

WALKING THROUGH THE FIRE

by Fran Caffey Sandin

Attendants wheeled a bleeding unconscious teenaged boy into the operating room of Parkland Hospital in Dallas, Texas, just after midnight. Another motorcycle accident. The O.R. team scurried about tending the boy's head and chest injuries and multiple broken limbs. As a student nurse, my heart pounded with excitement as we worked fervently to save him. When our efforts failed, the doctor looked at me and said, "Come with me while I talk to the family."

Outside the double doors, the surgeon gently stated, "I'm sorry. We did everything we could."

I watched the faces of the parents as their expressions changed from hopeful expectation to shock, disbelief, and finally tears. Their only son had died. I wanted to comfort them, but words stuck in my throat. I cried, too, although I did not fully comprehend their pain. Ten years later, I understood.

In 1974, before the days of the meningitis vaccine, the youngest of our three children awoke one Sunday morning with fever. My physician husband, Jim, checked him over and then took Steve, five, and Angie, three, to church while I stayed at home with our seventeen-month-old, Jeffrey. After calling the pediatrician and administering symptomatic relief for what we thought was a short-lived viral infection, Jeffrey became lethargic and reluctant to take liquids. That afternoon, we took him to the local emergency room, where a spinal tap confirmed the diagnosis of bacterial meningitis, later determined to be *Haemophilus influenzae*, type B.

Jim and I knew the seriousness of Jeffrey's illness, but our doctor said, "We've begun treatment early." Appropriate I.V. antibiotics were given while I stayed with Jeffrey in ICU that night.

But on Monday morning, he began having seizures and was transferred to Children's Medical Hospital in Dallas. Complications developed (pneumonia, hemorrhage, etc.), and the staff told us the next thirty-six hours were crucial to the outcome of Jeffrey's illness.

Our family maintained an optimistic vigil. But on Wednesday, after a respiratory arrest, Jeffrey was placed on life-support systems. By Thursday, a pediatric neurologist and several attending physicians advised us to remove the respirator. Jeffrey's brain was not functioning; hope for his recovery vanished. When Jim and I saw Jeffrey's ashen, lifeless body in ICU, our spirits confirmed the report. We were no longer supporting life, but prolonging death. Anguish and sorrow gripped us as we stood beside our son's bed, prayed, and released him to his Maker.

Now I understood the agony of other families in their losses. While friends and family lent their support, I struggled to cope. Several months later, I read the booklet *Grief* by Dr. Haddon Robinson which described "crisis, crucible and construction," and I began to gain insight into my own journey and the journey of others.

CRISIS

Any crisis becomes a turning point. A Chinese pictograph for the word crisis has two figures, one depicting danger and the other opportunity. In other words, during a crisis when we can either move toward God or turn away and become bitter. It is easy to see the danger but more difficult to see the opportunity.

Understanding this concept helps during a crisis time. We can take heart, knowing that we will eventually move through the emotions of our loss. A child of God has an opportunity, according to 2 Corinthians 1: 3-5, to eventually become an encourager for others, sharing the comfort God has given: "Blessed be...the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so

also our consolation is abundant through Christ.”

Two characteristics of this phase are:

1) **Shock and Denial**

Shock is a normal initial reaction. When a crisis hits, our first words are usually, “Oh no, it can’t be,” or “I don’t believe it.” This response is God’s way of protecting us because we cannot handle all the aspects of the loss at one time. Our intellectual knowledge precedes the gradual emotional acceptance. If we could comprehend the effects of the loss all at once, we could not handle it. God knows how much we can bear, and he allows us to gradually assimilate the loss. Otherwise, we would be overwhelmed. Shock and denial may last for several days or weeks.

2) **Weeping**

“*Jesus began to weep*” (John 11:35). When his friend died, Jesus cried, even though he would ultimately raise Lazarus from the dead. Perhaps he was showing us that weeping does not denote lack of faith, but rather is an important part of grieving and healing process.

Is it possible to prepare for a crisis? Yes. During more carefree days, not pressured by loss, we can spend time practicing the presence of God, memorizing Scripture and studying God’s Word in depth. In prosperity we sometimes get lazy and forget we are soldiers in a spiritual battle. However, during the good times, we have a wonderful opportunity to be diligent because Scripture tells us *we will have trials and tribulations that will test our faith* (James 1:2-5).

If we allow it, God can use our heartaches and disappointments to teach us perseverance, thus strengthening our faith and helping us to become mature believers. When we ask, “But how?” he gives us wisdom.

What can a caregiver do? People in a crisis situation do not need to hear preaching. They simply need to know that others love them and care about their pain. Be patient, let a person express feelings, but do not teach. Caregivers uncomfortable with silence and weeping may start quoting Bible verses or giving pious platitudes. Crisis victims do not want to hear them. It makes them feel their pain is being disregarded. They are hurting too much to receive exhortation. A caregiver helps most by being near, nonjudgmentally allowing a person to express grief and loss. Often just a touch or hug means more than words.

Taking care of practical needs is important. People in shock do not think clearly and may have trouble making decisions. For a time, the world has stopped. They will appreciate someone assisting with life’s ordinary activities: making telephone calls, helping with meals or other household chores. Gradually, they enter the next phase.

CRUCIBLE

A crucible is a container for melting ore. Thus this fiery trial follows the initial crisis. This period is the most difficult and is characterized by questions, doubts, and guilt. Sometimes it lasts for several months or longer, depending upon the person’s disposition. We enter trials with various temperaments, personalities, previous life events and responses. Each person’s crucible experience is unique, depending on many complex factors. An emotionally stable person may handle this phase more quickly than one whose emotional reserve is empty.

However, regardless of a person’s spirituality, he or she will “walk through the fire” on the way to recovery. What are some typical reactions? Anger, fear, loneliness, blame or physical problems such as heart palpitations, insomnia, dizziness, and other stress symptoms which may be difficult to diagnose.

One of my most memorable crucible times occurred during the first two months following the death of my father. At age seventy-one, he had exhibited symptoms of depression. Mother had taken him to their

family doctor who prescribed an antidepressant. However, two weeks later, Dad woke up one January morning in 1991 and shot himself to death.

Our family was shattered. Dad was like the Rock of Gibraltar, the last person we suspected to be suicidal. My sister and I had visited with Dad the week prior to his death. Of course, I felt extremely guilty and responsible, thinking I should have observed his distress and taken a more active role in his care. I had prayed about our visit, and my sister and I gave Dad some loving practical advice which he seemed to appreciate, but it was not enough.

Hindsight is perfect. Why didn't we take Dad to the hospital? "If only" became a merry-go-round in my thoughts. Guilt seemed to beat me with a whip.

Shortly after Dad's death, I sustained a back injury. For about six painful weeks, I spent most of the time lying prone on the family room floor. I felt forsaken, as if God had pulled down the shade. The entire turn of events seemed unreal. I cried and asked, "God where are you?" I was still dealing with the guilt over my father's death.

Then I began recalling Bible verses I had learned earlier. Quoting them from memory brought peace to my troubled spirit. I wrote out Scriptures on index cards and placed them around the house. Psalm 119: 28 spoke to me: "My soul melts away for sorrow; strengthen me according to your word." My situation did not change, but through God's Word and its truth, I gained stamina knowing he was with me, loved me and cared for me, regardless of how I felt.

With the help of family and friends, I made it through those tough times. Did I ask questions? Yes, many. Did I experience frustration and anger? Absolutely. Was God always with me? Yes! How can I know? He said in Hebrews 13: 5, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Like Job, I asked questions of God and then trusted His sovereignty.

Instead of facing the crucible head-on and dealing with it, some people want an anesthetic. They try to numb the pain by using drugs, alcohol, overeating or other methods. Adjustment to change and loss is not easy, but we find reassurance in God's words to Paul: "*My grace is sufficient for you*" (2 Corinthians 12: 9).

The crucible phase is a danger zone. Trials test our concept of God; and when our expectations are not met, we may feel cheated. Since our culture advertises that we have a right to be happy, healthy, and satisfied, we may be tempted to say to the Lord, "Give me what I want, and I will worship you; but if you allow distress, then I'm not sure you really exist." That is why it is so important for us to saturate ourselves with Scriptures during the good times. Then the Holy Spirit will use them as a healing balm and a balancing beam when inner struggles come.

What can we do while in the crucible?

- 1) *Cooperate with God. Continue believing by faith that God is working and accomplishing his purpose, even though we do not understand.*
- 2) *Be thankful. We can always be thankful for something. Dwell on it. I thanked God for the seventeen months we had our Jeffrey and for the joy he brought us. I thanked God for my dad's good qualities and all that he taught me.*
- 3) *Be faithful. We can go to church even if we don't feel like it. We can pray even if we don't feel like it. We can read Scriptures even if we don't feel like it.*
- 4) *Talk through your feelings with a trusted friend.*
- 5) *Write your feeling, both negative and positive in a journal. Be honest.*
- 6) *"Never forget in the darkness what you have learned in the light." This quote from the late Dr. Joseph*

Bayly has helped me. Realize that you may need to exercise self-discipline to keep from succumbing to self-pity.

7) Do what is right and feelings will follow.

CONSTRUCTION

Recovery of full emotional energy may take a year or more. Many times we struggle to take three steps forward and fall two steps backward. But finally a time emerges when our thoughts are not always focused on the loss. Do we forget the person we loved? No, but our memories of them are centered not so much on the death but on the happy times we had together.

As healing continues, we begin to direct our attention once more to ways we can bring glory to God. He seems more precious, especially when we remember he carried us through the fire. Still holding his hand, we are ready to build a new life.

One of the goals of the construction phase is to develop new interests and patterns not closely linked with the past. Some people have taken up painting, volunteer work, nursing home ministries and other activities. Options are unlimited.

In my own experience, I used notes taken through the days of Jeffrey's illness to write an encouraging book. I knew nothing about the writing profession but had a burning desire in my heart to minister to other hurting families. God took me step by step and opened the way for the manuscript to be published. Our story is touching people I would ordinarily never meet. It has also been translated into Russian and ministers to families there.

Suggestions for the construction phase include:

- 1) Think about some positive aspect of your loved one (joyfulness, honesty, enthusiasm, courage, etc.) and incorporate it into your life, so that a characteristic of the person lives on in you.*
- 2) Ask God to help you exercise your own special talents and gifts. We each have a mission on earth until we move to heaven.*
- 3) Reach out and serve others according to your abilities.*
- 4) Remember that God is for you. Death was not God's original plan for us. Death resulted from the sin of Adam and Eve, but God's love, expressed in the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, paid for sin, and through a personal relationship with him we know the One who is victorious over sin and death.*
- 5) Forgive whatever needs to be forgiven. Accept God's grace.*
- 6) Take up a new hobby.*
- 7) Plan and look forward to something in the future.*

When dealing with loss, it is important to remember that "this, too, shall pass." Life is a dynamic drama of change. Each day is a special gift package from God. No other day will be just like it. That is why we need to make the best of each opportunity--to love, to encourage, coming alongside, to uplift one another. Sometimes I'm the one helping, and at other times I am the one being helped.

What is my definition of faith? It is believing God and trusting him, no matter how grim our circumstances or how bad we feel. He is our hope. Regardless of the loss or crisis we face, it is possible to zig-zag our way to construction and know we will experience brighter days because Jesus is already there.

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