

**LOIS LOWRY**

**BROWN UNIVERSITY**

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## **BRIGHT STREETS AND DARK PATHS**

It is a pleasure to be back here on this campus again. My tenure here was brief and I've always regretted that I didn't hang around long enough to get my degree from Brown. Let me tell you why I didn't. I tell this story to myself — and occasionally to others — fairly frequently, because re-telling is the way we humans try to make sense of things.

Stories by which we explain things to ourselves often have to begin way, way back. That is how the phrase "once upon a time" came to be.

Once upon a time I was born in Hawaii. It was 1937, to be precise. When the war — that's World War II — began, and my father, a career Army officer, went to the Pacific, my mother took her children back to Pennsylvania, which had been her home. We moved in with my grandparents.

It was an emotionally austere but ostentatiously literate household. One room — it was to the left of the center hall — was actually called "the library." It was, of course, lined with bookcases from floor to ceiling; and the bookcases were filled with leather-bound books, dark crimsons and greens, embossed with gold and smelling of wisdom and importance.

There were other books, of course, upstairs in the bedroom my sister and I shared: *Winnie the Pooh* and *Mr. Popper's Penguins*; those were the books my mother read to us at bedtime.

But it was my grandfather's books — the smell and feel and color of them — that drew me.

My grandfather was a dignified and formal man. Old family photographs and home movies from Honolulu show him visiting there in 1939, and standing smiling, watching my sister and me play barefoot in the garden — and he is wearing a tie and jacket.

In Pennsylvania, in the evening after dinner, he would unwrap a stick of Black Jack gum, and chew it slowly — he thought it aided digestion — while he listened to the seven o'clock news on the radio.

I was in awe of him and in love with him. He saw that, somehow. And one evening he took me into the library. He took out a volume of poetry, opened it with a certain amount of ceremony, and then took me onto his lap in a blue wing chair, and read from it aloud.

It was long, what he read, and I didn't understand many of the words. But the cadence of it, and the sound, and the rapture of being on his lap, of having been chosen — he had not invited my sister into the library — made me listen with a fascination that I had never brought to Christopher Robin.

And I heard, suddenly, in the concluding lines of that long, long poem, a phrase that made me shiver a bit with recognition.

*As the long train of ages glide away, the sons of men,  
The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes  
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,  
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—  
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side  
By those, who in their turn shall follow them..*

It was *The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man* that I recognized. It was us. It was he and I.

And so, when he asked me the next evening if I would like another poem, I told him that I wanted to hear the same one again. I listened while he read it, waiting for the phrase, smiling when I heard it, stroking his knee; and the next night I asked for the poem again, and again the next.

At some point during those summer evenings, my grandfather saw me silently moving my mouth, forming the words along with him, as he read the poem.

"Are you reading that?" he asked, and he tilted the book to give me a better view.

"No," I told him. "I can't read yet."

"Do you know what comes next?" he asked.

"You mean after the speechless babe and the gray-headed man?"

He nodded.

I did. I said the words to him, as he watched the page of the book. I said the words all the way to the end of the poem.

"Remarkable," my grandfather said.

One evening toward the end of summer, my grandparents had a dinner party. From my bedroom near the top of the stairs, I could hear the murmur of voices and the clink of silverware, and the whoosh of the swinging door from the kitchen as the maids entered with each new course. I could hear the tall clock on the staircase landing as it ticked and chimed away the minutes of the evening.

I was half asleep when my grandfather came into the bedroom and — whispering so that he wouldn't wake my sister — asked me to come downstairs with him.

He held my hand. I wore pink pajamas with feet, and carried a doll.

He took me into the parlor — across the wide hall from the library — and introduced me to the gathered guests. The women wore gauzy summer dresses and smiled at me.

He asked me to recite the poem.

Children of a certain age believe that if their eyes are closed, they are invisible. I planted my feet in the oriental rug, closed my eyes to make myself invisible, and obeyed my grandfather.

*As the long train*

*Of ages glide away, the sons of men,*

*The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes*

*In the full strength of years, matron and maid,*

*The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—*

*Shall one by one be gathered to thy side*

*By those, who in their turn shall follow them..*

*So live, that when thy summons comes to join*

*The innumerable caravan which moves*

*To that mysterious realm, where each shall take*

*His chamber in the silent halls of death,*

*Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,*

*Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed*

*By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave*

*Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch*

*About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.*

Then I opened my eyes, yawned, took my grandfather's hand, and went back up the long staircase to my bed in order to lie down to my own pleasant dreams.

I was five, then.

When I was thirteen, my father gave me a typewriter as a gift. Today, of course, half the 13-year-olds you know have their own computers. But this was 1950. And in 1950 this was an astounding gift: a Smith-Corona portable typewriter with smooth dark green keys; and my name was engraved on the case, just below the handle.

Why did he give it to me? I don't know. It may have been simply because he was sick of my sneaking into his office and using his typewriter – maybe he was nervous about the damage I might inflict as I endlessly, noisily taught myself how to type.

But I like to think that he gave it to me because he recognized who I was, and what my dreams were, for the future.

Thirteen years later I was a sophomore at this university. I was majoring in what they then called "English Expression" — another way of saying "Writing." I remember that Professor Charles Philbrick gave me A's

and told me, during a conference, that I was a good writer. But he said, a little hesitantly, that I hadn't experienced very much yet.

I smiled at him politely. I felt that I had experienced a great deal during my almost-two-years at Brown. I had learned to smoke Marlboro cigarettes. I had learned to play bridge. I had learned to knit argyle socks. I had learned to drink beer.

"You need to suffer a grief," he told me.

I left his office rolling my eyes and thinking: *what does he know, an old guy like that, probably fifty...*

During that spring I received a letter from a Philadelphia law firm. It informed me of the death of a man named Edward MacFunn Biddle III. I didn't recognize the name.

But the letter told me that he had left one half of one percent of his estate to the little girl in pink pajamas who had recited Thanatopsis in her grandfather's parlor in 1942.

I wonder, now, what the man named Biddle had in mind for me when he made me that gift. A year at Oxford, perhaps, or Harvard? Enough money to support me while I did the research for my ground-breaking dissertation on William Cullen Bryant?

At 18 I was sophomoric, filled with literary pretensions, quoting J. Alfred Prufrock - or Freud — neither of whom I had ever read until that year— at any opportunity, growing my hair (not very successfully) to my waist, wearing a dirty trench coat which somehow was supposed to mark my identity as deeply intellectual, remarkably sophisticated, and profoundly superior.

I suffer a grief now, thinking of the man named Biddle and of how disappointed he would have been, then, to see me in my dirty sneakers, sipping coffee in a Thayer Street café, gleeful that my high academic average allowed me "free cuts"— so I rarely went to my 8 AM class because I didn't feel like getting up.

I took the large check that came to me from his estate and bought a pale blue Pontiac. I put my Smith Corona portable typewriter with its smooth dark green keys into the trunk. At the end of my sophomore year I dropped out of Brown and headed west into the sunset, to southern California. My summons had come to join the innumerable caravan which moves to that mysterious realm.

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I've just told you a story. To me, it's a true story. Parts of it can be documented, I imagine. Somewhere in the archives of a Pennsylvania courthouse would be a copy of the will of an Edward MacFunn Biddle III.

It is true that I used his money to buy a pale blue Pontiac and I suppose somewhere, in some Department of Motor Vehicles, would be records indicating that I registered such a car in the spring of 1956.

And I know it is true that I once, as a small child in my grandfather's library, memorized *Thanatopsis*. I would never have done so as an adolescent or an adult. It's a hideous poem, boring, sanctimonious, and didactic. But I know it still, though I have to fumble now for some of the words—and when I recite it, I find myself closing my eyes in order to make myself invisible, and I feel myself wearing pajamas with feet.

But memory is such a treacherous thing. When I was asked for a title for this address, I lifted a phrase — bright streets — from e.e.cummings, out of context. The complete line is

*Down the brittle treacherous bright streets  
of memory comes my heart*

So often we remember childhood as a continuous bright street of cheerful pleasure, the bright street where we roller-skated over a geography

of sidewalks memorized by our feet. The softball games at sunset, the smell of fresh-baked oatmeal cookies, the soft voices of mothers, the stern-but-just wisdom of fathers, and endless summer days – the nights flickering with fireflies - and the clean sheets at bedtime.

We forget the dark paths that all children must travel as well.

Let me tell you another story. I have often mentioned to friends how glad I am that I was born on the island of Oahu, so that my first memories have been of rainbows and the scent of flowers—that those things became part of the earliest part of me. I have over the years so many times told friends—and family—that I remembered being barefoot on the beach there—barely walking, so young—with that warm blue water beside me...

In 1985, with my father's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday approaching, I once again was wringing my hands, trying to think of a gift for a man who neither needed nor wanted anything. I remembered the old home movies. We hadn't watched them in years. As children, it had always been a great treat when we could talk Daddy into getting out the movie projector—(it seems so long-ago now, in the world of videotapes)—there were always hoots of laughter when we could talk him into running the films backwards, so that the scene where Mother poured milk from a pitcher into our glasses became

hilariously reversed, with the milk leaping from our glasses back into the pitcher.

I took the reels of film—some had simply disintegrated; they hadn't been out of their containers in years, and some dated back to 1935—and had what still remained transferred to videotape, and gave them to my father as a birthday gift.

I had a separate copy made for myself. And one evening, when some friends were over for dinner, I showed the videotape to them. There was the brief scene—probably no more than 30 seconds—of the child playing on the beach. She has a shovel in her hand, and wears a kind of sun bonnet, which the breeze is catching, so that again and again she reaches up to hold the hat back down over her blonde hair. The film is in color—unusual then, for home movies—and the color has faded; but still, the ocean and sky are the bluest of blues. The sky is cloudless. But there is a mist on the horizon, shrouding the outline of an island there.

The scene changed, and now the little girl, with her sister, is watering flowers in the garden of their Honolulu home.

A friend sitting in my living room said, suddenly, "Are you sure that was Waikiki? The beach scene? Are you sure that was Honolulu? It didn't look like it to me.

"There's an island," she said. "And if you stand on the beach at Waikiki, there are no islands in the distance."

"It has to be," I said. I was, actually, quite certain. My mother had often complained that during the years that we lived in Hawaii—1937 to 1940—our family had never travelled much. We had gone to none of the other islands, or even very far from our home in Honolulu. Travel of course was more difficult then; you didn't simply hop on a plane, as you do now.

But I paused the VCR and the little girls stood frozen and blurred, wearing their pale blue dresses, holding their watering cans, in front of the hibiscus bushes.

Then I rewound the tape, and we looked again at the child holding her hat against the breeze. There was the beach. And the island on the horizon, shrouded in that mist.

And this time, we could see that it did not have the soft, lush shape of a tropical island. It was angular—geometric. My friend John, a former Naval officer once stationed in Honolulu, looked carefully. "It's a ship," he said at last, after we re-ran the tape several times. "It's a battleship.

"I think it might be the Arizona," he said.

A silence fell, in my living room.

We were watching a little girl play on a beach in 1940. Behind her, hidden, shrouded and obscured, floating in that idyllic, still-blue sea, was a ship that held 1200 young men. They would all be dead, soon.

I think, as adults looking at childhood, we tend to see the child playing in the sand: the scene that makes us say "ahhhh" with a sense of nostalgia. Perhaps we need to look more carefully—more honestly—at what floats there on the horizon.

Sometimes, though, I am seduced by children . Beguiled into believing that they are, today, exactly as I was, once....

Often, when talking to junior high age kids, I read them a particular passage from one of my books. I do it in order to illustrate a particular point about writing fiction — at least that's what I tell them, and it's partially true — but I do it also because junior high is a tough crowd. They shuffle into the auditorium with an "Entertain me, lady, because I am soooo bored" attitude — and I've become aware, over the years, that this particular passage wakes them up, just a little; it makes them chuckle and punch each other — and it makes them think for a moment, at least, that maybe they can survive the assembly without falling asleep.

Here's the passage (this is from the book *AUTUMN STREET*, an autobiographical novel, this section told from the point of view of a six-year-old girl who is speaking about her newborn brother):

*Of Gordon's few baby skills there was only one that I admired. Sometimes, when Mama bathed him, I watched as he lay squirming and naked in her arms; and sometimes he peed into the air, high and arched like a rainbow...*

*"I wish I could do that," I confided in Mama. She smiled.*

*"Well," she said, "you're a girl. Girls can't do that.," I already knew that they couldn't. I had tried myself, privately, in the bathtub, and met with humiliating failure.*

*"Can Daddy do that?" I asked.*

*"Goodness," said Mama, "I suppose he could."*

*"My friend Charles can."*

*"Elizabeth! You haven't—"*

*I caught my error quickly. "Oh, no. I haven't seen him do it. But I meant that I suppose all boys can."*

*But I was lying. I had seen Charles do it, often, behind the lilacs. He aimed at ants.*

One time I had read that passage to a large auditorium full of 13 and 14 year olds in Seattle. After the assembly, there was a book sale, and they were milling around buying books to be signed. I could see a girl standing to the side. She reminded me of myself when I was her age. I felt that I could read her mind and that I could predict what would happen. She was shy, gawky, something of an outsider; and I was thinking that when the other kids had all finished and gone away, then she would come to me and and, looking down at the floor, would say, "I want to be a writer."

I was preparing, in my mind, the sensitive, helpful things I would say to her. My gift to her of wisdom and compassion.

And indeed, when the other kids had finished shoving and laughing and had dispersed, she did make her way over to me.

She glanced down at the piles of books, and then asked, smirking, "Which was the one about penis envy?"

My mother, in the final year of her life, when she was blind and bedridden, liked to reminisce with me. Perhaps she had told me many of the same stories from her childhood when I was young—but then, eager to grow

up, bored with family lore, I had only half-listened. Now I paid attention as she described those same bright streets.

"My best friend was (she named the child). My brother and I played with her and her brother every day. They lived next door," she told me. "Their father was a professor at the college. Math, I think. Maybe chemistry." I nodded, listening to her, enjoying watching her reminisce, marveling at her memory that was going back now probably eighty years.

"But he beat them," she said suddenly.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"He would come home every evening and go out in the yard and cut a switch from a tree," she said. "And then he would whip the children with it. We could hear them yelling. My mother would close the windows on that side of the house.

"Isn't that odd?" she said. "That we never said anything? I suppose today it would be called child abuse."

I agreed with her that it was odd, and sad, and startling. Privately I was thinking: that quiet street. Those large, lovely houses. All of those closed windows.

"And of course you know about the three dead children," my mother went on, warming to the task of recalling horrors.

"Remind me," I said.

"The Babes in the Woods," she said.



Oh. Of course I remembered. Their grave was in the town cemetery, near my grandmother's. Three little girls, nameless, unidentified, their bodies found in the woods beyond our peaceful little town, lying neatly in a row. "Babes in the Woods," the sentimental tombstone was engraved. As a child, I used to stand in front of the headstone, picturing the sweet children; I assumed they had blonde curls—starving to death? freezing to death?—I wasn't certain, but imagined something quiet, painless, and picturesque.

It was long before I was born. Back when my mother was young. Now—now that I was adult, able to hear the truth—she told it to me from her bed in the nursing home. The girls had, eventually, been identified. It was a tawdry tale worthy of a second-rate magazine: a married woman ran off with her lover, and they took the kids. They weren't even little curly-haired blondes. They were adolescents, probably sullen and angry. Not surprisingly, they became a nuisance.

*"They bumped them off,"* my 86-year-old mother described, with a tsk-tsk sound, and I found myself smiling at the way her speech had turned into paperback-thriller stuff, dialogue right out of Dashiell Hammett. Lying there with her snow white hair and her gentle blue eyes, she sounded, suddenly, like Humphrey Bogart as Sam Spade. *"Bumped them off,"* she repeated.

A few years ago, my brother and I went back together, to that small town, and walked its streets. We peered into the windows of our grandparents' house. I told Jon that I remembered standing on tiptoe in one of the upstairs bedrooms, looking into a bassinet to view him, my newborn brother, when I was five. Now he was standing beside me on the porch of the empty house—it belonged, now, to the college, and was unused during the summer.

"Smaller," we agreed. It had shrunk, we told each other.

My brother and I stood for a moment, on our trip back to Pennsylvania, in front of a funeral home. The last time we had stood there together was 1962, and our sister's body lay inside. Jon was in college, and I was a college dropout, a young wife and new mother. We had been summoned to Pennsylvania by her death. We were young, and sad, and uncertain, then; and I think we were probably both frightened by the sudden awareness of how tenuous everything was: how easily it could slip away. The immutability, the permanence of everything, seemed to dissipate on the day our sister died. It was as if the raised cracks in the sidewalk, the places we had learned to roller-skate over, had suddenly shifted and heaved again,

without warning; and now we had to look at what had been thrust upward and dislodged, had to learn how to find our footing again.

So much for the sanctity of my idyllic childhood. My town—its bright streets truly a treacherous memory—was filled with very dark paths. So was yours. And even more, so are those of today's children.

Kids write to me and ask, "Are you married? Do you have children? Do you have a dog?" and then—because always, when we ask someone to tell their story, it is because we want to tell our own—they go on to describe their own lives: how they move from house to house, to a trailer, to an apartment, to a grandmother's; and their tangled family trees, crowded with step-siblings, jailed uncles, cousins gone to foster care, pregnant teenage sisters, deadbeat dads.

One child wrote that her parents were defrosted. Just a slip of the pen, surely. She must have meant divorced. But for a moment, reading her sweet letter—in which she asked if we could be friends—I pictured them

melting, actually, their bodies sliding out of the stalwart, solid posture of parenthood into an oozing, useless puddle on the floor.

Each of us here today has chosen the way in which we will be a friend to children.; the gifts that we will give to them. The way I have chosen is to write stories. For all of us, it is our stories, as we tell them to each other, which explain the complex and tangled patterns that human lives and relationships create. They allow us to forgive ourselves for the messes we make of things; to comfort ourselves in the pain of the things we can't control. And through fiction—through stories—most of all, we remind ourselves that we are not alone in the difficult journeys we all undertake.

In 1975 — age 38, in case you haven't been counting — by now I was living in Maine, had gone back to college, and to graduate school — and had paid attention in classes this time around, and had given up both beer and cigarettes — I woke up one fall morning and the smell in the air, a smell of dry leaves and late apples — reminded me of a day twenty nine years before. My father, newly home from the war, had taken me — just me, not my sister or my brother — on an outing. We were new and unfamiliar to each other, and we were tentative with our affection.

I sat down — using the same typewriter that he had given me; it was old by now, and battered, but it still worked — and wrote a story about that day.

It began with the words *"It was morning, early, barely light, cold for November; I was nine, and the war was over. In the car, I sat next to the stranger who was my father —"*

The story was quite short. The time spanned was no more than a few hours. It told of a child and her father who wanted to love each other, and who each made a sacrifice so that that could happen.

He had taken me hunting. He had a gun. I was terrified.

He gave me a crow call...a little wooden instrument that mimicked the sound of the crows. I was to blow in it, when he directed me, and the crows would rise out of the trees, and he would shoot them.

There is a little dialogue as they walk up the hill that smells like dry leaves and leftover apples.

"Were you scared in the war, Daddy?" the child asks.

"Sometimes I was," he replies.

"What were you scared of?"

"Of hurting someone," he says. "Of being hurt."

Then he asks: "Are you scared sometimes?"

The child nods.

"Are you scared now?" he asks.

She nods again. "Of your gun," she whispers.

When the time comes, at the top of the hill, he nods to her and she puts the crow call to her mouth and blows into it. And from all the trees rise crows. The air is filled with their noise.

But there is no noise of a gun. When the child turns to look, her father has laid his gun against a rock, and he is watching her. He is smiling.

She reaches over and takes his hand. Some other day, on some other hill, he will fire the gun. But for now, on this day, they are simply quiet there together.

That story was published for adults. An editor who read it wrote to me and said, "You should be writing for kids."

I've done so ever since. 27 books now. Every one takes a fictional child on a difficult journey.

I do that so that real children with their own journeys to make will have fellow travelers.

Two of my best known books are called Number the Stars and The Giver.

Number the Stars begins on a bright street: a child running happily with her friend down one of the streets of Copenhagen, that lovely city. It concludes with the same child making her frightened way down a dark path through woods, with Nazi soldiers searching for her. She comforts herself on that journey by repeating in her mind a fairy tale, one with a happy ending.

The Giver begins with a boy on a bicycle, riding through the clean and safe streets of his community to the dwelling where he lives with his happy, cheerful, busy family. It concludes with the same boy riding a bicycle at night—hiding by day—for many miles, through terrible danger. He saves himself—quite literally saves himself; warms and nourishes himself and finds courage—by recalling the stories from the past that have been told to him by an old man.

Comfort, warmth, nourishment, courage: This is the power that stories have.

A friend who is a child psychologist says this: "There is only one thing worse than feeling hopeless, helpless, and worthless. And that is feeling hopeless, helpless, worthless, and *alone*."

My mother's little friend, whipped each night by her father, went out each morning and was greeted by neighbors—including my own grandmother—who had closed their windows against the sound. How alone that child must have felt. How helpless.

She would have had books in her home, for certain. The same father who whipped her was also, after all, a college professor. But what would her books have been? Elsie Dinsmore? Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm? There was no resource or comfort in the young people's fiction of that time.

Sure, there were books eighty years ago in which children were whipped: but they deserved it; they were bad children, or so it seemed in those moralistic books of the past. What comfort for the child who suffered at random? But today that child has books in which pain can find solace and companionship and perhaps healing.

Some years back, a cousin who was interested in geneology sent me a lengthy family tree from my father's side of the family. I looked through it with interest because my daughter was expecting a baby and was thinking about names.



I discovered, to my surprise, that my father had once had a brother who died as a child. I had known his two sisters - I had been named for them both: my aunts Lois, and Ann - but I had never heard of a brother.

"Yes," he acknowledged, when I asked him. "He died of meningitis."

"But that must have been terrible for you! You've never mentioned it."

"Well," he said, "people didn't talk about things like that. You just tried to put it out of your mind."

I pictured my father as a little boy in a stern, silent Wisconsin household, instructed to put out of his mind the fact that his brother was dead. How helpless he must have felt. How alone.

Books? Yes, he had books. Horatio Alger - he had told me that he read those, as a child. Small help there, for a child's grief.

(I wish I could tell you that my daughter named her newborn son for that long-ago lost child, and that my father was pleased and touched. But his brother's name had been Sidney Alonzo. My daughter named her son James.)

My first little boy was named Grey. It was a family name, one I always liked—and he did, too, when he was older and had outgrown wanting to be Greg like several of his friends.

Grey was an ironic name for a colorful kid, and he was that: even physically, with bright gold-blond hair, and blue, blue eyes. He did everything well, with eagerness and style: he rode horseback and skied and played tennis and yes, charmed women when he was old enough... He dated movie actresses and drove sports cars and flew planes; and he made what he called his world-famous, highly-respected lasagna, and he laughed a lot; and eventually he married a lovely young woman, not a movie actress, and together they had a little girl.

The reason I speak about Grey is because I want to close by reading you a letter I once received from him. He was a fighter pilot at the time, stationed in Germany; and on weekends he traveled around Europe, demonstrating the F-15 at air shows. This letter followed such a show in England

*.....I had gone first, so I was finished flying and was walking around, still in my flight suit, carrying my helmet, heading for the VIP tent for a cup of coffee.*

*It was a typical English day, cloudy, drizzling occasionally. But there were thousands of people there...the Brits really love their air shows.*

*People kept stopping me and asking me to sign their programs.  
(Sometime, Mother, you'll have to explain this autograph thing to me. What do they do with these autographs?)*

*While I was signing one for someone, I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, a little boy about eight years old watching me,. He was holding his program, and his parents were nudging him to come forward to get an autograph, but he kept shaking his head and looking at the ground. He was too shy.*

*So I said to him, "Would you like me to sign your program?" and he said, "Oh, please, sir."*

*And (although I'd been managing just fine, doing a juggling act, up till then), I said, "Would you mind holding my helmet for me while I sign my name?"*

*He took my helmet, and I signed his program, which only took a second, and then I glanced back at him and saw that he wasn't looking at me, but at my helmet in his arms. He was stroking it as if it were made of the finest crystal.*

*I was almost overwhelmed with the sudden awareness of what that helmet meant to him... what I symbolized to him...that I was a hero to that little boy, and to others like him.*

*And I found myself saying, as I took my helmet back, "You know, I think I wore out my gloves on today's flight, and I'll have to get new ones. Would you like to have these?"*

*He said, "Oh, yes, please, sir."*

*And I gave him my (perfectly good) pair of gloves and said good-bye.*

*As I walked away, I thought, "Lowry, you jerk, those were \$75 gloves."*

*But throughout the rest of the day, walking around, occasionally I saw that little boy. All day long he was wearing the gloves....they were enormous on his little hands.*

*And each time I saw him, I thought how lucky I was to have had that encounter with that child. I think most people go through their whole lives without ever having a moment like that, when they become aware of what they represent....*

My son's life was much too short. There came a spring day when he kissed his wife and baby girl goodbye and went out on a routine flight. But

there was a mechanical problem in the plane, and his life ended that morning.

In the aftermath of that tragedy there was, of course an investigation, and eventually I was given the official report, which included a transcript of the communication between my son and the second pilot with whom he was flying in formation.

Down the side of the page, numbers mark off the time in seconds.

At 8:26:09 my son said to his fellow pilot: "You're on your own."

8:26:10

11

12

13

14

15

At 8:26:16 my son's plane crashed and exploded.

I think often about those seven seconds in which my son knew that he was about to die. Time would have slowed for him then, the way we've all felt it slow when our car skids on black ice and things happen in a dreamlike and liquid way, and for those brief endless moments none of it matters any

more—it is all beyond our understanding or control. What would his thoughts have been in that blurred, silent, frozen slice of time?

I would like to think that it all came back to him then, and came together in a continuum: and that he could feel the hands that steadied him on his first bike; and his own child's hands when she reached out toward him and took her first steps; and the hands of the little boy who put on the enormous gloves that my son gave him as a gift.

How we all touch each other while we wait for what happens next.

Down those treacherous bright streets and the dark paths today's children travel, they need our companionship, our respect, our outstretched hands. I salute you all today who have gathered here this week to find the best ways to make those lasting gifts.

Thank you.