I recall that chilly March night in 1993. I was sitting on my bedroom floor playing Nintendo with my younger brother and sister. My mother suddenly opened the bedroom door and insisted that we get dressed quickly and go to the car. I could sense a trace of fear in her trembling voice. I asked my mother what was happening. With tears in her eyes, she told me to do what she had said because we needed to get to Indianapolis as quickly as possible. My mother did not have to speak another word. I had a pretty good idea about what was going on.

We quickly stopped what we were doing, shut the Nintendo game off, and ran out of the bedroom. All five of us, my father, mother, brother, sister, and me, scrambled through the house looking for our shoes, socks, and coats. In a matter of a few short minutes we were in our gray Celebrity pulling out of the driveway, ready to make the two-and-a-half-hour trip from Plymouth, a small town in northern Indiana, to an Indianapolis hospital, where my uncle had been staying for the last year.

Everyone in the car was completely silent. I was so frightened, and my heart was pounding so hard that I thought it would burst through my chest. The car seemed stuffy, and I found it hard to breathe. My mother broke into tears, and my father put one arm around her and kept one arm on the wheel. This became the longest and most difficult trip of my life. This was one trip for which I was not anxious to reach the final destination. For an entire year I had been trying to convince myself that I would
not have to make this trip, but deep inside I knew that it would happen someday. I just never thought that it would happen so soon.

You see, for the last ten years of my uncle Robert Cooley's life, he had to deal with a number of difficulties. These were not the same difficulties that each of us are forced to deal with on a daily basis. These difficulties were far greater than what you or I could ever imagine. My uncle had to deal with the reality that he would never walk again or enjoy such simple things as putting his arms around someone he loves. My uncle had no feeling in his body from the neck down. His paralysis was a result of an accident that had occurred while cutting down a tree for a neighbor. In the process of cutting down this tree there must have been some miscommunication between the men because when the tree fell to the ground, my uncle was in the way and was crushed by the impact. Doctors had said that he would not survive, but, as my grandmother most often said, my uncle was stubborn. He refused to give up.

For the next several years, I watched as my uncle struggled to accept the reality of what had happened to him. His life had been completely changed. Before the accident he led an active lifestyle. He was very athletic and enjoyed spending time with his family, but the accident had taken everything from him. He would no longer be able to play with his two daughters, he could never again hug his wife, and he would never walk again.

All of the memories of the last ten years kept running through my mind during the trip to Indianapolis. Just as my uncle had done so many times during his paralysis, I, too, kept asking God why he would allow something like this to happen to such a wonderful man who had had so many blessings in his life. As I sat in the dark car and watched the headlights of oncoming automobiles, I began thinking of my uncle's life.

Cynthia, his wife, took care of him at their home. As the years passed by, she became more of a nurse to him and less of a wife. They grew apart and their relationship became very distant. I am not sure exactly at what point it happened, but nearly everyone knew that she had stopped loving him and only stayed because he had no one else to care for him. I do not know for sure, but I think that even Uncle Bob could sense that they had drifted apart. They continued to keep their feelings locked up inside and never really talked about what was happening.

After what had seemed like an eternity, we pulled into the hospital where my uncle had been staying for the last year. He had been very ill, and his wife could no longer care for him. We sat in the car for what was probably only a few minutes, but it seemed like forever. I had a lump in
my throat and tears in my eyes. I could not believe that this was actually happening. I refused to believe that my uncle was actually going to die.

My father opened his door and stepped out of the car. The rest of us did the same. We walked across the parking lot. Everything seemed so strange. It seemed as though it was just a terrible dream and that I would soon be waking up. My mother grabbed my hand and whispered something to me. I could not understand her words, but her hand was so warm and her touch made me feel so much better. When we arrived at the entrance to the hospital, my father opened the door. He went to the large desk in the lobby and spoke to a dark-haired woman. She looked at us and nodded her head. In a few moments a man dressed in white, my uncle’s doctor I presumed, came up to us and led us down a long hall. As we walked down this hall, I looked in some of the open rooms. There were so many sick people. My stomach began to hurt. Once again I began to cry. I remember the smell of that hospital. It had the same smell as the nursing home where my great-grandmother had stayed. I hate that smell, and even now the thought of it makes my stomach hurt.

We proceeded down the hall, made a left, and then a right. Even though the walls were white, the place seemed so dark and gloomy. At last we came to a set of double doors. On the other side of these doors were more members of our family. My grandmother had had fourteen children, and all but one of them were present. Uncle Bill and his wife had not yet arrived.

We sat in the lobby together and waited for about thirty minutes before Bill and his wife arrived. He gave my grandmother a hug, and then we all stood up and walked down the hall together. This was what Uncle Bob wanted. He wanted to see his entire family together one last time. My grandmother lead us to the room. Nothing could have ever prepared me for what I was about to see. I had not seen my uncle in several months. He did not look like the man that I remembered. He had lost so much weight and his cheeks were sunken in. Several of us broke into tears at the sight of him laying there.

Thirty-five of us stood in that little hospital room. We held hands and prayed over and over asking God to help us through this situation. I remember looking at the faces of my aunts and uncles. I could feel their pain, but at the same time, I could not help but think about what an awesome family God had given me. We had all come together, and I experienced a feeling that I had never experienced before. We were all in so much pain over what was happening, but together I knew that we would make it through.
Uncle Bob, who had been unconscious, opened his eyes and looked around the room at each one of us. He smiled and said that he was glad that we had all made it. He struggled with every word that he spoke, but his words will forever be with me. He told us that he loved each one of us. He said that we should love each other and use the talents that God had given us. He wanted each one of us to be thankful for the gifts that we had been given and to never take anything for granted. Then he turned to me, and the words that he spoke were the most powerful words that I have ever heard. I can hear his voice just as if it had happened yesterday. He said, gasping for air between each word, “Tami, you have talent. Don’t ever forget that. Thank God for the abilities you have. You can make a difference. Run some for me, hey kid.” I nodded, and a tear ran down my cheek. My grandmother held his hand. He could not feel her touch, but he knew that she was there.

All of us, with the exception of my grandmother, were asked to leave the room. We said good-bye and turned to the door. I walked out of the room and down the hall and never once looked back. We waited in the lobby, trying to comprehend all that had just happened. In a few short minutes my grandmother walked into the lobby. She had tears streaming down her face and said, “He’s gone. He held on so that he could see each one of us once more, but now he’s gone. He let go.”

The trip back home to Plymouth was even longer than the trip to Indianapolis. No one said a single word the entire ride home. I kept running those words he spoke over in my mind. I did not realize it then, but I later discovered that I had been a part of something special, something that I will never experience again. My uncle’s death was a turning point in my life, and it is this reason that I choose to share this experience.

My uncle had everything taken away from him. He lost everything—his ability to move and even his relationship with his wife. In spite of all that he had lost, my uncle never gave up on life. He experienced many difficult times and came close to giving in, but he never lost his desire to live. He always managed to find the light amidst all of the darkness. Robert Cooley was and still is an inspiration to me. He gave me something that can never be taken away. He touched my heart by showing me how to live, and he is in my heart each day. It is for him that I continue to try my best in all that I do. Each time I step on the track I say a little prayer, and at the end of the prayer I whisper the words “This one’s for you” in memory of my uncle Robert Cooley, a man who had more strength than any other man that I have ever known.