

AColyte

May 8, 2020

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College

From Wynne Chapel to



the Valley of the Shadow of Death

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

New York City
April 30, 2020

Hey John. I feel ridiculous sending this message but your name came to my mind when I tried to figure out who to talk to.

I just woke from terrible dreams related to the work I've been doing. I work for an ICU floor and though the needs of the floor have shifted over the past two months, and we have actually had some beautiful success stories, there has been so much death and my days are filled with hard conversations as I walk through moments of grief with families.

It's morbid but I have a list of my deceased patients just so I can quickly look up their information when I get calls about them. It's meaningful work that has been a privilege to do, and I don't intend to stop helping, but I am realizing I can't pretend the information isn't also devastating.

I don't know how to go through this to appropriately address the agony of what's going on. I am steady for families during the day but every once in a while, like tonight through the outlet of a nightmare, the weight falls so heavy on me.

Jesse is on a night shift and was able to help me calm down some.

Not every moment is like this, either, and I usually keep my mind distracted.

But I don't know what the right way to deal with this is.

I am afraid if I avoid facing these thoughts and feelings they could tumble into PTSD or bad coping outlets.

I wanted to tell you when I'm in a moment of searching for help.

I don't always feel like talking about it but if you don't mind, please think over what I'm saying and let me know what you recommend. I messaged a pastor a similar message a month ago and all I got was a vague supportive text back.

I want to know how to deal with this because I am afraid of dealing with this alone.

I hope you and your family are well. Thanks for popping in my mind. I feel like I can get some sleep now 😊

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***AT THE END OF EVERY HARD-EARNED DAY
PEOPLE FIND SOME REASON TO BELIEVE.
-BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN***

Libby,
It means a lot that you contacted me.

Sorry for taking so long to respond. You deserve a thoughtful answer.

I have 5 pieces of advice:

Go deep.
Go wide.
Go back.
Go away.
Go on.

Here's what I mean:

GO DEEP

Embrace your nightmares.

Think about where they come from. They are a part of you.

Though I am no psychologist, it seems likely to me that your nightmares are your subconscious mind processing the terrors and tragedies you have witnessed. Vulnerable people are counting on you and you can't pause and deal with all the pain and excruciating details of every situation that you are involved in.

You are profoundly gifted and abundantly competent.

But you are also exceptionally compassionate. I think your nightmares arise from the fact that—even though you can't stop and fully process the pain and grief of every situation—you can't completely ignore that pain and grief either.

Maybe you can work towards accepting and even embracing your nightmares.

Don't fight them. See if you can learn to live with them.

GO WIDE

Look for vocabulary and categories to help make meaning in your current circumstance.

For me (and I suspect for you and Jesse) those categories and vocabulary are found in the Bible.

Read [Psalm 23](#)

Think about what it means to be led in paths of righteousness. You don't have to find those paths. God is leading you there.

Think about what it means to know that God is with you, even as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Think about how you might be evidence of God's presence and comfort in the lives of others as they walk through that darkest valley.

Read the [Parable of the Good Samaritan \(Luke 10:25-37\)](#)

Think of what it would be like to be that innkeeper. God or Samaritans or Jesus or ambulance drivers or somebody keeps bringing ambushed travelers to your door and saying, "Take care of this one – you'll have what you need."

And remember that your patients are not the only ambushed ones. Their families have been ambushed as well.

Read [Daniel 3:19-25](#)

Think of yourself as that fourth figure in the fiery furnace. That fourth character did not extinguish the fire that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were facing. But it was evidence that they didn't have to face that fire alone.

Read [Isaiah 43:1](#) ("I have called you by name, you are mine") and [Isaiah 43:4](#) ("...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you").

Cherish your "morbid" list of fatalities.

Let it remind you that each of those whole people with whole names were – and still are – beloved children of God.

GO BACK

Go back to the people who have accompanied you on your journey thus far (like me).

We're all dealing with our own uncertainties and anxieties. We won't always be able to make timely or coherent responses to you, but we're here.

And we love you.

You know that.

Keep reaching out.

You are not alone.

GO AWAY

Look for ways to go to a different place in your brain.

Listen to music you liked in high school.

Put costumes on the cat and take pictures together.

Get some ice cream.

Save some for Jesse.

Try to unplug for a minute or two when you can.

GO ON

Marshall your resources.

Remember what matters most to you.

Don't resent your nightmares.

Decide to be proof of the Easter truth that – even though death is certainly real – it is not the last word.

Try to be an ember of hope in this storm.

And when that's hard or impossible (which it will certainly sometimes be) look around for other embers. They will be there.

And never ever hesitate to reach out to me.

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From the deepest part of my heart, thank you so much.

I'm going to keep your words with me and that was exactly what I needed.

I've been hiding out from my feelings the past few days but I just had the best cry and laugh going through your words and flipping through my old reliable Bible scribbling notes and having a much-needed Bible study.

Thank you for reminding me of my identity as a child of God and for validating the witnessing I have been doing.

It gives me strength and hope to remember the presence of God beside/behind/above/beneath/within me (nod to Blair Monie's benediction) and the importance of showing up for people when they need someone beside them.

{**Blair Monie** was the pastor of Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church in Dallas while Libby was growing up there. He was a good guy.--ED}

Jesse is on his last night shift of the week and I am actually working 11 pm to 7 am in the emergency department since they needed extra help this weekend.

It's my first emergency shift so I was nervous all weekend.

But I feel emboldened and ready to take it on now. Your message came in perfect timing.

Jesse volunteered to be reassigned to work with adult COVID patients and is finishing his first round, but he signed up to do another two weeks because they sorely needed volunteers.

I am so proud of him.

We are staying in and doing our best to be safe.

Thank you so so much for your message.

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Also, on a more fun note, my sister sent me a coupon for \$50 off Uber Eats so we bought 5 pints of Van Leeuwen ice cream (like Blue Bell in New York).

I have been saving some for Jesse and laughed a lot when you texted that.

My 3 cats have been wonderful as always.

I have been watching "Gilmore Girls" (college favorite show) and "Moonlighting" (middle/high school favorite show) and recently going through photos and old playlists with Jesse from the past 8.5 years together.

I am a non-box-cheating jigsaw puzzler as well.

I have had almost weekly Skype Hangouts with Christine, Sally Kate, and Kalli (my former roommate).

It's a good time to get reoriented with our lives and values.

I also have a much more robust social life in some ways now that I can attend virtual church on Sundays while working and people are interested in skyping more.

I'll share your messages with Jesse too - I know he would love it.

We miss you and send love to you, Linnea, Emily, and Joseph!

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After I sent her the first draft of this *AColyte*, Libby sent the following response:

I initially didn't want my name on the story because I've been lying low, really low, out of a new bizarre habit of feeling so insignificant, afraid of openly facing my vulnerability, and being enormously self-conscious and afraid of criticism.

Maybe it's part of the feeling of exile from the things I thought made me "me", going from a very comfortable community in Sherman, to feeling like Moses in the desert in Lubbock, and then going far, far away from Texas to New York City where life is easier when you blend into the crowd, where I haven't found a church because I work every Sunday, and where it took me 4 agonizing months to find a job.

It's a really hard job, without much time to process or to reflect with others on the wins or mourn or the losses.

However -- I reflected on why I was feeling insecure and I remembered you know the "me" in me so well - better than I might know myself recently.

I've been so distracted by trying to hold back my spirit.

If my experiences and vulnerability and the wonderful advice you gave can help someone else--that matters so much.

That a person could find meaning in my story means everything and brings a big "yes, things are going to be okay" feeling into my bones.

The faith and support for me in your compassionate response reminds and requires me to be confident.

It reminds me to be honest and graceful to myself and to sit with both grief and hope.

You remind me that these experiences do matter, that I can find affirmation and uncover resilience.

Thank you for validating my feelings and for showing me that even the moment of feeling completely afraid and overwhelmed in the middle of the night can be used by God to bring so much meaning.

*Sincerely,
Libby*

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***BUT THE REAL TRICK
IS TO FIND A REASON TO BELIEVE
IN SPITE OF ALL OF THIS.***

-RAY WYLIE HUBBARD

Don't get me wrong, I definitely like it when Libby says such nice things to me about me.

But this is not about me.
It's about Austin College.
It's about our culture and our values.
It's about all of us.

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Libby Wise and **Jesse Janes** graduated from Austin College in May 2015.

I married them in Wynne Chapel in June 2016.

The conversation quoted above is included here with their permission.

Libby and Jesse moved to Lubbock after they graduated, where Jesse began studying at Texas Tech Medical School and Libby completed a Masters in Social Work.

Last Fall, they moved to New York City.

Jesse is currently in a pediatric residency program at the NYU Langone Medical Center. Libby is a Social Worker at the same hospital.

Wow.

What they got was sure not what they expected.

But I feel better knowing they *are* where they are, *doing* what they're doing.



They are amazing.

And they're not the only ones.

Austin College alumni (and students) have stepped up to serve in a fantastic variety of ways – both in and beyond the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

I know a lot of their stories.

And I have no doubt that there are many more that I don't know.

That's just who they (we) are.

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Austin College is where we all learn to **GO DEEP** as we discover the physical, psychological, social, political, moral, intellectual, and spiritual truth about ourselves.

It's where we learn to **GO WIDE** as we recognize and locate our own stories in the context of larger narratives that give us the moral vocabulary to think and talk about which things matter more than other things.

It's where we learn to **GO BACK** – not to some fondly but inaccurately remembered bygone era when things seemed simpler – but consistently back to the values and principles that have governed the life of this institution throughout its history (personal growth, justice, service, community, academic excellence, intellectual and personal integrity, and community life); and to the values and commitments on which we base our individual lives.

Austin College is where we learn to **GO AWAY**, intellectually and sometimes physically, to places beyond where we were when we got here – places where we encounter people and perspectives, ideas and insights that were previously unfamiliar to us.

And – around this time every year – a new batch of graduates join thousands of fellow alumni as, figuratively, they stand shoulder to shoulder, turn to face out from this campus, and **GO ON** to spend their lives sharing their gifts and serving and transforming this hurting, fascinating, frustrating, complicated, beautiful, sometimes brutal world.

This is real.

It's definitely good news for all of us that Libby and Jesse *are* where they are, *doing* what they're doing.

And it's also good news for all of us that other Austin College alumni and current students are where they are, doing what they're doing.

My whole career essentially involves standing in rooms full of Austin College people and saying, "I'm with them."

What a great gig!

Until next time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Still Practicing Social Distancing from Libby's Cats,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain