



5-9-2017

# The Internal Compass

Joshua Dyer

Follow this and additional works at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors\\_proj](http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj)

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Dyer, Joshua. (2017). The Internal Compass. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 197. Available at:  
[http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors\\_proj/197](http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/197)  
Copyright © 2017 Joshua Dyer

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

The Internal Compass

Joshua Dyer

Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University  
May 9, 2017

Prof. Katy Whittingham, Thesis Director  
Prof. Nicole Williams, Committee Member  
Prof. Evan Dardano, Committee Member

*The Internal Compass*

-Joshua Dyer

***Epigraph****Amazing Grace*

By John Newton

“Amazing grace how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now I'm found.  
Was blind but now I see.  
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear  
And grace my fears relieved.  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed...”

*Dedication*

For the ones that taught me that love was higher than the sky, deeper than the ocean, and more than chocolate chip pancakes. For the ones that showed me light when life seemed full of shadows. For Louise, who loved me more than I knew.

*To Whom It Does Concern (Mrs. Robertson)*

To Whom It Does Concern,  
To you I write today,  
To Whom It Does Concern,  
I truly want to say:

Thank you.

When I told you “this is dumb,  
all the writing and the reading,”  
you showed me I was numb,  
to all the words and their meaning.

You yelled while others whispered,  
but in a way that was so helpful,  
you taught my brothers and my sister,  
why we should read the whole damn shelf-full.

I write to you today to say thank you,  
so sincerely,  
you were a teacher and an educator,  
but more than just that, merely.

You are why I chose to write,  
oh so much I have to say,  
with your support and your might,  
you showed expression in a new way.

To Whom It Does Concern,  
that’s you, the reason I write today,  
thank you is all I have,  
all that I really need to say.

### *The Internal Compass*

On my fifth day in the homeland, as I had begun to call it, my exchange university had arranged for some of the students that were abroad to see the Cliffs of Moher on the southwestern coast of Ireland, near Galway, in a place known as The Burren. We drove up in a coach bus that seemed to be twice as wide as the narrow countryside roads. Narrating our trip was a short Irishman name Eoghan who told us about the history that surrounded us. We drove by castles that were older than the country that I called home, but they were now just remnants of the past in someone's backyard. The year 2016 was going to be my year, this I knew, because it was three weeks into the New Year and I was already crossing items off of my bucket list.

Uncertain whether it was the remaining feelings of jetlag or my 21-year-old mindset that did it, but I could not listen to Eoghan telling us about what I could see with my own eyes. In some ways, my mind was too focused on the farmer resting his arm against the old guard tower while he watched his sheep graze in the fields around him. In others, I could not believe that the pile of rocks that still resembled a guard tower was actually once a guard tower and not just a pile of rocks. It was just like my grandmother had told me it would be, beautiful but simplistic.

When the bus shuttered to a halt and the hydraulics had let off their final hiss, I grabbed my jacket and worked my way to the front of the bus. Before I stepped off of the final rubber step, I paused and took it in. For anyone who has ever stopped to smell the air around them, stopped to feel the sun caressing their face in the summer or the rain drops trickling down through their hair toward your scalp until they can feel the rain's cool touch, then they know the "it" I am referring to. My eyes closed, not as if they were just closing, but as if they were giving my other senses a chance to experience what my sight had on the drive there.

My eyes popped open when I heard my roommate blurt out, “woah guys, this is freakin’ gorgeous.” His name was Thor and he was from Minnesota. His laid back attitude has caused me to think the relaxed nature associated with Californian surfers is similar to that of those from the Midwest. He helped me to feel relaxed even when nothing around us was calm.

Another roommate, Cade, spoke up, saying, “we can see inside the gift shop later, I want to see the Cliffs.” Being the youngest son to a single mother, Cade took it as a personal challenge to have as many t-shirts as he could from any place he went that would fit his 6’7” body so when he went home he had something to show his mother.

The three of us hit a stride, fearing not if we would slip on the pavement that had been splattered by the salt water that was brave enough to climb up the steep Cliffs. We reached a sign that was intended to be in remembrance of anyone that had fallen over the edge, and it warned all visitors to be careful to not cross the barriers that were ten paces from the edge itself.

“Damn. Every man for himself, I guess,” Thor said.

Laughing I replied, “well it would be one hell of a way to go out.”

\*\*\*

Beginning in July of 2003, I lived at a summer camp. The summer before the trailer was wonderful. Momma was a cook at the Christian camp across the street from the trailer. Daddy was still working in Massachusetts so he stayed at the house where I learned to walk, read, and be more than just a baby that cried, slept, ate, and needed changing before sleeping once more.

The camp sat near a lake, with a long dirt road that passed the playing fields and the snack shack. It stretched toward the cabins that sat under the treetops before breaking off into footpaths that led to the lake where I almost drowned. I almost had my first kiss in the back of a motorboat at the age of 7 by some tween that was charged with making sure the sail from the

camp's small sail boat that fell on me did not stay on top of me for too long after it capsized due to poor navigating.

“You're fine. You're ok! What the hell were you thinking? You can't be past the buoys anymore,” she proceeded to yell at me while I found the breath that I had lost while under the water. I still feel bad that I ruined her day by almost drowning. I just wanted to be like everyone else.

I always had trouble with swimming because I sank in the murky water and my lungs never did help me much. At 5 weeks old I was put in an oxygen bubble after contracting pneumonia and was later told that gym class would be the extent of my physical abilities so I should not get my hopes up when it came to sports. It seems, however, the more that people tell someone they cannot do something, the more they want to do it; forbidden fruit is the sweetest.

Learning that at a young age, being told “no” meant I had to do it, I was up for anything. I learned to use the canoes that were for the campers and paddle over to Blueberry Island that summer. It was a distance away that left myself and my siblings tired, and in need of nourishment. We would eat our fill of the wild blueberries that grew there while swimming in the sandy banks of the small peninsula that we forever called an island. Knowing we were not supposed to paddle there and eat the berries made the hair on our necks stand at end and the berries all the sweeter. See we were young, but we knew we were different. The other kids at the camp had to pay to be there and they had to participate in the camp activities. We were the cook's kids, so we had free roam of the camp from sun up to sun down. As far as we knew it, we were the lucky ones.

It is said that ignorance is bliss, and going hand-in-hand with that is the thought that naivety is beautiful. That summer I ran as fast as I could in manhunt, only to be caught by the

kids that were at least three years my tenure with ease and being sent to “jail” as we called it. Each week with the new sets of campers I found it appealing to try and sneak out of jail to try to return to the game, only to be captured once more. Receiving mixed reviews, I either was pushed to the ground where I scraped my knee, or I was told I was a sore loser because I refused to stay captured. Well if you asked me then, or even now, I would say that I am without a doubt a sore loser. Too many years of my life were spent coming last in foot races, games, and events. Winning seemed so appealing, and here and there I met some people at the camp who made me feel as though I had won. They would let me win, of course, being at least 3 years older than me. It was not until I found out that they let me win that I became even more determined to truly win.

That summer I learned that it did not matter if all I had was a stick in my hand, I would have fun. The older boys told me it would be cool if I slept outside and used a rock as a pillow, so I did. They laughed at me the next day, covered in dirt and sap from the overhanging tree, but it worked, so I felt that I had won that battle. I had achieved a victory in my own eyes due to my stubborn nature, so I am thankful for those boys trying to make me look like a fool.

Two girls sat with me on the swings near the dirt road that led to the cabins, in front of the chapel where I was told God would guide me, and they taught me how to make bracelets out of colorful strings. They showed me kindness, and I remember how it felt. One with a squeaky voice and glasses, the other as talkative as an auctioneer, I kneeled by the swings and learned.

See even with the childhood teasing, I loved that camp. My sister got to be with girls her age, which she seemed to enjoy because she always wanted a sister but only had brothers, and my brother and I played often. My eldest brother had not yet joined the family; he would be introduced to me two Aprils from then before moving in and becoming a “brother from another mother” when the papers were signed. My Daddy, a man who could make eating sand look cool,

came to visit and would swim in the lake with us, play tetherball, and cards too. The only thing I never saw him do was go into the chapel. Daddy had lost his momma some time when I was really young and he blamed God in some ways for it. Even still, he never spoke ill of Him until I was old enough to make my own choices.

My favorite part of Daddy's visits were when he made Momma laugh. She has this smile that she plasters on for photos and it isn't very good. It looks sort of like someone embarrassed her and she is trying to smile through the awkwardness. But with Daddy, she smiled regular again. She smiled so that I smiled, so big that the whole world, the whole camp, knew she was happy. That was my favorite part. When we were all together, things just felt right. I loved that summer. From the blueberries to the canoes, to the young girls at the swing set and even the older boys teaching me to think things through first, that summer was wonderful. The naivety of a wee 7-year-old carried me through until the first frost. It was not until the school year that I realized things were not all I thought they were.

\*\*\*

Rather than heed the sign's warning, we worked our way to the side of the Cliffs where there were not any employees, but rather, mud soaked rocks that acted as the trail laid out a distance from the actual Cliff's edge. The challenge was accepted. My roommates and I wanted to make the journey in our own way and so that is what we did. We slowly climbed over the slight rock wall that separated the worn trail and the muddy cliff's edge, which gave us a better view. It seemed that we were finally close enough.

We grabbed loose rocks and threw them as hard as we could, my two roommates and I, to see if we could get them past the gusting wind all the way down the Cliff to the crashing waves below. No matter how hard we threw we could not see them hit the bottom of the 750-foot cliffs.

We decided to walk along the cliff's edge for nearly a mile, so it seemed, and no matter how far we went the Cliffs went further. Without saying much about it, the three of us all knew that we had gone far enough. We each found a dry patch of grass right on the edge, and decided to sit and catch our breath after the long trudge through the Irish mud.

"This is unbelievable guys," said Cade, "this, right here, this is why I wanted to come to Ireland. Everywhere we go we are surrounded by beauty."

"I could not agree more. I am glad that we are on this ride together, guys. Been a rough couple of months so I was looking forward to the adventure," I chimed in.

My feet dangled over the Cliff's edge and I could see birds flying below. The day was dark and seemed gloomy and the air was thick enough that I had droplets of the seawater that had begun to form on my jacket. When I had first arrived in Ireland it seemed that the constant rain and cloudy weather was going to be an unfortunate, yet frequent, occurrence during my four-month stay, but it was in that moment that I began to love it.

With my feet swinging back and forth, my heels tapping the edge of the Cliff ever so slightly, with my hands reaching behind me touching the last portion of the dry grass next to a pile of mud, I leaned my neck back, as I had when the bus first arrived. Just then, with the clouds covering up the sky, and the breeze biting at my cheekbones, it was almost as if I felt the sun begin to break through the clouds.

\*\*\*

The land around the trailer was picturesque, but the trailer itself left something to be desired. The main road went uphill ever so slightly, with a curvature that made the commute to and from school all the more bearable. Slanted trees lined the weather-beaten road with overgrown bushes holding them so that their leaning did not turn into falling. The foliage in

Autumn was something off of a postcard, with the pines and maples welcoming all who drove past them, but blistering cold in the Winter was something out of a nightmare, warning everyone that nature was nothing to take lightly.

Where the trees and bushes broke off and left an alleyway of dirt and gravel was where the driveway to the trailer was. The driveway broke off to the left, up a hill that would freeze over before the solstice and stay that way until the birds returned from the south later that year.

Atop the drive, a short distance back, stood the weather-stricken barn, resting beside the grassy knoll that was home to *Little House on the Prairie* days of imaginative play. My sister would play house using nothing but fallen branches for her structure, and my brother and I would be sure to fend off any invading Indians. After all, the television shows always reminded us that they were constantly invading unsuspecting towns of peaceful settlers; we had to make sure sister was alright.

“Get ‘em!” I yelled.

“We have to warn the others,” my brother pointed out.

We only ran inside when Momma called for supper, much like the characters we were pretending to be would have done. The mosquitoes were always calm and the sun warm, so days in that field were not all that bad.

The barn had a loft, so it towered over the aged trailer that was slumped a few hundred feet away. The barn had not been used in many years and was now the home to dust, dirt, splinters, and rodents of every type. The knoll was consistently overgrown, with a mix of grass and weeds that stood up to a grown man’s knees. The wind that gusted down each day caused the grass to sway and bob ever so slightly so that it was constantly a tangled mess.

To the left of the lofted barn resided the trailer. It had been driven up that steep drive years before we moved in and plopped in an open section of the forgotten land and was an off-white that had become yellow, as pollen had worked its way out of the nearby forestry onto the siding. Its shingles were done by the apprentice of an apprentice but they did their best to keep the rain out, though unsuccessful at times. The metal siding would boom like thunder if it was hit by a falling acorn or child's playing ball. The boom would send a ripple up the side of the trailer that would force an echo to work its way down the hall. The first storm in the trailer, brother, sister, and I went into Momma's room and hid under her covers until morning.

"No matter how bad the storm is," Momma would say, "you are always safe under these covers. Now pleasant nightmares, and sweet dreams."

In front there was a sun-battered deck that had gone gray over time, as the wood had slowly rotted. Loose nails had worked their way out of the boards in years prior and now caused tripping fits and stubbed toes to all who walked upon it.

The deck touched the front door that let more wind in during the Winter than it should have. Near the front door was the window that screeched when it did its job and actually opened. Beyond the window was the kitchen that had the cracked laminate flooring that was as yellow as it was shiny, like a smoker's tooth that had been polished to hide the fact that it had been mistreated.

With twelve feet from the door to the kitchen sink, the kitchen was the ugliest room in the trailer. It had a table to the left of the door that was the pearl in the oyster, because it had been retouched and refinished by a good man, Daddy. There were cabinets that consisted of three-for-a-dollar macaroni and cheese boxes, peanut butter, and bagged cereal because it was cheaper than the boxed kind.

Walking forward and taking a right past the cabinets was the fridge, across from the stove. The fridge had some milk, butter, hot dogs and ketchup. The frostbitten freezer that resided above the fridge held a few frozen chicken potpies that were more gravy and crust than chicken or peas.

There was a metal-lined doorframe that led to the living room, the largest room in the trailer. That is not saying much because the room itself was still only about twelve feet by twelve feet, but in comparison, the room was expansive. The floor was carpeted with a navy carpet that, like the deck, the barn, and the trailer itself, was faded with age. It was beaten down enough that it was no longer a carpet, but more of an AstroTurf surface that we braved barefoot each morning before putting on our school shoes. Our feet were often blackened from the dirt in the trailer and outside of it. We wore shoes rarely because they would become dirty and were no longer school-ready. It was part of the adventure of the trailer, because Momma used to say it was like we were hobbits.

The living room had wallpaper that could have inspired Charlotte Perkins Gillman's work. It was peeling as if was trying to escape the trailer, but it was also so set against the wall in a way that made it seem as though it would never be able to be taken off, no matter how hard it tried. The room had two couches that were fitted to the bodies that had been sitting in them for years, broken in enough so that there were only certain positions that were comfortable because of sunken in sections. There was a window that was too small even for the small room, but it let the light in just right so that there was a view of the sunrise and sunset each morning and evening. That window provided the only beauty that room had, besides movie nights with the family, watching the same five VHS tapes on repeat.

Beyond the living room, on the same wall as the front door, there was a narrow hallway that led to the bedrooms and the bathroom. With one bedroom for the boys, one for the girl, and one for the parents, there was enough room in the small trailer that everyone had their own space, in a way. The boy's room was dark and simple, with metal bunk beds on the left near the closet that touched the hallway wall and was just big enough for one of the young boy's to stand in and nearly close the door. The room itself was nine feet deep and ten feet wide, but gave the boys enough room to sleep and get dressed; the room did its job. The carpet was the same as the hallway and the living room, as were the carpets in the girl's and the parent's rooms, respectively, seemingly connected as if it was one large piece that stretched the length of the trailer. My brother and I used to kneel on the carpet to say our evening prayers each night, and to this day, that is the last place I actually prayed until I was much older.

The girl's room was like the boy's room, but smaller and made to accommodate a young girl. She did her best to make the walls and the bed sheets add warmth to the consistently frigid trailer, with the feminine touch my brother and I lacked in our room. In some ways it was like any young girl's room, no boys were allowed.

Beside the girl's room was the bathroom. It had a crackling laminate that had been placed years before the inhabitants had moved in, and it showed its age. On the left was a bathtub that was cream colored. The showerhead rested in a constant slumbering state and would only spit out warm water when it was too warm to even want a hot bath. The mirror was in front of the sink, near the tub, and that was where the boys learned to tie their ties, looking their best when even their best was not the same as everyone else's.

The parent's room was at the end of the trailer. Its wallpaper was white with faded green flowers that lacked any significant beauty, but rather, absorbed beauty from the room as it had

absorbed years of neglect into its faded coloration. That room was where the two boys and the one girl would come during the snowstorms and wake up the parents because they were scared. The corner, touching the wall where the bathroom was, was where the dog had puppies. The dog had to be taken away because she bit the woman who deserved to be bitten, but the woman who deserved the bite owned the trailer.

Soon enough, we would be out of the trailer and living at Grandmother's house. Brother, sister, and I stayed on an air mattress in the living room, Momma in the guest room, and Grandmother would always be in the kitchen cooking. Her shelves had more than macaroni and cheese and peanut butter, and we never had frozen chicken pot pies. It was not so bad after all. Not so bad, just different. We lived with her and she lived with us, and she loved us and we loved her. Her hand would grab my chin before they would grab my ears as she pulled me in to give my cheek a kiss. I can still feel her kisses, resting on my cheeks like raindrops in a storm.

\*\*\*

Three months, one week, and five days before the Cliffs, I had lost a piece of me. I had experienced loss once before, but I was prepared for that loss. It seems that preparation permits acceptance, at least when it comes to death. But the surprise of losing her without even knowing she was nearing her end, well that crippled me.

For months I regurgitated the "I am doing ok" and "thank you for your kind words" responses to people when they asked me if I was alright. It was in that moment that I let myself feel something. For months I fought back tears and would swallow in a way that made the knot in my throat feel as though it would never go away.

With nowhere to turn, nothing but waves and the distant horizon in my line of vision, I finally let myself feel. I did not cry, nor did I even find the need to fight back tears, but I felt like

a crackling fireplace smells, and I felt how grass does in the moment before the last drop of dew leaves the final blade in the yard when the sun rises in the early hours of the morning. It was in that moment that I was able to stop running from the feelings that I had tried to avoid, and finally experience them.

She stood barely over five feet, and was physically reflective of her appreciation for food. Her hair was short and a faded gray, her bifocals thick, and her hands strong. With a laugh that forced her to grab at her tensed stomach, let every tooth that she had see the light, and every laugh line near her eyes be emphasized when she squinted.

She stood only five feet, but seemed to be half that tall when she sunk into her chair and grabbed at her chest. Her strong hands clenched shut before they went weak and she slipped away. Her face tensed the way it did when she laughed, but the smile was gone, and the pain she felt was reflected on her face.

While I sat on top of the Cliffs and looked out, I felt the sun that had squeezed its way through the clouds. The warmth of its rays combatted the chill in the air that I had begun to be accustomed to. I knew what had happened, but tried to forget how it all occurred.

I looked over and saw my roommate lying down on the grass. “You’re going to get soaked, Thor!” I yelled.

“All good bro, I’m just taking it in,” he returned.

Thor was just taking it all in, just like I did that night.

We pulled her to the ground so she laid flat, like Thor. I gave her the oxygen that she used occasionally, hoping it would help, and Pops started pumping on her chest. Someone was calling an ambulance, someone else was crying, everyone was scared, but all of that blended into one splash of noise.

The crash of the waves below where I sat, wooshing back and forth, just kept me constantly hearing something. But occasionally, I would hear the wind that was around me the whole time as it passed my ear. Why didn't I hear it before? The wind had been there the whole time, but why didn't I hear it? My only guess is that once I stopped ignoring it, I remembered I could hear it.

\*\*\*

We sat in wallpapered living room on the furniture that had taken the shape of our bodies from the sheer length of time that they had been around. Daddy was up that night. He was usually back at the house in Massachusetts, but that night he was there with us. He still had his work shirt on and the keys in his hand from the drive. Leaning on the green chair that Momma was sitting in, with the hand that had his keys resting on his hip, he looked at us.

Daddy was thin. He was thin year-round, never reaching that "time to lose weight" phase in the late winter that many people his age would reach. I always loved the way he smelled. The bar of soap that he used was prominent, the deodorant always dull but not necessary. The different types of wood he had worked with that day had soaked into his shirt, and the brown liquid that he always blew on before he sipped left a smell that helped me to know it was Daddy I was talking to and not somebody else.

Momma was in the green chair that Daddy was leaning on. Her hair was as red as her face was in the summer heat, and her eyes were as blue as anyone's could be. Momma cared more than anyone I had ever met, in my brief seven years of life. She loved hugs and making her three kids happy. She was kind, and always wanted to give us the world. In some ways she did.

I sat on the sofa with my brother and sister, Zack and Tay. He was nine and she was eleven, so that made me the baby. Zack was a nut, and it was wonderful. He had more energy

than anyone that I had ever met. He was 17 months older but seemed to be years wiser. Tay was three and a half years older, a second mother at times, but in her heart she always meant well. I still remember her painting my fingernails and her telling me to wear dresses, “like a real life doll.”

Momma and Daddy said they needed to talk to us and tell us something. Usually they only sat us down to tell us something if we had done something wrong, but for the life of me I could not remember what I had broken that week.

“Kids, your mother and I need to talk to you about something,” started Daddy, “as you know Maxi has been with the Owens’ for some time now, and they’ve asked if they can keep her.”

“But, I—I don’t want to give her away,” I started, “you said it was just for a little while!” With a somber look my mother covered her quivering lip and pushed away her tears, swallowing hard to rid her throat of the lump that had formed after my interjection.

My father looked at me, still leaning in his arm against the chair that my mother sat in, and said, “think about her Josh. They’re givin’ her a good home.”

“Well, isn’t this a good home?” I asked.

He knew immediately he had chosen the wrong words. Even though I was 7, I knew those wrong words were the ones that I needed to hear.

“I guess you’re right. As l—long as they’re not m—mean,” I finally spat up through the childish tears that I pushed out rather than fought back as my mother did. Momma was tough, she always had been. She was tough but tender, the most non-moronic oxymoron of a person that I have ever met. She looked at me as I cried, because I was crying the way a child that does not truly understand does, and said, “someday Joshie, someday we will get a dog and she will be

ours forever.” It did not matter what was promised though, because in that moment I only cared about what I had lost. That dog was my dog, and now it belongs to the Owens family. It did not make sense at the time, but now knowing how much a dog can cost, monetarily and otherwise, it does make sense. I still remember Daddy leaning on the chair, with that look that he had, and Momma in the chair fighting off her tears. The only time I actually heard Momma cry was at night. She would cough and cough because of her pneumonia, and cry now and then. When the sun rose, so did she, like it was a new beginning.

So I lost my dog, and they felt that they had lost a bit of my love because of it. Maybe it was just the room in that little trailer, lifeless and ugly, but some things seem to be life-ruining in the moment when realistically they did not change much at all. If only I knew that when I was young. It was only a dog and she was alive, some place safe and warm. At least it was not a person that I loved because that would have been terrible. Thank goodness it was only a dog, and not a person.

\*\*\*

*1-2-3...Breath...1-2-3...Breath*

Pops had been an EMT in his youth, so he knew what to do. I stood there, ready to be told what to do to help, but nobody said anything to me. Mum asked if I wanted to leave the room, if I was ok, but nobody told me how to help. My back was pressed against the wardrobe in the corner, the one where she hid her snacks that were full of sugar for when the diabetes acted up, and I just stared on like a fool. I heard the noise all around me, it had been all I could hear, but when I stopped looking for what I could change, I heard her. With each *1-2-3* I heard a crack-cracking-snap and with each *Breath* I heard air pass from Pops to her. But it didn't work. Nothing we did worked.

Cade threw in, “Not going to lie, sitting here and not walking around makes you realize how cold it is.”

“Yeah man, the sun is hiding. It is like a constant cloudy day, but at least we don’t have to worry about getting burnt,” I responded.

The hospital’s air chilled my skin, but I felt the sweat trickle down my back as we stood in the room where she laid. The cold made me realize how hot I was, but the silenced sobs made me realize how cowardly I was. Staring at her, praying to a God that I had not addressed since I was 10, I first begged and pleaded for her to come back to us, only to ask for her to find peace wherever she was headed to. In that moment I argued with myself...

*If you want her here then ask for that.*

*It isn’t that simple. She wasn’t really in good health.*

*So you just want her gone?*

*Not at all, but isn’t she better off somewhere else?*

Mum grabbed her hand and sang “Amazing Grace”. I tried to join in, because I knew whatever piece of her was still in there while she was lying in the bed would love to hear the music, but I just squeezed my hands until I found myself standing like a statue.

\*\*\*

Once, in the frosty winter that rolled into the hill where the trailer sat, the pipes froze over. Little did we know, such an endeavor would become an issue that would not fix itself for some time. Momma told my brother, sister, and I to grab our clothes and we got into the beat up minivan that she called *The Warrior* because it seemed to be impervious to the dirt that was pushed to the car floor and because the van was able to drive with the gas light on for, what seemed like, an eternity. We drove to school before anyone else did, and Momma told us that we

would wash up there until the pipes defrosted. Momma was a teacher there and she had the keys to the door near the gym. She has always had a way of turning things into adventures. Whenever we would get lost, back in the olden days before phones had GPS on them, she would look in the rear view mirror at us and say, “Don’t worry! We aren’t lost kids, just on another adventure, that’s all.” The best part was, there was always another adventure.

As we journeyed through the dark hallways, Momma said Zack and I would go into the Boy’s locker room and she and Tay would go into the Girl’s. She told us to wash up before the other kids came, so we did. Zack and I stripped down and walked into a room of showers, with more showerheads in the tiled floor to ceiling room than I had ever seen. We finally understood why Momma called it an adventure. We found a room that had water that left the pipes without the walls groaning and the showerhead shaking like it did at the trailer. Best of all, the water was hot when the weather was not. It seemed to me, even as I grew older, that there was a dramatic difference between a warm shower and a hot one. Zack and I soaked it in and lost track of time. Some of the other students came into the locker room and saw us there.

We kept on minding our business, but we could hear them snickering; a muttered phrase or muffled noises from the distance and then laughter. It did not bother us much at all because we were almost done showering and using the soap that came in a dispenser on a wall. For us, a hot shower and unlimited soap was the best adventure we had been on in quite a while. Zack and I no sooner reached for the handle to turn the water off when we realized why the boys had muffled their whispers but not their laughter.

We turned to find our school clothes on the floor of the shower behind us. The boys had thrown them in there as they walked past, and we had not noticed. Luckily they were not soaked,

but they were just wet enough to be uncomfortable. The pant leg felt cool as it brushed against my hot water treated legs.

“Why don’t you just shower at home?” they finally called out, “they don’t have showers where you are from?” they continued.

“Ignore them,” Zack told me. He was 9 but had never liked physical confrontation. People, specifically men, seem to be driven by bravado and the “boys being boys” mentality, but Zack has always been years ahead of his time in peaceful thinking. So we left, wet clothes and all. Momma said we were going on an adventure when we snuck into the school before the lights were turned on. It is funny, I never missed the hot water when we were at the trailer or the groaning of the pipes behind the thin walls until I knew that there were hot showers and shiny showerheads elsewhere. Momma’s adventure showed me that I did not know what I did not have until I saw what others had. Momma and Daddy taught us to be tough and to stand tall, so we went through the whole day in our wet school uniforms, feeling the shower’s warmth leave our skin and the drying water’s coolness begin to sink in.

My teacher asked why my pants were wet. I told her I had been playing in the snow before school. She reminded me that at the Christian Academy there were uniform rules to abide by. I told her I was sorry and that it would not happen again. Later that night, Momma asked me how the adventure was and I told her it was great. Even at 7 I knew Momma called things adventures to make them seem fun. While the other kids talked about skiing, summers away at their lake houses, or whatever new toy they had been given, I just looked forward to snowball fights with Zack and Tay, macaroni and cheese with hot dogs for supper, or watching one of the 5 VHS tapes that we had watched on repeat. I did not care about what I did not have, but rather, cared about what I did have. The less I had, the more I cared. I had my family, and I had the

trailer with a big yard to play in. Life was good. It truly seemed good. I never understood why they made us leave.

\*\*\*

I was lost in my thoughts when I began to realize others had followed and gone on the road less travelled with Thor, Cade, and I. I picked some dirt off of my hand, realizing that I had leaned too far back and once again made the acquaintance of the Irish soil that was constantly bathed in Irish rain.

*Well that was a dumb thing to do, Josh.*

*Guess you'll have to stop getting mud on yourself or you'll be the messy guy.*

It was strange, but I took only one photo while I sat there, and it was of my feet. I wanted to show how high I was and how my feet dangled there, but the photo did not allow for perspective to assist in illustrating the true height of the Cliffs.

“Shit the bus leaves at half-four,” Thor said, the Irish-slang for 4:30.

“I kind of want to check out the gift shop still and grab a T. You guys down?” Cade asked.

“Yeah man, I’m down,” I responded.

Before I stood, I looked out one more time. The weather hadn’t changed, the sun had not shown itself, and the day was still as cold as it had been before, but I seemed to feel better. There was shadow all around, but the one that had enveloped me for three months, one week, and five days, was now nearing its end. I felt as though I was ready to begin to move forward. Not to move on, but to move forward, there is a big difference between the two. My grandmother had passed away, and she was gone, but I was not. The trailer was a distant memory that was hardly referenced by my family or myself, but it taught me to be resilient. The trailer taught me to be

tough, and my grandmother taught me to be tender. Just like walking near a cliff's edge, it was all about finding the right balance.

The three of us stood and worked our way back toward the gift shop. We jogged the best we could, not because we were truly in a rush, but because it just felt right. I was not running from my feelings, or flying away from facing the contents of my heart as I had when I first went abroad, but instead, I was running toward my next adventure. Just like Momma said, never lost, just on another adventure.

When my grandmother died, a part of me became dark. When I sat on the Cliff's edge and felt all that I had ignored for so long, I realized how much I had missed because I had shut down for so long. Life was going to go on, death was going to happen, and it was my task to make the in-between moments as memorable as possible.

We grabbed meat pies from the gift shop and sat to eat.

"This place is awesome," said Cade, lifting the whole of his pie.

"Yeah bro I am pumped we came. And this meat pie is out of this world," continued Thor.

"It's going to be a good four months guys," I chimed in, "definitely going to make some memories."

"To memories," Cade said.

"To memories," we toasted.

The rest fell into place, one day at a time, one adventure at a time.

*Points North*

He sits alone in a room that is filled,  
Surrounded by things and stuff,  
but he is alone, in some way,  
feeling what he cannot say.

The boy that was once a man,  
who walked tall, chin up, chest proud,  
the boy that was once a man,  
sat slumped, eyes down at the ground.

He was loved, this he knew,  
family and friends made that clear,  
but he lost what he thought could not be taken,  
leaving the boy who'd been a man truly shaken.

His heart was not empty,  
but his smile had gone crooked.  
it was not as frequent as before,  
as he laid there, alone, on the floor.

Just then as he felt alone, four legs approached...

The boy who had been a man pet the beast,  
she sighed until she snored,  
as the boy's mind wandered more,  
while he laid there on the floor.

It all made sense now,  
the light bulb had gone off,  
even though he felt alone,  
he realized that he was far from lost.

The boy who had been a man was not depressed,  
that should be quickly addressed,  
but with a flash and a bang,  
thoughts fell into his mind like spring's rain.

The same way a compass points north,  
the way the hungry use a fork,  
the boy again stood tall, with a purpose,  
similar to that of what Hers was.

He knew that he had not been truly lost,  
for now he knew the true cost.

He gave others his time and thoughts,  
only to be sold and bought.

Joy crept into him without a warning,  
just suddenly he rid himself of the storming,  
the turmoil that he permitted to leave him scorning,  
the boy who had been a man embraced the boring.

He no longer needed to be entertained,  
his happiness was alive, it had been saved,  
feeling such joy, he wrote what his thoughts had said,  
and the paper filled until only the pen was dead.

He missed her more than he thought he could,  
taken from him before he thought she should,  
the woman she had been, sweet and kind and good,  
was gone now, and his heart splintered like seasoned wood.

He wrote until the pen died,  
similarly to the way that she had,  
at first only just a bit, or a tad,  
then all at once, it went bad.

But he came to terms with it all,  
he knew there would be a rise after that fall,  
the boy who had once been a man could not stall,  
he had to walk and could no longer crawl.

The time was now, no moment to delay,  
the rhymes had come, so hear is what I say,  
“Love those who love you yester-morrow-today,  
for before you know it they too will be old and gray.”

“I thought that she was the sunshine,  
but even the sunshine has its rays,  
before you run out of time,  
enjoy all of your days.”

“Smile just to smile, to show people that you can,  
hold it for a while, to know you are again a man,  
love those who need it the most, I beg and I plead it,  
open you heart to those around you, you never know who needs it.”

**Reflection:**

The hardest part about this portfolio was truly finding the words to appropriately convey my message. It was important to me to express how my life's events have shaped the man that I am today but it was also important to me that I did so in a way that would make my family proud. After all, they are the characters in this work, but what was written was not thought up while sitting in a library, it was experienced while maturing and developing. Not being a person who is great with verbal expression of emotion, I found it somewhat uplifting to be able to express my feelings from all those years by writing some of them down. It should be kept in mind, however, that the work as a whole is not complete. There were many moments in my life that were unbelievably impactful, but these events worked well together to convey the message I hope readers will perceive from it.

After completing this work, one of many works that may happen as I continue to press on in my life, I feel that there will be more moments that define who I am. Modeling this piece after *The Color of Water* by James McBride, I used this as a way of appropriately expressing my process of dealing with my life's events. I admit, it is somewhat frightening, knowing I will face turbulent times in years to come, it is also uplifting knowing that I will be able to experience all that life has to offer and that, like the loss of my grandmother or my experiences in a trailer in New Hampshire, I will be fine. Working on this piece I have come to realize that no matter how difficult things may be, there is always a brighter tomorrow.

I have a newfound appreciation of personal narratives and works of storytelling after doing some research for this piece. It seems that the way that I have tried to come to terms with my journey is similar to how some other people have come to terms with their journey. Even having written this piece it seems that turning to writing and reading as an outlet seems like

something that I did not previously turn to now permits me to express myself in ways that I previously could not. I began this work with the intention of writing three individual stories, but have begun to shape a larger work that acts as an interconnected experiences of life's events. After all, self-discovery is only possible when all is considered, the good and the bad, light and the dark. It seems to me, and hopefully to anyone that reads this work, that as the work progresses it makes more sense, sort of how the longer someone has to process something the more it makes sense.