

# **An Agnostic in a Foxhole:**

## **The Story Behind "Heaven in My Hand"**

bob mccue  
October 25, 2004

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

### **Introduction**

Since leaving the Mormon Church a couple of years ago, I have had many new experiences. Most have been good, and some not so good. One I have wondered about is whether in cases of emergency – ill health, accident etc. – whether my old beliefs would re-assert themselves. That is, I wondered whether my new beliefs were fair weather friends, and acknowledged that I would not really know about this until I had some types of experience that none of us with to have. Events recently conspired to provide me with precisely that.

Rather than describe this experience and how both I and others reacted to it, I will supply lightly edited copies of some things I wrote at the time. I think their somewhat raw nature is worth preserving, since that is an important part of the experience. So, here are a few posts I made to the Recovery from Mormonism ([http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/w-agera.php3?site=exmobb&bn=exmobb\\_recovery](http://www.exmormon.org/boards/w-agera/w-agera.php3?site=exmobb&bn=exmobb_recovery)) and View from the Foyer (<http://www.aimoo.com/forum/freeboard.cfm?id=418550>) bulletin boards on the dates indicated below.

### **October 15, 2004**

Dallin, our 14-year-old son, is in intensive care today and as a result I am having another "first" in my post Mormon life. The question is, to what extent will I "miss" my faith in God, and perhaps revert to it. As they say, "there are no atheists (or agnostics) in foxholes".

Being a compulsive analyzer, I am analyzing this experience. This is helpful from a therapeutic point of view as well. My tendency to analyze, by the way, is largely the result of my attempts to use what some Buddhist theorists call a "watcher". The watcher is a part of our psyche that we ask to keep tabs on what we are thinking and doing – kind of like a therapist we invent and invite to travel with us through life. Hence, when emotions start to kick up the kind of images that sometimes entertain us, and other times obscure our view and cause us to make bad decisions, the watcher sends up a little flag that in my case usually says "Hmmm. Isn't this interesting.

Check it out", in which case I check it out. Sometimes I say, "Watcher, thanks for the message but chill out. This is just good clean fun." And other times I say, "Wow Watcher, thanks for bringing this to my attention. Here we have an important boat and I would have missed it entirely without your help."

In any event, here is the raw, present moment experience of a father who is watching his child fight for life in an intensive care unit.

A week ago Dallin had his wisdom teeth removed. No big deal. However, after seeming to recover normally for a few days, his discomfort increased. We took him back to the doctor (who we trust implicitly) and were sent to the hospital for intravenous IV on an outpatient basis because an infection had started in his jaw. The next morning (yesterday) he was admitted to hospital because the swelling had significantly advanced (read "baseball attached to one side of jaw"). A few hours later he was in the ICU and an hour after that in surgery to drain his jaw and neck. He is now on a machine to breath for him because his neck and throat are so swollen that he can't breath on his own.

I can feel my heart rate rising as a result of typing this. Our son is in serious trouble. And infections of this type are unpredictable. The doctors and nurses are positive about his chances of full recovery, but also are frank about the unpredictable nature of aggressive infections like the one he has.

Yesterday afternoon as I stood by his bedside while he was prepped for surgery, and at several other times during the past couple of days, I put my hand on his shoulder, told him how much I loved him, and assured him that he was in the best place he could be (the hospital, doctors, nurses etc. are first class) and told him that I felt good about how things were going. I also told him that he was exploring a part of life that no one volunteers to see, and that will give him some insights into human nature that are relatively rare for someone as young as he is.

While I did not think of it at the time, and certainly did not phrase my words to him as such, this was my father's blessing to him. It was between him and me. No intermediators. No higher powers relied upon. Just a father telling his son how much he loved him and that all possible was being done to care for him. He shed quiet tears. He was in a lot of pain and scared out of his wits, and has been for a few days. This is emotional heavily lifting of the most difficult sort.

The major difference between my mental and emotional state in this case as compared to other similar situations involving serious health problems is

that I am relatively calm. I am not attempting to exercise faith in anything. Reality is what it is. The laws of cause and effect will run their course. We have done, and will continue to do, all we can. I can do nothing to help my son by internally emoting – working myself into a frenzy by praying, fasting, etc. All I can do is be there for him; comfort him with my presence; express my love for him; and most importantly, provide access to the best medical care of which I am capable. If there is one thing that history makes clear it is that the quality of medical care we receive is far more directly related to surviving medical crises than positive energy of any kind.

I vividly recall in similar past situations the feeling of exerting myself to "exercise faith" and feeling like I was in one of those dreams where you run as hard as you can and go nowhere. There was nothing for my faith to gain traction against. It was classic tail chasing. I experience a measure of calm now because I am not doing that. Were my physical state measured now and compared to other similar occasions in the past, I am sure that my blood chemistry and other stats would show huge differences. I am not nearly as loaded with adrenalin and the stuff that goes along with stress now as I have been while walking this dark road in past years.

That is not say that I am happy. I can feel raw fear differently than I have felt it before. It is not masked by my frantic efforts to contact God on behalf of my son and work out some kind of a deal for him, or to beg and plead on his behalf and then at the end say "but Thy will be done". I am not attempting to control reality. I am yielding to it. And this means yielding to the fear I feel - letting it wash over me.

It is natural that I fear in a situation like this. I do not want to lose my son. I love him, and enjoy his company. He is as sweet and pure as a 14-year-old boy can be. He still – most of the time – even enjoys being with me. My Watcher sees these powerful feelings of fear and says "Wow, that is really something! Check it out!", and when I do I say, "Thanks Watcher. But this is horse we just need to ride until it stops bucking, as it surely will eventually, one way or another. And I hope the ride is short instead of long. It hurts like hell as my old bones are jarred by this ride."

So there it is. An agnostic in a foxhole, with no desire to be otherwise. I am not happy to face this reality. But I would much rather face it and know more of what it is than to have it hidden from me as I turn useless back-flips and otherwise work myself into an emotional lather that I do not believe would help my son in any way.

I should add that I do not wish deprecate those who choose to continue to believe in a higher power of one kind or another, and my initial post could be

construed to do that. My primary reason for sharing what I have above is that life has served me up a rare (thank goodness) experience, and I find my reaction to it interesting, having been taught my whole life that one of evidences for God is that when humans confront the grim reaper they almost invariably revert to a particular type of religious belief. My watcher noticed that in my case this was not happening and brought that to my attention.

There are of course many conceptions of a higher power and how we might relate to it. Some of them are much less helpful than others. I am critical of many of these. And others can be very helpful. But this is not the time to discuss that concept. Suffice it to say that I am not a soldier in the army that is trying to stamp out all belief in a higher power.

I conceive of "reality" as a higher power, and find myself in the company of people like Einstein and many others in that regard. I don't purport to understand it. I believe that our faith (or positive energy) does have an impact on what happens in life, but that this is explainable using naturalistic principles although I don't understand how they all work. And given what I have seen of, it is my view that many overestimate what faith can do, and many others miss an important and wonderful part of life by dismissing it out of hand. I am trying to chart a middle course that leaves me open to life's mystery and wonder while pruning away a variety of (in my mind) clearly unrealistic beliefs that I believe caused me more harm than good.

Nanna, you asked how my wife is doing. She is not an orthodox Mormon anymore, but still believes deeply in a personal god of some kind. The definitional edges are just a lot blurrier than they used to be. And we are getting along better than ever. See "Knowing" at <http://home.mccue.cc:10000/bob/postmormon.htm> for a recent attempt on my part to thank her for who and what she is. I wrote it while in Montreal a couple of weeks ago with her to celebrate our 24th anniversary.

In general, we deal with emotionally charged things differently. When tears well up in my eyes, they tend to fall from hers. She emotes in most ways more freely than do I. And this situation is pretty much what you would expect in that regard.

As far as the lack of priesthood blessing is concerned, she told me this morning that she appreciated the "blessing" that I gave our son, and that if a faithful Mormon wished to give him a priesthood blessing too she would not object. She noted that in her experience, blessings have more to do with comforting than curing both those who give and receive. So we are in similar spaces on the latter point at least. After some discussion, she acceded to my request that we not allow any well-intentioned friends or

relatives to give our son a priesthood blessing. I do not want that purported magic used by other well-intended people to strengthen his waning "faith" in Mormonism. I object to that kind of sleight of hand.

All the best,

bob

### **October 16, 2004**

I just found a computer at the hospital on my way to bed in the parents' quarters, and so signed in. Thank you for your good advice and support.

Our son is still in the woods. He is stable, but the swelling has been increasing steadily all day. If things are not going the other way by morning, they will do another CT scan and then perhaps operate again. They have put him on a second broad-spectrum antibiotic, and will add a third tomorrow if things have not turned.

The doctors are facing a more worthy than usual opponent in this particular infection, and have not yet "got it". It is interesting, and terrifying, to watch this contest play itself out. Our son is as secure and well cared for as he can be. A lot would have to go wrong for disaster to strike. But this is still a white-knuckle ride.

I stand by all I said above, and had a nice conversation with my wife this evening about it. She too is more peaceful in the midst of this maelstrom than in those we have experienced together in the past, and somewhat surprisingly from my point of view, agreed with much of what I had to say as to why our experience was likely different this time. This business of trying to change reality through sheer force of will is draining. To not try to do this conserves energy that can be used for all kinds of other more useful things. And, I shared with her a few of the emails I received in on my Blackberry while in the hospital today, and they brought tears to her eyes. So thank you for that too. She may even read this board for the first time as a result of those emails.

Thank you again.

All the best,

bob

**October 17, 2004** (after receiving close to two hundred supportive, thoughtful replies to my initial posts)

Trust me, I am not going to turn this into a soap opera. I again thank those who responded to the other thread. This, if nothing else, shows a different side of this bulletin board - one that I have seen in many ways before, and that some of those critical of this place would do well to see. This is a rapidly evolving pluralistic community - with all the turmoil, warts and blemishes that such communities tend to have - as well as many of the wonderful things that bind most communities together. I had no idea that my initial post would generate the volume and type of response it did and again express gratitude for the support your have given us.

This has been one of the most emotional days of my life. And writing about it both seems to help to control it in some ways, and intensify it in others. I have a long history of writing about the most meaningful things to me when in a highly emotional state. So, it stands to reason that a child staring the grim reaper in the eye would set me off.

Last night when I went to bed Dallin's infection was still flummoxing the doctors. During the night they put him on a third antibiotic - the most powerful yet - since the first two were not getting the job done and his swelling was still going up. When I got back to him early this morning he looked worse. The swelling on the "bad" side of his head was about the same as it had been the night before and the "good" side had started to swell. But his temperature was down and he was resting comfortably.

As I awoke, the words to Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven" were rolling through my mind, and while sitting with Dallin in the pre-dawn morning I decided to write something for him. I have written what might be called poetry in the past, but I prefer a clipped, non-rhythming, sometimes even elliptical, style. That is the most powerful way I know to express myself, and is what I had decided to do for Dallin. Those familiar with my usually verbose posts here will think it odd that my "A game" is as spare as possible, at least as I see it.

But when I started to write, things went differently than I had expected. Probably because I had been singing Clapton to myself, and perhaps because I spent a very enjoyable evening at dinner a few days ago with Tal Bachman and then listened to him play a gig here afterwards. Some of his beautiful music and lyrics have been on my mind as well. So, the words I reached for to make a gift for Dallin, and to ease my own pain, came with music and in rhythm. This was a first for me. And I cried - hence the words

to the song below. I was still feeling that raw terror that goes along with a real risk of disaster.

When Dallin's poem/song was about half done, and me blubbing at his bedside, the oral surgeon arrived. He has been a friend for some time, and Dallin is the fifth of our children he has treated. He cancelled a trip with his kids this weekend in part at least to be here with our kid. I deeply appreciate that. He was polite enough not to mention my state, examined Dallin, looked at his overnight stats, moved his jaw (to the small extent that it can be moved) and pronounced that the battle had turned in our favour – the last antibiotic they had tried had likely done the trick. And so the CT scan and surgery (to have been Dallin's second in three days) that had been tentatively scheduled for this morning were cancelled, pending how Dallin did later in the day.

To make a long story short, he is still real sick but is now visibly on the mend. He has the strength to (just barely) lift his hand to his face and put suction in his own mouth, and has painfully progressed to the point where he is breathing on his own with an oxygen feed to enrich what he pulls in.

Since only two of us are allowed at his bedside, I have moved out from time to time to allow other family members to be with Dallin. And so I watched other families coming and going to see their loved ones, often with tears streaming down their faces, arms around each other in the attempt to comfort what even time can only partially heal. And drawing closer to each other as a result.

The expression of love or gratitude for another human being is an amazing thing. It lifts all who experience it - either in giving or receiving. Dallin and our family experienced this many times in different ways today. So again, thank you for what you made us feel in that regard.

During the course of the day – mostly while I was moved out to the hallway as other family members sat with Dallin – I chipped away on the poem and wept a different kind of tears. These were tears of joy mingled with relief at fear's retreat. Dallin is still at risk, and the drugs that had to be used to pull him back toward the land of the living were so strong that there is a chance that complications will arise as a result of that. But the likelihood of this episode becoming the kind of frightening but happy memory some of you mentioned are much higher now than they were last night. A few people walking by me in the hall must have wondered what was going on as I stared at my computer screen and "softly wept".

What follows may not be anything special for those other than Dallin and me, but since it is part of this experience that you have shared with us, I share it with you. I am like the beggar boy who could juggle. He knelt before the altar where many before him had presented wonderful gifts to Christ on Christmas Day, and began to juggle. It was a poor, unorthodox gift, but it was all he had and so was what he gave. In that spirit, I offer this as thanks to those (many of whom I hardly know) who shared their feelings and love with our family.

Think about that. There is something about having shared an intense human experience - even an odd one like that of leaving or struggling with an inherited belief system - that often creates meaningful bonds. I have only met a handful of you, and yet you care for me and I for you, and each of the few times I have had the chance to meet any of you (as I was privileged to meet Tal the other night), the experience has been a pleasure.

One of the many miracles of the Internet is the manner it has facilitated the creation of meaningful communities that at the same resemble and are completely different from face to face communities.

In any event, four beats to a line, including the really short lines. In that way it resembles "Tears in Heaven" but the music in my head was unrelated to that song. "X" means a missed beat. The music in my head wasn't that great. I bet many of you will imagine something much better to bring this to life. Without music, it does not work for me probably because I like things more clipped than this is. [Note: A cleaned up version of this poem can be found at <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/rs.heaven%20in%20my%20hand.pdf>]

All the best,

bob

### ***Heaven in My Hand***

I

You lay/ broken/X be/fore  
me/e/e/e  
Here and/ al/most/ go  
ne/e/e/e  
Hopes and/ memor/ies/ hold  
me/e/e/e

As the/ morn/ing/ daw  
ns/s/s/s

Perfect/ life in/ imper/fec  
tion/n/n/n  
X The/ bitter/ makes the/ swee  
t/t/t/t  
I re/joyced at/ your con/cep  
tion/n/n/n  
Now I/ soft/ly/ weep

[instrumental]

II

Our fathers'/ flaw/less/ hea  
ven/n/n  
passed a/way so/ long a/go  
o/o/o/o  
No more/ hope/ for /mira  
cles/s/s/s  
We con/fess what/ we don't/ kn  
ow/w/w/w

Perfect/ life in/ imper/fec  
tion/n/n/n  
X The/ bitter/ makes the/ swee  
t/t/t/t  
I glimpse/ god in/ your re/flec  
tion/n/n/n  
Hear him/ soft/ly/ weep

[instrumental - long]

III

Through your/ eyes I/ found new/ world  
s/s/s/s  
Some I/ didn't/ want to/ se  
e/e/e/e  
But I/ followed/ you/ every  
where/e/e/e  
Wondered/ at all/ that could/ b  
e/e/e/e

Perfect/ life in/ imper/fec  
tion/n/n/n  
X The/ bitter/ makes the/ swee  
t/t/t/t  
I owe/ you/ so/ much my  
son/n/n/n  
Can't do/ more than/ softly/ weep

[instrumental]

IV

As you/ seem to/ slip a/way from  
me/e/e/e  
Toward an/ un/known/ lan  
d/d/d/d  
I ca/ress/ your/ cheek a  
gain/n/, and/ know that  
I hold/ heaven/ in my/ han  
d/d/d/d

[instrumental]

Perfect/ life in/ imper/fec  
tion/n/n/n  
X The/ bitter/ makes the/ swee  
t/t/t/t  
I lose/ myself/ in your/ comple  
xion/n/n/n

[slow down tempo]

As you/ final/ly/ slee  
p/p/p/p

[slow down tempo]

I/ soft/ly /weep  
p/p/p/p

[slow down tempo]

[instrumental]

**October 18, 2004** (after the receipt of many more supportive messages)

Thanks again folks.

Dallin was released from ICU last night, and walked for the first time this morning. His first steps were a matter for celebration, as were the first words he spoke yesterday afternoon hours after the breathing apparatus was removed from his throat. Cures like the one effected for him are real miracles. Not many decades ago he would have been dead almost for sure. And even now, had we been living in most other parts of the world, he would have been dead.

There is much to be grateful for in our home today.

All the best,

bob