

Derek's Journal

Forward

Derek began his Journal on January 22, 1997. His final entry was January 22, 1998. We do not know if he planned this or if it were happenstance because no one was allowed to read his writing until after his death on January 28, 1998.

With his advance permission, we have corrected spelling and typographical errors; otherwise the Journal is exactly as he wrote it.

Derek's writing needs no explanation. He is articulate, expressive, honest and direct. There is no question that he wanted to share his story.

We can only add our own commentary: Derek, we are grateful that you left us one more way by which to remember you. We find comfort in the realization that we really knew you. There were no surprises in your writing; you did not die a stranger to us. We are so glad that you knew how good you were, uncomplaining, brave, proud of yourself. And you even knew that, because we loved you so fully, we would grieve so profoundly.

As you requested, we make this Journal available, to honor your memory and pay tribute to your life. You have made a difference.

Derek Michael Sheckman died at home when he was eighteen years old. This Journal is a reminder of the value of life and beauty of spirit.

Sandy Sheckman and Peter Sheckman

February 1998

The Derek Sheckman Foundation has been established to perpetuate activities that honor Derek's memory. Donations may be sent to the Foundation, 10 Puritan Park, Swampscott, MA 01907

This journal is for all the people who know me and everyone that does not. It is for the members of my family, both immediate and distant. It is for all of my friends, old and young alike. It is for my teachers, mentors, and coaches. For my fellow teammates, Israel trip members and board members. It is for fellow classmates, club members, and class officers. It is for my doctors, surgeons, technicians, specialists, and nurses. It is for those who have been or who are cancer patients. It is for the young child or elderly person who was just diagnosed with a serious illness. It is for those who have or will experience surgery, from a simple tonsillectomy to a heart bypass. For those who have experienced the death of a loved one. It is for everyone and anyone. The intention is to inform and educate. It is to dispel any secrets, rumors, or misunderstandings. Ignorance is not bliss, rather knowledge is power. It is one chapter in a long and wonderful score. Here is my story.

January 22

So much has happened in the past few weeks. I don't know where to begin. It was the very first of the month when I began to have pain. It started as a what seemed a mere toothache - right lower tooth. I made a trip to the dentist and there he told me that I may have TMJ caused by grinding of my teeth at night. So he gave me a plastic mouthpiece and I wore it for a few nights. But the pain was getting worse each day. I felt confused, as I had never had this type of problem before. As the days passed, the pain slowly began to intensify. It was this weird feeling in my right jaw - an aching feeling and it was getting worse. I saw an ear, nose and throat specialist because I had also felt a sore throat earlier in the month. This did not go away either. My father, the doctor, became alarmed and decided to set up an MRI yesterday for me to rule out anything serious. It was the first time I have ever been in that machine - the MRI. It was kind of scary - They put in me in this small tunnel, where I could not move. And there were these loud banging noises. While I did not become claustrophobic, the whole thing just creeped me out. When it was over I was relieved - I thought I would never have to do that again.

I was in school today, calculus class to be exact, when the phone call came. I knew it was for me - I just knew it. I was told to go to the office where I found out I would need to go back to the MRI and have some follow up tests. Something was wrong. I could feel it in my bones and I could feel it in my jaw. So I went and had another MRI and they put contrast in my veins to help enhance the images. I was uncomfortable once again, but this time I was much more anxious, knowing that something was up. My father took me aside. I sat down in what seemed a rock hard chair. He told me today that there is a mass that has grown in the masseter space near my right jaw, causing the pain I have been experiencing. He said it could be benign or malignant, and would have to be removed by surgery. When I heard this, a million things raced through my head. Tears of fear engulfed my being and a dark malaise grew over my soul. The news hit me like a ton of bricks. Feelings of anger, rage, sadness, and fear overtook my very existence. I was scared out of my mind: scared of death, scared of what was to come, scared of the unknown.

January 23

I had several tests done today. We went to the Union Hospital in Lynn. I had a CAT scan of the head, neck, and chest. They made me drink this white chalky stuff - it tasted awful. It was another type of contrast. With all the advancements in medicine today, you would think they would think of a way to administer the contrast without having to drink awful white chalky liquid. They put an IV in and it was sore and uncomfortable. I was in what you might call a bad

mood. I was scared out of my mind. What was going on? Meanwhile the pain has gotten worse. I had trouble sleeping last night - from the pain and from the anxiety of yesterday's news. I have a bad feeling about all of this. Today all of my questions started to surface as I bombarded my dad with inquiries about this mass in my head. However, he could not provide much relief, as much of what was happening was just as new to him as it was to me. I missed school today. I haven't told anyone about what was happening. First because I was in no state to discuss it and second, there were still so many unanswered questions. The mass, or tumor as it is called may be benign or malignant. Could it be? No it couldn't be . . . cancer . . . could it? I also missed basketball practice - the coach is going to kill me. Somehow I have a feeling I'm not going to be playing for a while though. I thought a lot about Val lately. We have been fighting as of late and our relationship is about to end. All of a sudden, everything we have been fighting about is unimportant. I really love her and I need to tell someone about what is happening. The results of the tests today were encouraging. No sign of any other abnormalities or masses in my body.

January 28

I went back to school today. My close friends asked me where I've been and I just shrugged them off. The pain is getting worse every day, every hour, every minute. I started taking painkillers to take the edge off - couldn't drive to school. I'm hiding all of this from everyone - I don't know quite how to handle all of this. I can't go to basketball practice today - I'm in too much pain. I'm finding it very hard to sleep lately. This pain is unbearable at night. In fact the pain is unbearable during the day too. I have a real bad feeling about this.

January 29

Nothing new to report today. The last few days have been very nerve-wracking. I have never felt so confused or scared in my life. The worst part is that I myself don't know what's going on. It is a time of total and complete chaos. I'm experiencing pain that is indescribably awful and I don't know what the next step could be. Also, I can't tell anyone because . . . well because I don't want to tell anyone.

January 31

Had to come home from school early yesterday and I didn't even go today. The pain is so intense. I have a feeling people are suspecting something's up . . . and well they should. I probably haven't been acting myself lately. I've been a little preoccupied. I am beginning to be able to pinpoint the site of this pain. It seems to be coming from the right upper jaw - near the ear and right temple. When I touch it, there are shooting pains all down my face. My right lower lip is going in and out of being numb also. I have no idea why this is happening but it must somehow relate to this stupid mass I have floating around in my head. I can't believe this thing grew out of nowhere and is now engulfing my entire well being. I feel nauseous and tired - must be the pain causing it. If somebody doesn't do something soon I may burst . . . literally burst.

February 1

Can't write anything too substantial today - pain is unbelievably bad. It feels like someone is constantly hammering against my head. I can't even get up and walk around now.

School is long gone - haven't been there in what seems like ages. Can barely sleep and eating is near impossible. Can't write anymore. Gotta lie down and rest. I can't believe this is happening.

February 3

Went to see an otolaryngologist (ear, nose and throat) doctor- his name was Dr. Vavares at Mass General Hospital. He gave a quick examination and looked at my recent MRIs. When he returned he began to discuss my options. He said that I could let it grow until it eventually killed me or I could have it removed. I worried about this day ever since I found out what was in my body. He explained the removal procedure - a mandibular jaw split. An incision would be made from the lower lip down to the neck and then the jaw would be pulled away exposing the tumor, which would then be removed and my jaw shut back together. When he told me this, my stomach turned and I felt sick to my stomach. I glanced at my parents and began to cry - crying was not something that I did often. The only thing I could think of was that incision he described and the way it would make me look. I could not get it out of my mind. I felt like I was in some kind of movie and the "bad" music was playing - only it was real and incredibly scary. I thought to myself - it's not worth cutting up my face and then I rationalized it and realized this was my life we were talking about. The doctor explained that before any of this was done, they would need to biopsy the tumor, to be sure that it was benign as they suspected it would be. They would do a needle biopsy, going through my mouth and taking a piece of the tumor to analyze. If the tumor is benign, they would go ahead with the surgery to remove the mass at the same time. If the tumor is malignant, they could not remove it because attempting to take it out might cause more problems than I started with. If they pulled out a cancerous tumor, there is a large chance that the action alone would cause it to spread. I was told that the chances are that this mass would be benign, be removed and that would be the end of it. I hope to God that is all it is. I can't stop thinking about Valerie - I need to tell her how much I love her. Meanwhile, the pain is getting so intense. Sitting there listening to all of that was hard enough without this pain overtaking everything I do. The biopsy is set for Thursday. I need to tell everyone what's going on - I can't hide this anymore.

February 23

I can't believe what I'm about to say. I have cancer. I have recently learned that the mass that is growing is a rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare form of cancerous tumor. Rhabdomyosarcoma is a soft tissue tumor that arises from muscle cells. It can arise anywhere in the body, but is most common in the head and neck area. Rhabdomyosarcoma is extremely rare, as "there are fewer than five new cases for every one million children in the United States each year" (National Cancer Institute). The placement of my particular tumor is also extremely rare, located in the masseter space, behind the right jaw muscle, making me "one in a million". I think it will take some time to let the idea sink in. You see, when I first woke up from the anesthesia of the biopsy, I was not aware of what was going on. All I remember is asking my dad "did they get it out" and he said they had not. I remember feeling relieved that there would be no scar when I woke up. It was not until I was awake that I was told that I had cancer. In a way I was relieved. There were no scars and I finally knew what was causing my pain. I wanted to know right away how I would be treated, for how long, and what were my chances to live. My mind raced with so many emotions they could not be counted. I couldn't believe this was

happening. The first thing I thought of was me having no hair. I know, it is superficial, but I could not shake the image from my head. I was going to be one of those people. The kind of people you always saw and looked the other way. You felt bad for them but somehow scared of them also. That them is now me, the they are now I. I think of my childhood friend in elementary school who had cancer. He was out of school for so long and missed so much. He lost his friends and everything else. I remember not thinking too much of it at the time. I felt bad for him but was never that close to him. I was also very scared of the whole thing. Now I know that was because I was scared of what was foreign to me. I remember how sick he looked with no hair and cringed at the thought of looking like that. I stayed in the hospital for quite some time. I got my own private room. About two or three days after the biopsy, the phone calls and the cards and the flowers and the gift baskets started arriving. That meant that people were finding out that I was sick and that I have cancer. It helps to write it down - I know it's real if I do. I never had to tell anyone that I was sick. Everyone already knew. Its amazing how quickly people find something out and it spreads even quicker. I thought of Valerie and all my other friends and how they would react. I thought of how I would react if this happened to them. I hope that my friends will stay my friends. I'm worried about being and feeling alone. I don't want to be one of "those people" - but I am. I soon met my new oncologist. He introduced himself. He seems very kind and gentle. I like him. He spent a long time with us (us being me and my parents) discussing the treatment plan. When he was telling us all that was about to happen to me, I went into a kind of dream state. I blocked out all that was around me, including the doctor's explanation. I just kept thinking, "is this really happening to me?" I was later explained the treatment plan. Treatment for this type of cancer involved intensive radiation and chemotherapy. Surgery (removal of the tumor) had been ruled out because of the difficulty of the location of the tumor. The chemotherapy would include three separate drugs: cytoxan, actinomycin, and vincristine and would be administered over a 40 week time period. Every three weeks for a year, I will go into the hospital to have these highly powered and toxic drugs whose sole purpose was to kill all remaining cancer cells. However, the drugs will kill all cells, both cancerous and normal. I will therefore have many side effects.

February 26
Pericarditis

March 2

I went back to school today for the first time in almost a month. I know that everyone at school knows what has happened to me. It is a small town and a small school and things get around quickly. I am beginning to look different. I shaved my head real close so that when my hair starts to fall out, it won't be traumatic to watch it. I know that most people know that I'm sick, but don't know the whole story. Many people tried their best to treat me normally, while others tended to shy away from me. I think those who said nothing to me were scared not of me, but more of the disease. I understood this feeling and did not blame anyone for feeling the way they did. I think most people did not know how to act around me. Most of the kids my age were not afraid really of the disease - they knew that it was not contagious. However, I think it is part of the human psyche to be afraid in that way. English class was the hardest for me. It is a class where we sit in a circle for discussion. You can see everyone and more importantly everyone

can see you. It was impossible for me to concentrate at the task at hand. All I could think about was what has happened to me over the last month and how people are going to react to me the months to come.

By far the worst part of chemotherapy was the sickness I felt after each treatment. They pumped me full of these toxic drugs that ran all through my body. The feeling that I had was the worst I had ever felt. It is hard to describe the feeling, but if I had to, it would be that my whole body felt dead for at least a week after the treatment. I was nauseous beyond belief, feeling lethargic and just dead. After a week's time I would usually start to rebound and feel much more normal. You see, the drugs drastically dropped my blood's white count. The white cells are what fight off infection in the body. This is how the drugs killed the cells of the tumor. However, my white count would recover each time I had a treatment and I would therefore feel better. It was tough knowing in advance that every three weeks I would feel so awful. I would have to plan my schedule around how I was going to feel. The concept that these drugs were doing good, not evil was extremely hard to grasp. I knew in my mind that they were killing the tumor cells, but the only thing I could feel was sickness like I had never known. It was also hard to go to the hospital every three weeks and know in advance how bad I would feel.

The people at the hospital were so helpful, considerate, and understanding. My main doctor, oncologist Dr. Weinstein, oversaw everything that happened. I would stay in the hospital anywhere from two to three days. The drugs would be administered as well as a slew of antiemetics that helped with nausea, vomiting, stomach problems, liver and kidney function, etc. These antiemetics knocked me out, so much that I often could not remember the hospital stay at all. The nurses were all very helpful, especially my primary nurses who were always checking on my progress. But the hospital had an air about it that didn't sit right with me. I don't know if it was the disinfectant smell, the endless white hallways, or the feeling of being around really sick people. It became harder and harder to go there every three weeks.

But I did it, and I did not complain. I have to give myself credit where credit is due. Throughout this whole ordeal, I was very compliant. I was a very good patient. I did not want to cause a lot of trouble. I wanted to do what was necessary and then leave. I don't think everyone could have handled it quite as well. This is probably due to my relaxed temperament and laid back personality. I am not bragging by any means, but I think I handled myself well. Part of the reason I was so compliant was that I did not have much of a choice. I had to go through the radiation, the chemotherapy, and later the surgery. The alternative was death and to me, that was no alternative. This was something that I thought about a lot. Everything I did, I did because I had to. There was no thought of any other action, except to get better.

February 24

Because I am going to have so much chemotherapy, they decided to put a catheter to administer all the drugs and take blood biweekly. A catheter is a soft, flexible, hollow tube that acts as a more permanent IV. It is inserted by a surgeon under the skin of the chest wall into a large vein that leads to the heart. My catheter was a double-lumen catheter, as it had two tubes instead of one. There are definite advantages to having the catheter: with the amount of times that I will receive drugs and have blood taken, I would have to be stuck with a needle thousands of times. I hate needles. I would have to handle much more pain and risk the clogging and infection of my veins. However, the catheter has already proven to have its disadvantages. The

dressing at the exit site of the tubes needed to be changed biweekly and I need to flush the line every day with heparin. I can not take a real comfortable shower because the site needs to be covered at all times. I hate being limited in what I can do. I have developed a schedule everyday based around the care of this catheter. It will hopefully become routine like anything else in life. I can't wait for the day they take it out though. It's in a way, being locked in jail - I'm confined by these foreign objects attached to my body. And it is another thing that I have to constantly worry about.

February 26

There is absolutely no question in my mind whether I am going to survive. I am assuming that I will get my treatment, and then I will be free of this disease. Death is not an option. I never want to know what the risks of the treatment are. I do not want to hear the negatives, just the positive. While this is a good outlook, some may say that I am being ignorant, that I am not paying attention to what is physically happening. I just want to be well again. I must keep a very positive feeling through this or I know I will never survive.

February 27

I can't imagine what all this is doing to my parents. Their little baby is sick and they can't stop it. They must feel powerless and frustrated. I know they feel powerless and frustrated. They have been there for me every step of the way. Never leaving me alone when I needed someone and ready to be out of the way when I am with my friends and feeling better. Sometimes I think my age is the worst age for something like this to happen to someone. Kids who are younger do not fully grasp what is going on. But someone my age - it is very difficult. Because I am 18, I am part of the decision making process. I decide what treatment I will receive and what I will do with my life. I would like to be in charge of my health, but in a way I like being a kid. I don't have to explain stuff to everyone - my parents can do that for me. I like having my parents there next to my hospital bed to be there if I get real sick. There is something very comfortable and soothing about my parents. The thing is this: if this disease that has stricken me is in fact a genetic problem, my parents have to feel somewhat responsible. I am not saying that I am blaming them or even that I think that is the case. I can't help thinking that, though, they are responsible. The thing is, I love my mom and dad with all my heart. I am so lucky to have two loving parents who have helped me through by far the hardest days of my life.

March 8

I have been informed that I will be able to receive all of my hospital charts and files from the hospital so that I wouldn't have to include those technical things in this journal. It will probably be hard not to talk about the medical part of this experience because it has and probably will continue to occupy my thoughts and experiences over the next year. It is so good to be home from that hospital. I spent so much time there. I am hoping that I will not have to spend so much time there in the future although I have a bad feeling about that. I mean, what is going on inside my body is anything but normal. They keep telling me how rare my disease is. I am scared but I know there is a light at the end of this tunnel.

March 10

It is amazing how many people have been affected by this. I have received cards and

gifts from so many people. It is like that six degrees of separation thing. I affect a bunch of people and each one of those people affect another bunch of people. It's weird how it works that way. This whole thing wouldn't be so hard if I were living in a bubble and no one was around. Then again, I might get lonely, too.

March 11

The reality of what has happened the last couple months is just beginning to sink in. I have received so many cards from so many people. I am amazed at the amount of people who know what has happened so quickly. It is like you tell one person and in an hour later the whole world knows. I got flowers, stuffed animals, candy, cookies, food, prepared meals, gift baskets, balloons, and an infinite amount of cards. There are people who have sent me things whom I don't even know. Each day I become more aware of how many people's lives I have touched. What is most amazing is that I haven't received one duplicate card in the million.

March 16

I was thinking today about how many people have been involved in taking care of me. Just in that one hospital stay, there were hundreds of doctors, nurses, technicians, surgeons, and doctor's whose titles I did not know or understand. They were all there to take care of me and to help me. That was very comforting though. Mass General Hospital is unbelievably enormous. There are advantages and disadvantages to this.

March 18

Being a teenager, I am very self conscious of the way I look - every teenager is. Losing all my hair, and I mean all my hair, all over my body, makes me look and feel different. It is like a brand stuck on me that says "he's sick, so stay away from him". What makes me look most different is the loss of my eyebrows and eyelashes. It makes me realize that there are many things in life that you do not appreciate until they are gone. It feels as though everyone is staring at me, not knowing how to act or speak to me.

March 20

It's weird how something becomes more apparent once they are right in your face. Before I got sick, I did not notice how much there was out there. I watch TV and all I see and hear about is cancer and more about cancer. I don't think that there is now more out there, I'm just much more aware of it now. I wish I weren't though. Why did this happen to me and why now?

March 30

Something happened last night that was truly amazing. I am at a loss for words. I love Val more than anyone else the world.

April 3

Today I learned the details of the next step - radiation therapy. I met the radiologist who would be overseeing my treatment. Her name is Dr. Tarbell and she seems like a very sweet and caring woman. I think I'm going to like her. She explained what I would be doing, how it worked, and the things I should expect in the coming weeks. Through the use of two different

radiation beams, the tumor will be in a sense burned away. The first radiation beam is used at the Mass General Hospital. The second beam will be administered in Cambridge at a special lab on the Harvard campus. The MGH beam will take about 10 minutes every day for a couple of weeks. That means we have to drive into Boston every day to get this very short radiation treatment. That's really gonna mess up my schedule. I won't be able to get anything done. And my mom will have to miss a lot of work. I hope she doesn't lose her job. In order to plan the treatment, I went into a simulator of the radiation room. There they mapped out exactly the region where I would receive the treatment. The beam would go under my right eye, to the right of my nose, above my right lower lip. In order for them to make sure that I was in the same place each time I received a treatment, they had to put tiny little tattoos on my face. They were very small - smaller than freckles. One right beneath my nose and one on each side of my face where a sideburn would be. I was worried about these but when I saw them I knew it would not be a problem. They were minuscule and would fade over time. There was something very scary about getting a tattoo on my face though because it would be permanent. After this was done, I was told to go up to get in a mold fitted for my head. This mold will be used at the other place. My mother and I walked into this room. They sat me down and began to cover me with this paper mache stuff. They were making a sort of cast form the top of my head down to my shoulders. They covered me and I began to get real uncomfortable. The only thing showing were my eyes and mouth. It became hot and disgusting and I was when it was over. All I kept thinking was this: I have to do all these weird, uncomfortable things that are only very indirectly related to the thing that is inside my head. I wish they could just take the little sucker out and be done with it. I have a long road ahead of me.

April 5

Went out last night with my friends to watch the fireworks. I was feeling well, almost normal. We hung out at Alicia's house until the fireworks. Then we walked the entirety of Puritan Road, which for me would have been a trek, but I was fine. The fireworks were beautiful. I held Val in my arms as we watched, thinking how lucky I am to have her. What a girl!

April 13

Getting tired of all this. It is uncomfortable to sit there on a hard table. They have to keep positioning me. Taping my head down so I don't move. That's another thing I hate. Being able to move is such a great thing - it is a natural thing. Hate keeping still. Plus I have to wait there for such a long time in the waiting room. And there are all these other patients, many of them looking very sick and depressing the shit out of me. And they give you saltine crackers and gingerale that make you wanna heave. That makes you even more uncomfortable before you go in for treatment. In the room, the technicians keep telling you not to worry about the effects of the radiation beam (like on other body parts) but then before I'm treated they run out of there like it's the running of the bulls. It makes me tired and cranky and irritable and I hate it. But it is nothing compared to chemotherapy - I don't think anything will compare to that - I hope not.

April 20

I have had a couple days of this radiation already and to tell you the truth it is really not

that bad at all. I go into a room where a couple of technicians line me up with the machine in order to radiate the correct field (where the tumor is). Then they go out of the room, tell me to keep still, and I hear this high pitched sound for maybe thirty seconds. I can not feel anything. I cannot see anything. I cannot smell or taste anything either. Then they do the same thing again from the side of my face instead of the front. It does not take too long and I'm out of there. I am feeling a little better now too. You see, they stopped one of the chemo drugs during the radiation. Apparently that particular chemo drug does not react well with radiation. As a result, I am not feeling so shitty all the time. This is the first time in a long time that I have felt ok - just ok.

April 30

Radiation is still going on as planned. I have a few more days at MGH and then I must go to Cambridge every day for almost a month. I know I said things were easy here and that it was not a big deal - but things seem to be getting harder - or I'm just getting frustrated with it. Every day my mother and I have to park at MGH and walk in the building and then wait and wait and wait and sometimes wait some more. Then they call me to be treated and it takes ten minutes and we are on the way home. But it just takes away a large chunk of the day. I go after school and when I get home it is later in the evening. I'm getting sick of commuting to Boston each day. I don't know how people do it. I would go crazy.

May 4

I have finished with one part of the radiation - the beam at Mass General Hospital. I feel a sense of accomplishment. However, I have such a long road ahead. I am not looking forward to this next part. It is called the Harvard Cyclotron. It is a special radiation beam using photons instead of the more conventional proton beam. It is used because it can focus on a particular area and spare a lot of the normal tissue around it. There are only two of these cyclotrons in the country and Boston had one of them. It was a special radiation beam that was able to kill more of the tumor and spare more of the normal tissue around it. It makes sense to me, but all this radiation stuff is way over my head. I can't believe that I am being treated yet I cannot see it or feel it.

May 10

I have been thinking a lot about my brother lately. He is important to me. For the past few years he has been sick as well. He has become a different person. However, I continue to look up to and admire him. Sometimes I feel that I am being selfish with my sickness. I feel like I want to do something to make my brother better - but there's nothing I can do. I look forward to a day when we are both sitting talking about our different experiences and remembering them as bad memories - that's it - just bad memories. He is one of my driving forces for getting better. He needs me just as much as I need him.

May 14

I am at the age when the kid is supposed to prepare to leave the nest, become independent, meet new people and do new things. I will not be able to do any of that. I have officially decided to take in a year off and postpone my enrollment to Tufts University. It's funny. The day I received the letter that I had been accepted early decision was the day I had

that first MRI. This is the best move for me right now. I will still be going through treatments and I will not be looking my best in that first fall semester. So I will take the year off. I will plan on first of all getting better and back into shape. I will also probably work or try to get an internship. I am looking forward to this year off from school. I do need a break. And the possibilities for what I can do are limitless. I will have a little time to myself also, which I need desperately. I need time to work things out - think about stuff - get my head together. And when I come to Tufts the fall of 1998, I will be a new, healthy person ready to take on the world.

May 18

God is a hard subject to talk about because I have been questioning his existence my entire life. How can I believe in a God when all of this shit has happened to me over the past few months. If this was meant to happen, then why the fuck did it happen to me? I have been wrestling with this thought ever since I was told this news. When I was little, I used to believe in God for very different reasons. As I grew older, it became impossible for me to believe. I am a very practical person and a very scientific person. Only black and white makes sense to me not the gray in the middle. I remember going to Temple when I was young and wondering why I was there. What was the purpose? I began to get older and being Jewish became more of a family tradition and not a religion. It was a way for my family to connect throughout their many generations. When I went to Israel, I was confused even more about my religion. However, since all of this has happened, I just find it incredibly hard to believe. It's extremely hard to believe. It's fucking unbelievable to believe.

May 19

This has been a very, very hard week for me. I am recovering from chemotherapy. I am going to Cambridge every day to have radiation. I am studying hard and taking my advanced placement exams. I got through English ok . . . But it was so hard to concentrate. Luckily I am on the good part of the chemo cycle. But this radiation is really tiring me out. Not the side effects of the actual radiation, but the time it takes to go in and out of Cambridge every day. I don't know how I'm gonna get through these tests. I am lucky that I know what college I'm going to so the tests don't matter too much. I'm still stressed beyond belief.

May 20

I love being by myself. I love having no one to talk to. No one to entertain. No one to amuse. Just me, myself, and I. I love being left to me and my thoughts. I'm not really a loner, but I like a lot of quiet time. Maybe that's why I don't like hanging out in a big group. Maybe that's why I enjoy the company of a couple of people - the small crowd. I love being by myself.

May 22

The second radiation beam is not so easy. Everyday for four weeks, my mother will drive me to Cambridge to the Harvard Cyclotron. It was like in a large science lab with a waiting room. Unlike the earlier conventional radiation beam I was treated with, the cyclotron treatment took about 45 minutes each day. The room I was treated in looked like a scene right out of a Star Trek movie. I would sit in a large chair, with my head and shoulders in a plastic mold that kept me from moving. In fact, I could not move at all for the entire treatment, or else

they would have to start over. Uncomfortable is an understatement for how I felt. It got hot and sweaty in that thing and it is quite hard to keep absolutely still for 45 minutes. I often felt dizzy, uncomfortable, and nauseous. Like the other, I did not feel the radiation beam during the treatment. The worst part about the radiation treatment was the time it took to go into Cambridge and come back - often taking the whole afternoon and the whole month of May. However, I soon learned not to complain about the commute when I realized the amount of people that had to move their whole lives to Boston just for this treatment (There are only two of these machines the country). In fact, I met one family whose baby was being treated for eye cancer from Romania. When it was over, I got a certificate of achievement for getting through six weeks of radiation. I felt as if I had accomplished much and was more than halfway done with chemotherapy. Things were looking up and I was looking forward to the end of my treatment.

May 24

I am done with radiation and I have this huge sense of accomplishment. For six weeks I have consistently been through hell and I came out ok. I am so glad that I'm done. No more schlepping into Boston every single day. I am finished and damn proud of myself. No more radiation and I'm more than halfway done with chemotherapy. I am beating this thing and I am getting it done. I am the man. I can't believe how relieved I am right now. No more feeling uncomfortable and no more sitting still for hours at a time. They gave me a certificate to congratulate my finishing and it was the most rewarding piece of paper I have ever received. Things are good. I am feeling better than I have in a long time. I am fighting this son of a bitch and I am going to win. The next week should be so much fun. Senior week which includes the prom, banquet, parties, graduation is next week. I will be feeling well because chemo was almost a month ago and radiation is done. I'm excited for next week. Things are good.

May 29

Last night's prom was unbelievable. We had such a good time. My tux was looking good, my date was beautiful, and the night was spectacular. Everything went according to plan except a small screw up with the disc jockey. Someone forgot to confirm him. Besides that everything went great. The whole night was perfect. I was feeling really well and everyone was treating me normally and I danced the whole night. Valerie looked so gorgeous, like an angel. We had such a good time together. We went out after the prom and had a great time too. We stayed up all night and hung out with who we wanted to hang out with. The best part was that I felt so normal. I don't think I thought about being sick once the whole night.

June 9

There is something about graduation that was so incredibly gratifying. It's not just the end of a high school career but a signification that I can accomplish anything if I put my mind to it. I can even graduate, be a speaker, pass my AP exams, be VP of the NHS, while being sick with a life-threatening disease. I so enjoyed leading the way as the four officers marched their way to the stage. I felt somehow important and sad that it was ending all at the same time. Somehow this graduation meant so much more to me than I ever would have thought before I became sick. It meant that despite my being sick, I was able to get through what I needed to accomplish - a great feat. I was able to give the concluding speech and lead my fellow

classmates in the ceremonial throwing of the caps. Getting my diploma was just indescribably awesome. And seeing my closest friends receive theirs was even better. And when it was all over, I was so very saddened. It was like everything was coming to an end. All my friends would soon be leaving for school and I would still be here. I felt alone and confused. I went back to the field where the graduation took place because, believe it or not, I had forgotten my diploma, and I looked out at all the empty seats and bleachers, and really felt like a huge part of my life was over. But I put on my face and went to all the parties I could before I became tired. The whole last week has been such a joyous time with the prom, cookout, banquet and at graduation. I am feeling better than I have in a very long time. My hair has even started to grow back. I stayed out late after the prom and did all the normal things that teenagers should do. Sometimes I would forget that I was even sick at all. But I am worrying about what is going to happen next.

June 10

My family and friends have been so amazing. I am so lucky to have their constant support. They are calling. They are writing. They are cooking. They are doing everything and everything to help me. I appreciate it more than they know. I love them for it. That is the truth. After last week during graduation it became even more evident how many people are out there cheering me on. Graduation was a great day and I have been thinking about that lately. I have been thinking about this for quite some time. I love each and every person who has been there for me.

My family has done everything in their power to help me. They really have done everything and for that I am grateful. I also need time to myself. It is part of my personality. I need to be alone especially when I am not feeling well. I don't like for people to see me when I'm sick. I'm not much fun to be around and I don't need the extra anxiety and pressure. It is the way I want to handle this and I think, no, I know people understand. It is the way I have wanted it and the way I will continue to want it. I understand, though, that it is not fair to keep people away. I will do my best to remember that as long as they do the same. I am just so impressed by everyone.

June 27

There is a fine line that my parents have had to live on. That is, they must give enough space so as not to smother me, but not leave me alone - especially while in the hospital. They are learning but never seem to get it right. It is not their fault, though, because I am unsure of that fine line just as much as they are. What I would really like is to be totally independent. I am 18 years old for god's sake. I need my freedom!

June 29

birthday - camp has started

figure out what caused this
mom and dad together again

July 10

I have just finished yet another chemotherapy treatment. Although I hated it before, I am

really starting to despise it. Each treatment is getting worse and worse. I dread that overnight in the hospital when they pump me full of drugs and I know when I leave the hospital, it will be a long while until I feel well again. That is another strange thing about this. When one gets sick, they do not know its coming, so they do not have to anticipate feeling shitty. I have to get ready every three weeks to feel sick. When I walk onto the floor, Ellison 18, just the sight and smell of the floor itself makes me sick to my stomach. This is a case of classical conditioning, in which one stimuli that used to be coupled with another that caused nausea, but now is by itself, still causes that nausea. Although the whole thing sucks bigtime, it does not take too long for me to recover from these treatments. When I am feeling better, I am really feeling better. This means that I have to schedule everything I do by this three week schedule. When someone asks me to do something, I must think to myself, will I being feeling well or puking my guts out that day. I hate that. And my schedule affects my parents schedule and everyone else's schedule.

August 24

Alex left for school today and I somehow feel empty. I am going to miss him so much - he has no idea. I know that he will keep in touch regularly, but it won't be the same. We hung out last night and when we dropped him off, I said goodbye. I broke down crying. He has been such a large part of my life for so long, and now he is gone. Most of my friends have already left or are leaving soon. Val goes to school soon too and even though she will be close by, she will not be three minutes away anymore and I won't see her everyday. Alex and I were together everyday and now we will see each other every couple of months. It's gonna be hard to make that adjustment. It will be especially hard for me because I will be home not doing anything. At least he will be at school meeting people, going to classes and having fun. It's really hard to watch all my friends go away while I am left behind. I don't know what I'm going to do with myself. I think I will enjoy some time to myself though too. I will give me time to think and to get my ideas together for next year. I'm really going to miss everyone, though.

September 1

Val left for school today. I'm hoping that she gets there ok and that her roommates aren't obnoxious slobs. I really want her to be happy there. I think she will be but I'm worried. I feel responsible for her going there and I should feel responsible. She was going to go to Syracuse until she decided this summer that she wanted to stay by me. In a way it was good, because it made her realize that she should do what she wants to do, not what anybody else wants her to. She is an amazing artist. The sculpture she made for my birthday is absolutely incredible - it is truly amazing. I'm gonna miss seeing her everyday though. I love her a lot. She's one of those special girls that you have to hold on to.

September 15

People don't appreciate the simple things in life. This comes from the movie "Awakenings" with Robert Deniro. A great theme throughout this movie is this concept. People really don't appreciate the simple things in life: friendship, feeling well everyday when you wake up, eating your favorite food, taking a walk on the beach. The list goes on and on. The point is that there are so many who take advantage of the things they have in life. I didn't realize this until these things were taken away or made harder for me. My advice is take advantage of the simple things. Appreciate what you have and understand how easily these things can be taken

away. I am jealous of all my friends who have it easy or so it seems to me. I am so envious of them. I have to believe there is a reason for all of this though. There has to be.

September 17

I have recently started to feel some slight pain in my jaw. The pain is reminiscent of before I was diagnosed with cancer. Day by day, it seems to be getting worse and worse - just like it did in the beginning. For the first time, I am really scared about what is going to happen. Something is wrong - I can feel it all through my body.

September 22

Today I went to the hospital to have an MRI. When the results came back to the doctor, he informed me that the tumor had started to grow again. The chemotherapy and radiation had not done its job and the cancer was getting worse. I then learned that I would have to have surgery. I knew at that moment that my life was about to change dramatically. I was pissed off because they had originally told me that the tumor was inoperable. Now they were saying that it is able to be removed. My first thought was excitement that finally this thing that has been causing me so much pain and suffering was being taken out. Get the little fucker out. It was not until our appointment with the head and neck surgeon that I realized the magnitude of what is going to happen to me. The surgeon told me to remove the tumor, they would need to cut into my face, pull the skin back, take the tumor out, and then put the skin back. The thought of the whole thing made me sick. I am so worried about this surgery. I do not want to have scars all over my face. I will look ugly and disgusting - but it will save my life. Why am I forced to make decisions like this? Why can't I be like everyone else and worry about normal teenager problems. I hate this fucking tumor and everything its done to me. It's been nothing but trouble.

September 23

My parents and I decided to get a second opinion on the surgery. We went to see Dr. Ivo Janecka - a specialist in skull base surgery. Apparently, his whole practice is based around people like me who need tumors like mine removed. His specialty was skull base surgery. I was amazed that there was a whole program at the hospital that dealt with just my kind of problem. Suddenly, I did not feel quite so alone. He showed us my MRI, explaining all parts of it and what was wrong. Then he went into what he would need to do to remove the tumor. His explanation was much like the first doctor's. I was scared out of my mind. He seemed to know what he was talking about, though. It was then that I knew that this would be no simple procedure. Two doctors agreed on the same type of surgery and there was nothing easy about any of it.

October 2

I'm going in tomorrow to have surgery and I am scared out of my mind. I am scared of how I will look, how I will feel, and how I am going to handle this whole thing. It's like this is my last night of normalcy. I feel as though I need to go out and do something outrageous before my life changes. My life will never be the same after this. Everything will change. I will become a totally different person. I am starting to think I don't want to go through this surgery. But I am in so much pain, I can't even get up and walk straight. For that reason, to be out of pain, I must go through with this. The only alternative is not to live. I'm not ready to give up

yet. I am so scared I don't know what to do. Please let me get through this.

October 14

I have just spent 10 days in the hospital post surgery. I came home today and it was so good to be home. Home really is where the heart is. These past ten days have been the darkest days of my life. The surgery took 15 hours. They performed a facial translocation in which a team of several surgeons cut into my face - on the nose to below the eye to my right temple, down near my ear and across my neck. They pulled the skin back, removed the bone that goes from the temple to the lower jaw, and removed the tumor. Then a separate team reconstructed my face. They took a flap of muscle from my stomach and put it in the open space that my tumor once occupied. I spent many days in the Intensive Care unit. It was the most awful experience of my life. I was in so much pain from the surgery it cannot be put into words. It felt like a huge pancake was frying on the side of my face. It was a hundred times worse than the pain I had experienced when this whole thing started. The ICU was dark and drab. I don't really remember it because I was so incredibly drugged out. I know that I was vomiting constantly and that I was so uncomfortable. I had awful dreams and everything there just seemed dark and scary. When I look back on it now, I shiver at the thought of it. For days I lay completely still, tube in my mouth, countless IVS delivering high doses of pain medication. I thought I was going to die. I did not want to go through all this pain. I was soon moved to a real room at Children's Hospital. It was there that I started to become conscious of what was around me. I remember that day when they moved me to the room. We didn't go directly there, though. I vaguely remember trying to get up and walk and how hard it was to do. I couldn't believe that a simple thing like walking was such a hard task now. I knew then that I had a very long recovery period ahead of me. The first night in a regular hospital room, I did not sleep one second. I stayed up thinking in pain all night long. That was one of the longest nights I could remember. They brought someone in to watch me because they were scared that I was going to hurt myself. In the ICU, I had mentioned that I did not want to go on anymore - that I couldn't handle all this. I do remember saying these things, however I was under so many drugs. I only remember certain small time periods out of 3 or 4 days. It is safe to say that I was completely out of it. I never again had thoughts of suicide. They soon took away the person who watched. She was making all of us very uncomfortable. The hospital was very nice. Very well maintained and clean. The nurses were very helpful as well. Val came to visit everyday even though she had a ton of work to do, she made it over every single day. This was one of the many ways that I knew she really loved me. I did not want her to see me the way I was in the hospital. I was just ugly. Big scars all over my face - my eye sewn shut - a big piece of plastic hanging out of my nose - skinny as a rail. But she kept coming back to the hospital until I let her see me. And that first time I saw her there was this amazing sense of relief that the worst part was over. I saw her smiling face, gave her a hug, and smelled her amazing smell - the one that was so familiar to me. The doctors came often to check on me. My face was in a lot of pain- burning pain and entirely numb. It was and is so uncomfortable. I began to get up and go for walks around the floor, doing a little more each day. They took out the many hundred stitches that had been holding my face together and removed drains from my hip. The drains were there to "drain" all the excess fluid from the surgery. That was the most painful experience of my life. The first time I looked in the mirror I was shocked at what was staring back at me. I couldn't believe what I looked like. And I kept assuring myself that it would get so much better. If I looked like that then, I

must have looked so much worse 8 or 9 days earlier in the ICU. I'm glad there weren't too many people who saw me then. I left the hospital yesterday and it was oh so good to get out of there. I hated that place. I never want to go back. I came home and lied down in my own bed and it was almost magical. It's amazing how comforting home is. It is where I can go when I want to be with the ones I truly love. Home will not judge you. Home is just so comfortable. Home is where the heart is.

October 15

I quote Tom Petty: "You don't know how it feels to be me". No one in the whole world can understand what I am going through. They can try to help me and comfort me, but they just don't know how it feels. I wish I could find someone - just one person - who has experienced what I have experienced - but there is no such person. My case is so unique and I feel alone. This realization has just come to me. Before when I was going through chemotherapy and radiation, there were others experiencing the same thing. But now, it is totally different.

October 16

I have been at home now for a couple of days and the reality of what has just happened to me is starting to settle in. I can't believe what I have just been through. I am clear now on the fact that I have a lot of recovering to do - probably the biggest recovery in the history of all recoveries. I keep looking in the mirror to see what I look like and I am still surprised. I am telling myself that it will look and feel better - it will just take time. Time heals all wounds. I am not so worried about what it looks like, rather how it feels. The whole right side of my face is numb. It's that feeling you get after you have novocaine at the dentist - only I have that feeling on the whole right side of my face. It is unbelievably uncomfortable. Simple things like eating and drinking are hard tasks for me now. Since I can't feel the right side of my mouth, I often miss with food or get stuff stuck there and don't realize it. And I can't chew on that side so I have to make a major readjustment for that. I'm also having a lot of trouble talking from the numbness. I don't know if I'm ever going to get better at these things. I feel confused and frustrated. I don't want to work so hard to do the simple things. I am so scared and worried. I must get through this though. I must show everyone including myself that I can do this - but why does it have to be so hard?

October 18

I am hating the way I feel and how I look. I really don't know what I'm going to do now. I am hoping that someday I will look good again and feel good again. I believe what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. If that's true, I am really, really, strong.

I found out today that my dad's significant other has moved out of their house for good. I know they had been on the outs for quite some time but I never questioned it. I was too busy thinking about other things. Our relationship was never that great, but I always liked her for this important reason - she kept my father happy for a long time and for that I thank her. I somehow feel responsible though and therefore have mixed feelings. Yes, she and I were not the best of friends but she made dad happy. Now my dad is lonely and must go through my recovery by himself. I am hoping that he finds someone soon.

October 19

I am very worried about this numbness I'm experiencing. The facial nerve on each side of the face is divided into three parts. It is called the trigeminal nerve. One nerve supplies feeling from the forehead to the lower eye. The second from the lower eye to the upper lip and the third from the upper lip the lower chin. This third nerve is the one that was cut. They needed to cut it in order to get to the tumor. So I will never again have feeling in these areas again. This means that my right lower lip will never have sensation. The feeling in the other two areas are supposed to come back but will never feel the same again. This is a very scary thing. It's amazing how you don't realize how important something is until it is gone. It's just so fucking uncomfortable. I hate it so much. Things would be so much easier if I could feel my face. There's also this sense that I am not in control of my body because I can't feel part of it.

October 20

I hate feeling numb. It is so hard to function with this "handicap". I hate it.

October 21

If I had just one wish it would be to have feeling in my face again. I try to talk to people but they can't understand me - it is the most frustrating thing in the world. You want to communicate something and you can't. I feel so limited in what I can do. Eating is hard too. I have to keep wiping my mouth to make sure nothing is there. I can only chew on my left side so I have to take smaller bites and that means I eat really slow. I am also not very hungry. I think my stomach has shrunk or something. I eat to please my mom and not because I am hungry. I force food down to try to gain weight. I am very skinny - probably the lightest I've ever been. I want to gain weight but I can't force food down.

October 22

My face will permanently feel uncomfortable and will permanently look different. There is something about permanence that is so scary. Permanent means that it will never change and will be there forever. This is the reason more people don't get tattoos. They know it will always be there - even when they are old and wrinkly and they will regret having it done. It is the same feeling here. If I had to go through this for a certain amount of time and then it was over, it would be a different story. When I had chemo and I lost my hair - yes it was traumatizing - but I knew my hair would eventually come back and that I would feel the same again. Now, post surgery, what has happened to me is permanent and I can never change what has already been done.

October 26

I can't believe this is happening. I am so uncomfortable and in so much pain. It's amazing how easy other people have it. People don't realize how lucky they are to be healthy. I watch TV and see all these perfect faces and I want so desperately to be like them. I've never wanted to be someone else until this surgery. My self esteem is gone. I used to have this normal cockiness about myself. I thought I was invincible. I thought I could have any girl if I tried hard enough. No that's not true - but I felt good about myself. Now all I can think about are these stupid scars and how ugly I look. Sometimes I feel like that. But a lot of the time I am very optimistic. I keep telling myself that I am going to keep looking better. One day these scars will

be so faded I people won't even notice them after a while. Someday my life will get back to the way it once was. Life will never ever be the same.

October 28

If this damn tumor were anywhere else in my body, I would not have to go through all of this. Why couldn't I have had it in my leg or my arm or my chest? Why did it have to be inside my head? A person's face is so important. It's what the world sees. Everything else can be covered up somehow, but not the face. A person's face represents everything about them. You see a picture of someone, you look at their face. You talk to someone, you look at their face. You do anything and you look at their face. Well, my face is deformed forever. It will always look different.

November 23

I have just spent two and a half weeks in the hospital and I am pissed. It was the most frustrating experience of my life. You see, on Halloween night, I fainted on the way to the bathroom. It was a great night before that, though. Val was home from school and we got to be together, which I love. The next day I was checked into the hospital to be monitored. They brought me to the PICU and I stayed there for several nights. I began to have dizzy spells which I guess I had been having before but didn't really realize it. It was determined that something was wrong with my heart. No one knew what and why this was happening to me.

After days and days of being very uncomfortable, they finally figured out that I was having ventricular tachycardia - an electrical disturbance in the heart causing me to have several extra heart beats. I know now that when I fainted I had a long run of these extra beats at once and that caused my heart to race and me to faint. So I was back in the hospital - AGAIN. I was there from something that seemed to have nothing to do with the cancer. Another unrelated health problem that would keep me down. I was so angry I wanted to punch something - but I didn't have the energy. They eventually moved me to a floor specializing in heart problems. It was an adult floor, the first I had ever been on. The rules were different there. I was the only young person on the floor - the rest of the people were very old - very old! The doctors began to give me medications to try to control the disturbance. The head doctor, Dr. Garran was very nice and knowledgeable. He assured me that they would find an answer.

He informed me that not only was this kind of disturbance extremely rare in people my age, but also that the kind of disturbance in itself was rare. That's all people keep telling me - that I am so rare. "I have never seen this before" is common to me now. The things that have happened to me, together have never happened to any other human being in the world, ever. They tried a variety of medications and none of them worked. Each time they tried a new drug they had to observe me on it for at least three days - and I tried a lot of different days. Hence, I was there for an unusually long time.

It came to a decision to do a procedure that would find and ablate the disturbance by sticking a catheter into the heart and burning away what was causing this. They did not want to do this if they didn't have to and neither did I. I had quite my share of uncomfortable medical procedures. They tried one last drug and to everyone's surprise, it seemed to help the disturbance. That time in the hospital was just awful. I thought that after the surgery I would never have to be there again. I didn't really think that - but I hoped.

I know that I will never really be well again. Too much has happened to me. The thing

about the heart problem is that it's just another thing that's keeping me from being well. It will keep me down. I will have to take heart medication probably for the rest of my life. I will not be able to really exercise or do anything athletic again. It used to be such an important part of my life and now it's gone. It's hard for me to accept that. Not just because of the heart but because of the extensive surgery I've had. I can't play soccer or basketball with any kind of the same fire I used to. That part of my life is over - but I loved that part. It was part of me.

Of course Val was at the hospital visiting me every day. Even though she had more work then she knew how to handle, she jumped on the T and took a long ride to the hospital just to see me. I knew that it was a large pain in the ass to come see me, but she did it anyway. And when she was there I was happy. She made me smile. I knew that she loved me because of the things she did for me and I will forever be grateful for that and I will forever love her. My parents continued to stay with me in the hospital. I felt bad about them missing work and being there doing nothing. But I know they love me so much. They have also shown that as well. Not that there was any doubt before. And I love them too. While in the hospital this time, I was not so worried about what was going on around me. That is, the heart stuff. I was much more preoccupied with my face. How it looked. How it felt. How it would never be the same. It occupied and continues to occupy every facet of my thinking. I just cannot stop thinking about it.

November 25

I thought about many things being in the hospital for over two weeks. One thing that I haven't addressed lately, is the whole God issue. After the surgery, I was more confused more than ever about this alleged great being. Maybe God made me sick, or something else made me sick and somehow God made me better. But it's really not God. It is a bunch of surgeons with scalpels. I just want to know why. Why me?

November 27

I was informed while in the hospital that Brian Desroches' dad died of cancer recently. He had been battling the disease for quite some time now. I am so sorry for their family. He will no longer be in pain, though. Their family has been through so much. People like they and I do not deserve this kind of pain in their lives. It scares me to death. I could be him someday and my family would have to deal with that - and what about Val? I just won't think about that. I gotta be positive. Positive thinking has gotten me through so far

November 28

Thanksgiving dinner has come and gone again. It was so very good to see the whole family. There was something familiar and comforting about being around the ones you love and the ones who love you. Dinner was excellent - just how I like it - all my favorite foods. It was one of the first times I had been out since surgery. I tried to get dressed up and look my best but it was hard. I had the new tinted glasses on and the coverup makeup to try to hide the scars. I was just somehow uncomfortable - mostly with the way I was looking. I was also not feeling well either from the heart medication and the pain and uncomfortableness in my face. I really tried my best to be comfortable but it was hard.

The family has been so supportive through all of this. I have so appreciated everything

they have done. I know that I have pushed them away and they have been very understanding. It's not that I don't or didn't; want them there, but I often did not feel well enough to deal with a lot of people. They should know how much I love them. I don't know what I would do without their support. I love them so much. I really want to name them each individually and that's exactly what I intend to do. In no particular order: Mom, Dad, Brother Bryan, Papa, Nana, Grandma, Grandpa, Uncle Richard, Alice, Aunt Marilyn, Uncle Herb, Uncle Ed, Aunt Dorothy Lazurus, Aunt Muriel, Cousins Greg, Jennifer and Steve, Meadow Rose, newborn Gabriel, Brother/ Best Friend Alex, and Fiancee Valerie. These are the members of my immediate family and I felt the need to mention them. I love you all so very very much.

December 1

Even though I had such a long and grueling stay in the hospital these past few weeks, there is also something comforting about being in a hospital. In a hospital, you know that everything will be ok. It's like a safety blanket. If something goes wrong - they can fix it or make it better. If I have pain, they can take it away. I quote Morgan Freeman in "The Shawshank Redemption". Talking about prison, he said "There's something about these walls. First you hate em'. Then you grow used to em'. Then you learn to depend on them". It is the same feeling for me with the hospital. I am an institutionalized person. I feel safe there and I don't know whether I can make it on the outside or not.

December 4

I just watched the show "Party of Five". Charlie, the oldest sibling, has learned that he has cancer. It is too familiar. This episode he started his radiation therapy. They showed the machine and it was again all too familiar. It brought back a lot of bad memories. I keep thinking if only my cancer and my treatment were that easy. The six weeks of radiation were by far the easiest six weeks since I was diagnosed. They're making a huge deal out of this and compared to me, he has it so easy. I guess everything is relative, though. One's relative happiness can only be compared to what one has experienced before. The cold has given me a nasty ear infection in my other, healthy ear. I can't hear a damn thing now. I used to get ear infections as a little kid all the time. Maybe that's the cause of the cancer, the ear infections . . . or the medicine I took for the ear infections. What am I talking about! Well it could be - it could be anything I did.

December 10

I hate the way I look. I think I am ugly and deformed. Everyone else tells me its not that bad but I know how it looks and I know it looks awful. It feels awful too - the numbness. It is so uncomfortable it is unbelievable. I go out and people look at me. I feel like they are staring. I would stare too if I saw someone that looked like me. It all goes back to the same thing. People are scared of what is foreign or different to them. That is natural. I just wish people would stop looking at me like I was some kind of weirdo or something. I know a lot of it is my head. At some point I have to come to terms with how I look and deal with it. Get on with life.

December 12

I do not know what the future holds for me. It's amazing how what has happened to me in the last year has changed my whole thought process. College used to be so important to me. The idea of college was important to me. So many things were different. I was doing everything

that I was expected to be doing and everything that everyone else in a rich upper middleclass town was doing. I still think it's important to be educated. It is probably the most important thing in the world, except for love. Advancing and learning is the whole basis of society. But that does not mean I have to go Tufts and be the normal all American white boy. I am in no way, shape, or form . . . normal. I feel in so many ways that I am too old for college life. I'm not saying at all that I am a genius and do not need to be educated. But after what I have been through, there is no way that kids at school would understand and I don't expect them to. I can't go on now and pretend this has not happened. At least before surgery, I would have been able to put this behind me. Now, I am scarred for life - both mentally and physically. My whole life is just so different. I am truly and utterly confused. I need more time to think.

December 14

Today I went to Val's mother's art opening at her gallery. It was really good to get out and I enjoyed it. Val's mother is extremely talented and I can see where Val gets her artistic qualities. Leslie's artwork to me is just amazing. It's something I respect her for and am impressed by. It is so nice to have a passion and to be good at it too. Val's whole family has been just incredible throughout this whole thing. They are the reason that she is able to deal with all that has happened. The whole family. They have really taken me in and treated me well. I love Valerie and they know that. I know that they know that I did not mean for this to happen. I did not want to put Val through all this heartache and pain - I just love her and I will always love her. I will always love Leslie, Ken, Nikki, and Mike for everything they have done. Just wanted to say thanks.

December 15

It is Monday and a new week is here. Alex is coming home soon as well as everyone else. I am worried about seeing people but more about people seeing me. I know that I do not look the same as I used to. My eye has started to puff out and my jaw seems to be sticking out more. It really makes the right side of my face look different. The left side and the right side look like they belong to two different people. I do not look good. I keep telling myself that it will get better and to give it more time. And I know that many things can be fixed by plastic surgery, including my jaw and eye. Then I will look normal and everything will be ok. I know it's not as easy as that though. I feel like I can't go out anywhere or do much of anything because of the way I look. Sometimes I wish the surgery hadn't been done at all. At least then I wouldn't feel so uncomfortable and look so different. But then I realize that I would have died without this surgery. I had no choice. It's too bad that I had to make this decision so early in my life. It's not fair. It's just not fair.

December 16

Val and I went out for dinner last night and talked a lot about what has been going on. I told her that I know that I am not going to live a long life. If I live to my thirties I will be surprised. It is a feeling that I have. I do not have cancer anymore, but I am still very sick. I have heart problems. I have potential infections brewing in my face and head. I have a weakened immune system from chemotherapy. I have a very good chance of getting cancer again. And I will not fight it again. I do not have the strength.

December 17

I am sick again and frustrated beyond belief. I have a bad chill, fever, aching in my chest and back. And I just feel sick. I can't explain it really. I have no energy and I can't do anything substantial without having to lie down. I have not been well for so long. I have not felt good for so long. I remember when feeling well was something that I just expected. It is something people take for granted. Being healthy is a gift in my mind. I recently felt bumps on my head and they are getting bigger. I have a bad feeling about all this. I just want to feel well again. That's all I want in the whole wide world. I know that if the cancer spreads or I get it again later in life that I would never be able to go through the treatment process again. My body couldn't handle it and my psyche couldn't handle it. You see, if the cancer does come back it is something telling me that for some reason, I was not supposed to live a long life. I still believe that everything happens for a reason. Maybe it's so that my close friends or family can devote their lives to cancer research to find a better way to treat and cure cancer patients. Maybe it's so those close to me learn to grieve and make them stronger people. Maybe its to tell Lance to stop smoking. Maybe it is so that Val can find happiness somewhere with someone some day. And maybe I'm just really unlucky and this whole thing fucking sucks.

December 20

I am dying. The cancer has spread and I am going to die. Yesterday after a long day seeing various doctors I was informed that the cancer has spread to my chest and kidney. It may also have recurred in my jaw and may be many other places including my eye, face, and head. The doctor informed me that the cancer had spread and that my chances for living were very very slim. I was told that every case is different, but I did not have much time left. Maybe a few months. Maybe a year. I think I was in complete shock - utter and total shock. My first thought after I heard this news was Val. I thought of how much I love her and care about her. She means everything to me. I had to tell her as soon as I could. She is my best friend in the whole world and me the same for her. I thought of everything we must do together and how much I wanted to marry her. Although I won't ask her to marry me. It would not be fair to her. In a way the news was also relieving. I am so uncomfortable all the time. I feel sick almost constantly. I do not want to feel this way anymore. I want to be happy and this is not happy. On the way home from the hospital a million things went through my head. I thought about my family and friends. I am so worried what this is going to do to people. I feel like I'm abandoning people and there's nothing I can do about it. My brother is already severely depressed - what will this do to him? And my parents - who have been there for me since the day I was born. I don't want them to be all alone in this world and be sad and depressed for the rest of their lives. But most I'm worried about Val. She has been my everything for so long and I love her so much. I wish she did not have to go through all this pain. She deserves to be happy. She is the most - special, amazing, intelligent, beautiful, awesome, caring, sensitive, and every other adjective - person in the world. I feel sorry that I have put her through and will put her through pain. I never meant to hurt her. I love her so much. I love her so much. You know, this wouldn't be so hard if there weren't people left behind who love me. While I am sad for myself and just keep wondering why this happened to me, I am in tears for all those around me that must pick up their lives and move on after I am gone. I never thought I would have to write this kind of stuff down. It's like it's not real - some kind of movie. I only have a certain amount

of time left and that is it. I also feel like I must now do everything I wanted to do in my lifetime in this short time I have left. But I know that this is impossible: first because one needs a lifetime to do everything in a lifetime and second because I do not feel well and I will continue to not feel well. I have to say I knew something was wrong long before the news came to me. I even wrote it in my journal. My body did not feel right and I have been feeling sick. The kind of sick that you can't explain. The kind of sick where you just know something is wrong but cannot pinpoint it to one area. I am not scared to die. I am scared to become very sick. I do not want to be in anymore pain. I will be truly happy when I am no longer in pain. That's all anyone wants for another when they love each other - is for the other person to be happy. In this case the people that love me will be saddened by my death but will know that I am happy. I have to decide now what to do. There are a couple of options that I must think about. First of all, I could have radiation on the tumor growing in my jaw - to try to shrink it so it does not cause me unbearable pain later on. There is also an option to try yet another chemotherapy drug. However, I have been informed that taking this drug will not cure the cancer, rather it will prolong my being sick and eventually dying. My first reaction is not to do anything at all. I do not want to suffer for a long time and these treatment options would just keep me alive for a little longer - not even that much longer. I figure I should take the time I have now - feeling semi-ok and do what I need to do instead of spending my last healthy days in the hospital. Basically, I'm going to get really sick and I do not want to stretch that suffering out.

December 21

Alex came over and I told him that the cancer had spread and there was nothing that can be done. Val was there with me as she has been while I explained to Alex that I was going to die. His reaction was to talk his nerves and fears away. He was shocked by this news. His immediate impulse was for the three of us to go do something really special. So upon my dad's permission, the three of us used his credit card to stay at the Four Seasons Hotel last night and just have as much fun as we possibly could. We all figured that we need to get a lot of stuff done in a short period of time.

Material things don't make any difference now. Money has no value. We went for drinks (shirley temples) at the Ritz Carlton Bar and then swung back to the hotel for dessert by room service. We had such a good time together. That's what was important. It didn't matter where we were, as long as we were together. The three of us talked about a lot of things last night and into the early morning. We talked about who and how we should tell people. We talked about memories together. And we talked about what I want to happen in the future.

The most important thing to me by far is to make sure that all the people I care about are well taken care of when I am gone. Everyone needs to take care of each other because the people that I love are so important to me - I want them to be safe and happy. I asked Alex to promise me that he would take care of my dearest Valerie once I am gone and I hope he holds true to that promise for ever and ever. I also asked Val to take care of Alex, my parents, and especially my brother later on.

Val and I had a good long cry last night too. We have become so close and the love we have for each other is undescrivable. I don't want to leave her. I know everything about her and she knows everything and then some about me. She's my girl and I'm her boy. She's my honey and I'm her baby. She's my hottie and I'm her shmoopies. She's my cute little package and I'm her love. It's just not fair. It's not fair. I would do anything to be with her forever. I

know in my heart that she will go on to live an amazing life. Because I will forever be a part of her, I will get to do all the things I wanted, by way of her. I just don't want her to go through all this. I feel like spending this time with her now is just pushing her deeper into loving me and making it that much harder when I go. But I just can't stay away from her. I love her so much. I love her more than anything in the whole world and I always will.

December 21

I said before that I am not scared to die. That is not true at all. I am scared out of my mind. I don't want to die. I am so scared of becoming sick. I don't know what to expect. I am told that I will be kept comfortable but I am not comfortable now. I don't know the last time I will see those I love and that is a very scary thing. In some ways it's easier to know that you're going to die in advance. I can get everything I need to in order. I will be able to say my goodbyes to everyone.

It is very hard to know in advance and seems somehow would be easier if life just ended suddenly. I do not want to die a long and painful death and I hope that is not the case. I am filled with so many emotions. I am full of rage and anger - why me? What did I do to deserve this. I am filled with sadness - for those that I will leave behind. I just can't believe this is happening.

December 23

I woke up this morning and I felt awful. My whole body was aching so badly. I just felt really crummy. Last night was a great night. Alex, Val, and I talked for a long time about what has happened. We discussed many things last night. Alex told me that he is thinking of transferring to Boston University this next semester.

There are many reasons for his decision. U Penn has not had what he wanted for a while now. He feels like the people there are not what he is about. Obviously too, he wants to be near me now in my time of need. He feels that he has missed too much of my life already. If he goes to school here, he will have the support of his closest friends and his family, who will be near by, after I am gone. BU has everything that he is looking for in terms of academics. He said that with all this happening it puts things into perspective. He should do what he wants to do and not what he is expected to do. Life is too short. He wants to make movies and I think that's awesome. I think it is one example of turning a negative into a positive. It reminds me of what Val has done. She stayed nearby because she wanted to help me through a hard time. But because of that she ended up going to art school and she is doing very well, loving what she is doing. It makes me think that maybe all this does happen for a reason.

I know what Alex has told me is by impulse like us going to spend a night in a fancy hotel. He is mixing up his devotion to me with what he wants for his life. I think it would be best for him to return to U Penn, where he began a new life. However, even if he decides to stay just this semester and be there for Val, I think that is ok too. They need each other. U Penn will be waiting for him next year.

The two of them are amazing people. They have had such a large effect on my life and me on them. I am the luckiest person alive. Some people never have friends like that in their whole lives. I have touched their lives and I will always be a part of them. It is for that reason that now whatever they do, I will be doing it as well. I am a part of them and they are part of me. So all the things I wanted to get done in my life, I will get done - through them. I am

hoping so much that they take care of each other. They need each other. For so long I have been their life and that will end soon. I am really worried about them. I don't want to leave them. Why does this have to be so hard? This is a disadvantage of dying slowly. I must watch the people close to me grieve my death when I am still here. I wish I would have just gone quickly and suddenly.

December 25

Val and I have decided to get engaged. We both asked each other at the same time, so it was a mutual decision. We will be engaged but will not marry. We both know in some ways that this might be more hurtful than happy, however we are sure of what we have done. We figure that if we somehow unite as one, that I will be with her all the time, symbolically. Plus, I love her more than anything else in the world and have always wanted to marry her. Last night was the first night of Hanukah and we all lit the candles. We broke out my special menorah that was to be saved until I was married. It was beautiful to light the candles and say the prayers. This might be my last Hanukah, so it was very special.

December 27

People must realize how lucky they are to be alive and to be healthy - it is a gift. They have forgotten that the simple things are the most important - friendship, love, learning. One must live life to the fullest because you never know when your time might be up. Do the things you want to do and not what others tell you to do. Learn to be your own person and be proud of who you are. This whole experience has opened my mind tremendously. I have learned to be more compassionate and caring. Give time to those less fortunate all throughout the year, both financially and physically. Tell someone in your life that you appreciate them - give them a compliment - it will go a long way. Be open to new ideas - listen to people, really listen - try to look at things from a new perspective. When you find someone you love, hold on to them as long as you can. Be a good person - someone that I would be proud of.

December 28

Music is amazing. I love everything about music. When I am listening to a good song - I am taken away into a different world. I feel no pain, just happiness. Some music even makes me dance and for others I cannot hold back humming the words. I used to love to sing and play the guitar. It was another part of my identity that I lost after the surgery. I had trouble speaking - forget singing. A song can make you forget all your worries. Music is just the best thing in the world.

December 31

Today is the last day of a very long year - an extremely long year. The events that have taken place over the last year have dramatically changed my life as well as the many lives around me. Last year at this time, I was a healthy young teenager without a worry in the world. It was the first of January when I first began to feel the slightest bit of pain. Now, a year later, I am preparing to die. I think I have discovered the meaning of life. The reason why we are put here on this earth. That reason is love. I have discovered a numerous amount of types of love. There are as many types of love as there are people in this world. I love every person that has

touched my life in a slightly different way. I have learned to appreciate people for who they are and I truly love them. But love also hurts. It is love that connects my soul to everyone else's. It is love that will cause sadness and grief. And it is love that will allow me to live on in the hearts of others. I would love to tell each and every person that is close to me that I care about them. However, in trying not to forget anyone, I would like to say this: To all the people who have touched my life and to whom I have touched back - I love you.

January 2, 1998

This will probably be the last new year's that I will experience. It was the last Hanukah. It will be the last everything for me because I will probably not live another year. If someone asked me a year ago if I had six months to live, what would I do, I would have had no idea then and I have even less of an idea now. One of the many things I have learned recently is "carpe diem" - seize the day. One should live in the present - live life to the fullest now. Do not wait to tell someone how you feel about them. Do not wait for the right moment. Tell people what you want and need to tell them. Seize the day.

January 4

I feel so old, like an old man. I feel old in so many ways. Physically, my body is simply wasting away. I have pain all over. I am constantly taking medication. I walk slowly and I can hear my bones creaking. I need help to do things I once did by myself. More significantly, I feel mentally old. A person's age is not just determined by the amount of years they have been on this earth, but also by the experiences they have gone through. There are ninety year olds who have not experienced half of what I have. It's like I have lived a full life in an eighteen year span.

January 6

I said before that I love everyone who has touched my life. I feel though that this is not enough. There are so many people out there who have been there for me through everything. People who have unselfishly given themselves to me to help me feel better in my time of need. They have prayed for me. They have cooked for me. They have sent me letters, gifts, baskets, and balloons. They have befriended me. They have put me in as part of their family. They have made an extra effort to make sure I know they are thinking of me. They have given their free time to me. I want you all to know that everything that you have done for me has not gone unnoticed. I really, truly appreciate everything and I love you. I love you. I love you.

January 7

There are lots of things that I want to accomplish in my life. I will not be able to do it all, though. Therefore, I will need those close to me to carry out what I want to do. Not to say everything on my list can be done, but maybe just some of them. Here are some of them: jump out of an airplane - travel to Israel a third time - be on a game show - ski the hardest trail - travel to everywhere - own a restaurant - own a bed and breakfast - be a gourmet chef - have a large sailboat - be a millionaire - take a trip across the country - gamble in Las Vegas - legally order a drink - see Saturday Night Live in person - have a New York City apartment loft - have fun - play for the Boston Celtics - write a classic novel - help people - design logos - be a caregiver (doctor, social worker) - rent and watch hundreds of movies over a one day period - taste every

food in the world once - find an easier way to administer chemotherapy - help cancer patients - get one person to quit smoking - I WANT TO DO EVERYTHING.

January 8

I just want to be left alone. Everything seems to be getting to me. Everyone seems to be annoying me. I'm tired of being sick. I'm sick of being tired. I'm tired of everyone asking how I'm doing. How do you think I'm doing? I'm dying. I don't know what it is that's making me so irritable. I'm sick of everything. I don't want to be left alone but I want to be by myself.

January 12

I love my family and friends and everything that they have done for me. They have sent me constant messages, cards, good thoughts, and everything else. I simply do not want people to see me the way I am. I look very sick. I am deformed. I am constantly not feeling well. I cannot entertain people. I want people to remember me the way I was. That was who I was. I was not always sick with cancer.

January 14

While this journal was originally intended to reflect what has occurred in the last year, the emphasis has changed. There may be therefore some parts that are not as detailed describing the tribulations of my treatment. You see, these things seem so less important to me now. Before I thought that things were going to get better and my story would be an account like many others who have been through what I've been through. I did not want to forget such an enormous part of my life. It is important to document things so that one has a point of reference to refer to. This is why I kept a journal in Israel - to remind myself. I think now I must focus on what my life has meant in the past - what I have done and accomplished. What I plan to do. This past year is one year in the life of many years.

January 16

Time is such a strange thing - the future, the past, and the present. I have lived almost twenty years. I have been through twenty years of experience, growth, and learning. Yet there is so much I cannot do. I am limited not only by physical incapability now, but also time is running against me. There are so many things that I want to do and I am hoping that what other people do that know me will carry on my dreams.

January 17

This could be the last entry that I write in this journal. It has been almost a year now since I have started this journal and I am getting worse everyday. Everyday I am getting worse. I am feeling worse, looking horrible, feeling pain all over my body. Sleeping at night has become near impossible. I have been anxiety-ridden and unsure of what is to come. What the future holds is such a mystery. I feel I should write now while I have the energy and strength. I keep thinking I need to leave something behind. Leave my mark on society - to show that my life has meant something - that it has had some significance. There are the people on which I have and will leave my heart and soul. It's like I need something solid, touchable, tangible for people to

see and look at and have a memory in solid form. It's like I have all this money and resources which I should leave behind. I should donate to some organization - some cancer research. Leave a building or a laboratory. Help somehow other people or kids that will have to experience what I did to make it easier or somehow more manageable.

I really want to have my life make a difference. I have lived almost two decades and I have done so much. I have experienced so much. Many things that some never do and never will. But somehow, I feel incomplete. I need to get things in order. I need to go through my past and I must prepare for what is to come. Make up some kind of will. Make sure the material things are taken care of. I want to go through what I have done in my life and share these things with the people who will live on. I want to tell every single person in my life what they have meant to me. I want to write a separate note or leave a present or tell a secret or story to someone. It is impossible though, because there are so many people, so many things to tell, and just so little time. It is for this reason that I must also write down what I want for the future. I have started this but this idea is equally impossible. The possibilities are endless once again.

January 18

I don't want anyone to remember me the way I am now. I don't want to be remembered as the kid who got sick with cancer, went through treatment, lost a battle and eventually died. When people remember me, I want them to think of a healthy young man - strong, athletic, intelligent, friendly, caring, sensitive, loving, honest, handsome, mature, brave, confident, competent, thoughtful, kind, affectionate, musical, and everything else. I am not trying in any way to be conceited or cocky in any way. I WANT TO BE REMEMBERED AS ALL OF THESE THINGS AND NOT THE ONE WHO WAS SICK. THIS IS SO IMPORTANT TO ME. IF WHEN READING THIS JOURNAL, THIS THOUGHT IS THE ONE THAT YOU REMEMBER, THEN I WILL BE SATISFIED.

January 22

It has now been exactly one year since my first entry in this journal. I am getting sicker and my time is short. This is the conclusion of my experience over the past year. I emphasize again that I want to be remembered as a healthy young man and not a man of sickness. It has been one year in the life of me. Two years in the life of a long and meaningful score.

Afterward

Over 1000 people honored Derek by attending his funeral, a service that paid tribute to life. Rabbi David Meyer read letters from Derek's brother, Bryan, and from us, as well as excerpts from Derek's own Journal. Best friend, Alex Abrams, eulogized Derek and "almost mother-in-law" Leslie Rosenberg read aloud her poem to Derek.

We enclose these, as well as a letter from Papa, as an afterward to Derek's Journal because they express the genuine affection that Derek so richly deserved. So many people have asked us for copies of these sentiments because it seems they were inspired by what was said about our son.

We also believe these enclosures help to describe the way Derek touched us all. Individually each of us remembers special moments with Derek, and together we all remember a warm smile that emanated from a beautiful human being.

Sandy and Peter

Eulogy of Derek Sheckman

Written and delivered by Alex Abrams

Derek Sheckman was my best friend. He once wrote about me in a peer recommendation: "Alex Abrams is like a brother to me. I say this not as a cliché but as a real statement of my respect and admiration for my best friend in the world." I have undoubtedly the same feelings for him. Derek and I first met many years ago doing many different things: stuffing envelopes at the JCC for our mothers, playing together at Camp Simchah for many summers, and participating in the basketball leagues at the JCC for a number of years. But mine and Derek's friendship only truly blossomed when we entered high school. Before basketball practice one winter day Derek invited me to hang out at his house after school, a considerate gesture for he knew if I had to go home before the late practice it would be a long walk to and from the high school. Soon our friendship grew that freshman year and I remember many Saturday nights when Derek, Lance Sobelman and I would hang out together, going to the Warwick movie theatre, playing games of clue or monopoly, or just sometimes talking about what we thought junior and senior year of high school would be like. I was also a teammate of Derek's many times on both the soccer field and basketball court—unfortunately for us we experienced many more losses than victories! Our friendship grew as we were both the first youth board members at the JCC during junior and senior year, and spent many afternoons together traveling into Boston for meetings at Youth on Board, a program that we participated in that educated young board members. But it was in Israel during the summer of 1996 that Derek and I truly solidified our best friendship. We learned more about ourselves that summer than we ever had before, and most importantly we did it all together. From our count off numbers on the bus, (I was 16 and he was 17) to the climbing of Masada, to the time we spent together with Mr. Netzer in Jerusalem, I realized there was something really special about my best friend. We left Israel looking forward to our senior year in high school. And through all the turmoil that this last year has brought, Derek had always remained friendly, outgoing, and strong. The time that I have spent with him and Val, like the Senior Prom and Graduation, as well as with others during our trip to my house in the Berkshires in June, was a time extremely trying for Derek, but his presence at all these events and more never failed to make them happy times.

Through my four year friendship with Derek I have learned so much about him and have realized how great of a person he was. Firstly Derek was an incredible athlete and an incredible scholar at the same time. It always amazed me how he could perform so well in honors classes during the day and then that night start for either the varsity soccer or varsity basketball team. Derek's talents went beyond those two fields of course. His artistic abilities, ability to dance and act, and his musical ear were just more additions to his already long list of superb qualities. Derek was always a leader, and always stood up for what he believed in. Derek was someone with so few enemies that I cannot even remember one. He rarely ever got angry at someone and almost all of the time Derek had a smile on his face. On our trip to Israel, when everyone was being awarded their last will and testament, Derek was not awarded something a bit derogatory but rather a mean streak, because Derek never had one and was so friendly to everyone. Derek was always able to deal with whatever came along in his life. Many people that I have talked to

remember Derek as someone always smiling, always looking for the positive side of things. And why did he do this I asked myself, when many times things looked so glum, I think it was because Derek really enjoyed making others happy. Derek showed a special loyalty to all those who knew him and was always ready to help anyone out in times of need.

These unbelievable qualities, which became apparent to me during my friendship with Derek, must have been rooted in the huge role that his family played in his life. To his wonderful parents, Sandy and Peter, the foundation of Derek's morals and values which you instilled in him were shared with everyone whom he knew. His compassion, gentleness, sensitivity, and ability to love stemmed from the love and strength which the two of you showed for him. To his brother, Bryan, you were Derek's inspiration. He always wanted to play the guitar or sing the way you did. I remember times when Derek would be so excited to show me and Val the CD's that you had recorded in your acapella group. You were his idol. To his grandparents and the rest of his family, your love and concern for Derek constantly reminded him of the love that surrounded him. To his friends, classmates, teammates, teachers, coworkers, people who knew him and those of you who did not even know him, your words of encouragement and support in this past year had meant so much to Derek. He was always so appreciative and touched by your thoughts and sentiments. I am sure that you all have been affected by my wonderful friend.

Derek did not leave this world without teaching me many important lessons. Since I never had a brother he showed me the plutonic love that two guys can share. He taught me never to be picky, never to be petty, to always assert myself and succeed, to show respect to all people, and especially value those closest to me. His love for Valerie and the love that she showed for him taught me what true love really is—that it is not bound by illness and not even by death. When Derek presented Val with the engagement ring that she now wears on her finger and then asked her to marry him, he also made me realize the true love that I will find one day. I have always looked up to Derek. Whether it was choosing what clothes to wear, picking out the good music at the store, or even learning how to deal with girls, Derek always knew what to do—he was in my mind always the coolest. Derek was my best friend. He helped me to realize who I am today. I will never forget him.

January 28, 1998

Dearest Derek,

You already know everything we are about to say because we were able to tell you and you usually listened to us. We must now say "good bye" out loud. And just to be sure, one last time:

We want you to know how proud we are of you, not just the way you handled your illness, but the real you inside. We admire your sense of fairness and your sincere belief in being kind to everyone. We have learned about the countless ways you have been thoughtful to others. We are not surprised at what is described, just the magnitude. That you bothered to smile and include someone - even someone not popular with the class - makes a difference in everyone's sense of the world. You have a kind nature, a beautiful soul, a comforting smile, and deep expressive blueberry eyes. This cancer has robbed you of much, but not how we know you and how we will always remember you.

From the moment you were born, you have been stubborn and perseverant. You have always gone after what you want. On the soccer field and the basketball court you played hard, but fair. We loved to watch you tell the team what to do, and we loved the way they listened to you. You haven't been shy about telling any of us what to do. We love that you are confident in yourself and have not had trouble making decisions. During this last year of life, you stayed in charge, doing what you needed to do, accepting treatment, surgery, medication and finally deciding what you would tolerate.

As you grew older, we realized that you were a natural born leader: soccer captain, class officer, JCC Board member. We are in awe of the way you carried those leadership positions. You pitched in and did your share and earned the respect of those around you. You have become a mensch before our eyes.

This Thanksgiving when you wrote a letter to the editor of the Reporter, you weren't just hoping to get out of writing personal notes (though you hoped we would accept that idea), you really wanted to say thank you for caring to all the people whom you truly did not

know. It was a brave reminder for all of us. You were letting us know how you felt. Like when you went to overnight camp the first year - fearful at first as you climbed the bus, then smiling and blowing kisses as the bus departed. Conquering your fear and proud of it.

You will always be our hero and model of maturity - listening carefully to your options, making a decision, then carrying through with all your strength. You faced an awful time this year but you did it - every bit of offered treatment, as best as you could. No one could have done better. You can go peacefully knowing that you did your best - as always.

Derek, you know something wonderful about love. We know how much you love your Valerie and we know how hard you found it to say good-bye to her, especially. So you have some idea of how hard it is for us.

The world will miss you, not just because you leave it so young, but because of what you gave it. Your friends will miss you because of what you mean to them. And we will miss you because you filled our lives. Grandson, brother, child - always our loving Derek

Mommy and Dad

January 26, 1998

Dear Derek,

You mean so much to me, as you do to others who know you well and know how good-hearted you are and how unfair the world is that you should have to go through this. I remember the day you were born how ecstatic I was that I had a baby brother. We have so many good memories through good and bad that we have experienced together that to list them would be futile.

I just hope that the medicines that you take can relieve you of the pain that is so persistent. It looks like to me that you have so much courage – even if you are fearful.

You are the best little brother a guy could have.

Love always,

Bryan

To Derek, My Almost Son In Law

Jan. 13, 1998

A slender young man
on the brink of manhood
A sweet and gentle smile
and eyes that light
Bright and good
filled with potential
These are your qualities
I first regarded
It pleased me to see
you embraced by my daughter
You challenged her with thoughts
and made her try even harder
Hearing your voice she would smile
and it pleased me anew

I know my Valerie
her strengths and weaknesses
I know the depth of my
lovely child/woman
She has chosen you
as much as you her
And on the day you
asked to marry
we all cried and hugged
because it was so bitter sweet
My heart ached for you
for her, for all of us
How can fate be so cruel?
How can love be so sweet and
innocent?
How can life be so hard?

I watch silently in the near distance
as she remains devoted to you
She is my child
so wise and so amazing
I love her and admire her
as much as you

If only things could be different?
If only the future
could hold more promise?
But, the present is all
we really have

Each of us being sums
of our experiences
Growing and learning,
reaching out and reaching
new depths
All of us becoming wiser
than our years

My heart breaks
when I think of you dying
when I think of
your incredible struggle
My heart breaks for the people
who will be left behind
No one expects it to be easy
no one will be untouched
But, no one will be alone
The bonds created between us
through you
are strong and filled with love

I am so happy to have known
your beautiful you
To me you will always be
bright and good,
filled with potential
with a sweet and gentle smile
I am so happy to have known you...

with my love,
Your Almost Mother In Law

Janie

Jan. 30, 1998

Dear Derek,

In the Ukranian shtetl where I was born and raised to boyhood, we believed in the "*bashert*" — Yiddish meaning: "Fate ordained by God." When a young Jew died, it was *bashert*, we allowed ourselves to believe that God was in need of new angels and took the righteous young to serve in His court.

Taras Shevchenko, the beloved Ukranian poet wrote a poem, *The Soul and The Stars*:

"Mama dear, they say that the stars in heaven
Are not really stars, but the souls of those
Who did good and did no evil.
It was God who took them to heaven - to shine as stars.
Then, teach me Mother dear,
To do good and do no evil
So that I, too, can go to heaven and shine as a star."

Derek, Amigo, today, at this hour, I am the young boy of the shtetl and believe that your soul will shine among the stars. When the night is cloudless and clear — revealing the myriad of stars, I'll be looking for you. Please blink twice so I'll know you saw me too.

Amigo — good bye.

Papa