***Danielle’s Prayer***

The “8-pack,” a moniker given to my seven younger siblings and me by my brother Rollie, suffered immense abuse during our childhood. My sister Katrina, in fact, never planned on growing up, certain that she would be killed by Ma before achieving adulthood. However amazing, we all did survive the extensive physical abuse (e.g., being stabbed, thrown into walls, kicked into unconsciousness, pulled down flights of stairs by the hair, and much more), emotional abuse (e.g., being negatively compared with each other, denigrated at every opportunity, and, in one instance, forced to sit on the stairs for hours, expecting to be deliberately set on fire at any moment), and sexual abuse (various male relatives had their way with both the boys and the girls). We had each other for support: the 8-pack was very important to all of us in an age when neighbors and teachers looked the other way. Remarkably, contrary to what most of today's psychologists would expect, we reached adulthood without any lasting evidence of physical abuse or any significant emotional scars.

After coming to faith, I commented to God, “If only You had been with me during those earlier, difficult days, how much easier it would have been.” To that, a quiet, impressive Voice that always startles me when I hear it, responded “I *was* with you.” Had I only known!

That interchange reminds me of the experience of St. Anthony, the third-century desert father. As described in *The Life of Anthony of Egypt* by St. Athanasius, St. Anthony once hid in a cave to escape demons. The demons reached him anyway and seemed to have beaten him to death. His servant brought him out from the cave, and the other hermits prepared to mourn his passing when he unexpectedly revived and demanded that his servant return him to the cave. There he called out to the demons, who returned to attack him. This time, they were stopped by a bright light which Anthony knew to be the presence of God.

“Where were You before,” asked St. Anthony, “when the demons were beating me so badly?”

“I was here,” God replied. “I wanted to wait and see how well you fought for yourself.”

Telling this to Danielle as we walked about the moon-flooded Maine woods one night while visiting my brother Keith, I remarked that I found it unfathomable as to why we would be so protected by God. One can find any number of stories about children who did not survive abuse. Why should *we* receive special treatment? She looked at me curiously and said, "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" I asked.

"What all the rest of the 8-pack knew."

"What??"

"The very first thing I remember in my entire life—I think I was only two or three years old—was realizing what a predicament we were in, and I said a prayer: ‘Dear God, Dad is gone all the time, and Ma is a child. So, would You please raise us?’"

It took more than fifty years for me to learn about that prayer. Upon reflection, I believe that neither my siblings nor I were ever far from God’s sight, protection, intentions for our lives, or even the tendency to use us to help others. That could only have been the case if God had answered the prayer of a precocious toddler.

Why would I think that God answered that prayer? Because I am alive today, having survived a dangerously abusive childhood. Because my children are alive today in spite of two having been born with multiple birth defects so severe that doctors gave them little hope for survival, let alone the cheerful lives that they now lead. Because I have been chronically happy all my life when a person not protected by God might have attempted suicide. Because I am incurably optimistic even though I endured years of poverty and seven clinical deaths of my children. Because I can see where my siblings and I have been used for helping people in ways that we could not have accomplished alone.

And maybe mostly because I don’t know where the parachute has always come from when I have been in the process of falling off a cliff if it has not been being held out to me by God. I have always taken the parachute. I never used to say thank you because I did not think that there was Anyone to thank. At the same time, I never questioned that there would be a parachute if I needed it. It would appear that I had a tacit relationship with God on a subconscious level while totally oblivious to any sense of God in the conscious world—until the day of the grace.