From an Acorn to an Oak Tree:
A Reflection of Spiritual Growth

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"What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you. Not only your experiences, but all we have done, whatever great thoughts we may have had, and all we have suffered, all this is not lost, though it is past, we have brought it into being."

V. Frankl

This insight of the talented psychiatrist, Victor Frankl provides reason to reflect on the episodes of one's life. While it is true that some modern thinkers view dwelling on past occurrences as fruitless and unprofitable, Frankl gives sound reasoning for such reflection. As a Nazi death camp survivor, he views all of life's experiences, including its accomplishments, thoughts, and even suffering as valuable to the human soul. He provides an explanation of the significance of these life experiences in his book, Man's Search For Meaning. Just as Frankl recognized the importance of our past experiences to the overall meaning of life, I too have discovered the significance of my personal experiences in shaping my life and giving it meaning.

Throughout my lifetime, a variety of events have influenced my growth. The college years especially have been heavily saturated with new experiences and unusual situations which in turn have borne weight on my life. With Frankl's quote in mind, I would like to focus on the self-growth I have experienced during my college years. Using favorite quotes, lyrics, and scripture I will
illustrate my personal growth and its importance to me. I have chosen the selections I will focus upon for special reasons. Not only are they an aid to express my thoughts or a portrayal of distinct situations I have been in, but these selections also represent the changes in me during my cherished college years. I will begin my discussion with an extended metaphor from E. F. Schumacher's *A Guide for the Perplexed*.

E. F. Schumacher discussed man's choices for existence by use of an acorn metaphor. He explained that a human being could be content to be either a fat, shiny acorn on the ground, or a strong oak tree with branches stretching toward heaven (135). In reflection, I see myself in pre-college days striving to be a fat, shiny acorn on the ground. This is not to say that I lacked ambition or was content with mediocrity. I only mean that because of my limited world vision and lack of experiences, the conditions of fat and shiny in my innocent acornness seemed perfectly blissful. As an acorn, I wanted to be the fattest and the shiniest because such conditions seemed prestigious to me in my little acorn environment. Not until my first autumn in college did I realize that my purpose in life was to be served on a higher level. Gradually, and often unconsciously, my acornness was abandoned as my journey of self-growth began.

My journey is significant in that I grew in many ways: intellectually, culturally, and physically. But during this formative time, such growth is expected and even required. An area often overlooked or under-emphasized, however, is spiritual growth.
Looking back, I see spiritual growth as the most intriguing and exciting aspect of my life up to this point. The events spurring my spiritual growth and the ensuing consequences I hold dear to my soul. For this reason, I will focus my attention on spiritual growth and enrichment as it has influenced my life through three areas: athletics, friends, and family.

The definition of "spiritual" which I will use refers to the qualities which are above and beyond the sensible world. To me, my spiritual growth is an awareness in my soul of a higher power. The strengthening of this awareness during my college years has in turn changed my attitudes toward life, altered my values, and re-designed my hopes for the future. This major change will best be illustrated through the three areas of my life which lent the most meaning to me during college--athletics, friends, and family. I will begin with athletics because it is through athletics that I arrived on Ball State's campus in the first place.

ATHLETICS

Through God's gift of long, lean legs and my parent's examples of hard work and dedication, I arrived on the Ball State campus riding on a track and field scholarship. By no means was I a state champion. I was simply a gangly hurdler from a small school, earning my keep with swift feet, scared heart, and a superfluous amount of knee bruises and sore shins. I knew that small fish in small ponds could make BIG waves. I also knew that small fish in big ponds drown if they forget how to swim. Realistically
evaluating my athletic skills and comparing myself to the other
team members, I discovered that my days in the small pond were over
and that it was time to swim with the big fish.

My first year of college athletics was rough. Again and
again I found that the skills I learned in high school with which
I made big waves in my small pond were no longer sufficient.
Through hours of practice, numerous bags of ice, and several pairs
of bloody socks, I questioned my abilities. I knew that I was
good. I wouldn't be in college athletics if I were not talented.
But why, why was my once easy sport now so difficult? The answer
came as I stumbled through my Bible one evening:

Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the
way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who
enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way
is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are
few (Matt. 7:13-14).

These verses seemed to explain my situation completely. Yes,
I could see the gate was narrow; at times passage seemed
impossible. But if I passed through, I would be on my way to
something wonderful. Reading this passage gave some meaning to my
hard work and frustration. It would be very easy to choose the
wide gate and avoid the blood, sweat, and tears. This easy method
would take away the value of my work. While contemplating this
Bible verse, my eyes focused on another verse. The words were
neatly underlined in my Bible, and I likewise could envision their
stately message beneath a resplendent stained-glass window in my
church. The window showed Christ in a radiant purple robe and humble leather sandals, knocking upon a closed door. The message read: "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7). These words had fallen upon my ears many times, but I had never before heard them. They seemed to provide direction, urging me to humble myself and ask for what I needed. Confident that my prayers would be answered, I turned to prayer with a new-sprung faith. Years of Sunday school taught me that praying for a new bike was by no means assurance of receiving a new bike. Likewise, I now realized that praying for easier work-outs and fewer bruises wouldn't end my problem. I asked God for strength to handle my new and difficult situation. I sought a means of relieving my frustration. I was not surprised that the door to strength was opened. I was only amazed at how easily I could push it aside and step inside.

This experience did not completely turn my track career around. Many obstacles and stressors awaited me. The point is that my attitude changed. The problems I encountered were easier to face. This reversal is reflected in Frankl's words: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, . . . we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl 166). With God's help, a candle of strength was lit in my murky frame of mind. I saw my situation from a new and brighter perspective. With my improved vision I was able to tackle the obstacles in my path with renewed tenacity. As a result, I grew to really love track. Participation in the physical and mental challenges of the sport taught me discipline.
My body developed into a smoothly functioning machine, finely tuned and quite dependable. Respect and self-acceptance now came easily to me. In turn, I cultivated respect and acceptance for the members of the team and learned to appreciate each person's unique character and ability.

As a result, the experiences I've had and the people I've met will live on in my track memories. Through participation in track, feelings of joy, pain, harmony, and pride have been generated at levels I have never before experienced. My self-growth would probably have never taken place if I had not allowed myself to be challenged by these experiences.

Some of the memories are ridiculous, others very meaningful, but all contribute in some way to my growth. I remember dancing with two other pajama-clad teammates to our favorite rock video in a Bloomington motel very late at night after a track meet at Indiana University. I remember falling down in the final heat of the 100 meter hurdles at the Mid-American Conference Meet in 1989 and being unable to finish the race. I remember my friend and Coach telling me that she was resigning from her position and would no longer be with the team. I remember the look on my mother's face when I cleared the five foot, six inch mark during high jump competition at Purdue University; that mark was my best jump ever. There are many more memories, much like these. All have a special place in my soul.

For example, I will always remember the van ride to my very first collegiate track meet. It was cold and late at night as
Coach Wagner navigated a load of tired tracksters to a motel outside of Columbus, Ohio. Although I practiced with that vanload of ladies daily, I didn't really know them. Running laps together or lifting weights is not as personal as four hours on a Friday night in a Chevy van. I'm not sure who started singing, but before long the stillness of the black night was broken by our voices joined in chorus. The strains of "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore" and "Amazing Grace" filled the van and united each of our unique personalities in a special way. Although no words were exchanged between us, we each grew to know one another better. Perhaps it was the black night that cast its spell and drew us into a magical bond of song. Perhaps it was the words of those time-honored hymns that joined our weary souls. I think it was a little of both that opened our hearts and mouths and linked us in the harmony of friendship and song.

Another memory that I hold dear is the 1988 Mid-American Conference Meet at Central Michigan University. Much to my surprise, I had earned a spot in the final heat of the 400 meter hurdles. I was a freshman and I was scared out of my running shoes! I had not expected to advance this far in the competition. Because there were only eight hurdlers left, I could place dead last and still earn a point for the team. As the starter raised the gun, I pressed my quivering feet against my starting blocks. My heart exploded in my chest as the gun fired. Suddenly eight pairs of feet were tearing around the curve and consuming the hurdles placed in their path. It was all I could do to maintain
the pace set by these aggressive runners. I felt myself losing ground. My mind rationalized, "You've done good to get this far-- These girls are faster and older--Just do your best--Try to finish!" It was tempting to give in to my aching thighs and burning lungs. Then, out of the backstretch came two familiar voices. The sounds filled my ears and blocked out my own defeating thoughts. My friends, Cecil Franke and John Harmeyer from the Ball State men's team were pulling and pushing me into the final turns: "Let's go Lueking! Don't give in! Go after 'em!" As their words reached my ears, my pace quickened. I attacked the curve fiercely and blazed over the hurdles. Cecil and John's encouragement spurred me to give it my best shot. When the watches were stopped, I had recorded my best time of the season. Fourth place was mine. Cecil and John greeted me with smiles, high fives, and a pat on the back. I remembered some encouraging words that Coach Wagner had given the team earlier, "Success is never final or ever fatal, it is the courage to keep on keeping on that counts."

These experiences, expressed in bits and pieces, are what I will take with me when I pack my traveling bag after the last track meet. My worn spikes, my black track jacket, medals, tee-shirts, and pages of statistics will never mean as much as the memories of the days when I was a small fish making big waves.

FRIENDS

My self-growth is also manifested through the friendships I've created. A wise man once said that it is extremely rare to live
your life and find one good friend. I feel very fortunate that I have two. Quite coincidentally I met my two favorite people while pursuing track, my favorite activity. I sense an interesting correlation here and attribute it to a higher power. At this point in my life, I will not question it but will gratefully accept it and appreciate the two very special gifts I have been given.

Jody and I first met in Austria in 1986. We had been selected as high school representatives of the United States to compete in a track meet by the International Sports Exchange. I was very surprised to meet her again in 1987 at Ball State's freshmen orientation sessions. We recognized each other immediately and joined together in an attempt to tackle our career at Ball State University.

Because we were both track athletes, we spent a lot of time together. Our personalities complemented one another beautifully, and we embarked on our track career as a two-woman team. Jody practically taught me everything about weight lifting, a new concept to this small town athlete. I helped Jody with her homework at athletic study tables. On road trips to meets we often persuaded the coaches to let us room together. This combination proved to be volatile. Jody and I were early risers and loud gigglers. Our private jokes and abundant sense of humor provided us with our own entertainment.

As the years passed, we grew closer. Not only did we share track as a common bond, but also academics. We were both Exercise Science majors and we arranged our classes to coincide. Together
we attacked our course work and pushed and pulled one another down the dark tunnel of knowledge toward the light of wisdom. We joked that because we had worked so hard together as undergraduates, that we would need to find jobs together in the professional world. To be honest, this statement was surprisingly true for me. I had grown to appreciate her insight, depend on her clear, rational judgement and treasure her honesty and candor. I wondered if I could face the real world without her. Jody and I have shared so much together that it is difficult for me to face the fact that each of us will soon go our separate ways. I'm sure we will keep in touch, but phone calls, letters, and brief visits cannot express effectively my caring for her.

If I were to paint pictures of all my endeavors and accomplishments over these four years, Jody's face would appear in each picture. Sometimes she would be in front, often off to the side, hidden but very much there, and most of all she would be behind. She was behind me giving. Giving advice, giving hugs, giving laughter, giving gifts, giving answers, giving herself. I have yet to ask her for anything which she could not give me or would not get for me somehow. I often never have to ask; admirably she gives what I need anyway.

I could begin a list of all the wonderful moments Jody and I have shared. But the list would be too lengthy and it would never be complete. I know that in Jody I have found a true friend. Our list of good times has only just begun. A favorite song performed by Michael W. Smith explains my thoughts better:
A friend's a friend forever/ if the Lord's the Lord of them/ and a friend will not say never/ and the welcome will not end./ Though its hard to let you go/ in the Father's eyes I know/ that a lifetime's not too long/ to live as friends.

My other very special friend is Tim. I met him at Ball State's freshmen orientation sessions. He asked me to dance at a mixer and we spent the rest of the evening telling jokes, discussing our high school athletic careers and comparing our favorite country music artists. When school started in the fall, I was delighted to receive a phone call from this interesting young man. I readily accepted a date with him. I was attracted to Tim's handsome physical features, especially his hazel eyes and long dark lashes. His quick wit, powerful means of expressing his thoughts, and his sense of individuality also impressed me. Since that first date we have become the best of friends and are rarely apart from one another.

The first time my parents met Tim was an interesting situation. I was competing at an indoor track meet at Ball State, and my parents had come to watch. Tim arrived looking impressive in western boots, jeans, and a hand-knitted sweater. His thick brown hair hung over the collar of his sweater and brushed the top of his shoulders. A diamond stud earring glistened in his newly pierced ear. My parents laugh today about this initial meeting. They admit that one look at the long hair and earring drove them to question their daughter's judgement and values. Since that time
they, like I, have grown to appreciate this fine young man and realize that he is very special.

Tim's most special feature is his love. He gives his love to me unconditionally. I have known him for four years and have yet to find a limit to his love. At times I am amazed at his ability to see through all my pretensions, set aside my pride and stubbornness and uncover the real me.

He loves me constantly and without faltering. He loves me when I'm dressed in my best outfit, glistening with jewelry and carefully applied make-up, smelling sweetly of his favorite cologne. He loves me when I'm dressed in ragged shorts and faded sweatshirt, knees and hands black from practicing with my starting blocks at the track and smelling strongly of perspiration. He loves me when I'm happy, angry, silly, selfish, frustrated, sad and all the times in between. He is ever ready to set aside his own troubles and focus his attention on me. With Tim's love my college career has provided the most memorable and enriching years of my life. His absolute love has been a blessing to me.

Tim expresses his love for me in many ways and on many occasions. I remember when we frolicked in the fresh white snow in the quad on a moonlit night when our relationship was brand new, and he loved me. We played volleyball with my family in the summer and Tim missed hitting the ball completely and fell on his back in the green grass. I laughed hilariously at him, but he loved me. I ran to meet him in his architecture studio to tell him proudly that I had been selected Track Team Captain. He gave me a hug, and
he loved me. I was frantic and I called him late on a Friday night to tell him my two week-old nephew was rushed to Riley Children’s Hospital for heart surgery. Within minutes he was on his way to meet me, and he loved me.

Through the best of times and the worst of times, Tim has loved me. Witnessing such unselfish love has given me the strength to love myself and to truly love him. He has given me many beautiful material gifts such as jewelry and clothes. He has given me precious memories of our many days together. But the most glorious gift he has given me is his love. In giving of himself in this way, he has taught me to love. I cannot imagine a means of repaying him for this gift. The only way I have of saying thank you is to love him right back with all of my soul. The group Restless Heart has captured in a beautiful love song the feelings I have for Tim. The word seem to say exactly what I feel:

Changing my life with your love
has been so easy for you
and I'm amazed everyday and I'll need you
'til all the mountains are valleys
'til every ocean is dry.
I'll be yours until the sun doesn't shine
'til time stands still, until the winds don't blow.
When today is just a memory to me I know,
I'll still be loving you.
FAMILY

For many years I have believed that my family is the best family any small town girl could have. Over the years this statement has proven true. Through their love they have enabled me to grow into the person I am today. I am proud of myself and I am proud of my family. I thank my mom, dad, grandma, and sisters Mia and Kami for their wonderful contribution to my life.

When I lived at home with my family, I took their love for granted. When I moved away to college, I realized how important my family was. Simple pleasures like eating meals together, attending church, or hearing my dad say, "Keep your nose clean!" when I went out suddenly held more meaning for me. I missed my family and all the togetherness we had shared. I realized that if I were to be happy when my family was far away, I would have to make myself happy. I would have to take responsibility for my own actions, handle my financial matters independently, and make decisions about my lifestyle and my future. If I were to survive and be happy, I would need to grow up.

While growing up is necessary and desirable as one adds years to her life, it can also be a very apprehensive and intimidating affair. I really wanted to be mature and responsible. I wanted to prove to my family that I could take care of myself. At the same time, I wished my mom was around to help me with my laundry. I wished my dad was around to check my car and keep it running smoothly. When I was lonely, I even wished my sisters were around to argue with me or ask to borrow my clothes. As much as I wanted
to grow up, it seemed so much easier to remain as I was. In my heart, however, I knew that it was time for a change. I was in Muncie. My family was in Westphalia. One hundred and eighty miles separated us. If I was to grow up, I would have to do it alone.

The task of growing up so far away from my family was definitely challenging. At times, I didn't know if I would be able to handle this difficult task. When track practice was especially rough or I did poorly in my studies, I longed to be at home surrounded by caring hearts and familiar smiles. It took time, but I finally realized that although my family was far away physically, they were very near spiritually.

When I graduated from high school, my Grandma Lueking gave me a quilt made by her own loving hands. Grandma had always made clothes for us, and the quilt was constructed of bits of material left over from her many years of sewing. The quilt was a collective history of my childhood. Each scrap reminded me of a piece of clothing that Grandma had made for me. Memories of summer shorts, birthday skirts, and cheerleader jumpers were sewn into that quilt. In one corner she had stitched "AMY L." During all my years in college, this quilt covered my bed. When I lay down to sleep every night, I pulled this cozy quilt up to my chin. Although Grandma was far away, her love was wrapped around me, keeping me warm.

My sisters helped to ease the stress of college life also. My older sister Mia graduated from Indiana State University the spring before I entered Ball State, so she was well aware of the needs of
a college student. Mia wrote to me frequently to inform me of the hometown news. Because she was an elementary teacher, her letters were often jotted down on the back of extra worksheets or homework assignments. When her students were practicing writing letters, I received twenty-four letters from twenty-four third grade hands. It really made my day to read their happy messages.

In addition to letters and cards, Mia also tucked a little bit of cash into her mailings. She said extra cash always came in handy for a well deserved pizza or even laundry. I really appreciated that money. It made my student budget stretch a little farther. Occasionally, she would send gifts such as a compact of my favorite eye-shadow, a new pair of mittens, or even a book of stamps. Those little extras were just what I needed to get through the rough times and even the not so rough times. Although she was far away, she was thinking of me. That really felt good!

Kami, my younger sister was going through a growing up phase at the same time I was. When I entered Ball State, she was a sophomore in high school. Mia had just graduated from college and gotten married. Kami was left alone in the house with Mom and Dad. With her sisters gone, Kami had nobody to argue with over chores and nobody to borrow clothes from. She too had some changes to make in her life. When I returned home to visit, I was amazed to find that Kami had taken on some responsibility. She was helping Mom with meals, performing the household chores we once argued over, and even doing laundry. Likewise, she had perfected her study habits and excelled academically. She also matured into a
skilled and competent athlete. I am very proud that she was a member of the North Knox Lady Warriors Basketball team: sectional champs three years running! Also, Kami trained for the three hundred meter hurdle race in track and improved her time dramatically over the course of one season. Her determination and dedication are very impressive.

Curiously, my baby sister grew into an attractive, intelligent and responsible young lady while I was away. Now when I return home, we don't argue over chores or barter our clothes as we once did. Kami and I can actually hold a meaningful conversation. We both have grown up and have learned that sisters should be friends no matter whose turn it is to take out the trash.

My mom and dad are two very wonderful people. Although I've always thought they were special, not until college did I realize how special they really are. I feel very fortunate to be blessed with parents who love me and are able to express it so clearly.

I could begin by discussing the techniques of parenting Mom and Dad use. I could discuss how they handle money, how they assign household chores, how they discipline, what expectations they hold for me, and what responsibilities they require of me. I could discuss the ways my friends' parents raise their children and compare the pros and cons of different parenting techniques. All of that, however, seems quite useless. All I can say is that whatever my parents do and however they do it, they do it right!

At the time I was growing up, I often disagreed with their methods. At times, I thought my parents were mean, cruel, and
uncaring. Now that I am an adult, I see that they were kind, fair, and loving. I'm sure that their job as parents was not always pleasant. It was probably painful and tiring. But Mom and Pop did a great job. I have the utmost respect for these two people who have given me so much.

Not only did they give me love, but also hope and faith. I grew up loving my parents and my family. I thank my mom and dad for taking me to church, for teaching me respect for my elders, for letting me make my own mistakes, and for showing me how to love. My Grandma Shorter's favorite Bible passage illustrates my feelings about love. The words of this passage as well as their meaning are forever inscribed on my heart:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away, as for tongues, they will cease: as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (I Corinthians 13).
They may not realize it, but the little things my parents do show me how much they love me. I always look forward to the care packages my mom sends. She always knows just what I need: extra socks, M&Ms, a package of hot cocoa mix. Most importantly, she always writes a little message and signs it, "your biggest fan." When I see those words I feel warm inside, knowing that my mom is someone special and that she loves me. Likewise, my dad makes a special effort to show his love. He tries to attend as many of my track meets as possible. I find it intriguing that no matter how cold the weather, how noisy the crowd, or how much I'm concentrating on my race, I can always hear Pop's voice. His encouraging words ring through the air and make their way to my heart, "GO, AMY! Show 'em your stuff! MOVE!" The sound of his voice lets me know that he is with me and he loves me. All I can say to these two special people is, "I love you, too, Mom and Pop!"

These experiences, my track career, creating wonderful friendships, growing to love my parents, have helped me to realize that there is more to my life than being a fat and shiny acorn. The memories I've created and the people I have grown to love have shown me that I can be an oak tree. No power on earth can take away what I have learned during my years at Ball State University.

Through these four years, I've had my share of good times and bad times. Although it's easy to forget the frustrating, cloudy days and concentrate on the joyous, sunny days, I must be
realistic. Both the cloudy and the sunny days have helped me grow from an acorn to an oak tree.

This growth from an acorn on the ground to an oak tree has been a spiritual growth. Only I can know the true measure of this growth. In order for others to know, I must share my experiences, memories, and love with them. By doing so, I also acknowledge the awareness in my soul of a higher power—a power which has strengthened and guided me through my college years. This power became apparent to me through my participation in track and my relationships with my friends and family. I challenged myself with the task of competing in college athletics and maintaining high academic standards. I found a true friend in Jody and met a young man I want to spend my life with. I also realized what a special and loving family I have. As a result, I can feel the growth of my soul. I feel myself becoming an oak tree with branches stretching toward heaven.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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