

## Sand Dollars Gracing a Shore Within Reach

*Brian J. Fogg*

"HEY, BRIAN!" DAD LEANED into my room. "Be ready to leave in about thirty minutes."

"Fine," I replied, not worried that I hadn't even begun to pack. I rummaged through my drawers and closet and threw what I needed onto my bed.

I was looking forward to this family retreat at Pajaro Dunes: no phone calls, no visitors, no errands—and for Dad, no hospital rounds or church meetings. A week with just family and a sleepy stretch of Pacific coastline. That strip of sand on Monterey Bay not only had sentimental value—vacationing at Pajaro was a family tradition—but it also soothed me, gave me perspective.

As I finished stuffing my backpack with red sweats, old sneakers, and a small flashlight, I thought how different things might have been. I could have been packing to go work on a Third World relief project. While traveling abroad a few years back, I had run into Peace Corps workers building aqueducts in Thailand, studying leech disease in Malawi, teaching village crafts outside of Calcutta. The volunteers were articulate and idealistic; I was impressed.

Ever since high school, I had been prepared for the interview question that no one ever asked: "What one word best describes you?" I had the answer planned: "*Visionary*," I would say, with just enough hesitation for effect. Then I would explain that I was able to see how things should be, how they could be.

I carried my pack out to the van—the "Love Van" my brothers and I called it, deepening and inflecting our voices on the word *love*. We mocked its opulence: the multiple cassette players, the carpeted ceiling, the VCR, and the back seat that folded down into a bed at the

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touch of a button. When my parents bought it, I had laughed and rolled my eyes. They retaliated, threatening to send it back to school with me. Never. I felt as rich and empty as cotton candy every time the shag carpet oozed up between my toes.

It was all that “stuff,” like the Love Van and the endless choices at Albertson’s, that had led me to the Peace Corps idea. But when investigating, I found obstacles: first, I had no skill to share; I wasn’t an engineer, an epidemiologist, or an agronomist. At that time I was simply a pre-med student with a strong interest in Third World medicine. And I knew idealism alone didn’t relieve the poor and hungry. Next, the commitment was for two years. That meant delaying graduation, which meant delaying medical school. But I later changed my major, dropped my plans for medical school, and filed the Peace Corps pamphlets away. No, the Peace Corps wasn’t for me, but the idea of saving the world was.

When I walked back into the house, Mom asked me to pack our new Christmas games. I found them, *Scruples* and *Trivial Pursuit*, behind Dad’s chair in the study.

Two years earlier, Dad had sat in this same study chair while I tried to talk him into going on a summer relief project, maybe to Guatemala or Peru. I told him how I wanted to start working in Third World development. His skills as an eye surgeon would be in demand, and I could go along as his assistant. Although Dad was less enthusiastic than I’d hoped, he did say he could arrange to take three weeks off—maybe a month—to go with me. But I had to do the research and make the preparations.

Dad called me the next week at school to say he was sending an article he’d clipped from an ophthalmology magazine. A group called Seva Foundation was doing cataract surgeries in Nepal. The article described how people in remote Himalayan villages had no idea that a routine cataract operation would allow them to see again. A thirty-minute miracle.

I imagined how Dad and I could bring new light to the people of Nepal. I made phone calls and wrote letters. Seva Foundation was interested in Dad’s help and would allow me to go along as an assistant. But they wanted at least a two-month commitment.

I phoned Dad. “But Brian,” he said, “there is just no way I can drop my responsibilities at work and at church for two months.” My face burned. How could he deny those people his skills and their vision? If he couldn’t go, then I would—by myself.

"All right, Mom," I said. "The games are packed; the food's in. Anything else?"

"Just make sure all the doors are closed so we can turn on the alarm."

Once in the van, I thought how simple it was to pack now that we no longer had seven kids to get ready. Dad backed out of the driveway and headed for the house of my oldest sister, Linda. She and her family were going with us to Pajaro.

After I abandoned the relief project options, I signed up for a pre-medical internship in Mexico. But, as far as actually serving the Mexican people and making an impact in the world, my stay there was a disappointment. Because I was untrained, I spent most of my time just watching the doctors and medical students.

My frustration at being unable to help peaked the morning I went to the university hospital to check the day's operation schedule. A team of surgeons were working frantically on a gunshot victim—a husky man of thirty-five. Every organ inside his chest and abdomen was exposed; he looked like one of those take-apart mannequins in anatomy classes. The doctors had been working since 3 A.M. trying to repair the internal injuries. One of the interns whispered to me in Spanish, "We're not sure if he was shot with five or with six bullets. Anyway, he'll probably die. We had another case just like him last week."

Although I was right next to the surgeons, I felt like I was watching a drive-in movie, as if I weren't there at all. The scrub nurses used rags to soak up the blood that pooled in the chest cavity and then wrung red streams into a stainless steel bucket on the floor. Like bailing out a sinking ship. The bouncing green spark on the monitor slowed—then went flat. When no one was watching, I changed back into my street clothes and went home early.

At Linda's house, Mom and the girls started repacking the van while Dad and I went to find Linda. I didn't like this house. Scarred by tenants long since gone, it smelled of wet dogs and stale cigarettes. We walked in without knocking and found Linda on the kitchen floor, huddled against the cabinet below the sink with her left arm resting on the open dishwasher. She tried to wipe away her running mascara when she saw us. "We've had a hard morning," her husband explained. "Brittany's got an infection in her broviac. Her white count's down. May need to put her in the hospital. I don't see how we can go with you guys to Pajaro."

Dad sat down on the floor with Linda. Her new baby, Garrett, played happily in his wind-up swing. Three-year-old Brandon was using the couch for a trampoline. Brittany, a serious five-year-old, worked intently on the carpet with crayolas and a coloring book.

I walked back out to the van and told Mom it looked like we'd be there a while. She and the girls headed into the house; I stayed outside and walked down the curb, balancing myself with arms outstretched to stay out of the gutter. I looked at the sky. There seemed little chance that the fog and chill would lift from the San Joaquin Valley today. Finally, I struggled with what was going on inside.

Our family first worried about broviacs and white counts when Gregory, my youngest brother, was diagnosed with leukemia at age three. We then filled our lives with family vacations and looked to the future with hope, with faith, and with resolve. A General Authority gave Gregory a blessing that reassured us. We would defy the odds and beat leukemia. Yes, with God's help we would win. We had the faith. And I believed.

But after four years Gregory had a relapse. He then moved toward death like a raft toward a waterfall. Our only chance was a risky bone-marrow transplant. We tested family members to find a donor. Linda was a perfect match for Gregory; the eldest child would give new life to the youngest. But after a seemingly endless summer at the UCLA Medical Center, Gregory's body simply couldn't survive the treatment any longer. It just gave out. We returned home without him, shattered, distraught.

For the next two years, we tried to repair the damage. Then, unexpectedly, this rare disease—with no genetic link—struck again. Linda's oldest child, Brittany, was diagnosed with leukemia. "We've had our trial already," I anguished. Yet this time it was even worse: We now had no illusions about chemotherapy—the hair loss, the mood swings, the weight gain, the overwhelming damage the treatment caused to produce such a specific and precarious good. This time around, we would not only witness Brittany's pain, but also relive Gregory's.

To get the right treatment for Brittany, Linda and her husband, Brent, decided to move from Las Vegas to Fresno. Brent had multiple job offers, but the corporate health insurance wouldn't transfer. Because Gregory's bill had reached nearly a half-million dollars, Linda and Brent knew what a major consideration insurance was. Finally, Brent decided to commute between Las Vegas and Fresno for the next nine very long months of treatment. Their young family was torn apart by disease, geography, and insurance agencies that refused to cooperate.

They held onto the hope that after Christmas, with most of Brittany's chemotherapy over, they could move back to Las Vegas and live under the same roof. Visiting Pajaro Dunes just before the move was to be a much-needed respite from doctors' offices and U-Haul outlets.

I opened the front door and looked around Linda's living room. For the last few days, I'd been helping Linda pack. Cardboard boxes filled the room, just as I had left them. I heard my parents' muffled voices in the kitchen. Not knowing what else to do, I taped up a box and started packing again. Slowly, reflectively, I wrapped a porcelain vase in clear cellophane bubbles, as if the whole world depended on that vase arriving in Vegas without breaking. I carried the sealed box out to the garage.

On my way back through the kitchen, I saw Dad still on the floor with his arm around Linda. They weren't saying anything, just sitting. Linda leaned her head against Dad's. He took his glasses off, set them on the floor, and wiped his eyes. The scene was troubling and yet somehow comforting. I'd never seen Dad like that until Gregory got sick, and then he'd often hold Mom. They'd just stand, motionless, while the world walked by.

I sat on Linda's couch and watched Brittany race her crayon back and forth across a page. Finally Linda said, "I'm sorry. I wish I weren't such a boob about all this." She wiped her hand across her eyes and tried to laugh. "It's just that I'm so . . . so disappointed."

We talked for a while and decided that Brandon should give the couch (and his mother) a break and go with us in the van. But Brandon didn't want to go to the beach anymore. "Hey, buddy," I struggled to muster some enthusiasm, "go get your boots so we can find some sand dollars on the beach!" I got him dressed, while his dad packed a suitcase, then raced him out to the van. We drove away with little hope that the rest of Linda's family would be able to join us. They promised to phone us at the beach.

I rode in the back seat with Brandon. My sister Becky listened to her Walkman while miming her high school cheerleading routines. Kim stared out the window. I thought a lot about healing, about relieving suffering, about what was going on at Linda's house. I had become aware only recently of the way my parents reached out and shared heavy burdens. They hadn't built any aqueducts in Thailand, but I was now seeing how effective their simple ways were.

A few weeks before, Mom had selected a needy family for our annual Sub-for-Santa project. And as usual, just a few days before Christmas, the shopping still needed to be done. Mom handed me

some money and a list of names and ages and asked if I would take my sisters to Toys-R-Us. I wasn't very excited about the idea. Over the years, our Sub-for-Santa ritual had seemed to me a token effort at best, one to soothe my parents' consciences. Besides, I had no idea what to buy kids age six, nine, eleven, and sixteen.

But once at the store, Kim and Becky—high school girls who insisted on designer labels—caught the vision. I followed them from aisle to aisle as they discussed why a radio would be better than a chemistry set or wondered if the youngest would rather have toy trucks or teddy bears. We stayed longer than we'd planned.

Back at home, Kim and Becky wrapped the gifts without being asked. After adding food for Christmas dinner and putting it all in a big box, we went to play Santa in secret. Sure, I was happy to help another family have a better Christmas, but I then realized another purpose of the project: I could see the change in my sisters.

Just out of Los Banos, Dad began to nod at the wheel. "You want me to drive?" I volunteered.

But he continued on until the San Luis Reservoir, when Mom finally insisted, "Come on, Gary. Let Brian drive. Climb in the back and take a nap."

I drove up into the hills. As the van crossed over Pacheco Pass, we left the last of the valley fog and found the crisp winter sun. Mom handed me carrot sticks and Triscuits at regular intervals until we reached the coast.

We checked in at Pajaro Dunes and pulled up to our assigned beach house: Shorebirds, Number 21. Mom hesitated as we approached the door. "We were in this unit when we found out that Brittany had leukemia," she said. "I remember how hard it rained that night. We had to pack up and go home after we'd been here only a few hours."

I was at school when they made that trip, but Mom's memories were hard for me to deal with. Perhaps it would be best if the rest of Linda's family didn't come to the beach after all.

After unloading the van, I walked out onto the balcony and leaned against the weathered wood railing. Watching the white crests build, fall, and roll, I tried to absorb the warmth of the late-afternoon sun. The tide was out, the beach wide and deserted. I could remember my first time at Pajaro, about twenty years before. I thought about how things had changed—how *I* had changed again and again; yet the waves and the sand were the same.

Mom interrupted my thoughts. "Linda just called. They're on their way. The doctor thought Brittany would be okay here until the weekend."