

Brother

By [Milton Brasher-Cunningham](#)

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For all of my life in church I have noticed that one of Jesus' basic formulas for the parables was to begin with, "A certain man had two sons . . ." and, almost inevitably, the story had to do with how the brothers responded differently, and, on occasion, how they responded to each other. The Old Testament is built around brother stories as well, including Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau, all stories of sibling struggle in one way or another. They are on my mind because of my continued reading of Madeleine L'Engle's [A Stone for a Pillow](#), which is a series of reflections on Jacob.

I am the older of two brothers. My brother, Miller, is 21 months younger than I am. We share a great deal in common, like most siblings, I suppose, and we have our distinctions as well. The last two months have been pivotal in our finding each other in new ways, because since our mother died we are the family we have left.

Reading L'Engle today, as she talked about Jacob wrestling with the angel and then preparing to meet his brother whom he had betrayed, and as she noticed that Isaac and Ishmael had come together to bury their father after spending a lifetime alienated from one another, I have thought a great deal about what has happened between my brother and me over the last several weeks.

Our story is not a direct comparison to the ones listed above. Neither of us had betrayed the other, or stolen a birthright, or anything quite so drastic. We spoke from time to time and tried to keep up. At this point, I won't speak for him. I will say for myself that I allowed the physical distance between us—we haven't lived in the same town since we were in seminary—to be more than a metaphor. There was no bad blood. Though we share many similarities, we are different in many ways and I allowed the differences to define how I related to him. In my book, I said we were not essential to each other. What I meant was we didn't know much about the details of one another's lives, and so we lived with old images of who the other really was.

My mother's time in hospice gave Miller and me time together we have not had in many, many years. We took advantage of it and did the work we needed to do to find each other. The breakthrough for me was realizing if I had worked as hard to be kind to my brother—to trust him, to hope for him, to reach out to him—as I had in other relationships, he would have been essential to me. The roadmap to reconciliation is pretty straightforward: he's my brother, my only brother; be kind.

In an earlier chapter, L'Engle says, "It is not frivolous to say that sin is discourtesy," which sounds a bit understated at first. She continued,

Sin, then, is discourtesy pushed to an extreme, and discourtesy is lack of at-one-ment. If you drive your car without thought for the other drivers on the road, you are separating yourself. To be discourteous is to think only of yourself, and not of anybody else.

Discourtesy. The antithesis of kindness and compassion. Love, at its core, is about thinking of someone else before yourself, to understand life is lived in relationship, not solitude. To choose to disregard the connections is discourteous. Sinful. I read her definition and understand I was discourteous to my brother. For far too long, I evaluated the relationship on what I was getting out of it first, and I missed out on some good stuff. When I got home after the funeral, I sent him a poem I had read on the [Writer's Almanac](#) on Christmas Day—the day my mother first went into the hospital. It is "Brothers Playing Catch on Christmas Day," by Gary Short.

*. . . our throws are awkward
like the conversation of brothers
who see each other occasionally.*

The poem reminded me of an afternoon in the yard of our home in Nairobi, Kenya, when I was in ninth grade and Miller was in seventh. We were throwing the football back and forth, as we did many afternoons, but that day I started asking questions: who first thought up the shape of the football? How many sizes did they try before they got to the one that worked? Who made the first ones? Miller listened for a while, as we kept the rhythm of throw and catch, and then he said, "Why do you ask so many questions? Just throw the ball." We both laughed.

The certain man and woman who had two sons are both gone now. My brother and I are now orphans together. We are what's left of our family of origin, as they say. I am thankful that I am his brother.

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