned councils of Nicea, Rome, and London. I know why God does what He does and says what He says. I know the big thing that He knows: nothing makes you happier than to see your children loving each other. And suddenly not one commandment is a hoop to jump through, or even a test of faith. Every one is a gentle rod, nudging us together under the kitchen table, where we can share our toys, tickle each other's funny bones, teach one another all the songs we know, and make our Father smile.

I AM A CHILD OF GOD / 9 NOVEMBER 2003

"A Proclamation on Family," kid translation:

It's a special message that God told the prophets! Now they're telling me!
And the whole world!

The way to be happy and strong forever is learn how to be good to my family. Someday I'll marry somebody I love and be a mom or dad myself! It's what makes us happy and strong, like God! He planned it that way!

I'm a boy. I was always a boy. That's important, because I get the chance to grow up and be like my Heavenly Father!

I lived with my Heavenly Parents before I came to this world! I knew them and loved them! I wanted to get a body like they had, and learn how to use it to love people and make things, like they do!

In holy temples, my family can promise to do the happy things God asks us to do, and He will promise to keep us together forever!

I want to have babies, just like God told Grandfather Adam and Grandmother Eve to do. The power to have babies comes from God. I only want to use that power with the friend that I marry.

I must take good care of the person I marry, and take good care of the children that God sends to live with us. We'll learn to help our whole world to be happy!

Every child should get to have a mom and a dad who love each other enough to be married to each other and love each other the most, and not be in love with anybody else.

Our family will be happiest if we do what Jesus teaches us to do. We must have faith and pray, repent and forgive each other, respect and love each other, and feel sad for people in our family if their feelings or their bodies get hurt, and try to help them feel better. Jesus wants us to have fun working together and playing together!

My dad is in charge of getting money to buy food and clothes and a place for us to live. And he tries to keep us safe from harmful things and unkind people. My mom is in charge of teaching and feeding us, and helping me to know that they love me. But Mom and Dad help each other in all these things, because they're both just as important in our family. If one of them got sick or died, we might have to change those jobs around. My grandmas and grandpas and aunts and uncles and cousins should help us, if we need it.

People who don't keep their promises to God and to their families will have to tell God someday why they didn't do it. If we let our families not love each other and fall apart, the whole world will be a mess, and a really unhappy

place.

All the people who are in charge of towns and countries should help families obey and be happy, because families are more important than any town or country could ever be. Besides, if families are happy and good, then the towns and countries will be happy and good! That's what God says.

THE MORNING COMES SO SLOWLY / 2 NOVEMBER 2003

When I was about twenty-four, I was up in the Northwest on a little performance tour. After an afternoon presentation in Tacoma, three teens came up to me and asked me if I had a place to sleep that night. In fact, I hadn't yet arranged for that, so they and their parents took me home, not unlike a stray puppy.

I stayed with them for a few days, and one evening they took me swimming in a lake with the amazingly liquid name of "Sammamish." We didn't get there until near dark, and people were pretty much leaving. So we felt like we had the lake to ourselves. It wasn't cold, it was smooth as glass, and reflected the moon and a few stars that were beginning to appear. It was fringed, it seems, with pines.

I suddenly felt grateful for such astounding peace and beauty--grateful to God, who made it. It was a beauty in which I was immersed. I easily imagined God himself seeing that it was very good. Yes, "good" is the bible word for it--the "good" that would bring him walking through the garden in the cool of the day. Then I asked myself, "If he made something beautiful and then walked through it, might he make something beautiful and then swim through it?" Especially on such a glorious moonlit night? Instantly, with water rushing over my arms and shoulders, I felt more "in the image of God" than I had ever before felt.

Not long after that, when my oldest son Sam, now a father with three sons of his own, was little enough to wear my t-shirts for nightgowns, he jumped to his feet one night after family prayer, spread that t-shirt out wide like wings and announced, "When I grow up, I'm gonna be God!" Well, some kids only reach for President of the United States.

I didn't tell him the position was already filled--I think he might have known that already. I mean, we'd just been talking to that Person. But I think that my little Sam's innocence allowed him to see what ought to be obvious to the whole world, but isn't--that if God loves us without limit, how could he withhold from us the joy of swimming in a lake we have made? In a forest, under a moon, washed in light we have made?

MY SHEPHERD WILL SUPPLY MY NEED / 19 OCTOBER 2003

I should be doing my taxes. Every year I get a postponement, but I don't think they have a postponement of the postponement. I should be doing my taxes. But I think that, instead, I'll talk about my taxes. On the radio.

I think taxes are a good idea. It's good to have schools and libraries and roads and things like that. I'll even put up with a nickel of my taxes paying for some artist to make really dumb pictures, if a couple of bucks can go toward keeping some symphony orchestra afloat.

Of course, taxes can be abusive. It all comes down to what they're used for, really. In King Noah's day, there was a flat tax of 20% in the land of Nephi. What the people got in return was permission to sin, and a lot of government buildings arrayed with glory.

I didn't find out until recently that a lot of the taxes collected by the Roman Empire wound up paying for bread and circuses in Rome. I guess the average Roman spent pretty much all of his time eating bread and watching circuses. I suppose he had to stand in line for both, but standing in line is not exactly the kind of work that builds a lot of character. And of course if you're at the circus every day, you can't just watch the same thing you saw yesterday. Your thrill threshold creeps a little higher every time you watch. Pretty soon acrobats and jugglers don't give you all the goose bumps you expect from the circus. And since there's only so much you can do to make bread more thrilling, the circuses got way out of hand. It was "reality TV" to the max. Pity the poor taxpayer. Pity the poor tax user.

The Savior had an answer for those who asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. He asked for a coin. Then He asked whose face was cast on it (which, of course, was Caesar's), and said "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

If I don't let taxes kill me, I'll have a "me" left to render unto God, for I am certainly His. And in the meantime, I'll remember that also among the things that are God's are the birds in the air and the lilies of the field. And I'll try to remember how He feeds them and arrays them with glory.

GIVE, SAID THE LITTLE STREAM / 12 OCTOBER 2003

We planted our garden really late this year. We almost didn't plant at all, but I finally thought it would be better to have something growing there, even if it didn't give us anything to eat, than to have to look at a bare spot and weeds. It was an aesthetics-driven decision.

So, around the fourth of July, I went into a nursery and bought our whole garden for about two dollars. Tomato and squash plants that were about to explode their planting pots, priced to go. The pepper plants even had little peppers on them. And that filled me with a surprising hope. Maybe there would be a harvest after all. Maybe nature would smile on us.

We didn't even take time to till, just loosened the dirt with a shovel and stuck in the plants.

Now it's harvest, and I go out each day and survey the fruits of our repentant labors. Five squash, probably edible but not by any means massive. A cucumber (it was good). Lots of big peppers that shine like polished wax--and taste like polished wax. Six tomatoes that persist in being green, however hard it is to be green.

I had such hope for those plants, loved them and cared for them and had joy in them. Why have they not blessed me with the magical taste and abundance of autumn?

Well, because if they did, they'd have to be radically disobedient to what they're commanded to do, which is to be planted in the second week of May and grow like crazy.

Nature is astoundingly obedient. Ten years ago my daughter gave me, for Father's Day, a quaking aspen that I planted in the corner of the yard. Now, by selective lawn-mowing, we have an aspen forest in front of our cabin, because that first tree was obedient to what it had been commanded to do, which was to send out horizontal roots just under the surface that would spring up new trees, or new incarnations of the same tree. Mow off the new shoots and they just try again.

Rain falls down, not up. Aspens reach for the sky, not the earth. Lakes remain generally flat. And snow, when it melts, becomes water, never milk. If the obedient elements could talk, what would they teach us?

Well, "Give," said the little stream, as it hurried down the hill.

PRAISE HIM / 5 OCTOBER 2003

Let me tell you about my new friend, Roberto. He lives with his wife, Anna, in a little bitty house that sits way back, often with deer grazing between them and the road. I'm a little embarrassed to call him my new friend, because we've lived a half-mile apart for some years, and I just got to know him some.

They fled from Cuba when Castro rumbled into Havana, half a century ago. He left a good printing business and a nice house and now works as an all-hands builder in return for his rent and just a little more. He's kind of old, but wiry, and works hard.

His wife is not real well. I got a call a couple of weeks ago saying that she'd been taken to the hospital, in great pain and hardly able to breath. I drove down there and found Roberto in the waiting room outside Intensive Care. He recognized me from church, and we talked for an hour. For the first ten minutes he brought me up to speed on Anna, that she'd suffered the effects of congestive heart failure, along with a half-dozen other killer conditions. They'd performed an eight-hour open-heart surgery and given her a one-in-ten chance of surviving it. Having past that ominous test, she was now unconscious, and didn't show any signs of waking up.

Then we talked about music. Roberto likes Cuban music--that figures. But he also likes the Gypsy Kings. Anna really likes the Gypsy Kings. As Roberto would lead her from place to place at home, walking backward so he could hold both her hands, she would often fall asleep in mid-stride, but if the Gypsy Kings came on, she would wake right up and start dancing just a little. The day after our hospital talk, Roberto dropped by the Gypsy Kings CD for me to listen to.

A week passed, and Anna still lay unconscious. It was a worry. Then I got a call from Roberto. Could he borrow back that CD? He had this idea that if she heard it, she might wake up. Her nurse thought that would be okay--they could play it on the speakers in her room. He said no, it might make the other patients get up and dance, and that might be dangerous. So he gently placed headphones on his wife's head, she heard the Gypsy Kings, and woke right up. She didn't dance, but clearly wanted to.

I don't know if it was a song of praise, but that's what it made me want to do.

I WANT TO GO WITH YOU / 28 SEPTEMBER 2003

I like tragedy. That's a heck of a thing to admit, I suppose, but I do. I don't mean like when Hurricane Isabel hits the east coast and people get hurt. I'm talking about "King Lear," or "West Side Story."

I was even in a production of "King Lear" once, at the Park City Shakespeare Festival. I played the Earl of Gloucester. He's an old guy who, because he's a friend of the ousted king, gets his eyes dug out by the bad guys. It's pretty horrific, but I was kind of glad, really, because I only had to learn blocking for the first half of the play. The blinding scene was the last scene before intermission, and for the whole second half of the play I was led around the stage by other characters.

(I know the scene was successful, because on the nights we did "King Lear," during the intermission the sale of jelly donuts fell off drastically.)

So the king dies, eventually I die, the angelic daughter dies, the loyal jester dies. In "Peter Pan" (not a tragedy) Wendy tells the Lost Boys "Hamlet" for a bedtime story. She says that Hamlet dies, the queen dies, the king dies, the lover dies, Hamlet's best friend dies, but apart from them, everybody lives happily ever after. But, in fact, everybody doesn't live happily ever after. I was moved to tears every night from backstage in Park City when the few good survivors of the war against King Lear take over the kingdom. It would be a stretch to say they're happy. In fact, they're deeply sad, even though they're victorious. But they're not desperate, because they have been seared by the simple goodness of those who are gone. Their pity has enlarged them. I think that's what tragedy can do.

I recently acted in a very short play, only one scene long, where a man is driving his wife to her first night working as a prostitute. It seemed the only way out of the financial pit in which they were trapped. It wasn't a pretty play. Good friends, whom I love and respect, were deeply offended by it. I was sorry about that, but I wanted to ask them, "Hey, didn't these people move you to some pity? Of course they made a bad choice (like Lear, Gloucester, and Tony and Maria), but can't we be enlarged by this somehow?" (I probably just didn't act well enough for them to care about my character.)

Sorrow can harden us. And sorrow can soften us. We get to choose.

In 1989, something wonderful happened. I horse-traded for a guitar that will probably stay with me for the rest of my life. It's a beautiful guitar--I courted my wife with it. I don't suppose this would mean much, unless you knew that I've had, and lost, about forty guitars before this one. Every time I pick it up, I remember what a remarkable year was 1989.

Oh, and this other thing happened in that year. The iron curtain fell--brought down like thunder suddenly, as under the force of guns. But guns were still, and engines of war stood silent. The biggest sound was of human voices, beating the air like wings taking flight. Taking flight to freedom. Who would have thought the wall would fall under the force of feathers? But then, when have walls defeated wings?

Our pioneer parents came here flying hard in the wake of the same dreams. The allure of peace, unity, and freedom of worship brought them sailing and walking (and in their hearts, winging) from the ends of the earth. The material possibilities of America may quicken our blood, but the spiritual possibilities are the feathers that lift us into the light.

Some say there is no law but that which is made by government. But isn't there a law of common decency born in our hearts (not unlike a hatching egg). Let's defend our inalienable right to be moral, human, and prayerful.

Some say we must be many nations for our many people. But aren't we one nation under God, indivisible? We may celebrate our diversity, but we revere our unity.

Some say the grand order of society proceeds from watchful government. But is there really government for the people and of the people if it isn't government by the people? Don't we trust that American citizens, fired with correct principles, will rightly govern themselves?

Some say the founding fathers were wise for their day, but their guiding beliefs no longer relevant. Let's say not merely "wise," but "inspired." The vision God gave them lives and breathes. And lifts, like wings. Gives me something to sing about, with that 1989 guitar.

A SONG ABOUT THE WAY I FEEL / 14 SEPTEMBER 2003

I don't suppose I could count the times I wanted to say something beautifully, powerfully, memorably, and it came out sounding dumb. I don't think it's an accident that the word "dumb" has sometimes meant "can't talk." Nothing to do with "stupid," just a simple inability to speak. How many times have you made the perfect observation, answered the question brilliantly, laid out your feelings bravely and clearly, after the person you were speaking to has walked out the door, oblivious to the immensity of what you had bursting in your mind and heart?

Have you ever glanced sideways in traffic and seen people alone in their cars, rehearsing conversations?

In the theatre, we rehearse the things we're going to say before we go on stage and say them. In life, we usually rehearse the things we were going to say, but by then the curtain has closed, the lights are out, and the audience has gone home. That's when we nearly get it right.

I have a dream sometimes, where I can't run. I'm not much of a runner, anyway. When I was a little kid, I didn't know that. I ran like the wind, or like I imagined the wind would run. Nothing could catch me--not Indians, not forest fires, not the Dark Shadow whose breath I could hear right behind me as I ran back to the safety of the back porch light from the garage, where I was routinely sent on Sunday nights to fetch ice cream from the freezer. But in the fifth grade, we had a track meet, and I discovered that I was the slowest kid in the fifth grade. Bob Taylor was almost slower, but not quite. Wow.

I didn't think much about running after that. Until I was thirty, and learned the word, "aerobic," which had been invented after I was a kid. I started jogging, and before long was up to five miles a day--even actually running more than jogging. I even won a few races, in my age bracket. But I generally didn't much care about being fast or not.

That's when I started having dreams about not being able to move my legs. I had a little mini-stroke once, and remember telling my hand to reach out and grab something, and it wouldn't. So I know what it feels like when my legs won't move, and I know what it feels like when my hands won't move. And for sure I know what it feels like when my mouth won't move.

SWEET SUNDAY AFTERNOON / 7 SEPTEMBER 2003

I don't much mind Mondays, really. It's always kind of a new start, symbolically, another chance at getting at least the mundane things right. Because that's what it's mainly for. "Monday," "mundane," hmmm... No, "mundane" comes from a Latin root that means "world." So "mundane" is worldly, thin, maybe noisy, but temporary. But you have to admit it sounds a lot like Monday.

We don't have a word, "tuesdane" to describe things. Maybe because Tuesday is seldom all that different from Monday. Tuesday almost doesn't have an identity of its own. It's not Wednesday, which is the heart of the week, or the summit, if you're thinking of a week as something to get over. It's not like Thursday, which always feels like "Friday Eve." And it's certainly not Friday, for which we are all encouraged to thank God, and celebrate by attending a restaurant which is, more than anything, "mundane." One could even reasonably argue that a word that goes just beyond "mundane" ought to be "fridane."

Poor Tuesday. My little children used to ask when we were going to Disneyland, when we were going to buy a boat, when we were going to fix the kitchen floor so marbles wouldn't always roll immediately to one corner. They dreaded hearing me answer cheerfully, "Oh, I think we'll do that a week from Tuesday." Which meant, in our family, "probably never." It was a phrase that had the same value as "We'll see," which, as we had our kids repeat back to us, meant "We don't yet have enough information to make a firm decision," but which they all knew really meant "No."

Then finally there's Saturday. It's your day. No school, usually no work, just your day. Unless you live in a house, or have a yard, or own a car, or eat food. Then the day is claimed by your house, your yard, your car, or the grocery store. Of course, there are lots of fun things you can do, but you have to do them really fast, and it makes you tired. Maybe as tired as all the running around through the other days of the week, mundane through fridane. Still, I'm glad there's a Saturday in every week.

And I'm just as glad there aren't two of them.

PRAISE TO THE LORD / 31 AUGUST 2003

My kids are just as noisy as a derailing circus train. A lot of their noise is fun. Some is not. I think there are a couple of things about noise that are not so good. One is, it hurts Dad's ears. The other thing might be worse, though. When you're making a lot of noise, it's hard to hear things.

In my town, there used to be more space between the houses and the mountains than there is now. There were dirt roads and trails that wound among the sage and through oak thickets, some stretches bridged with trees. Kids used to ride dirt bikes along those foothills, missing everything that was good about that land except the bumps. I felt sorry for them as I ran every day along those paths. I thought I heard so much more, felt much more, of what the wild country had to say. Then one evening I had some hard thinking to do and I walked those same paths. I was astounded at how much I had missed, how much I could suddenly hear, how much I could see, and feel. Then, on another evening, I needed not so much to think as to pray. I walked out there and held still. For a long time. And I found myself wondering how I'd ever heard or seen or felt anything out there before. I realized that merely moving through that beauty, at any pace, had blurred everything.

We just took our kids to the mountains that overlook Zion Canyon from the north. They are almost six and almost three. Not the mountains, the kids. The mountains are old enough that there's a tree growing on them that was tall when Moroni walked the earth. And the mountain had already eroded into a fiery fan of yellow and orange spines many millennia before that pine cone sank into its skin.

We hiked to an Alpine pond with glowing trout moored among its mosses, and for once it seemed right to my kids to be quiet. We only whispered as we hiked, and sometimes we just stood and listened to the wind breath and the birds chitter. They loved it. It was reverence they could feel. We settled in a pine grove near the canyon rim and quietly considered another grove, bees humming, sweet birds singing. Shafts of light filled with loving looks and holy words.

It's hard to capture quiet in a song. It's easier to catch the feeling of all the joyful noise you can finally hear.

WHEN I'M WITH YOU / 17 AUGUST 2003

Nine years ago, my wife Laurie was not my wife, but someone I had admired pure and chaste from afar--in fact, from the orchestra pit at Sundance, where I was playing the banjo in the band and she was out on stage starring in "Li'l Abner." Now she was helping to direct a production of "Arsenic And Old Lace" and asked me if I would audition, and since she was entirely lovely and I was entirely bowled over that here she was on my poor unworthy telephone asking me to spend every evening for about two months in the same theatre with her, I did. Instantly.

I wound up playing the bad guy, the Boris Karloff role, the lunatic brother who murders people because he hates them. He's running from the law, and comes to hide out in the home of his lunatic aunts, who murder people because they love them and think they'd be happier put out of their misery. You may remember that one of the characters in this play (another nephew, and, well, a lunatic) thinks he's Teddy Roosevelt, and carries around a bugle and a biography of the dead president.

About three weeks into rehearsals, I was standing in the stage right wings. The props had by now begun showing up, most of them raided from Laurie's grampa's house, and my attention was drawn to a curious and rare book on the prop table, one that had been chosen to represent this Roosevelt biography. It was a book I'd only seen in my parents' home, the journal of Pioneer John Brown, one of Brigham Young's scouts. I was amazed--it had been printed and distributed only to John Brown's descendants and a few libraries.

At a break, I held up the book and hollered, "Hey, where did this book come from?" Laurie answered, "Oh, that's my great-great-great-grandfather." (She didn't mean the book, she meant the writer of the book, but I knew what she meant.) Whereupon I said, "But hey, this is my great-great-grandfather! You know what this means, don't you? Our children will be idiots!" Well, that suggestion kind of ratcheted our relationship up into a world of considerations that resulted in what we are now, which is married.

Our children are still under observation.

JESUS, THE VERY THOUGHT OF THEE / 10 AUGUST 2003

Just got home from a funeral. A sweet old grandma up the street passed away early last Sunday morning. The family asked my wife and me to sing her favorite song, "Springtime In The Rockies." We felt honored.

I like funerals. The veil gets very thin, and people feel a faint glow from the other side. For some, the notion of living after death is weird and nonsensical. For others, it's as predictable as spring, and certainly no more strange than leaves springing from sticks of wood poking through the snow.

Still, we hang on to life pretty hard. I remember waking up years ago to the distress of my little boy who's hamster was lying motionless in a corner of his cage. I took that little critter in my hand and stroked his belly for an hour. He seemed to revive some, then shuddered and died.

My older son, a teen-ager at the time, had a similar experience, though he knew from the beginning what the outcome would be. Our cat, Patches, came dragging in one afternoon with a gash on her underside and a fair bit of her insides suddenly on her outside. She'd been hit by a car, and clearly didn't have a chance. But she was still alive, and hurting, so we asked a neighbor who was a veterinarian to stop by and give her a shot to put her to sleep. I had to leave, but my son held her in his lap, stroking her softly until she died.

The only humans ever to die in my arms were fictional lovers on stage, and as soon as the lights dimmed on our tears, both the deceased and the mourning survivor sprang to their feet and drug the deathbed into the wings.

This morning, before we got up to sing, my wife asked me, "Where should I focus while you're singing the verses?" (It's the kind of thing that concerns actors, who are convinced that people are watching them continually.) I just said, "Look at the music, 'cause that's where I'll be looking." But it's a good question to ask at funerals. "Where should I focus?"

There are plenty of people to focus on, the deceased, the survivors, the folks up front singing the song. But if we stay focused on the guest of honor, we'll get to missing them horribly. If we focus on the loved ones left behind, we'll get to feeling pretty sad. There's another person we can focus on, though, the person who gives us life after death. And when we do, however deep the snow around our hearts, it's suddenly springtime in the Rockies.

IF JESUS WAS A RIVER / 3 AUGUST 2003

My wife's grandfather is ninety-three years old, and doesn't fish much anymore. So he gave me his rod and his nice spinning reel. The last time I fished was thirty years ago as a young married guy, and the time before that, when I was a Boy Scout. It's good I have at least ten fingers, because that enables me to number the fish I've caught.

Let me tell you about that last time. I'd been married less than a year, and was in California for a week. One afternoon my wife and I were driving up a little canyon in the San Gabriel mountains that I'd hiked in when I was growing up down there. We stopped at a little bait shop for a soda. On a whim I bought a little rod and reel for fifteen dollars, and then cast a few times in the stream along the road. Didn't catch anything. Which is good, I suppose, because I didn't have a license.

Back in Utah again, we drove once up Provo Canyon and cast a couple of hundred times out into Deer Creek Reservoir. Nothing. Decided to go home.

But on the way back, I spotted this wide spot in the Provo River that looked like just the kind of place I'd hang out if I were a trout. So we pulled over and I cast a few times. Nothing. On what was gonna be my last cast, Bang! a healthy mid-sized trout hit my lure, and I was back again in Boy Scout Land.

Flushed with success, I cast my lure out one more time. That was when a guy in uniform called out from downstream, "Hey, did you know these are closed waters?" I said "No, I didn't." He said, "Well, that's an honest mistake. Why don't you pack it in?" While I was obediently packing it in, he turned upstream toward me again and asked, "Hey, do you have a fishing license." I said, "Um, no, I don't." He said, "That's a dishonest mistake," and wrote me a ticket for twenty-five bucks.

The next week I bought a license (for, I think, twenty dollars). So that one trout back in '71 cost me fifty dollars. But that's not all. While I was talking to that game warden, my wife started feeling sorry for the fish and let it go.

Still, I'm going fishing again, with grandpa's gear. I'm gonna file the barbs off the hooks and let the fish go. And wish I were one of them, flashing gold in the clean river, worth fifty bucks at least.

YOU MAKE ME STRONGER / 27 JULY 2003

I don't suppose it often happens that you sit down to write out a story about extraordinary kindness and suddenly the phone rings and your writing is interrupted by someone offering you an extraordinary kindness. Well, that just happened.

Head gaskets are mysterious things, flimsy flat cut-outs that lie squished between the top half and bottom half of the engine in your car. I'm not sure what a head gasket would cost, because when a head gasket blows, you don't buy a new head gasket. You buy a new engine.

Not too many years ago I acquired a shiny new truck, red, with mag wheels--a typical "mid-life crisis" truck. I drove it blissfully through most of my mid-life crisis before the head gasket blew, which might have caused a whole other mid-life crisis, except that a good friend knocked on our door and invited us to come out and take a look at his faithful family van, because he and his faithful family were giving it to us. It had seen a lot of use, but it was extremely well cared-for. Extraordinarily well cared-for. You might wonder why everybody doesn't care for their car extraordinarily--I mean, car-care isn't exactly rocket science. But my friend is, in fact, a rocket scientist, so there you are.

That van blessed our lives enormously for a year. For a year, we were like everybody else, with room for our kids and their stuff and a gallon of milk besides. We were so much like everybody else that when one of the wheel covers broke off, I took the other three off so I could tell our van from all the others in the Wal-Mart parking lot. Then, perhaps because I am not a rocket scientist, the head gasket blew.

My good friend, wondering why he hadn't seen his old van by our house for a couple of weeks now, called moments ago offering to help us buy another one.

In the Bible the Savior says that if we are kind to anyone who needs our kindness, it's exactly as if we were kind to Him. I wonder if it works the other way around. I mean, am I the Savior in this head gasket story, or is my friend? The Savior is the one who's always giving a zillion times more kindness than He's getting. Like a good friend, my Savior gets me back on the road.

THE TRAIL OF DREAMS / 20 JULY 2003

In the spring of 1820 a young boy, Joseph Smith, went into a grove of trees with the simplest of questions to ask the Lord in prayer, "Which church should I attend?" Before the morning was over, he had done battle with the Prince of Darkness, held conversation with the Creator of the Universe, and heard the Father of Light speak his name. And in that moment, a stone was cut from the mountain without hands, and began to roll forward and expand to fill all the earth. And it filled the earth with dreams a godly dream of eternal life, a dream of Zion, a dream of angels speaking again to the children of the earth. And it was in pursuit of dreams, not of gold nor of richer soil, but dreams, that 70,000 souls, a century and a half ago, pioneered their way into the mountain valleys we call home.

I am descended from one. The way my grandmother told the story, her grandfather, John Brown, was the first of those Mormon pioneers to see into the valley of the Great Salt Lake. He and Orson Pratt were scouting ahead of Brigham Young's party and rode together up onto Big Mountain. Grandma said that Pratt stopped to tighten his saddle cinch, and my great-great-grandfather saw the valley first. Someday I'll ask him if it's true.

What I know is true is that he was a dreamer. Infuse a dreamer with a good deal of faith, and you get a report like this, from his journal: "I dreamed that I was in company with several brethren and all at once I was naked. Except my shoes and stockings and a vest. I was not ashamed, as I did not feel that I was to blame. While contemplating my condition, my stockings commenced growing and running up my legs and covering them and continued until my whole body was enveloped. I asked one of the brethren to help me off with my vest so that it would be out of the way, and we hardly had time to remove it, so rapid was the growth of my stockings. When I awoke in the morning, it was vivid on my mind that following the prophet would strip me pretty bare, but eventually I should prosper and do well."

After that first journey John Brown crossed the plains another twelve times, wearing out at least one mule in the process. And, near as I can tell, all his dreams came true.

MAYBE WE'LL SAY THESE LINES AGAIN / 13 JULY 2003

Last night we closed a show, "The King And I." I got to play the king. It's not often you get to be a king, around here. When America was invented, the first rule was "No kings allowed." I guess that was because for as long as anybody could remember, kings got pretty much whatever they wanted. Even if what they wanted was yours.

Well, my king didn't get what he wanted. He wanted a bright new world of light and peace and scientific knowledge for his kingdom, but he wasn't willing, or maybe able, to step completely out of his old world of shadow, war, and ignorance. (C.S. Lewis once said that you can't go to heaven without letting go of your favorite souvenirs of hell.) Breaking all the rules of musical theatre, my king didn't even get the girl, until after he was dead.

The king didn't get what he wanted, but this actor sure did. I got a family--lots of lovely wives, a couple dozen gorgeous children, a palace full of loyal servants and astounding dancers, and, of course, the girl, because I was (surprise!) only pretending to be dead--resurrected nightly for the curtain call.

In real life, families are created slowly, cautiously, and sometimes a little fearfully, if not accidentally. In theatre, families are created quickly, dangerously, boldly, and quite calculatedly. Because part of you knows it's all pretend, you remember to hold back a good portion of yourself. But about halfway through the run you start to forget, and more of you than you'd planned becomes a Siamese king. So when it's time to dismantle the family and abandon your home to the next show, it hurts a little. Because you wound up meaning the things you'd been saying and singing all those weeks.

You can't take your new family with you. So what do you take?

I once played opposite a bright lady who sang with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. One night the choir was called together into the assembly room at the top of the Salt Lake Temple for a performance. Odd place for a performance. There was no one else invited to hear them sing. Their audience was God.

When your audience is God (and it always is), maybe it's good that you've learned, with the faithful help of your friends on stage, to mean what you say.

Yesterday I was watching a very old cartoon with my tiny son. It was about Cinderella. The ugly sisters were pretty funny, but then Cinderella accidentally stepped on the dress of one of them and it ripped off. Then the camera fixed on the face of a terrified elf on the mantelpiece while the ugly sisters beat Cinderella up. I wondered if my son could tell what was going on, and hoped he couldn't.

I could tell what was going on because of the noises. It was the sound of somebody getting biffed. In the comic books, that sound is always represented by "pow" or "bam." But in movies or on TV or radio, it doesn't sound anything like "pow" or "bam." In fact, it doesn't sound like anything. We all think it sounds like somebody getting biffed, but it doesn't.

I know this because of an embarrassing memory from high school. Back then, I was a folksinger. I thought it was cool, even if nobody else did. Actually, I had a couple of friends who thought it was cool too, and we would draw on the blackboards little caricatures of Martin guitars and Vega banjos and write "Folksingers Rule!" We saw very little harm in this, a definite low-risk activity.

But our high school was in Southern California, where, in those days, what you usually saw scrawled on blackboards, and bridges, and boxcars, was "Surfers Rule." We had nothing at all against surfers, but suddenly we were sort of on their turf. You see, writing these two words was about all the time any of them ever spent at a blackboard, and they were jealous of that.

Our self-promotion and self-congratulation backfired on us one afternoon, maybe a half-hour after school was dismissed, when my friends and I were hanging out in the quad and two solemn young men came over and backed one of my friends into a corner. "We hear you don't like surfers!" And then one of them slugged him. It just didn't sound anything like when the ugly sisters biffed Cinderella. A whole different sound that I wouldn't even try to spell.

Why this memory embarrasses me even now is that I just stood by, frozen, doing nothing. My friend was standing there rubbing his jaw and I persevered in doing nothing. Now I'm a grown-up, and I still don't know what I'd do. But I'd like to think I wouldn't be ashamed to be someone's friend, ashamed to love someone enough to defend them.

BEAUTIFUL SAVIOR / 22 JUNE 2003

I remember a song by the Lovin' Spoonful that I liked a lot. Well, I sort of remember it. I think a verse went, "You know you really dig a girl the moment you kiss her, then you get distracted by her older sister. Then in comes her father and takes you in line. He says, 'You better go home, son, and make up your mind.'" I admit it--I could relate.

Last week I hiked with my wife's family to a place we call The Fairy Glen. It's a little flat in the bottom of a canyon where a stream slides along underground beneath a grove of pines. Between the roots there are little moss-banked caverns, and when you look down into them you can see the clear water, and touch it. Just downstream, above ground, are tiny waterfalls, thick as your thumb, threading over green ledges. Only occasionally does a dusty blade of sunlight sift through the shadows. We were talking about how blessed we are to live a stone's throw from rocky mountains, about how lots of people save up and drive thousands of miles to walk among these beauties. And then my brother-in-law pointed out how the same thing could be said of us and oceans.

Several years ago, I spent a week visiting an old friend in Hawaii. Every day involved the ocean somehow. You couldn't escape it. Who'd want to? The afternoon I arrived home, I walked down Main Street in Alpine, in the shadow of our rocky mountains, and suddenly felt sad to think that I'd have to drive six or seven hundred miles to be near an ocean again. What's the best? Where's the most beauty? In the words of the Lovin' Spoonful, I guess "you have to finally decide."

From the sublime to the ridiculous, my most vivid memory of a technician friend of mine while traveling on the theatrical circuit is that every time we were delivered our dinner in a restaurant, he'd see what the waitress was carrying to the next table over, and say, "I should've ordered that."

Maybe we don't have to finally decide. Maybe everything in the kitchen is good. I say my favorite season is Autumn, then I long for the first snowflakes, then I can't wait for the green shoots of Spring. Maybe there's just a season for each beauty. But isn't there a beauty that's constant clear through the year? Through all terrains of earth? That doesn't change? That doesn't fade? Are all the Fairy Glens and pretty sisters, all the sweets and oceans and autumns, mere shadows of some constant shining face, echoes of some ever gentle voice, whispers of some endless holy name?

GOODNIGHT COMING GENTLY / 15 JUNE 2003

When I was a little kid, I had a recurring scary dream. Our kitchen had a little bay window on one end, and I dreamed my older brothers and my dad were firing rifles out of its three faces into the night at Pancho Villa's army of Mexican rebels. I wasn't big enough to see up over the window sill, and didn't have a rifle, so I just stood back and watched, really scared.

I guess I was younger then than my dad was when his family was driven from the Mormon colonies in Mexico. My grandparents had taken him there when he was two, and back out again when he was eight. He remembers his age well, because he was baptized in Mexico in an irrigation ditch, and confirmed in Utah.

He told me stories about his adventures in Mexico, about his wonder dog named Bounce, snow-white with a coal-black head. He and his older brother and Bounce got in some serious mischief one morning that brought my little grandma stomping from the house, shouting their names. They scampered up a haystack for safety, and met Grandma at the top. This is the lady who would hang up her laundry on the clothesline with a six-shooter slung in her apron. It was a time of revolution, and when strangers came too near for her liking, or looked enviously at her horses, she'd pull out that six-shooter and plug a crow out of a nearby tree. She had no trouble with strangers, horse thieves, or revolutionaries. She was a good woman.

My dad moved to Los Angeles during the depression, and found his own good woman, my mom. He worked in those days for Walt Disney as a camera man (shot every frame of "Snow White") and courted Mom in a little bitty car that had Mickey Mouse painted on the side. Sometimes they'd come out of a movie theatre and find that five or six guys had lifted it up onto the sidewalk as a joke. Dad asked his boss for a couple of days off to take my mom to the Arizona Temple to get married, and Walt said (and I'll soften his language just a little), "Heck, take a month!"

Dad didn't come back to Utah until he was eighty-eight years old, and when the century turned, he died, at ninety-four. Starting his life at the beginning of one century and ending it at the beginning of the next mixed him up a little--he got it confused with B.C. and A.D. somehow, and started telling people at church that he was two thousand years old, and had known the Savior pretty well. It wouldn't have surprised me a bit if he did.

THINK I'M GONNA LOSE MY MIND / 1 JUNE 2003

Many years ago, some good friends of mine bought their first house. In the swirling illusion of having money, they also bought a new refrigerator, to go in the new house. It was a great day, the refrigerator day. One of the remarkable modern features of this fridge was that the door could be attached from either side, to open either from the left or from the right. It arrived in the packing crate with the door unattached.

My friends asked me if I could attach the door, indicating their preference of side. I'm not entirely sure why they asked me. Wait, I think I volunteered. And I suddenly remember why I volunteered. I saw them immersed in a study of the instructions, while the tools lay idle on the counter. I couldn't stand by and watch the instructions get in the way of getting the job done.

So I shoved the instructions aside and commenced scattering parts on the floor, picking up those that looked relevant, assembling them in ways that seemed sensible, tightening, tapping, hefting and hanging. Two hours later, soaked in sweat and warmed by the rosy tones of embarrassment, I dug out the instructions and started over. Happily, I had not thrown out the parts that had seemed, to me, irrelevant.

I do this kind of thing a lot. It's the old masculine thing of not asking directions, thinking your inner sense of rightness and your undoubtedly perfect comprehension of the universe will get you wherever you want to go.

I'm reminded of a story told by the father of my refrigerator friend. As a young boy, he'd been given the task of plowing a field in even parallel rows. He'd had the bright idea of picking out a distant landmark and using it to guide him across the field each time. It was a white spot beyond a far fence. When he was finished at the end of the day, he looked back over the field and saw something that looked a lot like the Mississippi delta from a high altitude. That white spot he'd taken for his compass point turned out to have been a pig, grazing back and forth on the horizon.

Sometimes it's best just to say, "I don't trust myself. Who can tell me what to do, or how to do it?" Or even to go beyond that and say, like the Savior did in the garden, "not my will, but Thine be done."

I LIVE IN A CABIN / 25 MAY 2003

This morning I rolled out of bed and went outside to trim some grass around the quaking aspens. Then I fixed the fence, and ran a rope from a treetop to the porch, to brace it against the south wind. In between, I did a quick pruning job on the cherry orchard (three trees), and a quick pruning job on my baby son's hair.

The cabin is thirty-some years old. When I first moved to town, twenty-nine years ago, the cabin was a gift store, which is what it was built for. I remember Christmas shopping in it. Then it was a real estate office. Then it was nothing but an empty cabin for a few years. Then I moved in, all alone.

I like to be alone sometimes. It feels good to be out on some ridge somewhere, looking down on valleys full of people who wish they could be alone sometimes. I like to carry an old Winchester with me, and satisfy my primal urge to hunt. Mostly what I shoot is cans, which is pretty unfulfilling, now that cans are made of some metal about the consistency of aluminum foil. But every now and then, glinting at me through the brush, hiding, but not escaping my hunter's eye, is a genuine glass bottle. I don't have a license, but then I never bring them back with me. I just glory in the fact that they will never hold beer again.

The solitude is comforting. There's nothing like firing off a .357 magnum round like thunder across a canyon, and realizing that no one but you heard it.

Other times, though, thunder is fun to share. And rainbows are never as good as when you're showing them to someone.

Life at my cabin is better, now. I had to fix the fence because since I moved in, a tree has grown so large it moved the fence out of its course. Those quaking aspens weren't there before I came, and are all the children of one tree my daughter gave me for Father's Day years ago. The cherry orchard (three trees) was a gift from my daughter and me to the mother in our home, and of course when I moved in, there was no little boy with golden red hair to prune.

The south wind blows, just like it did when I was alone, but now we all fall asleep to the whisper of ponderosa fingers on the roof.

I'm thinking about my daughter Eliza today. She's in England, trying to find herself. (Well, England is a much smaller country than the United States--maybe she thinks she won't have to look as hard as she would if she stayed here.) She's not looking so much for her center as she is for her edges, her limits. None of us will be surprised if she finds that those limits are as far out as she can reach, and, providentially, a little bit farther.

The curious thing about limits is that whenever we nearly reach them, they seem to recede beyond our grasp. New depths, new heights, more distant horizons. Eliza was born gazing farther into the bright distance than most people ever will. Growing up, her friends called her "Elightza."

Singer, dancer, actor, poet, collagist, photographer, film maker--any aspect of her awesome talent for giving could suddenly flare, sun-like, into a perpetual burning that could bring light and warmth to a whole lot of dark and cold hearts.

I'm so glad we allowed her to be born. She was conceived near the deafening explosion of the argument over whether or not people had that right--to be born, I mean. I found it ironic, at the time, that pretty much everybody who was arguing against that right were people who had already been born. Sort of like everybody who moves into my lovely little mountain-shaded town these days hopes nobody will move in after them.

In those days before Eliza was born, I was writing songs for the Osmonds, and the eldest musical brother (who, happily, didn't insist that he be the last allowed to be born--I mean, globally-famous bands are not usually one guy), the Osmond whose name is Alan, asked me to write a song about the right to be born. So I wrote a song for my little daughter, Eliza, several months before she was born, at which time she turned out to be my little son, David.

After four of such brothers, she finally arrived. On that first recording of her song, my voice was surrounded by the musical gifts of Osmond brothers. Twenty years later I recorded it again, my voice this time surrounded by the musical gifts of Eliza's brothers. A little gentler version, easier on baby's ears.

I was the last kid in our family, and the kid before me was nine years old when I was born. My mother was good. Really good. She's gone now, and one of the great unanswered questions of my life is, "Why, on my birthdays, didn't I give presents to my mother? Uncommonly sensitive, when we all gathered around the black-and-white TV with popcorn on Sunday nights, certain commercials would bring her to tears. What gathered us there was "Bonanza," and I think she rather fancied Lorne Greene--rich and righteous ranch owner. Very sensible, and very sensitive, woman. And hard-working, and charitable, and faithful. But I never saw her with that particular glow that somehow surrounds people who are holy, or, at least, magical.

Oh, there was plenty of drama and excitement in her life. She was born just after the turn of the century in Bingham Canyon, Utah, at a spot that would now be suspended in thin air, because the copper mine that gave Bingham Canyon its birth eventually gobbled it up and kept right on digging beneath where the town had been. Her dad was the saloon owner, later the owner of the first movie theatre in town, where my little mom saw a new show every couple of days, delivered to the racket of a live piano in the pit. She sledded down the main street in winter, upending drunks in her reckless path. Years later, when the cops weren't looking, she'd be the outside skater on the frozen pond at Liberty Park, racing like a rocket in the illegal sport of "crack the whip." She took region in her track event--poetically, the hurdles.

She moved to Los Angeles during the Depression, got a job babysitting for the heavyweight wrestling champ of the world, and one night when he tried to play a trick on her by sneaking in like a burglar through the window, she knocked him out cold.

But somehow the excitement of her life never quite, for me, reached "magical." And the goodness of her life never quite, for me, reached "holy." I realize now, though, that it's because I was the last kid. I was simply never around when she was in the process of once again becoming a mother. To watch that glow settle like a rainbow on someone you know, someone you love, is at once magical and irresistibly, undeniably, holy.

I have a pioneer great-great grandfather, John Brown. As Brigham Young's scout, he stood on Big Mountain on July 19th, 1847, the first of the Mormon pioneers to see into the valley of the Great Salt Lake. He and his mule, Zeke, trekked across the plains a dozen more times after that, helping people pursue their dreams in the West. His sweat and spirit is in the soil of this land.

He knew the hard realities of taming a wilderness, and yet he said the most amazing thing. He said, "I am building castles in the air, and inspecting those others have built. One can almost convert imagination into reality. What a happy faculty!" When I read that in his journal, I suddenly realized how the pioneering of the West could not have been done without enormous imagination. And thinking that these remote and ragged mountain valleys might be a light unto the world took even more imagination.

I have an artist friend, Mark England, who, with precisely that quality of faithful imagination, last summer created a compass of rough granite boulders on an edge of the Alpine City park. People were invited to place their own boulders radiating outward from this compass to places that had meaning to them, places their grandparents had come from, places they wanted their children to go. It was a way to tie our town, where our hearts are centered, to our memories and to our dreams, however distant. My little daughter rolled a rock to a place in the park that she imagined would define a line leading to the Salt Lake Temple, pointing to the path that was taken over the hills every week by the wooden-legged Alpine pioneer who carved on its face the words "Holiness To The Lord." Every time Caitlin moves among those rocks, her mind is turned to holy dreams.

But right now I can hear the front-end loader rumbling down the street in the city park, removing the rocks. And why are they going? Because our imagination is spent. We have a low tolerance for castles in the air, if we can't see that they're built to code, built to the code of what we have come to expect of ourselves, which is so far less than what the pioneers expected of us.

Still, a few with pioneer blood pray not so much for the preservation as for the resurrection of imagination.

CLEARING STONES / 27 APRIL 2003

I love the stones of southern Utah. Red, swept with wind, and baked under sun. I love the feeling of peace I feel there. It feels, somehow, earned. For people to have survived that wilderness, I think, demanded a rigorous peace. I imagine that in pioneer days, if you saw another soul, you counted him as a friend, if only because you were committed to the same hard land. But what did you think about those just passing through?

My son Sam lives in St. George, and I often drive down to visit. His little son, Skyler, is especially fond of a particular Winchester rifle of mine, and sometimes I pack it down there and we wage war on defenseless cans and bottles. It's guilt-free. They're not people, just containers of fizz and beer, both dangerous substances. Once we were blasting away in the hills above his home as the sky began to darken, and Sam told me we were not far from a place called Mountain Meadow, a name that had long filled me with dread.

It was there that two groups of people, the settlers and the passers-through, shrank one another to the size of enemies. An enemy is not exactly a person, you know--just a container of hate and fear, both dangerous substances. More easily blasted. Even if the container has been emptied of its poison, the scent remains. Even if the scent has faded, memory remains. Memory of flaming tongues and flaming guns when last these two groups clashed, neighbors field by field and farm by farm.

It was a military action by an army of farmers, this massacre of the passers-through. It was a pre-emptive strike. What was pre-empted? The truth. How many bad guys among the dead? Perhaps a few. How many good among the living? Perhaps a few.

Real soldiers in later years, softened by the story, piled the rough graves high with stones. In these days even bigger men have cleared those stones (my songwriting son was among them) and raised new stones in their place, more carefully and reverently wrought.

So as the shadows swallowed Mountain Meadow before our eyes, it struck me deeply that a place we want so desperately to forget should be set apart as a place of remembering. God and his army would have us remember what those poor pioneers forgot: that forgiveness is our best pre-emptive strike.

A ONCE BROKEN LOVE / 20 APRIL 2003 (EASTER)

I knew a lady who had a perfect name--perfect for her, anyway. Dawn. Dawn Ware. A very bright and good lady, with a big creamy singing voice that resonated up from a soul enlarged by both pain and compassion.

She'd given birth to a whole lot of kids--I don't even remember how many--and looked like she might have been one of them, only taller. One of the treasures she had traded for all those kids was a dream of bringing beauty to the stage. She'd been in shows in high school, but now mostly sang in church. I didn't know, at the time, what a big deal it was for her to audition for our little town's production of "The Music Man." But there she was, boldly bouncing lines back at me, Harold Hill. We had a great time with the show. She was astounding. For me, it was a chance to do for my town what I usually do for a living. For her, it was the rebirth of a dream. A chance to gather beauty from inside, and scatter it from the stage.

Somebody in town drew us a great logo for posters and tickets, a French horn with a little straw-hatted guy (me, I guess) riding on it.

Thinking of riding on things, I have to recall a mysterious, almost holy, image that a good friend of mine saw one afternoon a while after the show closed. My friend looked out her creekside window saw Dawn riding a horse bareback, all alone, and she was wearing a white dress, and barefoot. Sort of like an angel, I guess.

Dawn knew by then that she was dying. The cancer she'd beaten before her Music Man adventure had returned.

And so she died. It took awhile. People that full of life don't die quickly. When I saw her at the viewing, it was clear that nobody was home. Months afterward, I was walking in the cemetery, a hilltop sanctuary with little rows of pioneer children's graves and a tall sandstone shaft near the top with the weathered words, "killed by Indians" and I came across Dawn's headstone. Carved above her name was a French horn, with a straw-hatted little guy riding it.

My wife's mother died last Autumn, a dancer, a sprite, a darting glance of light. I went to the viewing. Nobody home. My gentle dad, a couple of winters back, lay reconstructed in his casket. Nobody home.

A few more of these viewings, and I might be reminded of the woman who stepped into a tomb, looking for her loved one. And she heard the bright angel say, "He is not here. Why seek ye the living among the dead?"

DAVID LIKES TO LISTEN TO THE STARS / 13 APRIL 2003

My son David was born with mysterious knowledge. One morning when he was three, he appeared at my bedside, eyes half shut, and solemnly announced, "Your blood ith really little tiny ladybugth, and when you get a headache, the ladybugth thit down on little tiny chairth and thing." Who would know that, unless it was knowledge that came to earth with them?

David had a little trouble, at first, with his s's. He loved dinosaurs more than anything other than ithe cream--I mean, ice cream. His favorites were thtegothauruth, compthognathuth, and pachythephalothauruth.

He had considerable ethical insights, as well. Once he accidentally knocked over his little brother's bowl of popcorn, and it scattered all over the floor like, well, popcorn. I spoke a little sharply, I'm afraid, and he answered me with this wisdom: "Well dad, life ith life, and thometimeth you don't do good."

He was pretty lucid in his observations about the physical world. One night after dinner he wiped his chin on the tablecloth and observed, "It theemth like water ith thkinnier than milk."

David grew up to be a pretty stunning guitar player, heading a number of bands (except the band in which he performs "percussion events," including the dropping of cymbals onto the stage and the breaking of bottles next to microphones.) But where he got his start was playing, by ear, movements from Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker" on my five-string banjo--not precisely what the instrument was made for, but hey.

He's always been curious, inventive, and really kind of innocent. Again, when he was three, the family would be returning home from some distant activity in the car, while night drew on above us. David would have his little moon-face pressed up against the window, trying to ignore the family din that filled the van. At length, he would turn to us, reproving betimes with sharpness, asking us to be quiet. And why? David was listening to the stars. Years later, I wrote a song, trying to capture the feeling of his innocence. I think what I wound up with was a song not so much about his innocence as about the loss of mine.

THE PASSING OF THE KEYS / 6 APRIL 2003

There are a couple of things I remember from Sunday School when I was a little kid. It seems the only teacher I ever had was a quick, bright lady named Dixie Alcorn--I think she advanced with us from year to year--maybe she was the only one tough enough to keep us in line. But I don't remember "tough." What I remember is her taking two or three runs every time on the pronunciation of "Nebuchadnezzar." She could have settled with her first attempt, we wouldn't have known the difference, but she wanted to get it right for us. Yeah, that's what I remember--her wanting to get things right for us. That's worth a lot, I think. I also remember "button, button, who's got the button." I mean, there's just so much doctrine little heads can hold.

There was a prophet on the earth in those days. His name was David O. McKay, and he had the kindest face of all. His wavy white hair seemed to ring that face with light. I grew from teeny to manhood with only one prophet--David O. McKay.

Then he died, something that seemed kind of impossible when it happened. Who would be the Prophet? People my age wondered what would happen next. People older than I knew what would happen, but had pretty much forgotten--it had been a long time.

Another memory from childhood, not from Sunday School, but from church conference on black-and-white television, was this dried-up old man droning on and on into the tabernacle microphone, never smiling and never looking at me over his papers. His name was Joseph Fielding Smith, and he was the senior apostle.

Well, when the magical McKay died, Brother Smith stepped quietly into his place. I wondered how to feel, wondered if we had been ushered into a sort of doctrinal deep-freeze. But we weren't prepared for the marvelous surprise. President Smith turned out to be everybody's grampa. He came to BYU and interrupted his address in the huge gym to sit with his wife on the piano bench and play while they sang what he called a "do-it."

Then, in time, he died as well, passing away gently in his armchair at home on a sabbath afternoon. We were grateful for his love, grateful that he listened to the heavens so humbly so he could get things right for us. We were sad, but we weren't even a little bit scared. We knew what would happen next.

TURNING THE HEARTS / 30 MARCH 2003

On July 20, 1969, I didn't do any missionary work. I was supposed to, there were any number of Australian's doors just begging to be knocked upon, but I was sitting on the floor in front of a friend's television set, watching Buzz Aldrin drop off the ladder onto the surface of the moon. I felt I was a witness to history. I wrote a poem, right on the spot. In fact, five of them, the fifth ending with

try to fathom perfect millennia of silence, ended
at the crunching burial of flagstaff in the sandy crystals.

These footprints will remain for millions and millions of years.

The place they landed was called Mare Tranquilitatis, Sea of Peace.

I was jazzed. But since then, I've seen articles (generally as I'm waiting to be checked out at the grocery store) shouting that it was all a hoax, all shot on an obscure government sound stage. Seems I may have seen, also, waiting for the checker to zap the barcodes on my twinkies, articles about how the world is indeed flat, and that the White House is in fact a space ship, and the executive branch of government its crew. Who knows what to think?

There are those who deny the reality of certain events witnessed by millions. The Holocaust, for example. I wonder if those deniers think they're talking to people with nothing on their minds but twinkies. It's hard to deny the photographs, the appalled faces of the liberating soldiers, the tattoos that still mar the survivors.

Right now war rages, crawls, sputters, rages. And you can watch the facts 24/7 on television. I wonder how the grocery-store journalists will explain these facts away, or bend them into something even more lurid, but far less real.

At the beginning of that moon-flight there was amazing violence, fiery forces unleashed at the surface of earth that blasted those astronauts across awesome voids of space. And at the end of the violence, Mare Tranquilitatis, Sea of Peace. We can hope for that again.

There are fiery forces continually raging. They're real, whether they point us to seas of peace or just more war. There really are threatening enemies at our doors. If you doubt it, turn on the television. If you don't have a television, do something even more terrifying--look in the mirror.

From my front door I look east and see high rocky mountains. I look north and see high rocky mountains. They join in (Where else?) the northeast. Up there is a magical meadow called by folks around here "The Divide." It's in the shadow of ten-thousand-foot peaks on either end, but from one edge of the meadow you can look down into Utah Valley, and from the opposite edge you can look down on the green ridges that finally relax to make room enough for Heber.

About sixteen years ago, we had what we thought was a pretty fun idea. "Let's some of us hike up to The Divide and have a formal dinner!" So off we went. We'd cooked up some trendy dish at home (I think it was called "Chicken Divan") and carried some pans to warm it up with. We carefully packed bottles of that sparkly apple juice, and long-stemmed crystal glasses to drink it from.

We couldn't take as much gourmet food as we'd have liked though, because we needed room in our packs for fancy clothes. The ladies all wore formals, most lately of Deseret Industries. One guy wore a tux. I think I had on a dinner jacket and ascot. We tied a red bandana on the dog. I distinctly remember tiaras, as well.

Soon the fire was crackling, the twilight drawing in. We were elegant.

A couple of young guys from our town happened to be camping up there, some distance off. They were drawn to our fire, as people are in the wide and wild solitude of those heights. I think they were surprised at what they saw, when they came within eye-shot. "What're ya doin'?"

"Oh, having dinner. How about you?"

"Uh...scoutin' for the bow hunt."

"Well, nice to see ya."

I don't think we talked much beyond that. They didn't stay around as long as is common up there.

One of the jewel-laden women at our wilderness dinner was studying to be a psychologist, and a tool she'd learned to pick up when she was distressed was to think of a peaceful place. A place that was safe and beautiful and quiet, where she could let peace seep into her soul. Her peaceful place was The Divide.

Suddenly in war, we need those places.

I COULD BUY YOU ALASKA / 16 MARCH 2003

My wife is an actress, a singer, a story weaver. We met working in theatre. When I was courting her, she was starring in a production of "The Sound of Music." They couldn't pay her enough just to play Maria, so she hired on to do some choreography as well. Actually, the twelve breakneck costume changes were worth some serious hazard pay, but she graciously didn't ask for it. She was quite wonderful in the role. I'd have attended the theatre every night if I could have afforded it. As it was, I often had to settle with buying a rose at Macy's grocery store and putting it under the wiper of her old VW bug in the theatre parking lot. This was winter, and I wondered where Macy's got such big, beautiful, and (dare I admit) cheap roses. So one night I asked. The kid working around the flowers said, "Colombia." Until then, I'd thought of Colombia with the scent of jungle, guns, and coffee. Suddenly the sweetness of roses, too. Magical place, I guess. Moreso than I'd thought.

My mother passed away just after I married my wife. As she lay there, certain she was on her way out, I asked her if there were any dreams she'd had that never came true, or anyplace she'd wanted to go that she'd never made it to. She was quick with an answer, "Yes, I've always wanted to see Alaska." I was amazed. That dream had never surfaced. I had no idea. Glaciers, fiords, pines on rocky ridges, fishing boats. I had no idea. It surprised me like a rose in winter.

My wife is a lot like my mother, in her love for magical places. We have pictures of many in albums on a shelf, or in safe chests of memory. A rock with Colorado river swirling 'round it. And I tell the kids, "I proposed to your mother on that rock, you know." Another picture, a span of stone, delicate arch of sandy stone. "Did you know I proposed to your mother under that arch?" A lone and ancient pine out on a canyon cliff. "You may not know it, but in the shadow of that pine I proposed to your mother." Fact is, after the first proposal (on an adequately magic wooden footbridge over dark water with eavesdropping ducks), I proposed repeatedly, because, well, isn't that why God made those beautiful places? So we'd be inspired to make something beautiful, too? Plus, all those proposals makes shuffling through the photos lots more fun.

THE WOMAN AND THE MOON / 9 MARCH 2003

There are a couple of things about barns that people ought to know. One is that sunsets often occur outside barns, usually at some considerable distance from the barns. Another thing is that barns often have gaps--gaps in the walls, gaps in the roofs, sometimes gaps above or below windows. Yet another thing is that, owing to the crush of hay and the trampling of hooves and the breath of the barnyard, the air in a barn is laden with earth and feed and fragrance, a universe of dust. I was in a friend's barn one late afternoon last Autumn, when all these things conspired to make a truly wonderful magic.

Clouds suddenly parted over mountains on the other side of the valley, maybe fifteen miles off. Through that rift poured yellow shafts from the setting sun, ninety-three million and fifteen miles off. One blasted against the side of our particular barn (as well as on a sizable portion of the Wasatch range) and from a gap under the barn window there projected through the stillness a flat swath of light as clean as a plank.

I got over to where I could look along its length from just above, then crouched a couple inches and saw it shimmer from below. It looked solid enough to walk on, like a ring of Saturn. But the substance of it moved. It was like looking at the blade of a sword, but with eyes that could discern the random flow of its atoms, diamonds myriad to the myriad power.

Suddenly I realized (with a little chagrin, actually) that all the air in the dull shadows around me was just as full of firefly diamonds as danced in that swath of light. But without the light, they were just dust. It was the light that gave them shape and glory, sweetness and magic. It's all about reflection, being in the path of light and catching it full on, like the moon does the sun.

Well, women are better than men. No, hold on, think with me for a moment. If there is a light, emanating from some unspeakable distance in space, reaching out through the darkness to touch our tiny planet, and if this light is a nurturing light, a creative light, a giving light, don't the women just reflect it better than the rest of us? Admit it.

A GOOD ENOUGH DREAM / 2 MARCH 2003

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, I lived with my wife and two tiny children in a very small house in Alpine, Utah. The house was once owned by a famous sculptor, who had built, with his kids, a rickety, magical, and truly dangerous treehouse in the apple tree just out the kitchen window. I often thought in those days about how, if his fame grew enough, I might sell the tree as a piece of art and make quite a lot of money. But my kids and I added on to the treehouse and improved it and made it even more rickety, magical, and dangerous, and I'm afraid that somewhere along the line it lost its artistic integrity. So our tiny Utah house went back to being only worth as much as it was worth, which wasn't much.

My father sometimes drove up from California in those early days to see us, and once he brought with him a picture he'd snipped from a magazine of a rambling, expensive, shiny-new ranch house--kind of a "dream house" I guess. He scotch-taped the picture to our refrigerator and told us to look at it every day. He asked, "What price are you willing to pay for that dream?" I was reminded of a friend of mine who was a rich executive. When he was a little kid without a dad, his mom taped a picture of a bicycle to the refrigerator and gave him a dream to work for, live for, and learn to pay for.

What is it with refrigerators? It's universal, I think. Dreams on fridges. I cried when I saw the film "Field of Dreams," but I can't help thinking a whole lot more people would have related to the movie if it had been called "Fridge of Dreams."

I think a good enough dream would be worth trading everything for.

There's a story I like, about a rich man who found a pearl so beautiful and perfect that he sold everything he owned to buy it. And how's the dream in that story different from what my dad hung on our fridge of dreams? Well, it's real different, because the Savior is the storyteller, and the pearl can't fit on anybody's fridge. Its light is too deep, too rich, too full of magic and hope to be captured and scotch-taped. Well, that's a good enough dream. A family saved and sealed, love made forever fresh. Worth any price.

Twenty-eight years have passed, and I still live in a tiny little house in Alpine, Utah. I even still have two beensy kids and a wife there too. But it's a different house. Same dream, though. Living in it with me.

When I was a teen-ager, going to church dances, I remember the constant battle between our youth leaders and the band. I once helped produce a song called "Stakehouse Rock," by Peter and Kim Webb, that captured this particular warfare pretty clearly. The first verse went, "Crepe paper streamers, punch and cookies by the door, We're dancin' in our socks on the hardwood floor. The band and the chaperones are goin' round and round, 'You better turn it down, son, you're playin' too loud.'"

There were actually three parties to this conflict: the chaperones, who wanted to be able to hear themselves think, the band, who wanted to rule the world, and the kids, who wanted to feel the beat. They all wanted different things. The dance was really for the kids, not the leaders or the band, but the kids wanted something very specific, and the leaders just didn't get it. And of course, the average garage band didn't really know how to give it.

This is getting a little complicated. Let me tell you another story. Years later, I was standing in the control room of the Osmonds' recording studio. This would be during the years when they were the most famous family in this quadrant of the galaxy. Their sound engineer, a genius whose name I have forgotten, was mixing down a live performance from somewhere out on the concert circuit. Somehow he had, with mic placement and finessing the frequencies, achieved a snare drum sound that just pounded me right in the chest. It wasn't very loud, but it pulsed right to my center. That's what the kids in the church gym wanted--to feel the music pound in their veins. They didn't want it loud, they wanted it deep. But they didn't know that. With enough know-how, the band could have given it to them and the chaperones still would have been able to hear each other talk over at the punchbowl.

Thunder is something you feel as much as hear. And I remember a pioneer story in which the company, camped for the night, felt a buffalo stampede before they heard it. After a stiff climb in the mountains, you feel your heart throb, and hear it as well, though no one else can.

Of course, there are things more powerful, and way more focused, than thunder, herds of buffalo, and especially garage bands. The prophet Jeremiah said he felt the word of the Lord "in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones." The music was definitely inside him.

The other day I was sitting at the kitchen table when my 5-year-old daughter Caitlin walked by. I was repairing a toy of hers and wanted to show her what I was doing. "Caitlin, come over here," I said. She stopped and stood right where she was, cocked her head to the side, looked at me suspiciously, and asked, "Are you gonna give me a hug?"

In her old age, she's become very selective about when she gets hugged, or when she hugs. It's a little tough on mom and dad, because hugging her has kind of become second nature for us. We got in the habit when she was just a baby--a very huggable baby. A very fat, huggable baby. We call some babies "fat" when we notice they have double chins. Caitlin had double wrists.

And her smile was just as big and round as the rest of her. As were her eyes, bright and wide. And she had no objection whatsoever to being hugged.

Caitlin hasn't given up hugs, cold turkey. I still get wonderful good-night hugs. And her little brother gets way more hugs than he wants. These days, though, she's definitely the boss of when hugs occur. This is probably a good thing, altogether. People should have that right, especially if they're as huggable as Caitlin is, even as a non-fat person.

With all that new-found hug-fussiness, however, there is still one sure way to win a hug from Caitlin, as sure as throwing a switch and seeing a light, or pushing a button and hearing a song. If her mother and I should find ourselves in a spontaneous embrace at the sink (it's a small kitchen), Caitlin will come hurtling at us like a wide receiver diving for an overthrown pass. She has to be part of that hug. She wants to be part of that hug. She feels safe in that hug.

I imagine that if she ever found me standing at the sink in an embrace with someone who was not her mother, she would not run to join the hug. I don't know what she would do. But I can guess how she would feel. Confused, maybe. Certainly unsafe. She might suddenly wonder if hugs meant what she'd always thought they meant.

No, her mom is the one to hug. I want Caitlin to have that safe and welcome hug to grab onto. She deserves that.

SONG OF AGES / 9 FEBRUARY 2003

Almost every song is a love song. You can turn on the radio and listen for days and never hear a song about food, or shelter, or the stock exchange. Lately I've heard some songs about clothes, but only as they impact your ability to get someone to love you, even if it's just until you change back into your comfortable clothes again.

(I suppose there are a lot of rap recordings that are about other things, like prostitution and cocaine and murder and very expensive athletic shoes, but I'm talking about songs, here.)

I've written a lot of love songs myself, and I've found that they almost always fall shy of what you really wanted to say. My guess is that most fall short, because no real love can be as small as a song. (Unless you're writing one of those thousands of tunes that run something like "I met you at the dance, and our love is gonna last for weeks." But maybe those songs are not, by strict definition, "love" songs so much as "like" songs. I think most writers feel like the nineteenth-century author, Flaubert, who wrote,

"None of us can tell the exact measure of his needs, or his thoughts, or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt stars."

Have you heard that kind of music? I have. But never on the radio, never on a recording, never in a concert hall. In those places, I only hear songs that remind me of that kind of music. I came close once, though, on an aspen-topped ridge one sun-blown rocky mountain morning, but the only real sound was a soft breath of wind in the leaves. And I've come close in other quiet places, too. In the shadows of an ancient pine, on a bridge over still, dark water, in the desert, surrounded by expanse of sand and silent stone. Alone with someone as fair as the beauty around us, whose spirit I may have known before the pine, water, or stone was made.

I think in a real love song, you expect to hear the voice of God, and someone long ago who listened very closely heard that music not in the earthquake, not in the whirlwind, but in the still, small voice. It's a song we sometimes are allowed to hear. It's a song that sometimes we are even allowed to sing.

COME TO THE RIVER (WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY CHILDREN? / 2 FEBRUARY 2003

A few Sundays back, our home teachers came to visit. They're a couple of great guys, a father and son, who care about our family. It's their church job, a monthly assignment, but we feel their concern whether they show up or not. On this particular Sunday evening, they got up to leave with the commitment that has become a proverb among home teachers: "If there's anything we can do to help, let us know."

My wife and I hadn't thought of asking, but suddenly there was, in fact, something they could do. The next morning, our one vehicle, a tired little van with a couple hundred thousand miles on it, was going into the shop for some brake work. I gulped and asked my home teacher if he had a spare car we could use for the day to make all the connections and see to some other family needs. I only gulped because my home teacher is an obsquatillionaire, lives in a house a little larger than the church we attend together, and has only astoundingly expensive cars. He gulped too and said, "Sure." I drove him home and kept his car.

Did I say car? More like the starship Enterprise. You could practically program in your destination and then settle into hyper-sleep while it took you there, and wake up surprised that it had given you a haircut and manicure while you were out. It had a screen in the middle of the dashboard that would give you your global position, the temperature in the front or back seats, on the outside of the car, or, I suppose, in the trunk. I could imagine that it might give you your blood pressure as well, along with your horoscope, certainly the status of your stock portfolio, and the location of nuclear weapons in Iraq.

All day Monday I was consumed with one passion: Return this car safely. Don't damage this car. Don't let this car get dirty. Don't drive on any streets that might make this car feel uncomfortable. And I was steadily amazed that I would have been entrusted with it--I, who can't keep a lawn mower running through a single season. What amazing trust! What an enormous risk!

As I pulled back into town that evening, I made the only gesture I knew how to make. I filled Lennon's car with gas. And for the first time in memory, for a few moments anyway, I had my fingers around the pump marked "Premium."

I wonder how the Lord feels about precious things He's lent us.

About three years ago, my grandson Skyler, who was six, was with me up on the dry ridges west of town shooting at tin cans with my new Winchester .22 rifle. It's a nifty gun, a lot like the cowboy rifles in the movies. We were after tin cans that day, but hoping to bag us a bottle or two. By now, all the squirrels and snakes and rabbits on those ridges know they have nothing to fear from me and my rifle, but there are bottles up there that will never hold beer again.

Skyler had a great time, except for the moment when, cradling the oversized gun next to his cheek and leaning in to peer through the sights, he pulled the trigger and found his nose between the hammer and the firing pin. Still, he shook his head a couple of times and went on firing. I made the mistake that morning of telling him that I'd given him that awesome rifle in my will. After we got back home to the cabin, Skyler waited until he and my wife were alone, then asked, "How long do you think Grampa is gonna live?" Later, alone again, he asked her, "You know how Grampa's gonna leave me the Winchester when he dies? Well, do you think he'll leave me any bullets?"

You see, Skyler knew what he needed. And he wasn't afraid to say it.

Sometimes it's less clear than that. My two-year-old son John came down the stairs a couple of days ago with something heavy on his mind. I sat down on the stairs with him, and he spoke at some length with measured inflections and urgent purpose. The only trouble was, I couldn't understand a word he said, even after many patient repetitions. Finally, I said "Cookie?" and though I'm sure it wasn't what he was after, he said, as clearly as James Earl Jones on a good day, "Okay."

John's brother Joshua, when he was just a little older, used to sit at the table and say, for a joke, "Pass the sheriff's hat." We all laughed at his attempt at humor, Joshua beamed, and someone would pass him the toast. Then the joke came to a screeching halt, because we'd guessed wrong. "No, the sheriff's hat!" Well, clearly toast was not the sheriff's hat--this morning, anyway.

We scamper around guessing what our kids need most from us--from their dads, and from their moms. Grown-ups will offer lots of suggestions, but the kids know. Maybe we should ask them, then listen until we understand.

YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY FROM GOD / 14 JANUARY 2003

I was about 11 when we visited some distant relatives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, east of Sacramento. A cousin whom I had never met lived with his family in a forest of thin pines. You had to squint a little to see the nearest house through the trees.

His family, all but one sister, had gone somewhere and my cousin was proudly showing me his rifle collection. I took one down and cocked it, then waited for him to say, "It's okay, I unloaded all of them last Tuesday." Then I took aim at some imagined target on the wall and pulled the trigger, with a flat click. I took down another--cock, aim, click, and another--cock, aim, click. Then a fourth, cock, aim, ka-bam! He said a word I'd never heard before, and when the smoke cleared, we looked to see what havoc we'd wrought, expecting perhaps that the roof would be gone. But there was just a little smoking hole in the dark pine paneling of the wall. No big deal.

But then we realized that this was not an exterior wall. We raced around to where we imagined the other side of the wall to be, and found ourselves peering into his father's closet. The bullet had sliced through all his father's shirts, and all his father's ties, but two. Then it whistled out the open closet door and mangled its way through the outside wall and off through the woods, leaving behind a sizable rip and a pile of splinters.

Suddenly we thought, "Hey, wouldn't this be a great time to grab a can of beans and some blankets, jump on a couple of horses, and head down the canyon to the river for a spontaneous overnigher?" Ten minutes and we were out of there.

We actually managed to forget, for a few hours, the responsibility and accounting that awaited us. The water was warm, and when you dove down into it just a little bit, you could stare big trout in the face. The fire was as magical as fires in the wild always are, and the beans were good. We slept well on the sandy bank of the river.

But of course morning came, and as we trudged our horses up the dirt road, his dad met us in his pickup. There wasn't any yelling, or belts plied on backsides, just a few solemn words, heavy with love, about how he'd expected a little better behavior, and did we realize the seriousness of what we'd done?

There's always a Father waiting on the road for us to return from not doing what He'd expected. If I'd had any sense at all, when I was sinking in the American River and staring that trout in the face, I might have thought of Jonah.

CHILDREN OF GOD / 7 JANUARY 2003

When I was five, I went to kindergarten. I went on the schoolbus, which loomed, a yellow Titanic. It carried me off to another world, strange and new, a world of monkey bars and flying sand, of kids that were friendly and kids that were dangerous, of leaders that weren't my parents. The distance to that parentless planet seemed astronomical. It was three blocks.

My mother walked me from our house to the bus stop on the first day. It was just up at the end of our puddled, unglittered street in Southern California. We waited for the bus against a line of about eight towering eucalyptus trees, each one bigger around than three of us, linking hands, could encircle. The bark peeled off in strips that lay curled on the ground. In old movies of *The Little Rascals*, in every scene, just beyond the kids and the old cars and Pete the dog and various ducks and donkeys, you can see those eucalyptus trees. I don't remember anything my mother said that first day, but I remember being comforted and encouraged by whatever it was.

About fourteen years later, early one morning, I climbed into our neighbor's car and headed off to Utah, for college, a couple of days away from being a freshman. My mom stood on the porch and cried a little. I was quite amazed. I guess that after that kindergarten bus ride I was used to intergalactic travel, but I guess she wasn't. Or maybe she knew more about the wonders and perils of living alone than I did.

A year later, I was standing with my dad in a terminal at Los Angeles International Airport. I'd just spent a week in Salt Lake City learning how to be a missionary, and now there was an hour layover in L.A. before the flight continued on to Australia. I guess my mom was there, but I remember my dad, because he was the one who gave me advice. I'd overheard other dads saying things like, "Baptize the whole country, son." or "Son, I'd rather have you come home in a pine box than without your honor."--stuff like that. My dad just put his hand on my shoulder and softly said, "Drink lots of water." Happily, I was going to a country where you could. I was going, though, about as far as you could go on the planet without leaving it altogether.

Some journeys away from our parents go way beyond inter-galactic. For those, I can imagine Heavenly Parents at the terminal, the front porch, the bus stop, though I can only guess at what they said.

My two-year-old son John is Buzz Lightyear. For Christmas, he got inflatable Buzz Lightyear wings, and he would sleep in them if we'd let him. But he was Buzz long before Christmas. You'd think he'd like the magical Toy Story movies the most, because Buzz looks so real in those movies. But no, his clear favorite is the Buzz Lightyear cartoon feature that jerks and freezes like cheap Saturday morning Power Rangers. Why? Because in the cartoon, Buzz isn't a toy. He flies. And his wrist-laser isn't a little blinking light, but a power that annihilates Emperor Zurg's robots.

John offers me an important choice about every twenty-three minutes. When shot with a laser-beam from the plastic button-bank on his wrist, I can die dramatically, or turn away and slide shut the glass door that isolates the little sanctum where my computer hums her siren song. If I take the latter choice, John might high-five me against the glass and then go away, or maybe he'll just go away. And I can go back to work. You know, real stuff. Stuff that serves him and the rest of the family.

But if I choose to die instead, his laughter and a second blast will compel another, more dramatic, death, then another, then another, the peals of laughter rising higher with each new mayhem. It's tough to come up with ten or twelve different ways to die in quick succession, each one expected to top the last. By the time his interest thins, I'm dying as Donald Duck might, when struck by a laser blast.

If it seems morbid that all this death should inspire such mirth, let me say quickly that John's favorite killing cycle involves one of the aforementioned demises, followed immediately by a springing resurrection and a laughing hug, repeated over and over again. With or without the hugs, all this killing can impede the progress of much grown-up work getting done. But, of course, I have a choice.

My dad provided well for me, I guess. I have this memory of an occasional new pair of jeans, stiff and stapled with cowboy blessings on the back pockets. And there was always enough food, even if it was mostly hash and lima beans, and usually enough comic books. But what I remember most is him looking up from Wednesday night wrestling on our tiny black-and-white TV and wrestling with me instead. You see, my dad had the same choice as Buzz Lightyear's dad.

I was about fourteen years old, putting on my fake surfer clothes, which were a fake Pendleton shirt and fake white Levi's and fake Converse All-stars, because some of my friends were going to an amusement park out on the Pacific coast to celebrate a birthday. It was night-time, and the birthday girl's mom drove us. I had never been to Pacific Ocean Park, but I'd heard everybody talk about the world-class roller-coaster that was there. I'd never been on anything more roller-coastery than some dips in the highway on the way to San Bernardino. It was an adventure, a high-risk adventure, and I was terrified.

Of course, there were other things you could do at Pacific Ocean Park besides brave the roller-coaster. Like you could throw darts at balloons, or buy a string with a balloon on it, or, well, I really don't remember anything else, because the roller-coaster was the real reason anybody went there, even if I was determined to avoid it entirely and try with all my adolescent might to lose myself among the balloons.

Still, there was a fascination, a pull, as I allowed myself to drift back to the roller-coaster platform and watch people embark with breathless anticipation and then return, shaken and pale. It was the siren-call of the unknown. How would it feel? Would it kill me? Why was the glowing night air filled with screaming?

You know, as I remember it now, it seems just a little wacky that a high-risk adventure like that should have been all about journey and nothing about destination. I mean, the adventure ended right where it had begun. The adventurers were changed a little, but they hadn't really gotten anywhere. What if you could get on a wild ride like that and then step off in some amazingly different place? Someplace where something as boring as balloons were replaced by, well, who knows? More unknown. And you're changed enough to see it, feel it, drink it in? Maybe the ride would suddenly seem worth the risk.

Oh, I did finally find myself on that platform at Pacific Ocean Park that night. I couldn't go home without tasting the adventure, having been so close to the edge. I held my breath and thought the ratchet and clank of that never-ending first ascent was the sound of doom. But there was no turning back. I rode the monster. Eleven times.

My dad began courting my mom in about 1930. Times were hard, so I'm told, in 1930. On their first Christmas together as young sweethearts, each of them found one little package under the tree. Neither of them had any idea what the other was planning to give. First Dad opened his gift from Mom and was amazed to find a lovely ruby ring. He wasn't amazed that she would be so extravagant (she was, after all, kind of fond of him), he was amazed because he knew what he'd wrapped for her, a large walnut shell with his face drawn on it. Inside the shell was a velvet lining and a nearly identical ruby in a ring.

Each tiny package had something kind of big inside. Not so much the rubies, but what the rubies stood for. I mean, the love they represented resulted in a series of homes, a posterity of three-score through four generations so far, and amazing adventures hinting at glories beyond the veil. They're both gone now, my dad joining my mom just a couple of years ago at age ninety-five, living those glories now, I suppose.

Before my wife and I were married, we used to wind out onto the yellow spines of earth that overlook Cedar Breaks, in southern Utah. There's a bristlecone pine out there that my wife had long since befriended. Her gnarled old friend is fifteen hundred years old. We have sat in its branches. We honeymooned there. A couple of years later, we climbed Wheeler Peak out on the Nevada border, and visited our friend's older cousins, maybe another thousand years older, the oldest living things on earth. I don't know if it was legal, but I scooped up a little cone that had fallen from one and brought it home and put it on the windowsill. Why? Because in that tiny cone hidden in my hand was nearly incalculable hugeness. How many millennia of bristlecone forests waiting patiently to begin their witness of human generations blowing by like swift clouds?

Somewhere about midway through the lifespan of that little cone's mother, another mother gave birth in a stable, halfway around the globe. That night was born the maker of bristlecone forests, and of the rocky summits they cling to. And of the earth from which those rocky summits rise. He was, himself, the biggest thing, come to us in the tiniest, humblest, swaddling-wrapped package.

WERE YOU THERE WHEN THE ANGELS SANG? / 6 DEC. '02

In school I sang in the choir. It's not that I didn't want to be an athlete, I did. I shot baskets 'til it was too dark to see the rim. I pitched softballs against the side of the house until the occupants very nearly lost their minds. I was great at practicing sports, all by myself, but whenever a couple of other players were added, particularly if one or more of them were trying to prevent me from making baskets, or trying to knock those softballs out of their decreed course with a bat or something, my effectiveness...well, lapsed.

In Junior High School I was accepted onto both the football and basketball teams. But just days into those seasons, I discovered I was really just getting in the way of the game actually happening. It was not unlike playing basketball around one of those life-sized fiberglass Ronald McDonalds, placed randomly about the court and shifted from time to time--a junior high Ronald McDonald in shorts, feeling even more embarrassed by having to wear shorts than by being Ronald McDonald. I was that ineffective.

Then, in the eighth grade, a couple of friends of mine found out that if you signed up for the school chorus, you could get out of attending seventh period every day! This was really too good to miss, so off I went, every afternoon, to the house beyond the parking lot (way beyond the parking lot)--the house the school district had purchased to protect the student body and faculty from the glory of the chorus.

I liked it a lot. I was kind of surprised, but I did. I signed up for glee club in high school, then moved up to the a Capella choir. I became a radical folksinger, I memorized the bass arias from The Messiah, I sang the leads in the musicals. I sang my little tonsils off!

Now, thinking about singing, these angels who sang on the night of the first Christmas--who were they? Did someone just make a general announcement to all the spirits who hadn't yet been born that the most amazing event in the universe so far was about to happen, and everybody who felt like singing about it should gather at certain coordinates in the sky over Judea? Where were you at about this time in history? Maybe there? If you like to sing now, maybe did you like to sing then?

Who were the angels? Fairies? Gods?

Who split the dark and lit the sky
like falling stars and flaming rods?

Were you among those wings? Was I?

THEY ARE TRAVELERS WHO SHELTER HERE / 11 NOVEMBER
'02

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, I was taller than all my sons. There are advantages to being larger than your kids. You can lift them into the crib. Or out of the bathtub. Or out of the driver's seat. And they might not presume to thump you when you cross them.

But they do get bigger, and they know they will. My son Joshua, now twenty-four, kept a little three-by-five card taped to the fridge during his adolescent years. On this card he would make a little mark every time I crossed him. He never really explained to me what it meant, but I had the distinct impression he was keeping track, and that it would all become clear to me the moment he surpassed me in physical stature. If he hadn't been, from his earliest days, the owner of a singularly wry sense of humor, I might have been a little spooked by the process. It turned out happily, anyway, because by the time he became taller than I (by about a half a foot, it seems) he was still about as big around as my wrist, and anyway, he liked me too much by then to thump me.

I remember when this boy was born. At that time, my oldest son had recently acquired a parakeet, named Percy. My second son had befriended a kitten, named Smoke. My third son cherished a goldfish, named Jaws. Everybody had a little life to care for.

While my wife was at the hospital acquiring her little life to care for (Joshua), I began feeling left out. So I took up my neighbor's offer of a baby billy goat. I named it J.B., for "Joshua's Billy," even though it was definitely mine.

So Joshua came, so very small. But in some ways he seemed older than we were. Certainly wiser, every now and then. I can remember buying legos for my sons, when they were little. On that first day, when I had finished a little square lego house with a door and symmetrically arranged windows, and thought I was very clever and that they would be very impressed, they showed me what they'd built: X-wing fighters, internal combustion engines, and double helixes. We've all heard those lines by Wordsworth about coming to earth from the starry home of God, "trailing clouds of glory." We like the idea--it feels true.

For sure, it's true about my son Joshua. His mother was dead serious twenty-four years ago when she said of her tiny boy, "Joshua is a great spirit, come to us disguised as a baby."

OUR BROTHER WALKED THIS WAY / 22 NOVEMBER '02

I love to hike rocky mountains. It's a different world up there. Even when you can see down into the valleys full of malls and manufacturing, segmented by concrete and split by Interstate highways, you feel so far away from them. It's kind of funny, from the valley floors the mountains look like these marvelous decorations on the edge of what's real. But from the mountain tops, the valleys look like little collection basins for things not brave enough to cling to the slopes, not hopeful enough to look upward. From the peaks, it seems clear that the mountains are the big part, the real part. Nearly three decades ago, I scrambled through the oak brush north of town and clambered up into the pines, looking for a remote lake, invisible from the valley below, faithfully following the directions an old-timer had given me in the church parking lot. He had described for me in great detail certain meadows that would serve as landmarks. He gave these meadows odd names--in fact, the names of Old Testament battlefields--don't ask me why. I just wished those names had been hung in the meadows someplace, because once I was up there, the first meadow I came to looked less like a meadow than I'd expected, so I didn't count it. Reaching the second, thinking it was the first, I hiked, as instructed, west from it until it became obvious that I was campaigning steadfastly away from the mysterious lake site people had been pointing to for years from the church parking lot.

So I backed up to the meadow (the second, if you're keeping track) and then just fumbled up the steep slope in the general direction they had pointed, feeling only a little less lost than before, but glad there were hawks and chipmunks and ancient pine carcasses and occasional grassy flats among the granite, and sudden overlooks with architecture that seemed divinely appointed for serene contemplation and the savoring of Hostess DingDongs (which can be eaten on Alpine hikes with no trace of guilt, whatsoever).

Still, I wanted that lake. I always enjoy the journey, but I really am a "destination hiker." Now, this granite would bear no trace of trails, no matter how many people or horses might grind their way through, but off in the distance I saw a little pile of rocks that was clearly not put there by wind, or chipmunks. I reached it, looked ahead, and saw another. Then another, and another. And over a ridge, the lake. Someone had been this way, had thought of someone else who might come later, and suddenly all the wise advice and advice and talking maps of any number of old-timers in parking lots were not so eloquent as these tiny towers of silent stones.

I guess my son John, now almost two, wasn't even a couple of minutes old when I noticed his right ear. Nothing wrong with it, really, it just runs north and south in a very straight line, then there's a sharp little corner where it starts to bend in a little rainbow shape over the top. The corner is the thing. Not quite a point, but the other ear doesn't have one. And I look around at other folks, and they don't have a corner on their right ear, either. John's corner is kind of...distinctive.

I never thought much about it until one day when I was shaving in front of the mirror and suddenly got one of the warmest feelings I'd ever had. Now, shaving is the original "different strokes for different folks." For me, it's pretty much a bother. I look for excuses to grow a beard, and almost always have a mustache, just to shave less of my face. So it was really annoying to get to middle age and find I suddenly had whiskers growing out of my ears! Now I run a razor around the edges of those fleshy little flaps, too. And that's what I was doing when the warm feeling came. For the first time in my life, if you can believe it, I noticed this odd thing about my right ear--the faintest hint of a corner. Enough of a corner, at least, to make it different from my left. And way enough to connect me to my baby boy in a way that made me grin. It was a genetic moment.

There are a lot of people around who only know me because I'm my children's dad. I rarely hear, "Your kids are growing up just like you!" What I do hear is, "Wow, you're just like Sam Payne, only bald!" They always seem to forget who was here first, but it doesn't bother me. My kids are the kind of people I'd like to grow up to be.

I don't know much about the science of genetics. I know it has something to do with corners on ears. It has something to do with why your kids are all artists, or athletes, mechanics, or whatever your kids are. It has to do with simpler stuff, too, like whether you'll grow up to have offspring who are, in fact, people instead of lobsters, or plants. We're made to grow up like our parents. My dad gave me eyes that seem especially fit for seeing fossils in rocks and fish in streams, deer at the far end of a forest corridor. My mom gave me a heart that I hope will become like hers, able to feel deeply both the joys and sorrows in others, as well as the wordless beauty of snow and autumn mountainsides.

They are my earthly parents. I'm an earthly parent. My kids are becoming earthly parents. There are patterns in this. And of course, we all have Heavenly Parents--who are at least as real as we are. More patterns?