

June Nelson Memorial Scholarship Essay

My life is indeed a series of stories; I've never been more aware of it than now. In December, my father and brother and sister passed away in sudden and unexpected plane crash. Now, my mother and brother are in the midst of a new story, a story with lots missing.

Their deaths are too soon and the time in between then and now is too short for me to speak with any clarity on how the experience of grief is shaping me. However, I do know that the lives of Dad and Zach and Kaitlyn shaped me profoundly. All the stories I can tell with them are sweet, precious things to me now and as I remember them each seems so full and real and rich. As a family, we loved so well together; I can truly say as I have no regrets. One of my favorite stories with Dad was this fall.

In October, Dad and I went on a moose hunt. We woke up well before the sun arose, ate a hurried breakfast, and pitched all the gear into a trailer. Down on the beach, half a dozen headlights dotted the water. As light crept into the sky, four boats made their way up Lake Clark.

When we reached the head of the lake, Dad and I were disappointed to find our jet boat didn't work. Even though we couldn't go up the river to hunt like planned, we made camp and looked for moose. That night, we made a fire on the beach and talked late into the night about things that matter—being a leader, college, leaving an impact my last months—as the sun went down over the lake. Sitting by the fire, deep in thought, his face lit by the flames and his pipe—that's how I remember my dad.

The next afternoon we were both surprised and pleased to see our friends returning from the river with a load of moose they had killed the afternoon before. We took their boat, leaky like a screen door, and blazed up the river like we wanted to the day before. Moose were plentiful the farther up the river we went, and I kept my eyes peeled with binoculars as we cruised past trees, mountains, and sloughs. Dad loved jetboating on rivers, and that also how I remember him: at the tiller, eyes scanning the river, face set hard against the icy spray, in love with adventure.

That night, we stopped at a sand bar to set up camp. As we ate dinner, we sat by the river and listened to the mosquitoes and water. To our great excitement, we heard something across the river, a great snapping of brush. Out stepped a moose. Running back to camp, we grabbed our gear and hopped in the boat in pursuit. We slid up onto the sandy bank and I leapt out, running into the woods with Dad close behind. There, 120 yards off, sat our moose. It didn't know what to do, but I did. Pulling up my .300, I took aim. It was quite literally a bullseye—I shot it right through the eye, and it went down like a sack of potatoes. We were there until two in the morning, removing every scrap of meat from the moose. Dad, cutting away by the light of our headlamps and moon, both our eyes heavy with exhaustion—that's how I remember him.

That moose hunt was the product of my resignation from cross country that season. I had a great career as team captain three years in a row and state qualifier the year before, but for whatever reason all desire for cross country that season left me that. When I quit, I was left with two months' worth of free afternoons and weekends I filled with fishing and hunting. And I'm very glad: the times I went fishing and hunting were important.

Dad and Kaitlyn and Zach left such gaping holes everywhere they were. Zach had so much laughter. Kaitlyn had so much grace. My dad had great wisdom and love. I move to the future challenged and humbled by them. The road of grief is a hard place to walk, but I also move to the future with hope. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, I know they are with their God in heaven, and there is no pain in the presence of God. Beyond everything, I move forward with great hope and expectation.