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### Personal Narrative Essay

One of my earliest childhood memories is when my father and I found a baby bird lying on the ground underneath a tree. Though I have never actually determined if this is true, the conventional wisdom at the time (and according to everyone I've ever discussed it with) was that if we returned the bird to the nest, the mother bird would reject the baby bird because it now carried the scent of a human being. In the internet age of instant access to information, that is the kind of thing we might have looked up online before proceeding. At the time, however, the closest thing we had to the internet was my set of Encyclopedias, and we were unable to determine from those whether the "human scent" issue was a genuine concern or a mere wives' tale. Choosing to err on the side of caution—and with the only other option being a potentially dangerous excursion into a fairly tall, and not easily-accessible tree, we chose to take the bird in and do what we could to nurse it back to health.

My father, using what little information he had at his disposal, purchased some earthworms from a local bait shop and conjured up a home-made "bird food" of mashed-up earth-worm and a small amount of milk. He created a makeshift birds' nest from an old cigar box and some shredded newspaper, keeping it warm with a small desk lamp. Several times a day, we fed this baby bird with an eyedropper, squirting small amounts of this "worm juice" concoction into its eager gullet. My mother got in on the act as well,

taking responsibility for the daytime feedings while I was at school and my father was at work.

Surprisingly, and to my great joy, the bird survived the ordeal, and was soon doing its best to leave its new nest. We moved the box to the back porch, a screened-in area with plenty of room for the fledgling bird to practice its new-found flight skills in relative safety. Before long, the half-blind, squawking little creature had blossomed into a fully-feathered avian, ready to fly away and take its rightful place in the sky. Though it was many years ago, and was only a matter of a few days out of my life, it was an experience I never forgot. The compassion my father demonstrated for this tiny, defenseless creature was a life lesson that stayed with me to this day, and in some way, helped to shape the person I've become.

Several decades later, with my father now gone, my uncle (my father's brother) came to stay with me. He was suffering from some rather serious diseases, including AIDS and Hepatitis C. Complications from AIDS had set in, including several bouts of pneumonia. I will admit that when the prospect of my uncle moving in with me first arose, I wasn't exactly thrilled about the prospect of being responsible for his care. I had very limited understanding of AIDS and Hepatitis, nor of what the ramifications of caring for an AIDS patient would mean in practical terms. I had a lot of soul-searching to do; not only was I fearful of the disease, I will admit that I was also selfishly concerned with what the impact of my uncle's illnesses would be on my personal life.

As I pondered the situation, and tried to determine what would be the best course of action not just for me, but also for my uncle, I suddenly remembered that tiny little bird that my father had rescued so many years ago. Some men would have simply

ignored the helpless creature, and left it there for nature to take its course. Others may have chosen to climb the tree and place it back in the nest, knowing that it would likely be rejected by its mother, but severing personal responsibility to the baby bird, and ending any concern for its fate. But my father did neither; he took the most difficult choice, but the only *right* choice; he took the defenseless and scared little creature into his home, and he showed me what real compassion was, by nursing that bird until it was ready to fly away.

Sadly, my uncle was not in the same situation as that baby bird. He was not going to fly away someday; the ravages of his illnesses were taking their toll, and he slipped a little further away every day. Like my father on the day we came across that baby bird, I had choices to make. I could let my uncle's illnesses be someone else's problem, or I could do my best to help ease his burden. And as I recalled the lessons of love and compassion I learned from my father, I realized I really had no choice; my uncle needed someone to pick him up and make him comfortable, and there was no question that I was the one to do that.

Those were trying times in the last few months of my uncle's life. As he slowly lost control of his bodily functions, and as he slipped further and further into the fog of pain and medication, I sometimes thought that the challenges were too much to bear. Yet every day I found just a little bit more strength, another small reserve of energy and willpower, and I carried on for another day. And when the day finally came that he was gone, I realized that I hadn't used up all my strength, but in fact I had received a wonderful gift from my uncle. For in his passing, I learned something about myself: I

learned that the greatest part of my father, the part of him that I loved and admired, had in some small way been passed on to me.

For the lessons I learned from these two men, the one who cared so much and the one who needed so much care, I will always be grateful. Truly, the best way I can honor them, and thank them for the gifts they gave me, is to continue on in the nursing profession so I can share with others the gifts they shared with me.