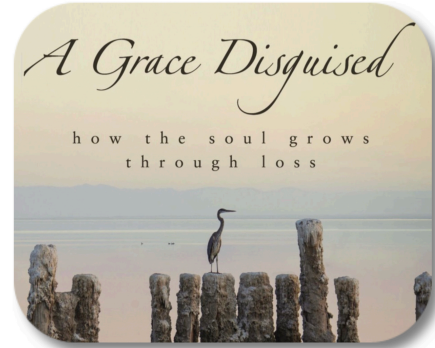


A Grace Disguised

How the soul grows through loss (a summary by Pat Evert)

• Preface

This book is about catastrophic loss and **the transformation that can occur in our lives because of it**. It is not, therefore, the experience of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives. It is how we respond to loss that matters. That response will largely determine the quality, the direction, and the impact of our lives. This book is intended to show how **it is possible to live in and be enlarged by loss**, even as we continue to experience it. My aim is not to provide quick and painless solutions but to point the way to a lifelong journey of growth. This book is the happy result of a bad experience. Who I am is a product of their love and concern.



• The End and the Beginning

Lynda, my wife of nearly twenty years, loved to be around her children. Each one of them was a gift to her because of eleven years of infertility. When she delivered four healthy children in six years, she was overjoyed. In the fall of 1991, Lynda was teaching a unit of homeschool to our two oldest children, Catherine and David, on Native American culture. She decided to complete the unit of study by attending a powwow at a Native American reservation in rural Idaho. So we piled our four children into the minivan on a Friday afternoon to drive to the reservation, where we planned to have dinner with the tribe and witness our first powwow. My mother, Grace, who had come to visit us for the weekend, decided to join us on the excursion. Afterwards we returned to our van, loaded and buckled up, and left for home. By then it was dark. Ten minutes into our trip home, I noticed an oncoming car on a lonely stretch of highway traveling extremely fast. I slowed down at a curve, but the other car did not. It jumped its lane and smashed head-on into our minivan. I learned later that the alleged driver was Native American, drunk, driving eighty-five miles per hour. He was accompanied by his pregnant wife, also drunk, who was killed in the accident. I remember the feeling of panic that struck my soul as I watched Lynda, my mother, and Diana Jane all die before my eyes. And I remember the realization sweeping over me that I would soon plunge into a darkness from which I might never again emerge as a sane, normal, believing man. I felt wild with fear and agitation. I could not stop crying. The two hours between the accident and our arrival at the hospital became the most vivid. **I was lifted momentarily out of space and time as I knew it and was**

suspended somehow between two worlds. One was the world of my past, so wonderful to me, the other was the world of my future, which awaited me at the end of that long ride to the hospital as **a vast and frightening unknown.** I had been suddenly thrust into circumstances I had not chosen and never could have imagined. I realized that I would have to suffer and adjust; I could not avoid it or escape it. One phase of my life had ended; another, the most difficult, was about to begin.

• **Whose Loss Is Worse?**

Living means changing, and change requires that we lose one thing before we gain something else. **Loss creates a whole new context for one's life.** Each loss stands on its own and inflicts a unique kind of pain. What makes each loss so catastrophic is its devastating, cumulative, and irreversible nature. I lost precious relationships that I had and still long for with all my heart. My divorced friends face an entirely different kind of loss. Friends of mine have experienced similar traumas, but in their cases the injuries caused disability rather than death. Those disabilities have required years of caregiving, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and constant attention. While they love their disabled family members, they also feel resentment, labor under constant exhaustion, worry about money, and wonder about the future. So I ask myself if it is possible to quantify and compare losses. Lynda was good and guileless at the core of her being. Her absence touches almost every area of my life. Is it really useful to decide whose losses are worse? **It is impossible to quantify and to compare.** Those coming out on the losing end of the comparison are deprived of the validation they need to identify and experience the loss for the bad thing it is. Their loss is dismissed as unworthy of attention and recognition. On the other hand, those coming out on the winning end convince themselves that no one has suffered as much as they have, that no one will ever understand them, and that no one can offer lasting help. They are the ultimate victims. **Each experience of loss is unique,** different. The right question to ask is not, "Whose is worse?" It is rather, **"What meaning can be gained from suffering, and how can we grow through suffering?"**

• **Darkness closes In**

Sudden and tragic loss leads to terrible darkness. However threatening, we must face it, and we must face it alone. I was rational enough to know that darkness loomed ahead and that I would soon descend into it. Later, my sister, Diane, told me that the quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but **to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.** I decided from that point on to walk into the darkness rather than try to outrun it, to let my experience of loss take me on a journey wherever it would lead, and to **allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I could somehow avoid it.** I tried to reserve time and space in my life for solitude so that I could descend into the darkness alone. Late in the evening, proved to be the best time for me. **This nightly solitude, as painful and demanding as it was, became sacred to me because it allowed time for genuine mourning and intense reflection.** The decision to face the darkness, even if it led to overwhelming pain,

showed me that the experience of loss itself does not have to be the defining moment of our lives. **Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss.** It is not what happens to us that matters as much as what happens in us. My first awareness of change within me came as I began to reflect on how I performed the mundane. Simply being alive became holy to me. I was not yet fully alive to these ordinary moments, but I began to glimpse how profound they were, and found within that pain the grace to survive and eventually grow. **Sorrow took up permanent residence in my soul and enlarged it.** It is this power to choose that adds dignity to our humanity and gives us the ability to transcend our circumstances, thus releasing us from living as mere victims. Poland's POWs found a way to transcend their suffering. It was this power to choose that kept the prisoners alive, Frankl noted. They directed their energies inwardly and paid attention to what was happening in their souls. Tragedy can **increase the soul's capacity for darkness and light, for pleasure as well as for pain.** Is it possible to feel sorrow for the rest of our lives and yet to find joy at the same time? Is it possible to enter the darkness and still to live an ordinary, productive life? The sorrow I feel has not disappeared, but it has been integrated into my life as a painful part of a larger, healthy whole.

• The Silent Scream of Pain

Pain is a gift because it shows we have a capacity to feel, whether pain in the body or pain in the soul. Denial puts off what should be faced. Ultimately it diminishes the capacity of their souls to grow bigger in response to pain. I thought about replacement relationships that could help me make the transition quickly and conveniently, but then I faced disappointment when two relationships fizzled during the first year as quickly as they had begun. I tried to drown the pain by indulging my appetites. I resisted the pain, finally, by venting anger. I was angry with God too. **My internal capacity to live with loss has grown. I have more perspective now;** I have more confidence in my ability to endure. I found depression completely debilitating. It took Herculean strength for me to get out of bed in the morning. I was fatigued all day long, yet at night I was sleepless. **I was apathetic and desireless.** This experience rarely follows immediately after the loss. It occurs at the end of the fight, after the denial yields to reality, the bargaining fails, the binges lead to emptiness, and the anger subsides. At the core of loss is the frightening truth of our mortality. Lynda said to me, "Jerry, I can't imagine life being any better than it is right now. It is so wonderful to me. I am overcome by the goodness of God." Less than one day later, she was dead. **The accident set off a silent scream of pain inside my soul.** That scream was so loud that I could hardly hear another sound, not for a long time, and I could not imagine that I would hear any sound but that scream of pain for the rest of my life.

• Sailing on a Sea of Nothingness

Those who suffer loss live suspended between a past for which they long and a future for which they hope. Grace remained so active in her later years that Catherine and David used to call her "the outdoor grandma." She seemed to have a knack for relating best to the grandchildren who had the hardest time growing up. Independent and

stubborn, Diana Jane, could get away with almost anything because she was so hard to resist and almost too cute to discipline. I cannot live with the memories, and I cannot live without them. I remembered a past that included people I did not want to give up, and I imagined a future that excluded people I desperately wanted to keep. The present was so barren to me and is so hopeless for many who face tragic loss. Will this emptiness continue forever? Am I doomed to sail forever on a vast sea of nothingness? Can anyone really expect to recover from such tragedy, considering the value of what was lost and the consequences of that loss? Recovery is a misleading and empty expectation. We recover from broken limbs, not amputations. **Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery. It will transform us or destroy us**, but it will never leave us the same. Sorrow never entirely leaves the souls of those who have suffered a severe loss. **It enlarges the soul until the soul is capable of mourning and rejoicing simultaneously.** Transcendence makes our tragedies look smaller and opens us to the possibility that life is more than tragedy and that there is also grace, which is given in the miracle of the present moment. Many times over the past two years, I have started to laugh, for no apparent reason. It is a laughter born out of the sheer joy of being alive to the present, and sometimes crazy, moment. Life will require a kind of sacrifice, the sacrifice of believing that, however painful our losses, life can still be good—good in a different way than before, but nevertheless good. **I have lost, but I have also gained. I lost the world I loved, but I gained a deeper awareness of grace.**

• The Amputation of the Familiar Self

Our sense of personal identity depends largely on the roles we play and the relationships we have. Loss is like the amputation of the self from the self, the self we can no longer be or become. Loss thus leads to a confusion of identity. Catastrophic loss cannot be mitigated by replacements. **One cannot escape it** simply by finding a new spouse, a new job, a new life. My quest for a new identity seems repulsive to me. Do I really want the kind of life I now have? Do I really want another life in the future? For those who have endured irreversible loss, phantom pains of their former identity may linger for a long time. Loss establishes a new context for life. **The tragedy became the catalyst for creative action, to form a new identity.** I started some new traditions during the first year, like observing the anniversary of the accident. What is left to enjoy after having lost so much that was so dear? Expectations can remain high, as high as they were before the loss, but only if we are willing to change their focus. **Perhaps I can expect something else that is equally good, only different.** I have the opportunity and privilege, to learn to enjoy life and find contentment as a single man, and to gain wisdom through the experience of suffering. Loss forces us to see the dominant role our environment plays in determining our happiness. Loss strips us of the props we rely on for our well-being. How much we take favorable circumstances for granted. **We begin to search for a new life, one that depends less on circumstances and more on the depth of our souls.** That, in turn, opens us to new ideas and perspectives. It begins to dawn on us that reality may be more than we once thought it to be. We begin to perceive hints of the divine, and our longing grows. **In coming to the end of ourselves, we have come to the beginning of our true and**

deepest selves. As a professor, I have given up trying to read every book I feel obligated to read and have instead tried to enjoy every moment of reading or teaching as a hallowed event and every encounter with my students as a divine gift. My loss has also enabled me to see how privileged I am to be alive and **how meaningful are the opportunities afforded me.** We need someone greater than ourselves to help us forge a new identity, based on grace and not performance.

• **A Sudden Halt to Business as Usual**

Loss turns life into a snapshot. The movement stops; everything freezes. Careers, relationships, and experiences unfold only gradually over time. We find ourselves bewildered that there is no relationship anymore. This problem of incompleteness is aggravated in the case of those whose relationship at the time of loss is at a low point. Loss takes what we might do and turns it into what we can never do. Regret keeps the wounds of loss from healing, putting us in a perpetual state of guilt. We think there is no forgiveness or redemption because we are deprived of the opportunity to right our wrongs. People with regrets can be redeemed, but they cannot reverse the loss that gave rise to the regrets. **People can be changed by the unchangeable losses they experience. Thus, for redemption to occur, they must let go of the loss itself and embrace the good effects that the loss can have on their lives.** While nothing they can do will reverse the loss, it is not true that there is nothing they can do to change.

We cannot change the situation, but we can allow the situation to change us. I call this the “second death,” The first kind of death happens to us; the second kind of death happens in us. It is a death we bring on ourselves if we refuse to be transformed by the first death. Divorce may tempt us to hate an ex-spouse; but the hatred itself is not the result of the divorce but of **the way we choose to respond** to the divorce. We must decide whether or not to allow these destructive emotions to conquer us. Failure to take stock almost ensures that we will repeat patterns that became chiseled into our lives before we suffered the loss. We will be inclined to remarry unwisely because we did not learn why we married unwisely the first time around. The gift of divine forgiveness will help us forgive ourselves. A just God shows us mercy and embraces us in love. The apostle Paul wrote that nothing can “separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing! Not dangers, problems, conflicts, failures, guilt, regrets. Nothing. Not even our losses. That is **the promise of true transformation.** I was empty of energy and desire. All I could do was let God love me, even though I hardly believed that he loved anyone, least of all me. God loved me in my misery.

• **The Terror of Randomness**

One of the worst aspects of my experience of loss has been this sense of sheer randomness. I could not discover any explanation that made sense of the tragedy. I did not even know the man who crashed into us. Yet he has changed my life forever. He has killed three members of my family. How can this be? Suddenly I felt the terror of randomness. Life in this world is an accident waiting to happen, and there is not much we can do about it. Better to brace myself for accidents and endure them as best I can. Better to give up my quest for control and live in hope.

There are two stories in the Bible of randomness; Job and Joseph. Job is no worse than other men. In fact, he may even be better. Why, then, is he suffering so much more than everyone else? He can make no sense of it. His suffering seems random, and he is terrified by it. In God's heavenly court, where the hosts of heaven, including Almighty God, watched to see how Job's life would turn out. Job's choices really mattered to them. He had no idea how far his power reached. I also realized that Job stopped asking questions not because God was a bully but because Job finally beheld God's unfathomable greatness in his immediate experience. He had spoken about God; then he came to know God. On meeting the real God, he simply had no more questions to ask. **He discovered that God is the answer to all his questions.** Job ultimately found meaning in the ineffable presence of God, **which he could not fully comprehend with his intellect but could only experience in the depths of his being.** As it turns out, however, his life does not consist of a succession of isolated events randomly strung together but rather of a story with a purpose that he does not see and will never entirely understand.

On the other hand, Joseph understands enough to say to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good." Joseph acknowledges that great evil was done against him, but he also believes in the face of that evil that God's grace has triumphed over it. The Joseph story helps us see that **our own tragedies can be a very bad chapter in a very good book.** I choose to believe that God is working toward some ultimate purpose, even using my loss to that end. Loss may appear to be random, but it may fit into a scheme that surpasses even what our imaginations dare to think.

• Why Not Me?

No one is safe, because the universe is hardly a safe place. It is often mean, unpredictable, and unjust. Loss has little to do with our notions of fairness. Loss deprives us of control. We are forced to face our limitations squarely. Our expectations blow up in our face. We resent the intrusion, the inconvenience, the derailment. Why me? **'Why not me?' is closer to the mark, once we consider how most people live.** I realized soon after the accident that I had just been initiated into a fellowship of suffering that spans the world. My tragedy introduced me to a side of life that most people around the world know all too well. Even now I hardly qualify, considering the good life I have been privileged to live for so many years and live even today. So why not me? Can I expect to live an entire lifetime free of disappointment and suffering? Free of loss and pain? The very expectation strikes me as not only unrealistic but also arrogant. **We feel violated when we get what we do not deserve and do not get what we feel we do deserve.**

Eight months after the accident, the alleged driver of the other car was tried in federal court on four counts of vehicular manslaughter. But the defense attorney was able to cast enough suspicion on the testimony of these witnesses to gain an acquittal for his client. The driver did not get what he deserved any more than the victims, whether living or dead, had gotten what they deserved. Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths, but I did not deserve their presence in my life either. Living in a perfectly fair world

appeals to me. In such a world I might never experience tragedy, but neither would I experience grace. **The problem of expecting to live in a perfectly fair world is that there is no grace in that world**, for grace is grace only when it is undeserved.

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* tells the story of Jean Valjean, and **by the bishop's act of mercy, Valjean's bitterness is broken**. Valjean has every reason to hate and exploit, since fate so often turns against him, yet he chooses the way of mercy, as the bishop had done. He raises an orphan who is entrusted to his care at her mother's death, spares the life of a parole officer who has spent fifteen years hunting him, and saves a young man, his future son-in-law, from death, though it almost costs him his own life. At first, Valjean sought to get what he thought he deserved and raged with anger when he failed. He changed his mind, however, after his encounter with the merciful bishop, becoming a merciful person himself. He never got what he deserved, either way. His life was both miserable and good. His suffering was undeserved, but so was his redemption. Like Valjean, I would prefer to take my chances living in a universe in which I get what I do not deserve—again, either way. That means I will suffer loss, as I already have, but it also means I will receive mercy. **I dread experiencing undeserved pain, but it is worth it to me if I can also experience undeserved grace**. Quietness, contentment, and simplicity have gradually found a place in the center of my soul, though I have never been busier. So, God spare us a life of fairness! To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world may make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. **A world with grace will give us more than we deserve**.

• **Forgive and Remember**

If we insist life be fair, we will be disappointed. People will fail us and will not pay for it. Systems will fail us and will successfully resist efforts to reform them. Sometimes victims want more than justice. They want the wrongdoer to hurt as much as they do. A just outcome only reminds them that no punishment, however severe, can compensate for their loss and satiate their appetite for revenge. The real problem, however, is not revenge itself but the unforgiving heart behind revenge. Unforgiveness is different from anger, grief, or the desire for justice. It is as ruinous as a plague. **More destruction has been done from unforgiveness than from all the wrongdoing in the world**. Is it worth the misery it causes? Is it worth living in bondage to unforgiveness? Is it worth the cycle of destruction it perpetrates? **Unforgiveness does not stop the pain; it spreads it. Unforgiveness makes other people miserable**, as Glen's friends told him. Ironically, unforgiveness makes unforgiving people the most miserable people of all, for they, more than anyone else, must live with the poisonous consequences of their unforgiveness. The process of forgiveness begins when victims realize that *nothing*—not justice or revenge or anything else—can reverse the wrong done. But there can be going ahead. Victims can choose life instead of death. **Forgiveness is simply choosing to do the right thing. It heals instead of hurts**, restores broken relationships, and substitutes love where there was hate. Forgiving people must give up the right to get even, a right that is not so easy to relinquish. However difficult, forgiveness in the end brings freedom to the one who gives it. Forgiving people let God

run the universe. They can be normal and happy human beings who learn to forgive. It takes time to forgive. **Forgiveness is more a process than an event.** In one sense, forgiveness is a lifelong process. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Not only is forgetting impossible for most people, considering the enormity of suffering, but it is also unhealthy. My memory has become a source of healing for me. It reminds me of the loss. But it also tells me that the loss was not simply the ending of something good; it was also the beginning of something else. And that has turned out to be good too. Jesus once said that people who are forgiven much love much.

• The Absence of God

The Hebrew word for the Divine Name, Yahweh, can be translated, **“I am who I am,” which means that God is the One who really is; God is ultimate reality.** God has complete authority in the universe. How, in such circumstances, can we reconcile God’s sovereignty with human suffering, especially if we believe that God is both good and powerful? God may exist—transcendent, and omniscient—but he does not seem to care about us. So we ask ourselves, Who needs this kind of God? Who wants a God who allows suffering, even though he could presumably do something about it, or who shrinks before suffering, lacking the power to alleviate it? Having no God may be preferable to having a weak or a cruel God. **Suffering forces us to think about God’s essential nature.** Is God sovereign? Is God good? Can we trust him? Lynda in desiring children became profoundly sad and disillusioned, and for many months she was angry with God. She said to me once, “My earthly father would never do such a thing to me, but my heavenly Father has.” I did not thank God the night of the accident, and I hesitated for many months afterward to begin praying again for anything. I wondered whether I would ever again be able to trust him. It was bad enough to lose three members of my family. Why make things worse by losing God too? What we lost was good; that we lost it rightfully makes us feel bad. There is too much mystery to make God’s ways easy to explain. Even human freedom, then, becomes a dimension of God’s sovereignty, as if God were a novelist who had invented characters so real that the decisions they make are genuinely their decisions. **God embraced human experience and lived with all the ambiguities. In the end he became a victim of injustice and hatred.** His sovereignty did not protect him from loss. If anything, it led him to suffer loss for our sake. God is a suffering Sovereign who feels the sorrow of the world. The point is that *we have a choice*. More than anything, **God covets our love. But real love can never be forced. Freedom is what makes love possible in the first place.** If we believe, it is because we have chosen to believe. I have made peace with his sovereignty and have found comfort in it. It is no longer odious to me. That peace came in the form of a waking dream. I knew in that moment that God was there at the accident. God was there to welcome our loved ones into heaven. God was there to comfort us. God was there to send those of us who survived in a new direction. I began, in small ways at least, to believe that God’s sovereignty was a blessing and not a curse.

• **Life Has the Final Word**

I could not protect my children from suffering but could only go through it with them. Loss reminds us that we do not have the final word. Death does, whether it be the death of a spouse, a friendship, a marriage, a job, or our health. In the end, death conquers all. Death claims everyone and everything. We really need more than a miracle—we need a resurrection to make life eternally new. The followers of Jesus were devoted to him. They became profoundly disillusioned by the turn of events and terrified that they might also die. So the disciples scattered like seeds in a gust of wind and hid from the Roman authorities in fear and bewilderment. The death of Jesus crushed them. They could no more invent the idea of the resurrection in the weeks following his death than I could in my grief. Reality would have eventually won out. Death is not so easily defeated. It always gets its way. Yet a few weeks later, these followers of Jesus were proclaiming audaciously that **Jesus was alive** again—not as a resuscitated corpse, which would have only put off the inevitable, but **as a resurrected being who would never die again**. So sure were they of their experience that the apostles preached it everywhere. They were martyred because they would not deny it. The resurrection was his vindication. Death does not have the final word; life does. His great victory was not his miracles but his resurrection. **The Easter story tells us that the last chapter of the human story is not death but life. Jesus' resurrection guarantees it.** We doubt, yet try to believe; we suffer, yet long for real healing; we inch hesitantly toward death, yet see death as the door to resurrection. This ambivalence of the soul reveals the dual nature of life. **We are creatures made of dust, yet we know we were made for something more.** A sense of eternity resides in our hearts. Living with this ambivalence is both difficult and vital. Once again my soul increases its capacity for hope as well as for sadness. I end up believing with greater depth and joy than I had before, even in my sorrow.

• **A Community of Brokenness**

We must enter the darkness of loss alone, but once there we will find others with whom we can share life together. It was natural, that a winnowing effect drastically decreased the number of people who functioned as my intimate community. Trite answers were a poor replacement for compassion. **Sometimes to keep silence would have been wiser and more helpful.** When people who suffer loss do find community, it comes as a result of conscious choices they and other people make. Comforters must be prepared to let the pain of another become their own, and so let it transform them. **They are changed because they chose to get involved and to allow my suffering to become theirs.** I also grew because these friends provided security and familiarity in a world that had fallen apart. Our home became a laboratory of experimentation and discovery. It made us mourn; it also helped us grow. They must take command of their lives as much as they are able to, in spite of their distress and brokenness. **It is natural that people feel cautious about loving again because they are afraid of losing again.** If people want their souls to grow through loss, whatever the loss is, they must eventually decide to love even more deeply than they did before. Choosing to withdraw

from people and to protect the self diminishes the soul; choosing to love even more deeply than before ensures that we will suffer again. **The greater loss is refusing to love again.** It takes tremendous courage to love when we are broken. **It seems paradoxical to put brokenness and love together, but I believe they belong together.**

• The Cloud of Witnesses

I see that I am only one of millions of people who in suffering believe nevertheless that God is still God. **A Puritan wrote after the death of a loved one: “Now life will be a little less sweet, death a little less bitter.”** This cloud of witnesses includes people from other cultures who have continued to believe in spite of, or perhaps because of, their suffering. Many have faced circumstances far more torturous than mine and yet have endured and prevailed. They remind me every day that I am not alone but am **a member of a vast community of suffering people that transcends** my own space and time. Often the most helpful people have endured suffering themselves and turned their pain into a motivation to serve others.

• Heritage in a Graveyard

Much of who I am is a product of the heritage given me at my birth. My story is part of a much larger story that I did not choose. I was assigned a role for which I did not audition. Yet I have the power to choose how I will live out that story and play that role. I want to preserve the heritage my mother introduced to me, to strengthen that heritage if I can, and to pass on a tradition of faith and virtue that future generations will want and need. I worked long and hard to survive loss, and I now feel less energetic and focused than I used to, although no less contented. Never have I felt as much pain as I have in the last three years, yet never have I experienced as much pleasure in simply being alive and living an ordinary life. **Never have I felt so broken, yet never have I been so whole.** What I once considered mutually exclusive—sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure, death and life—have become parts of a greater whole. My soul has been stretched. The supreme challenge is when we learn to take the loss into ourselves and be enlarged by it.

• Looking Back, Looking Ahead

I am looking back on thirty years of sorrow, hope, and change. It is now 2021; the accident occurred in 1991, thirty years ago. But there is no arrival in this kind of journey. Nor should there be.

My grandnephew was just diagnosed with osteosarcoma, bone cancer. He is eighteen years old. He had just begun his first year at Whitworth University, the school where I taught for thirty years. He was planning to play football. His life hangs in the balance, unutterably and irreversibly changed. Beauty and pain. Glory and agony. It fills me with wonder, confusion, and fear. I can hardly make sense of it. So much beauty and so much pain. I am learning to live in that tension and embrace the paradox. Yes, life is good. My kids are adults now, all married and with children. I see them often, and I enjoy our shared life together. I remarried ten years ago. I treasure Patricia. She is pure

gift to me, as are her two daughters, their husbands, and their children.

No, I have not recovered, but I carry the loss more lightly. No, my life is not better or worse, but different. **Suffering forces us to respond and change. It will never allow us to remain the same.** From the moment the accident occurred, life began to unfold without our loved ones present. Their absence, not their presence, changed us. **Our response to that absence has played the leading role.** I see a family of four become a family of twenty-one (and counting). This is not recovery, nor misery. It is simply another story. We had to choose to open ourselves to this new life. But I love this life too, passionately so. Those who suffer loss are still alive, whether they like it or not. Life calls forth life in and from them. I can say that it was true for me too. One story ended, and another began. The first was good. And the second is too. Believing did not spare me or deliver me from suffering. But it did carry me through it and enlarge me as a result of it. Loss has power. It destroys people, but it also transforms people. Suffering is universal. We must never think that our experience is worse than everyone else's. Surely different and unique, but not worse. Suffering can enlarge us. It can awaken us to the reality of God's presence and power, and it can help restore our capacity as God's image bearers. We develop capacity through desire, determination, and discipline. Hard work will only get us so far. **Suffering** is as necessary as effort, and perhaps more so. **It is the only way we can become our true selves as God's image bearers.** My life is very different now from what it was in the months after the accident. I was bleeding then; now I only have scars. In the end **it is not the loss that matters, however important it is. It is our response to it.**

• To the Community of Faith

To this day my wife, Patricia, comforts me when I mourn. I could not have survived without these friends, my caregivers. They said very little. **Their presence mattered more to me than their words. Being with me, not doing anything for me, met my greatest need.** That was their gift to me. Mere words lack power, even when they communicate truth. Sometimes it is best to be quiet. Job's three friends rendered him the greatest service when they sat with him in silence. Loss is not a rational experience. There is no way to explain it. I became like a window. Standing outside myself, I looked in. Standing inside myself, I looked out. I learned how to observe my grief, as if I were a scientist studying myself. Standing outside the self, we ask, What is happening to me right now? Standing inside the self, we ponder, What is happening in me? What suffering people choose to believe about reality does matter, it can provide a deeper kind of power and perspective. But it was actually not my belief that mattered, at least not initially. My community of friends stood beside me, held me, and believed for me. Caregiving almost requires belief in the existence of God—a good God who cares about people, even when he seems absent and cruel; a patient God who stays with people.