

UNCLE

(A Story of Joy and Pain)

By G. Raymond McCullough

When we allow ourselves to become vulnerable and connect with others we embrace the inevitability of joy and pain. A young child doesn't waste the mental energy to ponder this deep truth of life. Thus, this is a story about a young child's early experience with the bittersweet tragedies of life.

This story of joy and pain chronicles my first experience with significant loss. The loss was profound (it would not have been profound if I had shielded myself from closeness and intimacy), and it stands as one of the most significant emotional events of my life. That significant emotional event was the death of my beloved Uncle Norman.

As if it were yesterday, I can remember the passing of my beloved uncle, the brother of my father. We all (my brothers and I) called him Uncle Norman. I can still hear the ring of his name in my ears as I so joyously shouted out his name time and time again: "Uncle Norman!"

My Uncle was sensitive, gentle, and kind. He was the youngest of my father's four siblings and probably the most gifted of the four. Uncle Norman never married and had no children of his own. This is probably why he had so much time and energy to devote to all his nephews and to what I believe was his first love: writing. Uncle had written several books. His special interest was writing poetry. Today, I still have two of his tattered books in my personal library: a play, *The Other Side of Hell*, *A Tragedy in Verse*, and a book of poetry, *Lemons on the Rosebush*. Uncle Norman was a scholarly man who held the academic title of

Doctor of Philosophy in English and Literature. I remember holding in my child-size hands a book he had written and being in utter awe that all the words inside had come from one man's head. To say I was impressed is an understatement. As I write this story and stop occasionally to hold both books in my hands, I sense his presence and inspiration to write this story.

The only relief my Uncle Norman got from my childhood worship was when he returned to his work as an English professor at a university near Columbus, Ohio, a three-and-a-half hour drive from our home in Youngstown, Ohio—a medium-sized city of steel-producing fame during the steel industry's heyday in America. Because of the distance, it was only during the summer months that my brothers and I got to see Uncle Norman. I know my two older brothers were just as excited about seeing him as I was. He always seemed to have a bright silver dollar for each one of us when he returned to Youngstown. I can still feel the heavy coldness of the silver dollar in my small palm and feel the love and warmth I have for him.

In the fall of 1965, Uncle Norman returned unexpectedly to Youngstown in the middle of his teaching term. My surprise immediately turned to excitement for my brothers and me because our favorite uncle was in town. As he always did, Uncle ceremoniously bestowed upon my brothers and me the traditional silver dollar. However, by then at our age, a silver dollar did not hold much monetary value for any of us. We were just excited—at least I was—to see Uncle Norman. In all the excitement, however, I noticed something different about Uncle: the energy that typically radiated from him and the glow in his face were muted. Instinctively, I knew something was wrong. My feelings (of impending doom) would intensify as the

weeks went on and my uncle remained in Youngstown.

Months—it felt like years —later, my uncle remained in Youngstown at his parents' home. The situation had changed dramatically during that time, as my uncle had been in and out of the hospital and was now confined to bed at my grandparents' home. On the nightstand next to his bed lay a syringe filled with some drug (probably morphine) that provided him relief from the physical pain he was experiencing, the intensity of which was revealed in the expression on his face. With assistance, he would occasionally leave his room to sit at the kitchen table downstairs, as I remembered him doing so often in the past. These times were different, though, because now he didn't have the same energy and enthusiasm I once sensed in him when we huddled around that table. He had become a mere physical and spiritual shell of himself. I knew now that everyone close to my uncle was denying the unspeakable: Uncle Norman was dying.

The silent agony went on for almost exactly a year. In the early evening, on a fall day in 1966 the phone rang. My mother answered the call on the yellow wall phone in the kitchen. My mother came into the living room where my father, middle brother and I were watching television. What my mother shared with my father shook my world. To my father she said, "Norman is dead." Before my eyes, my father, a massive man of six-foot-four inches and 265 pounds, sunk into his chair and cried like a child. I felt totally bewildered, helpless, and at a loss. I knew the terrible feeling I had a year ago had just culminated in my mother's three simple words: "Norman is dead."

The events that followed are still blurs in my mind. I remember most distinctly the ride I took in a large black car on a cold, rainy, fall day to the place where my Uncle was to rest forever. My father didn't make that ride with

us. For the past week, he tried to find comfort by drowning his sorrow in alcohol. He was too incapacitated to attend the burial. Afterwards, I vaguely remember the family gathering at my grandparents' home. There were tables and tables of food, and sullen faces of family members and people who were strangers to me. We never talked about my Uncle again after his death. I believe the mere mention of his name was too much for anyone to bear. Somewhere, I believe —at least for me—if I didn't acknowledge his death, he would someday return to Youngstown, as he often did, and ceremoniously bestow upon my brothers and me a bright silver dollar.

I treasure the memories of my Uncle and if I could see him one more time, I'd simply say, "Goodbye".

Following are two poems from one of my Uncle Norman's books of poetry (Copyright 1958):

The Other Side of Death

*Light the lamp of long dark nights
In caves of dewy moisture deepened by
blackness.
Put out the light of short bright days
In pools of livid water enlivened with deceit.*

*Comix, diffuse, remelt the sounds of death
Wailing with the bobs of tails like squirrels
Chopping pears, or like the moon's palid sway
O'er forest beasts.*

*Unfounded chaos, scourge of Bleakness
In full-bloomed love of passionless awe.
Deathless thou hast been, ever fulfilling
gorging lust,
Always raging, swirling wild.*

*Unchained, unbottled, delicate and soft
Co-speaker for the laws of creation,*

*Seldom invited, much discussed like the optic
nerve
Of a blind needle's eye.*

*Silence is your inner self, yes.
You lover of life, you seeker after life,
You passionless kisser of the long dark nights,
You restless seeker after men.*

The Ebbing of a Song

*A lifting, rhythmic melody cam
Through encasing walls;
It warmed my soul as would a flame,
Lighting up my walls.*

*In all its beauty it portrays
Serenity of life;
But are such things here to stay
Amid eternal strife.*

*Suddenly the mood has changed
With all its beauty gone.
Alas, my heart does feel quite pained,
Night has challenged dawn.*

*Then it ceased with all at rest,
As does this our life.
It seemed to have a greater quest
Devoid of earthly plight.*

My closing thoughts are: You can never truly understand the profound effect that significant emotional events have on our developing and evolving psyches. Sometimes, it is years later while in some deep, sober, and thoughtful reflection or introspection that we derive some wisdom from these life-forming events. It was not until 26 years after my Uncle's death, when I wrote the first version of this story, that I truly understood a fundamental truth about life: without suffering, we cannot experience joy and happiness. For the two are life's companions. Suffering and joy are not perpetual states. They are transitory. However, one serves the other. We do have a choice in

how long we will suffer before we allow ourselves to experience joy. Finally, alcohol and drug addiction only mask our suffering and provide a temporary respite. Invariably, trying to cope with life by using alcohol and other drugs leads to elimination of joy, which is replaced with pain. In a twisted way, this event taught me the fundamentals of this philosophy. I owe thanks to the life and death of my dear Uncle Norman.

Joy and Pain

By G. Raymond McCullough

*The siren from the sea beckons me.
I flinch because I am afraid.
Has the siren come to bring me joy or pain?
My call for an answer is drowned out by the
sea.*

*I know my answer is not outside myself.
I struggle for the strength to seek the truth.
I know that truth is not outside me.
I must look within for my answers about joy
and pain.*

*The titillations of life beckon my wistful
thinking.
I am lured closer to the truth.
Pain breaks me and Joy restores
Life is a cycle of Joy and Pain.*