Last Rites

Holy God, Holy and Mighty,
Holy and merciful Savior,
deliver us not into the bitterness of eternal death.
—"The Burial of the Dead," Rite Two,
The Book of Common Prayer

Five years ago, in the summer of 2000, after I'd had another gut-wrenching argument with my wife, I found myself standing on a traffic island at the intersection of St. Francis and W. Manhattan in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I was looking away to the north, because St. Francis is also the route of US 285 through Santa Fe, and I was hoping a heavily loaded semi might come into town and hit the lights just exactly right.

Here's what I meant that afternoon by "exactly right": a truck that managed to miss all the red lights coming into town might be going a good 45 or 50 mph when it reached me, and if I stepped into the road in front of it, there was a pretty good chance that I would get squashed like a bug.

In the summer of 2004, I drove back to that intersection, turned left down Manhattan toward the house where my family and I lived that previous awful summer, and I discovered that there is actually an adobe-walled church, Westminster

Presbyterian, right there at the corner where I almost took my life.

When I saw that church, I had a sudden flash of memory: how I had passed the church on that afternoon, weeping so hard that I was weaving like a drunk down the middle of the street.

Seeing the church reminded me that I had paused there for a moment when I saw a large sign that says "Peace," which is what I lacked more than anything in those days, and I had laughed at the irony, hard, although it was not a sound you would have wanted to hear.

Then I stood in the street in front of the church and spoke a challenge to God as I prepared to walk to my death that dark afternoon: "You can't help me. And you can't stop me."

I was so confident in my own ability to decide at least that much of my fate, so secure in my lack of faith, that it was only very recently that I understood the truth: God both stopped me—and saved me.

How that happened, how I was transformed into a person who not only can't imagine trying to step in front of a speeding truck but has become instead someone who wants to try to save other people—well, that is the story I have to tell, and although, like many stories, it could go back to my birth—or before it—I want to start five years ago, in that dreadful year of 2000.

It was in 2000 that I first started thinking seriously about killing myself.

By "thinking," I don't mean the idle sort of speculation we do sometimes when we are feeling sorry for ourselves in a maudlin moment: Oh, woe is me, better that I had never been born. And I don't mean the Tom-Sawyer-crashing-his-own-funeral adolescent vision of weeping mourners who would see how much they missed me: Oh, don't they wish they'd treated me nicer when I was around.

No, what I mean is that in the winter and spring of 2000, I started thinking seriously about just exactly how I could cause myself to die.

I had suffered from serious chronic depression for many years, since long before I knew what it was called, in fact. Since my adolescence I had accustomed myself to the idea that the ways of this life were stale, weary, and unprofitable. Even though I had a beautiful wife, two sons I loved beyond reason, tenure at a fine university, and that very summer I finished what would be my first published novel, I couldn't see much of a point to life.

Actually, for a good fifteen years I hadn't much cared if I lived or died. There was, in fact, a certain freedom to that, to seeing that when the plane started to buck like a bronco I was the only one who didn't freak, to knowing I would gladly run into a burning house to try and save someone because I didn't care about the consequences.

I had been perfectly content to die, if it happened. But it was in 2000 that my serotonin-starved brain, my nightly insomnia, my dissolving marriage, my overwhelming guilt, and my feeble faith sat down, took a meeting, and came to this conclusion:

It would be better to be dead, maybe even right now, than to go on living like this.

You have probably heard that suicide is a cry for help, and maybe, sometimes, with some people, that might be true. It's more true with fumbling attempts, of course—the person who expects to be caught, the person who leaves clues, or doors open. I'll grant that those people are dramatically announcing something to somebody. But people who have actually decided to step off are doing something else entirely, something that people who have never suffered from Big D Depression can scarcely fathom. They've reached one or more of the same decisions that I reached that year: that life was too painful, that I was unworthy to live, that there was no hope.

As I walked down the street in Santa Fe that afternoon, you may be sure I wasn't crying for help. I was crying because I believed that death was my best option, and you may also be sure that this is a pretty horrible thing to feel.

Ah, but what kind of death? Suicide is a tricky thing, especially if you're genetically encoded to be a responsible person. I knew that I would have to die in such a way that my wife and my boys would still get my life insurance, and I studied my policy carefully before I discovered the good news. After a lengthy break-in period—to discourage those opportunistic suiciders, I guess—I could kill myself pretty much any old way and my family could still live happily ever after.

That was also good news because, frankly, a lot of the less obvious ways I had been thinking about seemed less than foolproof. For example, earlier in 2000, after one particularly virulent late-night argument with my wife in front of our horrified son Chandler—all of our arguments seemed to be in front of Chandler, sadly—I had taken our car out onto Interstate 35, which is the major north-south artery in Texas, sped up to about 85, and scoped out the bridge abutment I'd rammed some characters into in one of my novels.

In *Cycling* I killed them dead as dead, but in real life, I thought there were too many variables. Sure, I could be going like a rocket, we were talking unyielding concrete, but what if I lived? Then I'd be disabled *and* depressed, and probably unable to control my own fate ever again. What if, as a result of the crash, I lost those few things that made life tolerable? Now that would be hell, if there is such a thing.

No, the best solution was a handgun. They're expressly designed to kill people, and on the afternoon that my wife and I had argued in Santa Fe, I had actually gone down to the basement and torn through the closets of the house we were sitting,

hoping to discover the heavy cold steel of a Smith and Wesson in some box way up high.

If I'd found one, I would have shot myself. Right then. Right there. I was ready to die at that moment, and the fact that the people who owned the house were pacifist granola people like ourselves was the first gift God provided. In those first moments when I was so emotionally overwhelmed that I would definitely have stepped into any abyss, there was no conveniently located abyss to be found.

That's what sent me out the door and down the street, what had me talking to God as I approached the intersection. You might be wondering why I had taken the time to talk to God on my way to death; we don't traditionally associate belief in God with such despair. And let's get this straight: I did believe in God. I was raised in the church. I had had a so-called conversion experience when I was a kid. Immediately before we had come to Santa Fe, I had even taught Sunday school, assisted with baptism, and occasionally sung in the choir of a church whose members loved me and cared about me.

So I had some sense at the back of my raging brain that what I wanted to do was not okay with the universe. But I had also had some bad experiences with God—or rather, let's say, with God's posse—and although it's true that I had been a guest in God's house from time to time, we were not exactly close. I still got the occasional e-mail—a burst of sunlight through dark clouds, or the kind of revelation of grace through literature, music, or movies that Walker Percy described as "a message in a bottle." But we were like Facebook friends who never do a face-to-face, or, maybe, I was like one of those people who sits at the receiving end of a one-sided correspondence, glances at the message, and never responds. Eventually the other person seems to stop sending, and if you are as dense as I am, you may even wonder why.

But more likely, if you're like me, you get so caught up in the white noise of life that you never even notice the silence.

That I stopped and talked to God for a moment on my way to death is not, then, unaccountable. People have always wanted to make their peace, get something off their chests, or state their case. In Catholic traditions, there is a ceremony commonly called "last rites," or sometimes "extreme unction." For Catholics, it's a sacramental sending off, one last chance to make things right with God before you step off into the unknown. For me, that moment of stopping in the middle of Manhattan Avenue was my last acknowledgment that there was a God—and my final rejection of any comfort that God had to offer.

It seemed to me that God hadn't been much help to me in my unhappy life, and so my final message to God might have been one of rejection, me talking back to a computer screen. I can't help but shake my head now in rueful amusement when I realize that I might have died without ever knowing that if I'd so much as put the tips of my fingers to the keyboard to e-mail God back, I would have found a message from God saying, "Let's go have coffee."

You know that I'm writing these words, so obviously I didn't die that day in Santa Fe. And I didn't die after my wife left me, when I counted up my sleeping pills and thought about taking them all, and I didn't die the following fall when I called up my best friend Chris after I'd caused a drunken scene at my former wife's birthday party and told him I felt like I was about to do something bad to myself.

I didn't die any of those times. But I came very close, and especially so on that afternoon in Santa Fe.

I can't tell you how long I stood out there on the median on that day—it could have been a minute, it could have been ten. The thoughts and images were flashing through my brain like it was a Cray super-processor.

And I can't tell you what I must have looked like to people driving by, although I can imagine: a grown man, weeping so hard that he's bent almost double, watching the road to the north with a desperate expression on his face.

But I can tell you why I didn't do it, and it doesn't have to do with any of the rational reasons that flashed through my head. I didn't care that it would leave my sons bereft and desolate; I honestly thought they would be better off without a father like me. I didn't care what my family would think—even though they had just left earlier that day after an extended visit—or what my colleagues would think, or what kind of message this would send to my students.

When you're in agony, none of that matters.

Ultimately, I didn't kill myself on that afternoon because in that last moment, the lens of empathy, God's gift to my writing, put me in the heads of the two people who would be most directly affected by my wish to die.

I imagined how my wife would feel when she got the news, how she would blame herself, how it would break her. And crazy as I might have been, cruel as I might have been, I was never petty, and I had never stopped loving her. I couldn't do that to her.

And I also imagined the poor truck driver, his trailer heavy with tall pine trees from the Sangre de Cristos, so heavy that he'd have no chance at all to stop if some idiot stepped off the curb in front of him.

I could imagine my brakes squealing. I could feel the thump. I could imagine what it would be like to know that I had rolled over somebody, run him down without meaning to, certainly, but all the same he would be dead as yesterday's news, and I would remember that every time I climbed up into the cab to do my job.

I stood there for a long time.

I was ready and willing to die.

But I didn't want to hurt anybody else in the doing of it.

And so, finally, after two minutes, or ten, however long it was, I walked back across St. Francis and back down Manhattan in the direction of my house.

I was still sobbing, and this may be the saddest thing of all: I was bereft because I really wanted to die and saw now that I could not. At that moment, as paradoxical as it seems, it seemed like my only hope was passing out of my hands.

That I didn't die that day was a blessing, for me, perhaps for others. That, at least, is my hope. And the reasons that I didn't step off may have seemed purely personal, but I can see now that they were also spiritual. Although I tried to make God sit this dance out, clearly, as Jules says in *Pulp Fiction*, "God got involved."

Although I didn't yet understand it, I had been saved for something.

In the summer of 2001, I began attending a multicultural Episcopal church in Austin, Texas, which is where my wife, my son, and I landed after we left Santa Fe in August of 2000. My wife and I split up shortly after we arrived in Austin, and the first two years there were the worst of my life. Much of my understanding about how and why I survived has come through my contact with the people of St. James' parish, with the rector, Greg Rickel, and with the Episcopal way of seeing the world as charged with the glory of God. This sacramental vision is at the heart of all I believe now; it has finally helped me make some sense out of those unaccountable e-mails from God, helped me see how God might make something straight out of all the crooked paths I've trudged.

We believe that the sacraments are signs of God's grace moving in the world, what the Book of Common Prayer calls "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace."[1]

1. *Prayer Book and Hymnal* (New York: Church Publishing, 1986), 857.

Protestants and Catholics disagree on exactly what the sacraments are, or how many—most low church traditions (I grew up a Southern Baptist, and my family has Assembly of God and Methodist roots, so low church is my heritage) say there are only two, baptism and marriage. Catholic, Orthodox, and the Anglican/Episcopal traditions typically respond there are seven formal sacraments. But however many there are, and whether they are formal or informal, sacraments are things of the greatest power.

I can tell you from experience: They can save your life.

Frank Griswold, the past presiding bishop of The Episcopal Church, explained the power of sacraments in this way:

> In Hebrew, "word" carries with it notions of occurrence as well as speech. Words therefore happen; they take place. The sacraments and sacramental rites are therefore enacted words whose force and power once again derive from the risen One. "You have revealed yourself to me, O Christ, face to face. I have met you in your sacraments." These bold words of St. Ambrose underscore the formative and developmental effect of our sacramental participation in season and out of season, and at the different turnings of our lives.[2]

In season and out of season, in joy and in weeping, sacraments can give us a tangible connection to God, can create pathways for God to speak to us, can help us believe that God is really there.

I know all this because the sacraments are how God convinced me that there was a life worth living. It was through the sacraments that God at last turned my grief and despair into joy, at last brought me into communion with God and with

2. Accessed at http://archive.episcopalchurch.org/pb25_1312_ENG_HTM.htm.

other people seeking him. If I had only understood then the sacrament we Episcopalians call "unction," which involves a priest's anointing the afflicted with oil, I would have understood that I wasn't alone, that, in fact, I was never—and will never be—alone.

Greg, my rector, tells me that the oil for unction is blessed every year by the bishop at a ceremony where the priests reaffirm their ordination vows. "The oil," he says, "is blessed, put in vials, and sent out with the priests to be used throughout the year. The oil placed on the head of those being baptized or in unction is an outward sign of their connection at that moment to the greater Church, the Body of Christ. In a sense, the Church is there, as God is there."

I didn't believe that then; I know better now.

So the story I have to tell you is a sacramental one, and if I write it well, it too will be made up of words with power behind them. It too will be lined with grace. And in its simplest outline, it will be like that simple story Jesus told about the Prodigal Son: I was dead, and now I live; I was lost, and now am found.

I was blind, and now I begin, at last, to see.