

In Action – Compassion

“To suffer with”

Life was coming together for me. After years of study, I could finally put “PhD” after my name. My husband and I had two beautiful young children. And to top it off, seven months after the birth of our second son, I began working as Christian Ethics Consultant at The Salvation Army Ethics Centre. Things were falling into place.

Then things fell apart.

Mere weeks after beginning my job, I experienced a severe headache, blurred vision, and numbness on my right side. A scan revealed a mass in my brain. I underwent a craniotomy. At the age of 31 I was diagnosed with grade 3 brain cancer.

“There is good news!” announced my oncologist. Recent studies indicated that, along with radiation, a particular concoction of chemo drugs could extend my life for years. The chemo, he added in no uncertain terms, would hit me like a Mack truck.

This didn’t sound like good news.

Pain and discomfort did accompany my treatment. But it was the isolation of suffering that bedeviled me most. Such loneliness could not be medically alleviated. Where was God in this? I believed in a God who suffers with people. But at the worst time of my life it was difficult to perceive any divine compassion.

I was keenly aware that my family suffered with me. They sacrificed much of their time offering hands-on care while radiation, chemo, and other drugs worked their injurious effects. They supported me in other ways, always listening when I expressed my insecurities. And though they suffered their own insecurities, they made my suffering their first concern.

Many others were moved by compassion and sensed my spiritual anxiety. Shortly after my diagnosis, a corps officer from Heritage Park Temple, someone I hardly knew, brought me a wall hanging that read:

Sometimes God calms the storm.
Sometimes God lets the storm rage and calms his child.

She told me it had been given to her when she had gone through a difficult time. Now she felt moved to pass it on to me.



While laid up at home, my mailbox and inbox began to fill up with well wishes. I became a subject of prayer for Salvationists and others all over the world, including people I had never met. Colleagues at the Ethics Centre and Booth University College were generous in popping over to see me. My supervisor also offered a gift. This terrarium arrangement of dried plants was, as he put it, “something that would last.”

Generous volunteers at Heritage Park Temple and my own church community worked together to provide my family with a meal every weeknight over the course of my entire treatment. (Chemo itself took a year.) Every time I received a meal at my front door, my loneliness subsided. People showed me that I was not forgotten.

Toward the end of treatment I began my return to work. I was offered the freedom to come back on a gradual basis until I was fit enough to take up full-time responsibilities. I know this is not something every new employee can expect! It made me feel both valued and upheld when I was frustrated with what I felt was slow recuperation.

These acts of care and compassion encouraged me to show compassion to others. Shortly after chemo began, my husband and I joined a support group for people with brain cancer and their caregivers. At the beginning we were people who needed to be supported by other group members. Now we are at a different place in our journey. We continue to attend meetings so that we can find opportunities to be compassionate toward others who are suffering.

I live with the knowledge that someday my cancer will recur. But the reality of God’s compassion has been evidenced to me in the ways others have suffered along with me. That is good news indeed.

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