



# ESL MiniConference

## William Wallace Scott My Brother Turns 48

This week my brother Bill (William Wallace Scott) will turn 48 years old. I have not seen him since early in the year 1992, when we visited in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he was living then.

Sometime later that year, he got fed up with the odd mix of sibling rivalry and family angst that had come to typify communication among the four of us children as we were moving into our thirties and forties. Our brother Bill made it clear to each of us that he was no longer interested in hearing from any of us, and after a few years he moved to a new town and it became impossible to contact him at all.

It would be easy enough to blame our parents for the emotional baggage that my two brothers, my sister, and I have carried with us during the 33 years since our mother and father died in [the crash](#) of our family plane at an airport in central Kansas.

They were very serious about religion. We attended church and Sunday school twice every Sunday. We were not allowed to play with friends or do any activity related to the secular world on that day each week. My brother Bill and I used to create Super 8 movies about Bible stories, which was permitted.

At the same time, our parents gave us so much love. My mother cooked wonderful meals every day. My father worked hard, but still had time to help us on math and science homework. Our mother read to us a lot when we were young, and would look over our English papers before we turned them in for grades.

Bill had an experience he and I used to talk about, which was when he had had a big argument with our Mom about something and so called Dad at work. Dad took about an hour to listen to Bill's feelings on the phone, even though there were patients waiting for appointments. This happened less than half a year before our folks had their plane accident.

When we all were suddenly thrown into a new way of life, without our parents to accompany us, it affected each of the four of us differently. My sister, the eldest, had already established her life outside the home, in

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another city, so the year she came back to watch over us was kind of a detour in her development.

My older brother had just recently finished college and started working, so his memories of conflicts between himself and our parents--especially our father--were very fresh. One time he related to the rest of us how affected he was by the memory of the last time he said good-bye to our Dad, and Dad embraced him with that bear hug all of us well remember.

Becoming an adult was, in our family, a true rite of passage, with months and years of testing your will against your parents' wills. My older brother and sister had come through the other end of that experience, intact, yet bearing the scars of their struggles.

Bill and I, on the other hand, did not go through this "baptism of fire," because we were in high school when our parents died. But we also benefited from what they had learned in the process of raising our older brother and sister. Although our home environment was controlled by strict moral standards and behavioral rules, we and our human spirits were treated much more gently than theirs had been.

Yet there was something different about Bill. He is a very creative person and is especially protective of his individual freedom and privacy. In junior high, a teacher told him to stop shuffling his feet as he walked in the hallway, and my brother answered, "You can't tell me how to walk."



He also loved performing in theatrical productions, so, wherever he is now, I am certain he is involved in community theater. He is very outgoing socially, perhaps the one of us four who most takes after our mother's natural gregariousness.

This is why he is so missed by everyone in the family as the years go by and we pass through the rituals and ceremonies of life that always evoke reflection. A short decade ago, Bill could not be contacted when the father of our older brother's wife passed away. At Christmas celebrations with that family for many years, Bill was the life of the party and had an especially close rapport with these in-laws. It was extremely sad that he could not be found when the family would have appreciated his presence and solidarity.

More recently, an uncle of ours--one of my mother's five brothers--passed away, and it filled me with remorse that I had no news of Bill to share with relatives gathered for that funeral.

In truth, a situation like this brings with it feelings of guilt. Did I not listen enough to my brother when he was willing to communicate? Did we inspect the progress of his development as a young adult too closely, and not allow him enough emotional space to find his way on his own terms?

The experience over the years with my brother Bill also suggests lessons for me as a teacher. How often today are students' difficulties in learning considered to be problems that are located in them rather than in the fit between them and the curriculum? How much of the informal conversation between teachers amounts to rationalizing our own failures by blaming the students? How many times did I have a conversation with my older brother or sister in which it was more important to me to seem better adjusted or more aware than our younger brother, instead of learning more about his experiences of life?

There was a church camp we used to go every summer for one week near Estes Park, Colorado. Bill and I attended every year from 1968 to 1975. In the daytime, there were walks to Bear Lake and climbing three and a half miles up to the top of the mountain Twin Sisters. At night, there were campfires, "smores," Psalm sings, and testimony under the stars.

I remember one of the preachers, Rev. Bob McFarland of Quinter, complimenting the dining hall food as he spoke at evening services near the end of the week, saying that "at the start of camp, I could barely spit over my chin, but now I can spit all over it."

My brother Bill's self-imposed exile from the family for the past 16 years has cast a grey pallor over many occasions where we might have expected him to be involved. But his choices have also forced his three siblings to reflect deeply on family, love, and relationships. His last interactions included playing soccer with his five-year-old nephew Robbie, my son, who is now about to turn 27; coloring pictures with his three-year-old neice Stephanie, who is now 25. He has never met Heather Giselle, now 19, or his namesake, William John Scott, now five years old.

At the same time, their uncle has undoubtedly grown and developed intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually far beyond what any of us might have imagined two short decades ago. None of us have ever stopped telling the children about their wonderful Uncle Bill, and I never forget how our parents would often remind us--in the midst of our fighting as kids--that they named us Robert Bruce and William Wallace because those two famous Scots had such a deep bond of friendship.

There is no mansion or father's feast to return to, and my brother Bill is far from a prodigal son. He knows he will be welcomed with open arms at the homes of his brothers and sister, whenever this long-awaited reunion occurs.

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2008 ESL MiniConference Online



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