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Earlier this month, my family suffered a terrible loss.

Many of you will know the story. Corwith Davis III, my nephew, was visiting High Hampton with his young family. On Monday, August 6, he set out on a morning solo hike up Chimney Top. Two young women running up the trail met Corwith coming down, just off the top. Greeting them in the friendly hiker's way, he smiled and said "You're almost there." Continuing on, the women made the summit, took in the view, and started back down. It was about ten minutes from when they left him to when they found him lying on the ground. In those few minutes, Corwith had a heart attack and died at the age of 35.

Bereft, he leaves his mother, my sister, Cynn timer, his sister Caroline, his loving wife Blair, their three-year old daughter Lulu, and baby Mike, age 1.

I am a theologian. Theology is well described as "faith seeking understanding." C.S. Lewis said that, up to a point, suffering and evil are not so difficult to understand. For example, we can understand that the good of moral freedom comes hand in hand with the risk of moral evil. If I am free to choose the right, I must be free to choose the wrong. Ghandi and Hitler are branches on the same tree. Also, we can understand that for lions to exist they must eat meat, which means suffering for zebras. Aquinas called this "natural evil."

To this extent, we can make some sense of evil. But not even Thomas Aquinas tried to explain it all. Lewis said he could understand it up to maybe 80 percent. The rest of the problem, he just couldn't find the reasons for. It is like your dog not understanding why you are watching Downton Abbey. We are missing information and we lack the tools. To understand, we will need that information along with new and better eyes, minds, and hearts to take it in. As Lewis put it, we cannot see God face to face, until we have faces.

I so well remember Corwith as a bright little prince of a young boy. His mother would dress him up for the big occasion in the little boy suits one grandmother or the other would have made good and darned sure he had: velvet shorts, fancy collar, white polished shoes. In our part of the world the grandmothers have to give them; the mothers have to lay them out; the little boys have to put them on. Do not ask me why. Your dog better understands why you are watching Downton Abbey.

This I do know. Watching boys being boys in those fancy little suits, chocolate on collar, grass stains on shoes, brings smiles and laughter, which are good medicine, and moment to moment reminders of the goodness that persists in life through times of sorrow. Aquinas reasoned that God would not create a world where evil triumphs over good. Evil scores, but it doesn't win.

Corwith played the little boy prince's part with special flair. In my wedding album we have a picture of my nephew at the age of two, dressed all in white, standing straight up, eyes raised to his dotting mother bending to him, he sucking wedding cake icing from her finger: just gassing up, getting ready to go. I will never see that picture without smiling.

Now let me praise Corwith Davis as a man. He was a Virginia hunt country bred, Tulane law and business educated, Louisiana red dirt organic farmer. As to style, he was tractor cap and pickup truck. As to planning, he was every inch the MBA. As to product, he was acre by acre transforming a traditional plantation—cotton, soybeans, corn, add Treflan, Round-up, Malathion—into a model, large-scale, organic operation. They say that can't be done in Louisiana. Respectfully, Corwith disagreed.

Writing about the Civil War, and President Lincoln's proclamation of a union blockade of southern ports, Shelby Foote writes this:

"Proclaiming and enforcing were two different things . . . especially considering the size of the fleet charged with transferring the blockade from dry paper to salt water."<sup>1</sup>

It is one thing to proclaim the virtues of organic farming, and another to deliver food to the table and profits to the bottom line. Corwith Davis was a dreamer, a planner, and a doer. We can't know what he would have accomplished had he lived. What he did accomplish was a lot. Already, he had opened up a boxful of new possibilities for Louisiana farmers, and the transfer from dry paper to salt water was well under way. For a man thirty-five years young, my nephew leaves a good-sized footprint on the planet.

My friends know me as a man of faith—some might say "deep faith." My faith is deep at least in that it has been with me a long time, and I have navigated by it, and, when I say the creeds, I am not pretending.

*We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.*

. . . Leaving an enormous footprint.

Emotionally, faith is not an antidote to grief. Losing someone in faith probably hurts about as long and hard as losing them without it.

Why would that be?

According to Aquinas, human nature is a unique blend of animal and spiritual. We share things in common both with angels and Labrador Retrievers. Angels are perfect in one way, Chocolate Labs in another. We partake somewhat of both the animal and spiritual perfections. Just as dogs can't fathom Downton Abbey, according to Lewis angels are baffled by our appetite for sex. Human love lives in this blend of animal and spiritual. In animals, separation hurts. As thinking animals, who understand the loss, it hurts us that much more. With human love, happiness and grief are branches on the same tree. We are stuck with grief, praise God.

How then does our spiritual nature lift us?

Faith, according to scripture, is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." The spiritual assurances of faith are vast, colorful, and deep. Rather than dispensing with our animal emotions, they enrich them.

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life . . . We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*

There is no part of life and death that these assurances eliminate; and no part that they do not possess and change. They are in the food we eat, the air we breathe, the rocks and hills. In his studies of the soul, John of the Cross finds them in our powers of sense, reason and imagination. He discovers that the graces of the Holy Spirit don't replace these powers; rather, they fill and guide them to perfection. Intelligence acquires faith. Memory takes hope. The will is love. Like Jesus on the mountain, our human nature is transfigured.

In Walker Percy's novel *The Last Gentleman*, a dying young man receives a visit from a Catholic priest. The boy, named Jamie, is about nineteen. His brother is there, named Sutter, with their friend Will Barrett. Among Jamie, Sutter and Will, there isn't enough faith to move a molehill. The priest has come to baptize Jamie. Jamie's sister, a catholic nun, had called him in. At the deathbed, the priest begins by rote, as if reading from an ancient script.

"Son," he says, "Do you accept the truths of religion?"

Jamie doesn't know. These "religious truths": what are they?

"Oh," says the priest, realizing that he isn't speaking to a convert. So he backs up and spells it out: the Christian faith in one hundred words or less.

*Do you accept the truth that God exists and that he made you and loves you and that he made the world so that you might enjoy its beauty and that He himself is your final end and happiness, that he loved you so much that He sent His only Son to die for you and to found his Holy Catholic Church so that you may enter heaven and there see God face to face and be happy with Him forever?*

Jamie looks to Will, his trusted friend.

*"Is that true?"* he asks him. Caught off guard, Will is speechless.

*Jamie's bruised eyes went weaving around to the priest. He said something to the priest which the latter didn't understand. The priest looked up to [Will.] "He wants to know, ah, why" said Will. Why what? Said the priest. "Why should he believe that."*

*The priest leaned hard on his fists. "It is true because God himself revealed it as truth." Again the youth's lips moved. Again the priest turned to the interpreter. Will translates: "He asked how, meaning how does he know that?" The priest sighed. "If it were not true, " he said to Jamie," then I would not be here. That is why I'm here, to tell you."*

If you are thinking, "that is not an answer," you are right. Speaking for the priest, I can tell you that good answers to that question run to volumes. There wasn't time, nor was this the place, for discussing books. Wisely, kindly, the priest throws himself into the breach: "That is why I'm here, to tell you."

Me, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, (Kindle edition), 112.