

This past week on my way home from NY, I listened to an interview with Dr. Brian Green, professor of physics and mathematics at Columbia University, called *Reimagining the Cosmos*.¹ It was both mind-bending and fascinating for a lay person such as me, leaving me puzzling for days over the implications of the scientific realities and probabilities of which he spoke. One such implication had to do with the idea of free will. Dr. Green maps the world in mathematical equations, and he argues, based on these equations, that we do what we do based on the laws of physics, that we only have the sensation of choosing to do one thing or another. We think we are making choices but it is really the laws of physics playing themselves out, so essentially the idea of free will goes away. This proposal is hard to get our minds around because we are beings who like to think we're in control of our lives, that we operate with certain amount of freedom, that our lives are based on the choices we make, good and bad.

As I was bristling over the thought of losing free will, I was reminded of our reading from Romans, in which Paul vividly describes this almost unbearable internal struggle. He writes, "I do not understand my own actions...I don't do the good that I want to do but I do the evil that I don't want to do... it is the sin that lives in me that is doing it... I am a miserable human being."

Paul is describing what sounds like an internal war between doing what is right and what is wrong and the feeling of being a prisoner, captive, out of control and unable to choose the good he desires. Now Paul isn't talking about the laws of physics any more than Dr. Green is talking about sin, but as much as I was bristling about the idea of losing free will, Paul's reflections on the powerful, constraining grip of sin hit home. Who among us can't relate to this - to feeling mired, either now or at some point in our lives, in some destructive, disconnective pattern that we can't seem to break free from? I daresay all of us, if we're willing to admit it, have found ourselves saying at some point, "I don't understand what is going on. Why can't I do what I know I need to do? How did I get into this mess? Why can't I get out of it? The world with my help seems to be conspiring against me and I can't seem to do anything to stop it!."

This painful dynamic hit home in a powerful way when I read a blog post called "My Brother's Ghost,"² written by the sister of one of my best friends. Her name is Kelly. She wrote of her brother's death over 18 years ago from a heroine overdose. It is a day I remember all too vividly as I sat for who knows how long with my beloved friend Matt, her other brother, in the silent rage of his grief, shock and confusion on that day so many years ago.

Kelly's post is about the opioid epidemic, the proposed defunding of treatment and research, and the need to de-stigmatize addiction and substance abuse. But mostly it's the story of a brother and his family

struggling to do what is good against what seems like all odds and ending up staring death in the face—literally and tragically.

Kelly wrote, “I don’t like to talk about my brother’s death, mostly because it’s painful, but also it makes for an uncomfortable conversation, especially if I’m honest about the circumstances. There is a stigma associated with addiction and drug overdoses. More often than not, if someone asks me how he died, I will just say it was an accident to avoid having that conversation... Because we’re taught that addiction is something that we should be able to control—that it is a personal failing, addicts are criminals, they are not good people, it’s something to be ashamed of, something to hide... The truth is... addiction isn’t discriminatory. So now I feel that it is time to talk about what happened to Todd.”

“Todd was smart, athletic, handsome, charming, creative, and full of potential... He could, and would, talk to anyone. He liked people. He liked kids. He was great and patient with our elderly and ornery relatives. He was charismatic and fun, played guitar, and was never shy to perform in front of a crowd. Unfortunately, he inherited the addictive gene that cursed both sides of our family and he developed a degenerative disc problem, which also seems to run in the family. At an early age those two things collided and at some point, he lost control of them.”

“I can’t remember when Todd started having back problems, but it was sometime in his late teens... In total he had four or five surgeries. At times it seemed that Todd had a pharmacy in his room, he had so many prescription bottles... The first time Todd overdosed was on a combination of methadone and Percocet. I don’t know exactly at what point Todd turned to heroin...”

“He managed to function well enough to keep working for several years, but eventually it took over and he lost his job and then he got kicked out of where he was living. We were told that we had to practice ‘tough love’ and not to give in if he asked for money or a place to stay, otherwise we were just enabling him. They told us that he had to hit rock bottom before he would help himself. The hardest thing I ever had to do was turn him away on a cold night when he came to my house looking for a place to stay. I gave him an old sleeping bag. He said he had a friend he was going to try to meet up with. I know he was disappointed, but he didn’t get mad. I barely slept that night and when I woke up before dawn I knew he was outside my house. I looked out the window and there was his car parked in front of the house. I went outside. It was freezing. He was asleep in the backseat, wrapped in the sleeping bag. I brought him inside and cooked him breakfast...”

“Shortly after that Todd checked himself into detox and they kept him there for a week or ten days... He wanted to go into the county’s long-term residential treatment program called Crossroads, but there was a waiting list... While he was on the waiting list, he was required to go for weekly drug tests and attend AA and NA meetings, which he did for six weeks. For six weeks he was clean and the old Todd was back, but then one night something happened that made him give in and use one more time. My father found him in the basement early on a Saturday morning. He had been dead for several hours by then... We’ll never know what triggered him to shoot up that last night, but I can say there is no consolation in knowing that he had passed all the drug tests up to that point and that he was next on the list to get a bed. It’s heartbreaking to know that he came so close and we did everything that we were told that we should do and we still couldn’t save him... Todd died on March 13, 1999, one week before his 35th birthday.”

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... Wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Paul’s words never sounded more painfully, heart-wrenchingly true... What is to be done in the midst of such carnage? Where is their hope in this? If raging internal war and a battle of the wills is our reality, then how in the world can Paul then transition so abruptly, so jarringly, so gratefully into exuberant gratitude? “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul is here to tell us that this is not our reality. Paul points to our sin-enslaved world where addiction, depression, disease, violence, hatred, racism, poverty, injustice, and more run rampant, and reminds us that the antidote is not about making better choices with a little more will power courtesy of Jesus, because this is not about an internal struggle of individual will. Instead Paul is describing something that is cosmic in scope.³ This does not absolve us from individual responsibility, but it is of a different degree and magnitude altogether. He is describing sin, with a capital S, as invasively, systemically, aggressively cosmic in scope, and so the antidote is also cosmic in scope. In Christ Jesus, in his life, death, resurrection, “God sets the cosmos free from bondage and everything in it” – every living thing – “opening the way to liberation and life abundant.”⁴ That is the reality – this opening of the way – and so Paul can say, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

This opening is our reality, and it is in this opening where we stand, not alone, but with each other. In this opening, we feel each other’s pain, we celebrate each other’s joy, we join each other’s struggles, and we make way for the world to share with us in the way of liberation and life abundant. In this opening we

stand no longer ensnared by sin but forever embraced by the love of God – in life and in death ~ forever embraced by the love of God, so we too can say, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Amen.

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/brian-greene-reimagining-the-cosmos/>

² <https://restlessboundaries.wordpress.com/2017/07/05/my-brothers-ghost/>

³ Ted A. Smith. “Theological Perspective: Proper 9, Romans 7:15-25a,” *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*. Bartlett and Taylor, editors. 2011, pg. 210.

⁴ Smith.