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The Building Blocks of Friendship

There was no time to waste! A man with a red face stood at the top of the largest tower. His posture was strong, his cape was flowing in the wind, and he breathed threats like poison against the city. However, he had no idea who he was up against. A young boy stood with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. The boy quickly jumped up to the top of the tower in one great leap and struck the red-faced man. As the villain fell to his doom, the boy's partner swooped in with an airplane and sent the villain scattered into pieces. Legos... everywhere!

"Aaron! Where did his head go?" I chuckled hysterically. "I think it rolled under my bed!" Aaron said, laughing. We laughed in the face of common threats because we knew nothing could stop our "dynamic duo." Well, except for Aaron's mom calling us down for dinner.

Aaron and I, though being born one year apart, have been "connected at the hip" for as long as I can remember. Our moms played volleyball together and attended the same church. Because of their deep-rooted friendship, we were able to sprout one of our own. A friendship so strong that I've always considered the Bowmans my second family.

My biological siblings are much older, so I mostly grew up as an "only child." However, going to a house filled with three rambunctious boys just a couple years younger than me was always an adventure. The oldest, Aaron, never stepped away from a challenge. I don't think he was afraid of anything besides the monsters we believed lived in their basement. The middle

child, Eric, always struck me as the brawn. He was independent but enjoyed attention when a quick one-liner could be thrown into the conversation. The youngest, Ian, always felt like a little brother to me. He was the only one in the group I could beat at wrestling and certainly the calmest of the brothers. I remember telling my mom once that he was my favorite because I did not fear for my life nor did I have to work on my own when I was around him. He was calm.

But, as natural selection would have it, Aaron was the closest in age to me. I was stuck fighting tornado monsters in the backyard on windy days, shooting bb guns I didn't know how to use, and being terrified for my life every time Aaron got a new idea. All these things composed my childhood. Well... that and Legos. Aaron loved Legos.

I was never really a fan of these colored building blocks. They're germey and difficult to pull apart. You can spend all day building a masterpiece just to watch it crumble to bits when it's "time to clean up." I suppose there is some redemption in the pride you feel after constructing some intricate battleship or house. And even so, my distaste for Legos never seems to quench the nostalgia I feel around them today. They were the building blocks of our friendship, if you will. I remember Aaron would stack some boxes and reach up to the top of his closet where there rested a large tarp filled with Legos. He'd pull it down and there we would begin.

In those days, we started by laying the foundation. The work wasn't intentional or explicit. We were just playing board games, wresting, and eating Kid Cuisines to pass the time. We naturally developed a healthy competition between us. We constantly tried to figure out who could be the fastest and who could be the strongest. Those questions had us racing to the grocery store down the street or up the hill on the way back. They had us maxing out on pull-ups and push-ups every time we made it back inside. If there was a bar to climb, up we went (though Aaron was often more monkeylike than myself). If there was something to accomplish, we

fought for it. We were just kids without a care in the world seeing who could build the tallest tower out of Legos. Kids just playing with Legos.

Then we moved to the infrastructure. Sports seemed to dominate the free time we spent together. For a while we played on opposite teams because we would be “too stacked” if we were on the same team. Consequently, our ongoing competition continued in opposition of each other. But we were unaware of the change that was about to happen.

My mom ran an Upward Sports program at my church and just started a flag football season. Community members flocked in and with them, talent. Aaron and I were finally allowed to be on the same team! Sadly, our first season was rough. The teams were all new and we didn't know how to work together yet. However, we all seemed to enjoy the time, nevertheless. The second season though! Oh! Oh! Oh! Those were moments I won't soon forget!

We were playing the toughest team in the program and we were down by a couple points. Just one touchdown was needed to win the game, but time was quickly running out. I was the quarterback this year, with an army of a team. They were quick, strong, and smart. But the competition was equally, if not better. Thus, it was decision time. As our team stood huddled, I ran over to Coach Matt. We scrambled to find a play in our playbook that would work. Finally, I stopped him and asked, “Do you trust me?” He nodded his head and I ran back over to the team. We stood in silence for a moment. I made eye contact with Aaron and said under my breath “go long.” He nodded and we lined up. The seconds felt like an eternity. Until suddenly there it was. The snap. The pass. The catch. The touchdown. And the game was won.

Winter soon came, and with that came yet another basketball season. The team rosters would change on occasion and Aaron and I wouldn't always make it on the same team. But when we did, the scoreboards knew it. He pushed me to my limits. If I wasn't running as fast as him,

he'd yell at me to catch up. He never seemed to shame my weakness but always drew out my strength. Called me to be better because he knew what I could be. And that teamwork manifested itself on the court. There was an unexplainable connection between us. I noticed this during one game in particular. I was dribbling down the court not consciously aware of what was happening. I'm not even sure I was looking towards the basket. But there was Aaron cutting in towards the basket and I passed it to him. The ball went through the defenders to land at Aaron's perfectly timed destination. He made the shot and I stood dazed at the fact we didn't even need to communicate to know what each other would do.

Blocks upon blocks our house was built. It had history, design, and was starting to get some height. Thus, we kept building. Separately, we both noticed a "help wanted" ad for the summer camp we attended with our youth group. We agreed to apply only if the other person would too. Therefore, Aaron, a mutual friend Nate, and I all turned in applications and got hired working wait staff at the camp we so dearly loved. Except, it was the opposite side of the camp where we faced early mornings, long days, and late nights. The work was tiresome and unrewarding. For a "Christian camp" the staff was very rough around the edges. And, for all three of us, it was the first time away from home for an extended amount of time. But we did it together. We would help clean each other's tables. We would team up during the staff activities (though Aaron always seemed to win anyway). Aaron was even the best man during my mock wedding when a "Ring Pop Proposal" was taken a little too seriously. Through the good and bad, Aaron always had my back. Like I said, those Legos are tough to pull apart.

The next summer, Aaron and Nate went back, but I didn't. I got a job working somewhere else and the pennies I made at camp didn't compare to my current job. I felt a couple

Legos come off that summer. I feared Aaron would start forgetting about me. I was starting school at Houghton pretty soon and that meant I wouldn't be around as often. I also knew what I wanted to do with my life while Aaron was stuck at Walmart hating every moment of it. I had plans for him. He would be the "handy man" around my church. Strong, wise, and able bodied to accomplish any task. That was my dream. To take *my* friend with *me* on *my* journey through life. But that isn't how the story goes.

It was my sophomore year at Houghton College. Around Christmas break, Aaron began to come up with some future plans. He juggled a lot. Literally, he juggled- had school records in pole vaulting and was extremely talented in just about everything he tried. He could do whatever he wanted. I told him that often. Then, one day, he said it... "I want to join the Marines."

Fear gripped my spine and I swallowed deep. My brain kicked into overdrive as I calculated the estimated chance of survival, how long this crazy whim would last, and wondering if I was about to lose my best friend. I felt the foundation of our house of Legos start to shake as the realization hit that neither of us were kids anymore. After leaving his house where all those memories lived, I went into defense mode. Rather, I ran. My attention went to my girlfriend at the time. I thought about my classes. I thought about anything to keep me from facing reality. Eventually the break ended, and I went back to Houghton College holding on to assurance that "recruitment isn't until next year."

Next year turned into that coming May. May turned into right after Easter. Right after Easter turned into "Jacob, I'll see you in a couple months."

I received numerous letters from Aaron while he was at basic training. He spared plenty of details, but it was certainly hell on earth for him. He would add in little jokes about having fun and comments about how I should write him back.... But I never could. I couldn't face the

reality that my best friend was in the Marines. His life would soon be on the line. And I heard the Marines changes people. Would I even recognize Aaron when he got out? And in the moments when he needed me most as a friend and support, I vanished. I didn't write him back. I never built up the courage to put the pen to the paper and reply.

It should have been so easy. He is my best friend. I should know what to talk about. But for some reason, I didn't. I had no idea what questions to ask and everything about my life seemed unparalleled to his. As I was battling emotional mountains with my significant other, Aaron was climbing mountains with 50 pounds strapped to his body. As I was fighting with my other best friend, my girlfriend, Aaron was learning how to fight. When the trigger was finally pulled on that relationship and the breakup happened, Aaron was learning how to pull a trigger on a gun.

I lost one best friend before summer hit and I would be returning home without seeing the other until the end of May. That's when Aaron would be graduating basic training down in South Carolina. My internship in New York would be starting June 1st, but I had expressed to the Bowmans very clearly that I wouldn't miss graduation for the world.

Finally, the day came. We packed a van full of Aaron's family and drove 12 hours to see what Aaron had been going through the past couple of months. I prayed all those Legos would still be standing by the time we got back. I prayed desperately that I wouldn't lose another best friend.

Sadly, those prayers didn't seem to be answered. Upon greeting him for the first time, my worst fears had come true. We greeted each other with hugs and "missed ya bro." But something was different. Aaron was taller now. I'm not sure if he actually grew or if he just held himself tighter. Either way, he looked over me. As my eyes were glued to this soon to be hero, he barely

made eye contact. He asked how I was doing in a tone of voice that didn't seem to care. I still figured his problems were bigger than mine. I probably gave some "off the cuff" answer about school and what I was doing for the summer. And once again, defense kicked in. I grew apathetic. If he didn't care, I didn't care. I just listened in awe at the stories he was willing to tell and tried to enjoy the southern heat.

We drove back those twelve hours a tad bit more squished than last time. Because I was so skinny, I was sent to the back of this crowded van. My legs were pressed up against the seat in front of me and a sharp pain would stab my hips from being in that position too long. The pain made sleep nearly impossible. With the combination of emotional turmoil, physical pain, and anxiety for the future, the ride back to Pennsylvania was torture. And yet, I'd still endure much worse if it would bring my best friend home.

Finally, we got back to the Bowman's house around 1 a.m., where I showered and proceeded to drive to New York. A four-and-a-half-hour drive was in front of me on this cool summer night. Exhausted and emotionally drained, I turned on my Spotify playlist. The music helped to distract me. However, it was only a temporary solution. The song *Unconsolable* came on by X Ambassadors. Ironically – or not so ironically – it is a song about losing a friend, a song wishing that we could stay "as thick as thieves" and like "butter and bread" (X Ambassadors). Shortly after it played, the track skipped, and my aux cord stopped working. The music was only a fleeting fix to drown out the impending silence of the vehicle. Suddenly, everything went silent except for my thoughts.

There were a lot of questions rattling around my mind. As I drove into the darkness of the early morning, I was quickly reminded of my fear of the dark. After doing some reflection I

realized, it wasn't just the dark, but a fear of the unknown. I wrestled and lost to my fears during that drive.

You know, Jacob, this wouldn't have happened if you just took things more seriously. She warned you that there were problems in the relationship. Why didn't you change? You obviously weren't loving enough. And it's no surprise Aaron is gone. He was wandering aimlessly for months about what to do with his future. Where were you for that, huh? You just brushed it off like a problem that would solve itself. Look at you now. Your two closest friends... ex friends, are gone. And what are you going to do about it? That's right, you don't know.

Have you ever had your Lego tower kicked down by somebody? It hurts. The time and energy you put into constructing that beautiful masterpiece... gone. It was during that lonely drive back to New York that I realized not only had the tarp full of Legos been taken away, but our well-constructed tower had laid shattered on the ground in the process. Some big bully, some Marine, kicked over my tower.

Thankfully, that isn't how the story ends. Time went on and Aaron never completely went lost contact. I would get updates from his mom and brothers about his next whereabouts. However, one day I got a call. It went something like this: "Jacob, I met someone. She's amazing, beautiful, and everything I could ever dream of. I think I love her. I want you to meet her."

I probably squealed like a little kid receiving their favorite Lego set for Christmas. She won my approval and there was no one else I would have wanted Aaron to marry. A couple months later, Aaron and Lacey would make a trip home for Christmas break. The friend I lost had now been found again. He even reached up in that old closet and brought down the tarp full

of Legos. We constructed airplanes and houses again, despite Lacey's consternation. I had never been so overjoyed to be told "you guys are acting like kids."

Aaron and Lacey got married February 29, 2020 and I was asked to be the best man. It was a shock to me. It was humbling. I couldn't believe it when he asked. I was at a friend's house at the time and probably looked foolish jumping up and down with excitement. The wedding was still months away, but my excitement grew stronger and stronger. I spent hour after hour trying to figure out what to say in the best man speech. I pondered what childhood memories would I say to spark that nostalgia. This might be my last shot at rebuilding that tower I thought was shattered to bits.

Finally, the wedding arrived, and it was time for me to make the toast. I opened with a couple of puns to win the crowd's attention. The main portion of the speech consisted of sentiments and well wishes for the couple. However, I was sure to capitalize on the conclusion. I had expressed a dream of mine. Aaron and I would be retired and sitting on one of those wraparound porches. Our wives would bring out some sweet iced tea as we watch the grandkids play in the backyard. Maybe we would even pull down that tarp full of Legos for the kids to build something of their own. It would be friendship built throughout many generations. A friendship that has its Legos reinforced with superglue.

As boys, we mimicked our favorite superheroes. We battled evil villains with our shields and handcrafted ships. He was the Captain America to my Bucky; a dynamic duo that could withstand any trial. With this in mind, I concluded the speech by putting my hand on his shoulder and I said, "Mr. and Mrs. Bowman, 'I'm with you till the end of the line.'" (*Captain America*: qtd. in Goodreads) It was a kind of promise claiming that no matter what life brings, I'm not giving up those Legos.

Works Cited

Goodreads. "A Quote by Captain America." Goodreads, www.goodreads.com/quotes/9172876-i-m-with-you-until-the-end-of-the-line.

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