

The tragic bonfire accident has made an indelible mark on the life of every Aggie. Many of us are struggling with how to deal with the grief that grips us. Confusion, shock and grief are only a few of the emotions we are experiencing. We encourage you to take the next step in processing the enormous amount of grief we feel. We need hope in the midst of incredible sorrow.

In the early 1980s, Steve Sawyer, a hemophiliac, contracted the HIV virus and Hepatitis C from unscreened blood supplies. Years later, at 19 years old, knowing his death was imminent, Steve used his remaining years to travel to hundreds of college campuses to share with students what he'd learned about living with hope and peace in the midst of terrible circumstances. Like your classmates, he, too, died an unfortunate death. As we mourn the loss of our fellow Aggies, thousands of students who heard Steve would tell you that Steve's message about hope and God's love changed their lives forever.

The following is edited from a talk Steve gave at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Living with Hope No Matter What Life Throws at You

by Steve Sawyer

Off the coast of Maine, there was a Navy ship sailing in very dense fog. This night the midshipman on duty saw a light and immediately contacted his captain. "Captain there is a steady light in the distance heading straight for us, what do you want me to do?" The captain told the midshipman to flash a signal to the vessel, directing it to change its course. The vessel signaled back, "No, you change your course." Again the captain instructed the midshipman to command the on-coming vessel to change their course immediately. "Again the reply was, 'No, you change your course.'" With one last attempt, the midshipman signaled the vessel saying, "This is the Captain of a U.S. Navy battleship and you must change your course immediately." The reply was, "No, you will have to change your course. This is a lighthouse."

This story illustrates how we as humans tend to deal with pain and suffering. We always seem to want the circumstances around us to change course, rather than changing ourselves to meet the circumstances.

My life has been a perfect example of this. I was born with hemophilia, which is a blood disorder in which my bones and joints will painfully swell. Hemophilia is treated with a protein from a blood product gathered through donated blood. Well, somewhere between 1980 and 1983, one of the donors of my particular donor pool was infected with the HIV virus. As I result, all the medications I received from that particular pool, which could have been hundreds of doses, was all infected with the HIV virus. I also later received Hepatitis C in the same way.

I actually wasn't told I was HIV positive until 1990, which was my sophomore year of high school. When I was told, my initial reaction was a fairly common one when we're dealt something we can't handle. My initial reaction was just to deny that I was HIV positive, just try to pretend that it wasn't there. HIV didn't hurt, like hemophilia hurt. With hemophilia, when your joints and muscles swell it is very, very painful. And HIV had no outward symptoms. You couldn't really tell it was there, so it was very easy to just pretend it wasn't there. And actually that's the way my parents dealt with it too. They said, "You look good, you look OK, so you must be OK."

A great example of this denial is from the movie, Monty Python's *In Search of the Holy Grail*. In one scene King Arthur is trotting through the forest and comes across a knight in this beat-up, black armor. This knight is blocking his path, and King Arthur realizes that he's not going to get by unless he defeats the knight in battle. A battle ensues and King Arthur manages to sever the arm of the black knight. King Arthur sheathes his sword and begins to walk by, but the knight says, "No." And King Arthur says, "I cut off your arm." The knight looks at it and says, "No you didn't." So King Arthur looks at the ground and says, "There's your arm right there." And the knight says, "It's just a flesh wound." King Arthur realizes that he's going to have to severely maim this guy in order to get by him. So the battle continues and King Arthur severs all the limbs from the knight's body until all that is left of the knight is just a stump on the ground with a head. As King Arthur trots by and you can hear the knight in the background yelling, "Come back you coward, I'll bite your knees off."

Well, needless to say, that knight is in denial. He couldn't face the fact that he had lost the fight. And although that's a humorous example of denial, the dangers of denial are very, very real. If I had continued to deny the fact that I was HIV positive I might not have taken the right precautions with little cuts in my fingers or things like that, and I could have severely hurt, or even killed someone. But the dangers to yourself when you deny something like that are also very dangerous, and very painful. When you push something down for that long, and you try to pretend it's not there, it builds up. And eventually it explodes. I was able to deny that I was HIV positive for about three years. My senior year of high school, in 1993, I got very sick. I started showing symptoms of the disease. T-cells are the white blood cells that fight infection, and the number of T-cells you have in your body tells whether

you are HIV positive and whether you have AIDS. When your T-cells drop below 200, you are considered to have full-blown AIDS. My T-cell count was at 213 and dropping. And I was very, very sick, and very pale. I couldn't hold down food, and I could no longer pretend that this wasn't real. This was very, very real.

Denial would no longer an option, so I had to find a new way to deal with everything I was going through. The first thing I tried to do was blame someone. If someone could walk up to me and say, "Steven, this is my fault, man. I'm sorry," then maybe I'd feel better. So initially I decided to blame the entire homosexual community. Easy cop-out. And after I thought about that, I realized that it's kind of stupid to blame an entire group of people for my problem. I then decided to blame God. Now I didn't really believe in God at the time, but I figured if anyone has control of the situation, it's got to be God. So I blamed God.

What happens when you have someplace to focus all this built-up pain, is it turns into anger. And eventually it turns into rage. And now I began to deal with everything I encountered by getting mad. And anytime someone said anything that just kind of annoyed me, I'd explode at them. Punching walls. Destroying my room. Things like that.

But I found out that anger has the ability to cloud your mind, and keeps you from thinking rationally, and it keeps you from acting rationally. Worse, it hurts those you love in the process. A much better way to deal with pain is to cry, because it doesn't hurt anyone and it feels really, really good.

Well, on one occasion, I was in my room. And I had reached bottom. I was very, very sick. And I had lost a tremendous amount of weight. And I was in my room and I was screaming, swearing at God, punching the walls, and my Dad walked in. And he closed the door behind him. My father is a recovering alcoholic. And through AA he learned about a Higher Power, he learned about God. He looked at me and said, "You know Steve, I can't help you. Your doctors can't help you. Your mom can't help you. You can't help you. And the only one who can help you right now is God." And he walked out of the room and closed the door.

Now, I had just finished swearing at God, so I didn't think I was quite in the right position to be asking God for help. But, here I am, no choice. I dropped down on my knees, and through my tears I said, "Alright God, if you're there, you help me and I'll help you." In an extremely short amount of time I gained all of my weight back, my T-cell count jumped up to about 365, which is pretty good. And I felt great. I felt great, just like that. And I thought, *OK, thank you God. Bye. That was nice. Goodbye.*

I graduated and I went off to college to take my placement test the summer before my freshman year. This was when I met my roommate. I got there and I finished the test, and there was this tall, skinny blonde kid standing there. And he said, "Hey, you look normal. Want to be my roommate?" And I thought, *Well, ok, you don't, but... "Sure."* And we became roommates, and actually we became best friends. And I found out that my friend was a Christian. And at the time I had this picture of what a Christian was. To me a Christian was a hypocritical, condescending, condemning person. That's what a Christian was to me. That's all a Christian would ever be to me, I thought. But my roommate was different.

He had a problem with dyslexia. And I noticed that he would study, and he would get to that point, (where I would start punching walls and destroying things, and just tearing things apart), when he would reach that point, he would just stop, he would close his eyes, say a prayer, take a breath and go back to work. And that blew me away. And I thought, *How can you not break something? You have to break something!* It really amazed me that he was able to do this.

My roommate invited me to go to spring break with him to Daytona Beach. While there, my friend started talking to the guy next to us on the beach. And at first we started talking about common things, normal stuff. Then my friend decided to get into some deep, heavy issues. And I didn't want to get into that. I had been struggling with a lot. It's

tough to know you're dying at such a young age. And I really didn't want to talk about that stuff with some stranger on the beach, and so I kind of faded out of the conversation. They kept talking, and eventually it got around to the point where my friend tried to explain what he believed as a Christian. I never heard what a Christian was. I always had a picture of what a Christian was, but I never actually knew what they believed, or what they thought. So I kind of listened in on what he was saying.

And he explained it in a way that was fairly simple. I don't know if I could explain it quite as well as he did. But he explained something like this. "I believe in God, obviously. And I believe that God created us to be in relationship with Him. But we don't want to be in that relationship with Him, so we push Him away. The Bible calls that pushing God away, that rebellion, (whether it's actively rebelling against Him, or just a passive indifference), the Bible calls that 'sin.' I don't like the word 'sin,' so I think of it as just pushing God away.

"And because we did that, and because we were created to be in a relationship with Him, there's a penalty. The penalty for that is death, we die. And there's a spiritual death, we're separated from Him." I thought, *That's happy.*

I didn't really understand what he meant by that. So I said, "But God loves us." And he said, "But God is just, as well. Love without justice means nothing." And that still didn't really mean anything to me. And he said, "Well, picture the person you care about most in the world, the person you would give your life for, in a second. Picture yourself pushing that person away, and you don't see him again for a long time. Then one day you see that person fifty yards away, and you go running to him and you throw your arms open, but they stop you and say, 'No, you pushed me away, remember?' Now picture pushing away the greatest love in the universe, and that's what's it's like."

And I thought, *Wow. That's not good.* And he said, "Well, it doesn't end there, fortunately. Because God loves us so much, because He cares about us so much, He decided to pay the death penalty for us. He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross in our place. And because Jesus didn't push God away, (since He was God in the flesh), He could pay the penalty for us."

And he said, "And when Jesus rose from the dead three days later, He conquered that spiritual death. Now we wouldn't just die, we would die and spend eternity with the greatest love in the universe."

And I said, "Wow." "But," he said, "the catch is, even though He offers this, He paid the penalty, if you don't accept this...well, it's up to you." I still really wasn't clear on this, and the guy he was talking to fortunately wasn't clear on this either. So my friend said, "Ok, imagine yourself driving down the road out here, and you're going 90. And the speed limit is 35. You're flying down the road, and a cop pulls you over and writes you a ticket. To pay the ticket you have to go to court the next day. As you walk in the courtroom and look up, you see the judge is your dad. And you think, *Hey, that's my dad.* Your dad looks at you and he goes, 'Steve, did you break the law?' And you say, 'Yeah.' And he says, 'Ok, \$500 fine or two days in jail.' He hammers the gavel down and that's it."

"Now because he's just and he's fair, he had to pass sentence. But then he steps off the judge's bench, takes off his robe, reaches into his back pocket and hands you \$500. Because he loves you, he's going to pay that penalty for you. But you have to accept the payment. He's standing there with 500 bucks saying, 'Here you go.'

"You can just say to God, 'No thanks, I'll just spend an eternity separated from you.' It's a choice you have to make."

And my friend said the way we accept the payment is through prayer. He said, "You simply accept this payment. It is a gift from God, it's by God's grace. There is nothing you have to do to earn this. It's just a gift from God." This was the first time I ever heard about grace, what grace is. He said, "It's a gift that you accept by faith through prayer." And my friend offered to pray with this guy. And as my friend prayed out loud, I prayed this to myself, silently.

From that second on, my life took on a whole new perspective. I no longer had to go to bed every single night and worry about whether I was going to be alive the next day. I no longer had a fear of dying, because dying wouldn't just end in this blackness, in darkness. Now when I die I would spend an eternity, forever, with the greatest love in the universe. It was so freeing.

My parents accepted the payment as well. They



prayed that prayer. And their lives have totally taken on a new perspective as well. I mean, to think that they would even let me travel, when I've been given six months to live. It's been over a year now, (actually I should have been dead twice over now). You can imagine how difficult it's been for my parents to just stand there, with their hands by their side and just watch as their son dies in front of them. There's nothing they can do. The only reason that they can deal with that, the only reason that I can handle that, is that we each have Christ in our lives.

Can I give you the chance to accept God's payment for you? If you are going through something that you just can't handle on your own, and you'd like someone there who can stand by you and pick you up when the whole world is kicking you and stabbing you in the back, then I ask you to please pray this prayer with me right now. This is not going to be some magic phrase. It's not some magic incantation that's going to change your life like that. It's not a big emotional trip or a thought. It's beginning a relationship, with God. And just like any other relationship, it takes time. It takes effort. But I ask, if you really feel like you need this, don't pass up this opportunity. It's free.

So I'm going to pray a prayer. Prayer has nothing to do with closing your eyes or bowing your head or folding your hands or shouting. "Alléluia!" Nothing like that. It's an attitude of your heart. It is saying to God, "God, I've broken the law, I've pushed you away. And I want to come back by accepting your payment." If you feel like you need that, please pray with me right now. "Lord Jesus, I need you. I thank you for dying on the cross for me. I ask that you come into my life and make me the kind of person I've always wanted to be. Amen."

Now if you just sincerely prayed that prayer, you've just begun the greatest relationship you could ever have, a relationship with God. I would ask that you not leave this here, but that you would take this and follow through with it. A relationship with God is a process. It means daily trusting God, trying to do not necessarily what you want or what feels good, but what you think God wants you to do. The goal is to walk in His path, even though we will screw up a lot. You make mistakes, but you keep going, you keep working at it, trusting in His forgiveness and His grace. Pray. Read the Bible. Find out what God wants you to do. Can't do it if you don't know what He wants. Some day you'll reach peace. It may not be until you reach heaven, but then it's forever.

Steve Sawyer died of liver failure from hepatitis C on March 13, 1999. He spent his remaining years speaking on hundreds of college campuses, even though the traveling compounded the pain of his illnesses. In the last days of Steve's life he said he wanted to speak to "just one more campus." Why? "If I had to get these diseases that are killing me for that one person to understand that they can have a relationship with Christ, then it is worth it. In light of eternity, that is all that matters."

We'd love to talk to you. Please call us at the CRU office—696-8289.

From the Bible . . .

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." (John 5:24)

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55)

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