

BY DAVID CRENSHAW

## In His Footsteps

*Lessons of acceptance from an older brother*

MY BROTHER BOB was three years older than I, but for as long as I can remember, he always seemed younger, and never more so than on the winter night when he awakened me in our shared bedroom. "David! David! Wake up!" he said in an excited and frightened voice as he leaned over my bed. "I killed somebody, and the body is on the front porch!" I was 11.

Outside our bedroom window, snow was falling quietly, as it had for hours. What Bob was saying to me made no sense, but he was so agitated that, for a moment, I thought in horror that it must be true. As we walked together downstairs, my heart was pounding and my fear so extreme that I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. I flipped the switch to the overhead light and scanned the snow-covered porch. No body. It was then that I knew beyond doubt that my brother was having hallucinations.

A year later, on Christmas morning in 1955, I again woke up in the predawn hours, in the middle of another snowstorm. My brother, now 15, wasn't in his bed. I woke up my parents and together we went out to the front porch. There were tracks leading off it into the snowy darkness.

After throwing on some clothes, my father jumped into the car, while I sat on the hood in my mittens and heavy parka, pointing out Bob's footprints through the heavily blowing snow. We followed his tracks all the way up to Route 169, the main highway running between St. Joseph and

Kansas City, Missouri. It was 3 a.m. Visibility was nearly zero, but there were no other cars on the road, so we were easily able to follow the trail Bob had left right down the middle of the highway.

We crawled along for another five miles until, at the bottom of a steep hill locally known as "Happy Hollow," we saw his footprints leave the road, leading behind a collection of large grain silos. There, huddled in his pajamas, with his feet bare, was my frightened and nearly frozen brother. He offered no explanation. He suffered frostbite on his feet, but otherwise survived physically. How anyone could have walked barefoot in deep blowing snow for more than five miles, I still can't understand to this day.

I didn't know exactly then what was wrong with Bob—nobody did—but we'd always sensed that something wasn't quite right. He'd been a "blue baby," suffering anoxia during birth.

While I did reasonably well in school and got along well with my friends, he struggled. Now the pressures and stresses of adolescence were driving him toward his first full-blown psychotic episode.

I still remember how hard I tried, over the next few weeks, to reason Bob out of his delusions; how badly I wanted to help him. But all of my gently reasoned talk had no impact whatsoever. I remember that he just sat on his bed in our shared room, staring past me. Among other things, he thought we were poisoning him and refused to eat. He lost a great deal of weight and finally went into a catatonic stupor. My family had no choice but to take him to the state hospital.

On that trip—the first of many over the next three decades—I rode in the backseat with Bob. My dad, who was driving, cried all the way there and all the way home. It was the only time in my life I ever saw my grandfather cry,

too—a hard, sobbing cry, just like my father's. My mother only cried a little, but I knew her heart was breaking as well. Families too often feel blamed in these situations, when they feel an overwhelming burden of guilt already.

Bob came back three months later somewhat improved. With great effort he finished high school, but he didn't get better. In fact, as the years went by, he got worse. He spent most of his adult life at home with our parents—a life punctuated by trips to the state hospital and periodic episodes of

*Continued on page 95*





## FAMILY MATTERS

Continued from page 96

running away. Over time, he experienced neurological deterioration: he developed seizures, his handwriting became unreadable, and his speech increasingly hard to understand.

Throughout those decades, as I underwent my own training as a clinical psychologist and began my career as a therapist, I did whatever I could to help. Bob realized that I was mostly ineffectual, but he did bestow on me one special power: on the occasions when he ran away from my parents' house, he made it a matter of principle to insist that I was the only one who could talk him into coming home. It made me feel that I could help him, at least in this one modest way.

One day in 1990, my brother sat down for lunch with my mother and began to cry—sobbing in an unusual, wholehearted way that he couldn't explain. That night, he died unexpectedly in his sleep. Not long afterward, my parents gave me his high school

class ring, the only worldly possession he'd acquired in his 48 years. I treasure it because I know that the courage and determination it took for Bob to finish high school far surpasses anything that I've ever exhibited. All the therapy in the world will never make it seem right to me that I could have been so privileged and he so tormented.

I keep that ring to remind me of all that Bob taught me. He taught me my first lessons in humility, lessons repeated many times since I got my license and began to sit and listen to families. Remembering that night in 1955 when my father and I inched down the snowy highway, I accept the fact that I couldn't help my brother in the way I'd have liked to—to have talked him out of his delusions and given him even a portion of my own happiness. All my father and I could do that night was follow his tracks through the snow.

In the same way, I'm not able to help every kid and family who seeks my assistance now. All I can do is to remember what Bob taught me—not to blame those who seek my help when I can't

help them. Bob didn't make much of an impression on the world outside our family. But he was a masterful teacher for me, and the lessons he taught me accompany me into every therapy session. ■

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