

## **Preface**

I wrote the following to honor our son and brother Eric, who died in a mountain-climbing accident in Austria in his twenty-fifth year, and to voice my grief. Though it is intensely personal, I have decided now to publish it, in the hope that it will be of help to some of those who find themselves with us in the company of mourners.

**BORN ON A SNOWY NIGHT** in New Haven, he died twenty-five years later on a snowy slope in the Kaiserbirger. Tenderly we laid him in warm June earth. Willows were releasing their seeds of puffy white, blanketing the ground.

I catch myself: Was it *him* we laid in the earth? I had touched his cheek. Its cold still hardness pushed me back. Death, I knew, was cold. And death was still. But nobody had mentioned that all the softness went out. His spirit had departed and taken along the warmth and activity and, yes, the softness. He was gone. “Eric, where are you?” But I am not very good at separating person from body. Maybe that comes with practice. The red hair, the dimples, the chipmunky look-that *was* Eric.

THE CALL CAME at 3:30 on that Sunday afternoon, a bright sunny day. We had just sent a younger brother off to the plane to be with him for the summer.

“Mr. Wolterstorff?”

“Yes.”

“Is this Eric’s father?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Wolterstorff, I must give you some bad news.”

“Yes.”

“Eric has been climbing in the mountains and has had an accident.”

“Yes.”

“Eric has had a serious accident.”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Wolterstorff, I must tell you, Eric is dead. Mr. Wolterstorff, are you there? You must come at once! Mr. Wolterstorff, Eric is dead.”

For three seconds I felt the peace of resignation: arms extended, limp son in hand, peacefully offering him to someone-Someone. Then the pain-cold burning pain.

He was, like all our children, always quick and bright. He entered college as a National Merit Scholar. Excellent at science and math, he spent his college summers in computer programming. Eventually, he decided to go into art history rather than science; there, he felt, he touched humanity. He was a fine artist himself, an accomplished potter, knowledgeable in music, good in performance.

He was a hard worker, not disposed to waste his time-perhaps too much so, too little inclined to savor or even tolerate interruptions, too much oriented toward his goals, not inclined enough to humor. He gave up potting because it didn't fit into his plans. Still, he knew delight. He was venturesome, traveling on his own throughout much of the world, never shrinking from a challenge or turning aside from the exploration of fresh terrain, inclined to overestimate his physical skills and strength. At ten he almost drowned, not willing to admit that he could barely swim. He lived intensely.

On Thanksgiving Day the pastor spoke of acquiring a grateful eye. Eric's was a grateful eye-and ear and mind. Not just a delighting eye but a grateful one. He was a person of faith. Once when little-six years old, perhaps-as he was riding in the car with me somewhere he asked, "Dad, how do we know there's God?" He asked the question, but I don't think he ever

seriously doubted. He loved to worship in the company of a genuine community. He died in the Lord.

He put his stamp on things. I think of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins's notion of inscape: a thing had inscape for Hopkins when it had some definite character. In one of his letters Hopkins speaks of the pain he felt when a tree in the garden, full of inscape, was chopped down. Eric put inscape on things: the way he dressed, the way he cooked, the way he shook hands, the way he answered the phone. "And I wished to die and not to see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more."

When I got angry with him, it was usually over his self-centeredness. Though he spent much of one summer helping rebuild the houses of tornado victims, he was grumpy when I took him along to help build our cabin. I remember being surprised when, without being asked, he cheerfully helped carry our suitcases through the Chicago train station when he was a young teenager.

In his latter years there was in him a loneliness, an inner solitude. What gave him most delight was friends-close friends to whom he could speak of what he most deeply thought and felt and believed. He always longed for those fleeting moments with friends when there is no longer any gap between them. He saw his

old friends drifting off to other places and other interests, getting married. His deep longing for intimacy left him lonely.

He was loyal, and principled to a fault—too severe, sometimes too stern and critical, too little accepting of humanity’s warts. That gave him trouble in human relationships. Yet he could be gentle and loving. His landlady in Munich told how his face lit up when he learned that his brother was to be with him for the summer. He eagerly anticipated holidays with the family, telling me once how this surprised his friends in graduate school.

And he loved the mountains, loved them passionately. “Über alles,” said his landlady. That was not quite true. He loved friends more. But the mountains lured and beckoned him irresistibly. Much as he loved the art and cathedrals of Europe, he loved the mountains more.

His love was his death.

We took him too much for granted. Perhaps we all take each other too much for granted. The routines of life distract us; our own pursuits make us oblivious; our anxieties and sorrows, unmindful. The beauties of the familiar go unremarked. We do not treasure each other enough.

He was a gift to us for twenty-five years. When the gift was finally snatched away, I realized how great it was. Then I could not tell him. An outpouring of letters arrived, many expressing appreciation for Eric. They all made me weep again: each word of praise a stab of loss.

How can I be thankful, in his gone-ness, for what he was? I find I am. But the pain of the *no more* outweighs the gratitude of the *once was*. Will it always be so?

I didn't know how much I loved him until he was gone.

Is love like that?