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## Childhood

Childhood means different things to different people. To most, it means adolescents having fun, goofing off, and playing with their friends. It is also the time to build bonds with friends and family, while creating lasting memories. Childhood is a carefree time to relax, live in the moment, and enjoy innocence, or at least it should be. Unfortunately, not everyone has the opportunity to be carefree. I know I didn't. Imagine a little girl between the ages of 6 and 11 growing up in chaos, unsure which parent would be available to her or what the day would bring. Imagine the reason being that the young girl's older sibling was so sick he practically lived in the hospital, and her whole life revolved around the sibling's illness. I can imagine it very clearly because that little girl was me. My older brother Matt was born with a chronic medical condition called Hydrocephalus, or water on the brain. The illness and complications caused him to endure 93 brain surgeries in the first 14 years of his life. Throughout my childhood, I had to grow up watching him live in the hospital, unsure if he was going to make it another day. Since I was so young, my parents attempted to shield me from the worst of it. They did not want my other brother and I to become traumatized by seeing Matt suffer, so they told us only what we needed to know. They also did not push us to visit Matt in the hospital every day. They allowed us to choose to go to see Matt almost every day, or to stay home. My oldest brother John very rarely opted to go to the hospital. During the worst of it, John was in high school and frequently claimed to have too much homework. If he stayed home, I was allowed to stay with him, but I chose to visit Matt every chance I got. Although I was unaware at the time, I see now that I applied the Rotary principles to my thinking. In fact, I relied heavily on the Rotary Four-Way Test to help me make my decision. This test asks of four things: is it the truth, is it fair

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to all concerned, will it build good will and better friendships, and will it be beneficial to all concerned?

First of all, is it truthful? Would it have been truthful to say I was unable to go? Certainly, it would have been easier to stay home, play with my friends, or enjoy some other aspect of a normal childhood. Yet, I knew even at that young age that not going would make me feel worse. I don't know how I would have felt if the one time I didn't visit was the time I wouldn't ever see Matt again. Granted, it felt like I was watching my brother die right in front of me, but I still would have felt more horrible not to see him. I needed to see him as often as possible. I needed to be truthful to myself, Matt, and my parents.

Next, is it fair to all concerned? If I stayed home, I would not have seen my mother or my brother. More often than not, my mother stayed in the small, cramped, white walls of the hospital room with my brother. I had to grow up without either of them. If I hadn't gone, I would have missed seeing both of them, and that was not fair to any of us. If I did not visit Matt, it would not have been fair to him. He didn't want to be in the hospital away from his family and friends, longing for the comforts of home. I could have protected myself and my own feelings rather than to give my brother the support he needed during that rough time in his life. Thankfully, I did not make that choice. Giving Matt the support he needed was more important to me and we became closer because of it.

In addition to the first two questions, the third aspect asks if it will build good will and better friendships. In my opinion, good will is about considering someone else's needs before your own. It is also about showing a sincere kindness toward others. Visiting my brother could help him gain the support he needed to become stronger. I needed to push back my own personal

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doubts about the situation and take in the consideration that my brother needed me. In turn, it built a better friendship between us.

Lastly, the Four-Way Test asks if it is beneficial to all concerned. In other words, will the decision result in a positive outcome for all concerned? In the situation involving visits to my brother in the hospital, the answer is absolutely yes. Visiting my brother would result in making him feel loved and cared for. It would build a stronger relationship between us and help him gain strength from this love and support. It also benefited me because I was able to see Matt and my parents, gaining love and support from them as well.

To conclude, I believe the Rotary Four-Way Test has helped me make many important decisions in my life, but one of the most important ones concerned those visits to the hospital. I gave up much of my childhood going to the hospital to visit my brother. I grew up worrying more about my brother than about myself, and today I still do. It was hard to see my brother hooked up to tubes and monitors, to see him so sickly and fragile, but it was amazing to see him gain strength from my support. It has been four years since Matt's last brain surgery, but he still struggles with the aftermath. He suffers from seizures, short-term memory loss, the side effects of a debilitating stroke and vision impairment, but he is so much stronger than he was four years ago. There were a few times I remember overhearing my mom talking to a nurse saying they were not sure Matt would survive. In fact, he went on a Make-A-Wish trip, and we thought it was his final wish, but it wasn't. If there is one thing I know about Matt, he is a fighter. In fact, he plans to be a motivational speaker someday. I would like to think I had some small part in his recovery. I am so glad I made the decision to visit him regularly in the hospital. Neither of us enjoyed the carefree innocence of childhood, but my brother and I are very close, and I have the Rotary Four-Way Test to thank for it.