

BEAUTY

James Carroll

“It’s very easy to get caught up in all the distractions and the schedules and the stress, but taking the time to reflect and appreciate the vitality that we’ve all been blessed with, I’d say is the thing that I currently try to do.”

James Carroll fiddled with settings on his synthesizer, adjusting various textures of sound with one hand, while his other hand danced across the keys. This was always tough—getting the melodies and rhythms that ran through his head out into the air.

He’d closed his bedroom door, blocking the rest of the world as he worked on what he loved.

He had a lot on his mind: music and all that went with it, high school, the past, this summer, his future. He’d tied the knot with Taylor University, where his sister went. He’d declared Music Composition, not Computer Engineering, which he had considered before.

Now, it was all hitting him. Not long from now, he’d leave Ohio for Indiana, home for college, and the solitary confines of his bedroom for a dormitory full of guys.

The future was . . . stunning? Scary? Gloomy? Bright?

James didn’t have an answer. He knew the future was there. That was enough.

“How have I changed since freshman year?” James asked, leaning back in his seat and scanning the ceiling. “I’ve changed a lot. I think I still weigh the same. It’s fluctuated, but . . .” He laughed a little, shook his head.

Born in Indiana, James spent his first few years living in a Warsaw trailer park with his parents and older sister while his dad attended seminary. Then the Carrolls moved to Ohio, where they stayed.

“I was a pretty solitary boy, growing up,” James said. “I kept to myself a lot of the time. I was heavily interested in my studies.”

Music was a major part of James’ life. He sang in choirs and on his own, played piano for most of his life, and played violin for five years before quitting in high school and transitioning to guitar for its “coolness factor.”

“What really started . . . my passion for recording music was, when I was twelve, my parents got me this recording software and big synthesizer, and I started recording little things for fun.”

James enjoyed putting the pieces together: the rhythms, the notes, the sounds. But he tended to do it by himself, as with a lot of things.

Coming to Taylor as a freshman, moving onto the Brotherhood, and entering the music program gave James a new context in which to create music. For the first time, he had older guys—brothers, in a sense—to look up to and an almost immediate friend group of musicians.

James met Josh in his first music class that fall.

“I was trying to size up who’s in this class,” James said. “I was trying to be the funny one. And I was trying to figure out if this guy was also going to be funny.”

They hit it off right away, and for the rest of the year they were best buds in the Music Department. They did homework together and ended up hanging out a lot of nights.

“I don’t think either of us were the coolest cats when coming to college, but we got more social,” James said.

Josh was always a step ahead.

“But I came along. Eventually.”

Josh was James’ best friend outside of the Brotherhood. They played intramurals and performed in MyGen and Nostalgia Night

together. Toward the end of freshman year, they gathered a group that met and played worship songs, and Josh began talking to James about starting a chapel band.

The next year, with Josh no longer in the Music Department, playing together in chapel band kept their friendship strong. James ran into Josh a lot, and most of their conversations centered around the band: listening to and picking out songs, talking about the meaning of worship.

“He had us all write down on a card what worship meant to us, and then he met with all of us and talked through that,” James said.

These conversations were significant for James, who had left high school on a path toward cynicism and been deeply impacted by the worship he saw as a freshman at Taylor.

“When you’re playing music for other things and you’re on stage . . . you try to get into it to make it be a fun show,” James said. “But when you’re playing for chapel band, it’s not supposed to be about you, even though people are all watching you.”

Being in chapel band with Josh meant getting up at six in the morning to shower, while Josh, according to James, ran something to the tune of ten or fifteen miles for his marathon training.

“I was like, ‘You’re insane,’” James said.

By seven, the band was in the chapel, ready for sound check—Josh included—and James was creating music with others.

Junior year, Jazz Combo replaced chapel band as their main shared activity, keeping them involved in each other’s lives beyond greetings on the sidewalk. During the breaks in the middle of practice, James and Josh would walk around and catch up with each other. Conversations ranged from relationships to their spiritual lives, with Josh asking about James’ prayer life and inviting him to Living Waters.

“That whole year, junior year, I felt this desire to hang out with him more,” James said.

This was tough with their very different schedules, and when it

worked out, it didn't always live up to what they'd imagined.

"One time, we had lunch together at the Grille and talked about some funny stuff. . . . Afterwards, (Josh) said, 'That wasn't the deepest conversation.'"

On one of the last days before spring break 2012, James and Josh decided to have dinner together at the Grille. Friend Joel Plosz joined them on the way. It was nice out, sunny with a clear blue sky, so they decided to take their food outside.

"I say, 'What a perfect dinner. Me and two of my best friends just hanging out on a bench in this beautiful weather.' And (Josh is) like, 'Really? You consider me one of your best friends?' And I'm like, 'Of course, man.'"

They went on to talk about their spring break plans—Josh was road tripping with a bunch of people he and James had hung out with freshman year—and Josh talked about his video ideas.

"Everything is looking really happy," James said. "Just one of those days where it's sunny out and the future looks very bright."

As bright as the sky, James said. He'd begun to see the beauty around him and enjoy it with other people.

The day before Josh died, Josh and James had Jazz Combo together, and with it, their walking talks. Josh was excited about the possibility of leading worship for Social Justice Week chapel.

"He had all these funny ideas, and I was like, 'Oh, maybe, we'll have to see if we can try it,'" James said.

The next day, Josh was gone.

The ugliness surrounding his death sent James scrambling for beauty to cling to. In the weeks following, whenever a memory of Josh came to his mind, James wrote it out and added it to a file on his computer.

He has it now, printed out, and holds it carefully. It's a treasure he doesn't share with many.

Josh was open. That's what James remembers most about him, and that's how Josh changed James' life.

“Being open. Being open even if others have their eyes closed, or are closed,” James said. “A willingness for openness—not just with others, but with your eyes and your heart.”

James remembered Josh pinning a sign to his backpack that read, “If you need prayer, just ask.”

James asked him once if anyone had ever asked him for prayer, and Josh had said not really. But that didn’t keep him from giving the option.

“(He was always) willing to be there for someone if they needed it and not building up a wall that would keep someone from even trying to talk,” James said.

James was quiet. He took his time to answer questions, carefully choosing the right words, not rushing to say anything.

“I’m trying to cling to what I know is important,” he said, looking out the window and watching people on the sidewalks. “And that’s love and caring for others and just appreciating beauty. Trying to live each day being fully aware of what’s around you, of the life and the beauty that surrounds us each day.”

Josh.

“He was a good influence, but also just a good friend. I think people after his passing . . . painted him as this angel,” James said, “but he was also a human . . . a dude you could hang out with and was real.”

Reality.

“It’s been a journey of kinds. . . . I went through a more rough year, searching and being hit by more and more worries and thoughts and concerns and doubts. That made dealing with his death a little more confusing, a little more difficult. I still don’t know if I’ve fully, really processed it. Or if I ever will be capable of fully processing it.”

The future.

“My life is a totally blank slate, which on one side is exciting and one side it’s scary. I think you have to choose to get excited about it . . . and just realize the opportunities of forging your own life path, while at the same time not taking anything for granted, and just trying to

THE ROLE HE PLAYED

live a life where you appreciate beauty and create beauty with others.”

James spent the semester after Josh’s death in Nashville, studying studio recording and working with artists, recording them and putting on shows. He was doing what he loves: making music, orchestrating sounds to get what was in his head out into the air.

Only this time, he wasn’t making music alone. He was making music, creating beauty with others—something Josh helped him learn to do.

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