

Joanna Levin
Bryn Mawr School, Baltimore, MD
Dante Senior Elective at Gilman School

You Don't Have to Be an Addict to Be in Recovery

I was singing Jessica Molaskey's rendition of *By the Beautiful Sea* that June morning. Complete with dance moves, facial expressions, and of course a mediocre singing voice, I stood proudly on stage, belting out the words from my 4th-grade self. I stood on stage without a single family member of mine in the audience. I knew why they were not there, and I did not care the slightest bit. I had made the executive decision to miss my brother's high school graduation because I had a solo performance in my 4th grade musical production. I am still surprised my parents allowed me to stay despite my, I guess what would now be considered successful, begging and pleading. At the time it seemed so important; the thought of me missing my solo for my brother's graduation was disturbing to my 10-year old self. But now that day is the one I regret most.

My brother was important, remarkable, and kind; he was the kind of person teachers boasted about and was often written about in the paper. He was Naval Academy bound and Olympic wrestling bound. He was the ultimate image of success. I had always looked up to my brother. We looked most alike, we acted most alike, and we liked the same things. But now I hate being compared to him. When people say, "you're just like your brother" it makes me disappointed and concerned. I know I am harsh, but I am scarred. My entire image of my brother changed on a dark April evening in 2012. My parents told me that my brother had been "asked to leave" the Academy because of a DUI he had gotten. The fall wrestling season preceding that dreadful April night, my brother turned to alcohol as a coping mechanism after tearing his shoulder to shreds, consequently losing his spot in the 2012 Olympics and leaving him sidelined

for that upcoming winter wrestling season. This would not be the first DUI he would be charged with. A quotation from Canto 13 reminds me of how my brother must have felt. “My spirit, at the taste of disdain, believing by death to flee disdain, made me unjust against my just self” (13.70-72). His spirit was shaken and he chose unjust means to heal his just self. Although my brother did not turn to suicide or death to “flee disdain,” alcohol was his method of choice (13.70-71). His *subsisto* was damaged, perhaps even ill, but so was mine. I was in shock. My big brother who I had always wanted to be just like was now the type of person everyone is told to avoid becoming.

I remember thinking about the Naval Academy bumper stickers on our family cars; how people would look at them and ask questions, and how they would be simple reminders of that fateful time. I remember throwing away the shorts my brother had gotten me that had “USNA Lacrosse” printed on them. I tore down the poster from my wall that was signed by the women’s lacrosse team at the Academy. The worst was when family members, aunts, uncles and cousins who had not heard the news of my brother leaving, continued to ask questions about his experience at Navy. “When is he graduating” was the worst question of all. A part of me hated my brother for the mistakes he made; I was struck by a painful reality that my brother was not the perfect being I always thought he was. But another part of me was extraordinarily selfish; I became intensely self-conscious of what people would think of *me* because of *his* mistakes. My spirit and *subsisto* felt “the taste of disdain” for my brother’s mistakes quite deeply (13.70). I was ashamed of my brother but also ashamed of myself for putting so much faith in him. I was chained by the image of my perfect brother and perfect family, but it had come to a violent crash all in one evening.

Canto 13 uncovers the sin of being self-conscious and undoubtedly I have committed this sin. There is a difference between self-awareness and self-consciousness, however I still struggle with finding that differentiation. I am aware of his mistakes and the effects they have had on my family and me, but I am perpetually curious and conscious of what people think of *me* as a because of *him*. It seems plausible for my brother to be self-conscious of his own mistakes, but it seems less reasonable for me to be so impacted by something I have no control over, such as his poor decision making. Still however, my fatal flaw is not letting go and allowing his mistakes affect me, and as he continues to struggle with alcoholism, I continue to struggle with accepting it.

I miss having my big brother as my perfect guide on my journey through life. I know I am too harsh and judgmental of him and his misfortunes, and I will work to improve that. I try to keep memories of him happy or us having fun together in my mind as reminders that he is not entirely a failure. I know my brother is imperfect and is in some ways a work in progress, but he is still my big brother whom I love. I wish I would have gone to his high school graduation because it is now the only formal graduation he was ever a part of. I wish I would have gone to his high school graduation and committed an act of selflessness instead of being concerned about missing my performance. I wish I would have gone to his high school graduation because it would be another memory for me to hold as a reminder that his many successes do not disappear and are not destroyed by his few failures.

In Canto 13, the people who have committed suicide, or those who suffer from chronic self-consciousness, become trees. The branches of these trees have thorns bestowed upon them, causing pain to the inflicted. Dante speaks of the trees and the wood as having “...no marked path. Not green leaves, but dark in color, not smooth branches, but knotted and twisted” (13.2-4).

While this punishment is horrendous and causes immense pain to the suicides, I think the image of trees and greenery can be a slight sign of hope and growth. Dante could have chosen any other means of punishment for the suicides, but for me, the choice of using trees and the color green renders some hope. When I think of trees I think of life and the color green, and it is known that green is Dante's color of hope. Perhaps Dante was trying to say that beneath the pain of the thorns, there is still hope for life. Dante could be alluding to the idea that chronic self-consciousness can be healed. I believe that my brother and I have room for improving ourselves. While he works through his alcoholism, I am working towards accepting it. I know the path for my brother and his alcoholism will not have a "marked path," as Dante says, and the road towards accepting his mistakes is long and twisted for me, too (13.2). However, beneath the pain, trouble, complications, and fear, there is hope for more successes and happiness throughout life.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*. Trans. Robert M. Durling. Vol. I. New York: Oxford U, 1996. Print.