

**Statement from Jacob's father at memorial service
Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Cambridge, February 24, 2006**

I thank God for the life of my son, Jacob Kliman-Trimble. His life is a blessing for all those whom he touched in his nineteen years of life.

We buried our Jacob as he was raised, as a Jew. Yet, Jacob had found in Jesus the strength to redeem his life. He would want for there to be a Christian observance in his memory. I offer these words in Jacob's honor, and in honor of the many generations of Christian ministry from whom my children and I are descended. I will need their help, and yours. Looking out over this congregation, I see there are people who can support Jacob and me with their Ay-mens. There will also be moments when I will ask the whole congregation to join me in singing, "Ah-meyn."

At his Bar Mitzvah, Jacob read and interpreted the Torah portion Kedoshim, from Leviticus, chapters 19 and 20. Jacob argued against Biblical injunctions not to seed your field with mixed seeds, and not to wear garments made of mixed fibers, because he was proud of coming from a family and having a group of friends that included people of different races, beliefs, and sexual orientations. When Jacob came home from his first worship service here at the Vineyard, he was radiantly happy about how welcoming you are to people of all races, sexual orientations, walks of life, and forms of belief.

Jacob would have said that God put his friend Ryan in the car next to him the night that Jacob lost his life, so that Ryan could call Silvana, whose mother Zulima, a member of this Christian Fellowship, could call to wake us and tell us that Jacob was in a terrible accident on Route 93. With Jodie at home to field telephone calls, I drove into the night, preparing myself for what I might hear. For several years, Jacob's struggles with substance abuse and destructive decisions had us living on the knife edge of uncertainty, not knowing when we went to bed whether he would arrive home safe or we would get the call that he was dead. As I drove down the empty street, I reached out to Jacob's spirit with the Mi shebeirach prayer. I could not tell if he was alive or dead, but I could feel his intense distress and confusion.

Driving home with the worst news imaginable, searching for a way to hold the pain of such loss, I remembered the Mi shebeirach, the Jewish prayer for healing. I ask those of you who know the prayer to join me in its beginning verse, and all of you to join at the end of the verse with, (sing:) *Ah-ah-ahmeyn. Mi shebeirach, avoteinu, m'kor habracha l'imoteinu - May the source of strength who blessed the ones before us, Help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing, and let us say, Ah-ah-ahmeyn.* As I started down the long journey of life having lost a child, I grew determined to find the full measure of blessing in our son's brief life, and to extend that blessing to others in a way that not only honored him but made the blessing of his life even more precious to us.

In the short time since that night, I have found more blessing than I could imagine. There is not a story about Jacob that does not have in it some blessing, some source of grace that nourishes the spirits of those who tell and those who hear the story. Let me introduce him to you in the words of people who knew him:

One friend gave us a letter she wrote to him after his death: “You were one of the best people I knew and you were so kind and generous to others. You were smart, funny, bright and very caring...A person who had gone through things that many people do not experience in their entire lifetime. Your strength, courage, ambition, and drive inspire not only me but everyone you’ve befriended...It’s amazing how you had changed your life for the better. That courage alone is not within everyone, you’ve accomplished so much more than people your age usually do accomplish. You were and still are an inspiration. Your soul, so kind, and you had such a youthful sense of mind that most people do not have. You were never bitter or mean, just a sweet, gentle person.”

Another friend wrote, “Jacob, a seemingly tough young man, in reality was soft on the inside with a fun energy and goofy sense of humor.”

A guidance counselor wrote, “I was comforted today by some of Jacob’s friends, another example of how his kindness will be extended through all those whose life he touched, especially his peers. I will always remember his sparkling eyes and beautiful smile.”

Jacob gave us the first of those beautiful smiles when he was two days old, hours after he was placed in Jodie’s arms by his birth mother. Jacob had been as hungry for his new mother’s eyes as for the formula that she was feeding him. When she broke the eye contact by lifting him up to her shoulder to burp him, he twisted his whole body around to keep gazing at her face. Startled to discover that he had such strength and control in his infant body, his mother gasped and brought him back to face her, as he gave her his first radiant smile. We had many more smiles - and many more tricks - from Jacob over the next nineteen years. He blessed our lives, and the lives of people whom he touched, with his amazing abilities to feel and share joy, to be fascinated by the world around him, to love, and to care deeply about respecting other people. He hated boredom, he loved excitement, and he was full of tricks.

As a child, Jacob often found it difficult to be satisfied. He would want what he didn’t have, and when he got it, it often wasn’t enough. We tried to help him with this by talking with him about resisting insatiability, “not letting Mr. I beat him.” When he was around nine, I came in the door after a long day of work, to find him greeting me eagerly with the words, “Daddy, I want this one hundred dollar Lego!” I greeted him, and told him that we weren’t going to buy such an expensive toy. Undeterred, he responded, “But Daddy, I really want it!” “Jacob, I already said no.” “But Daddy, I really, really want it.” As he kept it up, I wore down until, my face contorted with anger, I yelled, “Jacob!!!” And Jacob whipped out the camera that he had been holding behind his back the whole time, and captured the picture of my angry face before I dissolved into laughter.

There is not a story about Jacob that does not include blessings. We must find them to make our own lives blessings for others. Embedded in the many stories I could tell of Jacob’s playfulness about anger in relationships are lessons about his own struggle to find peace in a life in which his distractibility, learning disabilities, and trouble with his moods often felt unbearable. His anguish over these problems came out mostly at home, too often in situations where one or more of us, overcome by frustration and helplessness, would lash out with angry voices. Yet, his

mother and I could see the sweet child behind the angry, provocative teenager, crying out, “Mommy, Daddy, I’m hurting. Why aren’t you making it better?” For years, Jacob tried to make it better with drugs, alcohol, and increasingly risky behavior. When times were at their worst, he would accuse us bitterly of not knowing how to love him, even of not loving him at all.

When Jacob was seventeen, his birth mother, knowing that she was dying, reached out to hasten the reunion both had dreamed of all his life. She died days before Jacob was to meet her. He reacted to this loss with more substance abuse, placing himself in greater and greater danger, and withdrawing more and more from productive activity and loving engagement with others. In his eighteenth year we came, finally, to the painful decision to tell him that we could not provide food and shelter as long as he was destroying his life. For months, we did not know whether or not he would choose life. Finally, as his friends were graduating from the High School from which Jacob had dropped out, he made the decision to go into detox, from there into a rehabilitation program, and from there to Heartland Christian ministries.

We knew that Jacob had been seeking a spiritual life in Christianity, and prayed that he could find in religious belief a way to stay sober and the strength to go on. In a letter, I said to him, “God is always ready to enter our hearts, at any time or place. It is up to us to open our hearts to Him. You may find that it doesn’t come to you right away. You may need to show God and yourself how strongly you want to feel His presence in your life. Don’t be surprised to find that, even after you have made up your mind to accept Jesus, the joy of feeling his presence may not come to you right away. In every spiritual tradition in the world, the joy of being in the Divine Presence comes to those who yearn for it with all their minds, all their hearts, all their souls, and all their beings. You may be on your knees in despair when it finally comes to you. God will know when you are ready, and God will not fail you.”

“I love you deeply, and pray that you are able to find the spiritual connection that can, at long last, give you the peace and calm that you have ached for, and tried to find in so many dark and destructive places. Love, Dad”

At Heartland, Jacob found Jesus in his life, and he flourished. He wrote to a friend, “I love to work because I am being paid to learn how to fix cars and trucks, I love it. Life is a lot better these days. I don’t ever wanna use again. I like how I am now and it makes me happy...Are you still gonna be around next summer? Cuz if you are, maybe I could take you out somewhere in my new car...P.S. Pray for me - That can’t be too religious, can it? I need people to pray for me.” To another friend, he wrote, “I have been sober since you have last seen me at AA. I’m working really hard. I go to church every day, work out, lift weights, work in a kitchen and save up money...” Later, to that same friend, “I’m working in a truck shop now. I fix up trucks and 18 wheelers from 7 AM to 6 PM, 7 days a week. It’s really fun and the best part is I get fat paychecks...By the way, it’s ok to cry. I ain’t gonna lie, I cry a lot. Especially lately, ya know, all I got here is Jesus/God, and me...I’m really proud of my self ya know. Been sober almost 2 months. I got money saved up; things are looking great for me.”

After nearly seven months of sobriety, Jacob started talking about coming home. He told us, “I know that if I stay at Heartland the rest of my life, I won’t have problems and I will be safe. I

know that if I leave Heartland, I will have to accept every day that I do have problems, and that I am not safe.” He trusted that he could rely on his relationship with Jesus to make it. He wanted to get his high school degree to prepare for the work he loved, and he felt alienated by Heartland’s conviction that theirs was the only true belief in God, their condemnation of unbelievers (including his Jewish family) and sinners (including his gay uncles and friends) to Hell, their intolerance of differences. In a series of telephone calls, we saw Jacob begin to deal in new and better ways with disagreement, with our worries and concerns about him, and with the process of difficult negotiation. We finally agreed to a detailed contract, which Jacob knew he had to keep in order to stay at home. Jacob planned to put his earnings into a substantial downpayment on his dream car, a Pontiac GTO, and we would carry his payments as long as he was in school and keeping the contract. Jacob arrived home New Year’s Eve, committed to regular drug counseling with weekly urine tests, and to serious effort in school. He was truly transformed. After years of fear and anguish, we had our beloved son back in our home. He had never left our hearts.

There is not a story about Jacob that does not include blessings. We must find them to make our own lives blessings for others. Jacob’s friends have blessed our lives, and theirs, by telling us after his death how he loved us, and how he knew we loved him. It was hard for him to tell us he loved us, even after his redemption from substance abuse. He returned from Heartland to a world in which he had problems every day, and was not safe. Although we were respectful of each other, and able to contain our expressions of anger and frustration in ways we could not have imagined before Heartland, there were still misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and much left unsaid or unheard. He worked harder than he ever had since he began high school, yet he still needed to work harder in order to succeed. Although most friends respected his determination not to use, not all did, and his own standards began to slide. Thanks to his friends’ honesty, we know that he drank at least once the week before he died, and that he drank the day before he died. We had suspected a relapse, because in the morning, Jacob was difficult to rouse, and difficult when roused. He was particularly impossible the morning of the day he died, mistreating his mother, setting off her anger, then reacting indignantly to hers. Yet, as he left the house for school, he called up to his mother to say goodbye. She called down, “have a good day.” He called back, “*You* have a good day, *too*.” That afternoon, checking in by phone with his mother, he was proud and happy that he had earned As on his science lab reports. He spent some time with friends who shared his love of cars, doing gearhead things. He drove a young woman whom he cared about to a park, taking her to surprise her with the beauty of a place where he and his mother had often eaten peanut butter sandwiches together when he was a little boy. And, he had a couple of beers with some other friends.

Now, I am now going to ask you two difficult questions. The only way we can get through this together is by being honest as we take care of each other. Even if you are with your parents, or with your kids, today, for Jacob’s sake, please answer my questions honestly. Perhaps this may start an important family conversation. Please now raise your hand if you have ever in your life said the words, “I had a couple of drinks,” or, “I had a couple of beers.” Thank you. Please keep your hands in the air. Now, if even once in your life, when you said “I had a couple of drinks,” you actually had more than two alcoholic beverages, please lower your hand. Thank you. From now on, in honor of Jacob’s memory, whenever you say or hear the words, “couple of drinks,” or

“couple of beers,” say these words, to yourself or aloud: “That’s drinking, not thinking.” Thank you.

Around 10:30 that night, Jacob picked Ryan up in his beloved GTO. He told Ryan that he had had “a couple of beers,” and, later that evening, Jacob had another. The two of them went cruising down Route 93, talking about how determined they were never again to smoke weed. Jacob had his seat back tilted way back, driving with his arms extended in front of him. They followed 93 as it turned toward the north, and Jacob sat forward in his seat, fully focused as he opened up his muscle car for as much as it could perform. The road whipped away hypnotically before them as Ryan saw the speedometer hit 147 miles an hour. A car emerged in the road ahead of them, too fast for Jacob to do more than cut the wheel to the left, trying to make his way between the car and the guard rail on the left. The car rose up onto its nose, sliding down the road as Jacob and Ryan looked helplessly through the windshield at the guardrail whizzing by in front of them. The car, with plenty of momentum left, then tumbled over and over all the way across the superhighway, heading for the treeline on the right hand side. As it rolled, it left two wheels and Jacob’s door behind. A tree sheared off the engine compartment, and the car finally stopped as it struck another tree, its engine resting 30 feet away. It tilted up against the tree, then fell back down onto the ground on its roof - and onto Jacob, who had been thrown from the car. Injured, dazed, but conscious, Ryan was helped out of the car by two passersby, and they tried and failed to lift the car off Jacob. Ryan could see Jacob’s legs extending out one side of the car. His fingers were visible on the other side. Over and over, Jacob screamed his friend’s name, as Ryan and the two strangers called back to him. Jacob cried out like a child in pain and confusion, seeking comfort and safety. Ryan could tell that his friend Jacob knew he was there. Jacob said nothing after he stopped calling out his friend’s name, but, for at least several minutes he continued to breathe. Finally, his leg stopped quivering, both legs relaxed, and, as he stopped breathing, his legs curled up as though his body were seeking the fetal position in which Jacob had lived in his birth mother’s womb.

There is not a story about Jacob that does not include blessings. We must find them to make our own lives blessings for others. Let us seek for blessings in this awful story of Jacob’s death.

The road to recovery is not a straight path, nor a smooth one. Jacob had begun to relapse. Already, parents and teachers were seeing telltale shifts in attitude and mood. Had he lived, he would have had to confront the consequences of his stumbling on the path. He would have needed to restore the humility he had learned at Heartland, and to commit himself to sobriety and consistent attendance in groups. Painful as it would be, he had already shown himself and others that he could handle the process of recovery. As his friends witnessed him picking himself up and restoring his sobriety, he would have continued to make his life a blessing by inspiring others.

At Heartland, Jacob once wrote to his friend, “I have to stay sober for the rest of my life because I have so much on the line. Mainly my life, yea my life. If I go back to using and all that crap I will die in a matter of time. A short amount of time. I’m not ready to die, there’s a lot of things I want to do in my life that I haven’t got the chance to do yet. I want to race cars one day, I will have to be sober to do that.” If Jacob knew that, how could he have made the decision he made

to drink again? Some friends suggest that Jacob wanted to show that he could drink so that he could live out his proud identity as a redneck born in East Texas; an antiracist redneck like his grandmother, aunt and uncles and cousins. In fact, his aunt and uncle, fully mindful of the genetic risk for substance abuse and mood problems that cast its shadow over Jacob's birth mother's life, do not find that their abstinence from alcohol at all compromises their proud identities as East Texans. What was wrong with Jacob's judgment?

One answer to that question, a short one, is that all kids are damn fools. Science will tell you that the front part of the brain, the part that controls the faculties of planning, judgment, and practical sense, does not fully mature until your mid-twenties. Whether parents know the science or not, we all know that our kids are in most danger when they can drive cars and be out in the world on their own before they understand the gravity and complexity of life's dangers. When I was seventeen, my friend David Bendler was driving when his car hit a patch of ice, and we were skidding sideways, looking through the windshield as the roadside stone wall rushed past us. David pulled out of the skid; there was a moment of shocked silence, then we both burst out laughing. We then turned the car around, drove back, and tried to skid again. Perhaps I survived that damn foolishness because God wanted me to be Jacob's Dad and talk with you today.

There is more to the story of Jacob's relapse than simple immaturity of judgment. Jacob had told us that he relied on Jesus to control his craving to use substances. Three Sundays ago, he did not go to church, then again the next Sunday, then again the next. Each occasion had its plausible reason, but a pattern was emerging. In a conversation with his mother about religion during these last three weeks, Jacob said that a person might not necessarily need Jesus; that what was important was a belief in a God. Fine words for his ecumenical, religiously liberal Jewish parents to hear, but I remember wondering at the time: Is Jacob backsliding?

Backsliding is a word that would have been familiar to Jacob's and my Methodist minister ancestors. A Christian who has made a passionate commitment to a relationship with Jesus and a life according to Jesus' ways, who then loses sight of that commitment as he or she is drawn into the temptations of the world, is backsliding. Our ancestors knew that backsliding happens, that we are all fragile human beings striving for God's perfection, and that most efforts to live a Christian life are marked by periods of salvation and periods of backsliding. The Indian sage Meher Baba taught that turning away from God is as much a part of the Divine plan as turning toward God. He taught that God is a universal unity beyond time and space. There is nothing outside of God. God's self-awareness is a process that begins when God gazes into the void that is nothing and imagines the universe of Creation. The most sentient beings in Creation, human beings in the case of planet Earth, are created with the capacity to know God - and to ignore God. It is through the human yearning to seek the presence of God that God knows God's self. We are the instruments of Divine self-awareness. If we could not be ignorant of God, we would not have the impulse to seek God. Backsliding and redemption are part of the natural cycle of our mortal existence.

Let us go back for a moment to Jacob in his last moments of life, no longer crying out to Ryan but still alive. His relationship with Jesus was strong enough that he needed only a moment to

prepare himself to meet his God, to accept responsibility for his sins, to ask for forgiveness, and to believe with all his heart and soul in Jesus Christ's promise of redemption. You may remember that, when I reached out in prayer on my drive to the police barracks, I found Jacob's spirit in a state of confusion and fear. Hours later, after wailing with his mother and finally lying down for what was left of the night, I reached out for his spirit again. This time, it was a clear, bright, coherent pillar of light. Over the next few days, I witnessed Jacob's spirit as it continued its journey to his God. The pillar of light that is his spirit moved toward an enormous pillar of the same light, gradually becoming less and less distinguishable from it. Rabbi Meshullam Feivush of Zebriza described this journey with a metaphor: "It is like a single drop of water that has fallen in the great ocean. When it returns to its source, it becomes one with the waters of the ocean, and it is indistinguishable on its own at all."

In the Bible, the angel who wrestled with Jacob named him "Israel," meaning, God-wrestler. Our Jacob is not the only God-wrestler in this family. In this year that Jacob became a Christian, I am becoming a Jew, and his sister became a Buddhist. Every member of Jacob's family, struggling to make meaning of Jacob's death, would have something different to say about what happens to Jacob's spirit after death, but all of us respect the human need for deep meaning, whatever form that meaning might take. If our planet is to survive, the human family will need to share that respect. May the Source of strength who blessed the ones before us help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing. I am struggling against my pain to do just that. My spirit has followed Jacob's on its journey to reunion with God as far as my spirit can go and remain attached to my mortal body. As my spirit returns from its close encounter with the Source of strength that blessed the ones before us, it has helped me find the courage to make my life a blessing by sharing these words with you today.

This service will close with the Lord's Prayer. Jews and Christians are close cousins, and this is a prayer that can be easily shared between us. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." In a closing prayer of the Jewish service, we pray for the day that God will be sovereign over all the world. We pray, "On that day God will be one and God's name will be one." I believe that God gave us the gift of Jacob's spirit to help us take responsibility for our role in Creation. As Jacob urged us at his Bar Mitzvah, we will need to plant a mixture of different seeds in the soil of humanity, and weave a garment made up of different threads to clothe the whole world.

These words are particularly for those who struggle to understand why Jacob died so very young. If Jacob's seat had been, like Ryan's, firmly against his back as he made his race drive, he probably would not have been thrown from the car. Our family might today be dealing with a different burden than his death. We, the parents in the room, live with our helplessness as our children make their way through these years of dangerous damn foolishness. Perhaps Jacob's blessed life ended early as it did to save the young people whom he loved, and who loved him, by teaching this lesson: It is human nature to stumble and to fall. You may stumble and fall less as you get older, but you will still stumble and fall. God seems to need us to have this human frailty, from which we find redemption by rising up from our mistakes. Jacob was making some mistakes, and could have risen up from nearly all of them. Driving at 147 miles an hour on a public highway, though, is like walking on a tightrope hundreds of feet above the ground. If you stumble from such a height, there is no opportunity to rise from your mistakes. If you all can

survive through the next few years of brain development, nearly all of you will come to recognize and avoid danger intuitively. Until then, please remember Jacob. He was high enough above the ground for everyone to see him stumble, and to show everyone what it costs when you make a bad judgment in a dangerous situation.

Jacob's family asks that all the young people here help us to extend the blessing of our son's life by making Jacob's life a blessing in your own life. Be inspired by his love of life, of people, and of the world. Treat each other with respect. Have fun, and laugh. Thank Jacob for showing you that, no matter how bad your life may seem to you, it is possible to redeem yourself, to turn yourself around, to discover what it is that you are really good at and what you can do to make the world better for people around you. As you make life-shaping decisions in the future, please remember the pain in your heart as you hear these words now. As hard as it is to believe that you are mortal, that your own acts can bring yourself or your loved ones harm, please remember that Jacob did die. Make your lives a blessing by taking the blessing of Jacob's life into your heart the next time that you are confronted with a decision about whether to get into a car with someone who has been drinking, whether to take just one chance on risky sex, whether to let an argument escalate into physical violence, whether to tempt the law to try to make a fast dollar. If you can hold Jacob in your heart, and honor Jacob by accepting that you are mortal and vulnerable to harm at such moments of decision, you will help us continue to make our son's beautiful life a blessing to the world.

Believe it or not, I will stop talking in a few minutes. Other family members who choose to do so will share a few memories. After family members have spoken, if you want to share with us some memory of Jacob, please rise quietly and come forward here to form a line. Please show Jacob respect in the dignity of your sorrow. It may be that there will not be time enough for all of you who want to speak to do so. We will be working to assure that those who want to speak and most need to do so will be brought to the front of the line. If you get in the line and don't get to speak, you must promise us that you will not leave this hall without having made a commitment to a member of the Vineyard community to join a group at the Vineyard to share your love and memories of Jacob. All of you here are invited to do so, but those of you who rose to speak and were unable to do so must promise me that you will make the commitment to join a group. You don't have to be a committed Christian to participate; the Vineyard is open to all who seek deeper meaning in life. If you are not Christian and feel that it would compromise your religious conviction, please promise me that you will see a high school counselor, attend an AA meeting, or find some other setting to give you help and support to say what you need to say. Pastor Chuck will help identify the members of the Vineyard Fellowship with whom you may talk after the service.

Near the moment of his death, I connected with Jacob's spirit through the Mi shebeirach, the Jewish prayer for healing. We no longer pray a healing prayer for Jacob. Rather, tonight in Synagogue, we will recite our prayer to remember the dead, the Kaddish, which praises the name and magnificence of the God with Whom Jacob's spirit has reunited. With so many hearts in this room freshly wounded by his loss, there is plenty of use for a prayer of healing for the living. I am going to ask those who know the prayer to join me in the two verses of the Mi shebeirach, each of which ends with Ah-ah-ah-men. Please, all of you, join us in the Ah-mens.

(Sing)

*Mi shebeirach avoteinu
M'kor habracha l'imoteinu
May the source of strength
Who blessed the ones before us,
Help us find the courage
To make our lives a blessing,
And let us say: Amen*

*Mi shebeirach imoteinu
M'kor habracha l'avoteinu
Bless those in need of healing
With r'fua sh'leima,
The renewal of body,
The renewal of spirit.
And let us say: Amen*