

Traveling Companion: What do you say?

Fr. Michael Tracey

The doorbell rang on Wednesday evening as I was about to watch the national newscast. A tall woman stood outside. I opened the door and she asked, "Would you talk to my son?" "What is the problem?" I asked. "He was in a wreck and his best friend got killed."

I invited her to ask him to come. She called out to him. He arrived and she introduced him, saying, "This is my son, John. We will stay outside while he talks to you."

I ushered the tall, eighteen year old young man, dressed in his baggy blue jeans and dark blue T-shirt into my office.

"Your mother told me you were in a wreck and your friend got killed," I began. "Would you like to talk about it?"

He began to tell me the story. He and his friend were about to go off to Boot Camp for the National Guard and they had decided to party before they left. Both had been drinking earlier in the day. John was driving on a country road that was unfamiliar to him. They were on the way to pick up his friend's girlfriend. His friend was wearing a seat belt. John was not. He was traveling at around 70 m.p.h. when they came upon a curve and a bridge. He lost control of the car, hit the bridge and careered down a 10 foot embankment into a stream. The car was severed in two. His friend was ejected from the car and John, when he extricated himself from his driver's seat, found his friend lying, face down, in the stream. He tried mouth to mouth to no avail. With the help of a neighbor, who happened to be passing by, they called the ambulance and the paramedics pronounced his friend dead at the site. Both young men were transported to the local hospital. John received treatment for some minor facial, head and neck cuts and was released three hours later.

His friend's parents were notified and drove from Colorado. His friend was cremated and brought back to Colorado for burial. The parents tried to console John and tell him they understood and did not want to punish him any more.

The Sheriff's Department obtained a blood alcohol sample from John after the wreck and now he waited to find out the results. He wondered if he would be charged. Would the fact that he was eighteen, make a difference. He consulted with an attorney.

As John sat in my office, telling his story, tears began to pour down his cheeks and he tried to hide them by wiping them immediately.

Inside he was in torment and was experiencing his own agony and torture. Obviously, he had more questions than answers. He mentioned that he had tried to go out with some friends to distract himself from the fury of thoughts and feelings that constantly flooded his mind. But, the questions, thoughts and feelings surfaces powerfully when he least expected. Some had told him that he needed to "move on." Others mentioned that he would "get over it." While he appreciated their willingness to help lessen his trauma, deep down he realized it was not going to be so simple. He knew he would have to live with the nightmare of that night for the rest of his life. He also realized that his dream life was shattered forever; that he was no longer invincible; that he was now vulnerable and lost in his own agony. The thought of prison also became a real possibility for him.

An hour later, John left. We shook hands. I told him if he needed to come back anytime and talk some more, I would be glad to meet with him.

As he left, something Leon Bloy once said came to mind. "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence."

John discovered places in his heart he never knew existed and now they were filled with haunting memories and the suffering and pain they generated.