



Every day grace

MAGAZINE

EDG Issue No. 2

all that heals

Creating an issue of a magazine on healing, in some ways, implies a belief and perhaps faith in the process of becoming healthy and whole. What we hope you'll discover in this Every Day Grace (EDG) issue on healing is instead stories about becoming. Because for so many of us who've experienced the loss of loved one, struggled with abuse, depression/anxiety or a terminal illness – healing is never guaranteed. But through it all, we are always becoming.

Telling stories about healing requires courage and vulnerability from our storytellers. These aren't easy stories to tell, and in some ways, they may not be easy stories to read. We believe, however, these are sacred stories because they remind us we are not alone in our becoming. EDG magazine is a publication of the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. The design and artwork were created by Mary Andreolli and Adam Baker. If you'd like to request additional copies of EDG magazine, please email: communications@nccumc.org.

May your journey through Every Day Grace magazine remind you of all that heals.



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RYAN LIVES

Delores Benton Evans

Because of severe renal disease, my kidneys had been failing for many years. Sometimes I was emaciated. I also suffered from congestive heart failure and hypertension, and type 2 diabetes exacerbated the renal disease. But, I was able to have three lovely children and receive two graduate degrees in social work and law before end stage renal disease changed my life. Eventually, I was forced to stop working and qualified for social security disability.

While waiting for a kidney transplant, I tried peritoneal dialysis because it was flexible enough to allow me to continue to practice law. However, because of a hole in my diaphragm, the dialysis fluid would not remain in the abdominal area and it was discontinued. Finally, I was forced to do nocturnal hemodialysis, eight-hour treatments, three times a week.

I vowed that if I was fortunate enough to receive a kidney transplant that I would become an avid volunteer working to increase organ tissue and eye donations and be an advocate for people receiving dialysis.

Until you have a personal experience with life on dialysis, it is difficult to comprehend the issues and the desperation you feel about receiving that transplant.

My son Ryan volunteered to be tested as a living kidney donor for me but unfortunately he was deemed ineligible for living donation. In a tragic twist of fate, on November 18, 2008 my precious Ryan died. On November 19, 2008, I received his left kidney. It is amazing that in life he could not donate a kidney to me, but after his death it was possible. I have been told that this was the first occurrence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where a parent received a kidney from a deceased child.

His awesome, precious gift of his left kidney changed my life. I have energy, look and feel better and know the joys of being able to enjoy life free of dialysis treatments.

I have resumed hobbies and travel again, relieved to know that I do not have to schedule my activities around dialysis.



Ryan was loving, generous, and supported charities and events designed to help young people. I describe him as being a doting son, a loving sibling to his brother Earl and sister Angela, and a protective nephew to his Aunt Carol. Ryan played sports and was a star athlete in basketball and football at Jordan High School in Durham.

In addition to saving my life with his kidney donation, Ryan saved and enhanced so many other lives. One man is alive today thanks to Ryan's heart, another thanks to his lungs.

Each time I attend an event to promote donation, I heal a little more by connecting with other donor and recipient families. Hearing their stories and sharing information helps us heal, learn and educate. Now, I travel, garden, care for my grandchildren and I work part-time. I tell my story at events to honor Ryan's gift of life. I received my first standing ovation after telling my story in church where I was invited to talk.

Many people have told me that they have learned a lot about transplantation because of Ryan's and my story. Our story generated publicity about organ, tissue and eye transplantation. My pastor said he decided to become an organ donor and changed his driver's license because of me.

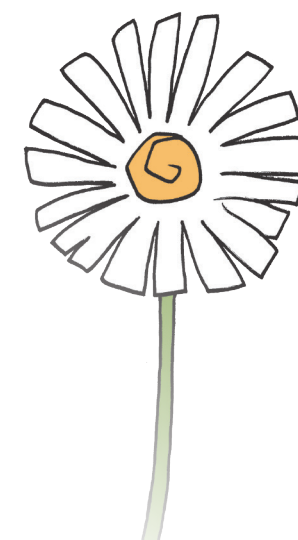
Ryan lives on in me and in his other recipients. Though I miss him every day, I'm so grateful for the gift of life he gave me and so many others.



Delores' Story

Delores Benton Evans both gave and received life from her son, Ryan. Following his death, Ryan saved not only his mother's life, by giving her a kidney, but also the lives of many others.

If you'd like to learn more about becoming an organ donor, please visit carolinadonorservices.org.



i wrote hallelujah

Heather Williams

I have been told stories of my toddler brother and I being used as human roach clips to pass around the joint in an apartment building full of people in inner city Detroit. I am glad I was too young to remember any of that. I do have memories as far back as I can remember of not being wanted or loved. My mom was remarried by the time I was three and the man she married was someone who acted one way towards my brother and I before they were married, and a completely different way afterward.

I recall being told I was stupid around age five. It became so normal to have horrible things said to me that even to this day I find myself able to believe the bad instead of the good.

My stepfather had a way of stripping any worth from me and making me feel empty. The hitting began around that time as well. It was a slap that started it all. I think I was upset or crying over something and he slapped me, hard. I can't pinpoint the exact day or even age that slap happened.



It all kind of melted into one big movie scene. This entire time we were going to church.

My birth mom and stepfather were both adamant about going to church. They had both been brought up in the church and so naturally we all went. I grew up hearing my Sunday school teacher tell us Jesus loved us and in my head calling her a liar and pretty much hating God. I thought, How could Jesus love me and let all of this horrible stuff happen?

When I was eleven my birth mom got rid of me. It was not out of some noble notion, it was out of convenience. My brother (who was gotten rid of a year later) and I were a nuisance and she chose her new husband over her children. They had four other children and to me it seemed I was not even worth being part of a family. I wanted to live with my grandpa Rice (my grandfather). He drove down to Georgia where we had been living and took me to live with him in Michigan. A year later my brother came to live with us too. It was a big adjustment for me. I came from a place of such abuse and hatred to a place of being made to feel loved without very many restrictions. I pretty much did whatever I wanted. I rebelled. Even though my Grandpa made sure I was in church I still hated God. I began drinking and experimenting with drugs. It was, I guess, a way for me to fill the hole I had inside of me.

I chose to find worth in boys. I had a boyfriend in high school that I ended up being sexually active with and when we broke up I was devastated and went off the deep end. I then dropped out of school at age eighteen and after being given an ultimatum to either go back or get out I left home and was homeless.

It was February in Detroit the day I decided to be stubborn and stupid and choose to leave home over going back to school. It was extremely cold. I would find open doors in an outdoor mall near our house and even hung out at a 24-hour donut shop where the owner would give me free coffee and a donut every now and then. It was my rock bottom. I remember thinking,

HOW DID I GET HERE?

Through a friend, I was reconnected with my birth father who lived in the same town. I was taken to meet him and he connected me with a lady from his church to stay with. But I had to go to church if I wanted to stay with her. I was desperate and broken, so I did not complain and did what they asked. I went to their church in downtown Detroit. It was an old Shakespearean theater and it was nothing like any church I had seen before. I walked in and people were smiling, singing and clapping. It freaked me out at first. I stood in the back and watched.

I would listen to the preacher but I just let it go in one ear and out the other. I had heard it all before and was not going to be fooled.

One day about a month later, I stood in my usual spot and watched everyone clap and sing. I even did my "white girl" sway and sang a few lines along with them and then sat to listen to the preacher. He started talking about the love of Jesus. I rolled my eyes.

I had heard this Jesus loves me junk and I settled in to fold my arms and not care. But he then said something that caught my attention. He started talking about Jesus loving us just the way we were. That we didn't need to clean ourselves up to come to him but that we could come to him and he would make us clean. He spoke of this love and something inside me ached. I wanted that. I wanted to be loved just the way I was. I was so broken, so angry, so sad, so lost, and I just wanted to believe that I could be loved.

The pastor gave an altar call and I came forward. I remember praying, "God, forgive me." It was an epiphany. I had been blaming God my whole life for everything, and telling him I hated him, and yet God still loved me. I could be forgiven.

I could not change
my past but
God could heal it.

I began reading my Bible and
praying. God began to grow
in me. A year and a half later,
after meeting and dating
him, my husband and
I were married.
Tim was a
musician
and

began noticing that even though I was shy,
I could sing. He began coaxing me to sing
in front of people.

After a few years of touring and recording
independent projects we were ready to
start a family but were told that we would
have trouble conceiving. I was crushed. I
had always wanted to be a mom.

After years of trying we finally found out
we were pregnant and our son Caedmen
was born. I remember thinking, THIS is
what unconditional love feels like. He was
an amazing boy. Blue eyes, blonde hair and
a smile that would melt you. He was a joy.
He smiled at everyone.

We did not know it at the time but our
time on this earth with our son would
be short. When Caedmen was six-and-
a-half months old he came down with
what we thought was a cold. After
taking him to the doctor, he was
admitted to the hospital for pneu-
monia. We were told it was not
bad, but he needed fluids and he
should be home in a couple days.
We were not worried, other than
normal parent heartache at seeing
your child hurting. Caedmen was
admitted to the hospital around noon
and a short four-and-a-half hours later I
was standing in a room full of doctors and
nurses performing CPR on my baby until

they all, one by one, slowly stopped and the doctor broke the silence with, "Time of death, 4:34 p.m." I was stunned. A nurse wrapped him up in a blanket and handed him to me.

He still had tape on his mouth and I swear I thought he would open up his eyes and be okay. But he wasn't.

It was more than I could bear. It went so fast yet it plays in my head almost every day. I stood up after a few minutes and left the room. As I left, I told the nurse who took him,

"I want you to know that whether my son had lived or now that he is dead, my faith remains the same."

I walked out and that was the last time I saw my precious boy. Tim and I left the hospital and went outside and we prayed and cried. We asked God to help us. We also made a new commitment to him. I don't know why in that moment there was such a "breakthrough" moment with God, except we knew that we only had two choices in that moment. We could run from God or we could run to God. We chose to run to God. It is in these broken, rock bottom, can't-see-a-way-out moments that this choice is so critical. It is so easy to run from God.

But if we have surrendered our lives and ourselves to God, running to God is the only way real healing can take place.

One thing I found that helped so much after Caedmen died was reaching out to help others. It allowed me to see past my own heartache, and in helping someone else, I was helped as well. I believe in this principle, and live it out to this day. I choose to love others even when I am having the crappiest, worst day. I am living proof that God can take anything and work it for good.

I wrote the song "Hallelujah" in the year following Caedmen's death. It was a prayer crying out to God, letting God know I could not do it alone, and telling the world that I would still lift my head and sing hallelujah no matter what. Now, almost thirteen years later, that song is still touching lives and healing hearts. If I had not given my pain to God and used music to express it those lives may not have been touched.

*This is my story,
this is my song.*



THE BREAKING POINT



Lisa Bachman

Jesus, help me! I didn't even realize until later that this prayer escaped from my lips as I landed on the hard tile floor in excruciating pain. The fall on the wet floor was so unexpected and sudden that my brain did not even register I was falling. The diagnosis: hip fracture. The prognosis: complete healing with surgery followed by twelve weeks on crutches and physical therapy.

Hip fracture and surgery? Really? I am only 59; I am healthy and too young for this! Is there no other alternative? Can't I just let it heal on its own? The doctors and even my husband told me to have the surgery. But something told me to trust God for

healing; pray and trust. For most of my life, trusting God as part of my healing would never have occurred to me.

When I was ill or had a bad migraine as a child, my mother encouraged me to rest when I needed to and then when I began to feel better I was encouraged to shake it off and get moving. Of course, I was under a doctor's care at times but we did not rely on the doctor for every little thing. I was taught to pay attention to my body, learn the needs of my body and determine if it was time to rest or time to shake off the pain and keep going. This way of dealing with health issues served me well most of my life.

It is a valuable skill to know your body, pay attention to your physical needs and respond in appropriate ways.

Sometimes I knew I needed to rest for a while and sometimes I knew it was best just to keep moving. Learning to trust God to guide me through this decision-making process has added a sense of peace and rest to my self-care decisions. I wish I had discovered it earlier in my life.

The coping skills I learned as a child came in handy when my husband, Bob, and I experienced infertility issues when we tried to conceive a child. Through it all, I was upbeat and positive. Knowing my body and learning, in depth, about the reproduction cycle added greatly to my ability to determine what I needed physically to be successful during In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) treatments. During this time of IVF treatments, my mother put me on the prayer lists of her various groups. She told me repeatedly that she and her friends were praying for a healthy baby. Although I had been raised in the Methodist church as a child, I was uncertain of my beliefs at this time of my life. We were not attending church and I did not really believe that prayer would help the situation. I was appreciative that my mother was trying to help. I just did not give it any credit.

Twenty four years later, I look at my strong, healthy son and I know without a doubt that my mother not only prayed my son into existence but she also prayed me back to the church.

So what in the world does this all have to do with my broken hip?

After my son was born we moved to Hillsborough, NC, and began to attend New Sharon UMC. I credit my church family with helping me to develop spiritual maturity. They nurtured me and I began to understand what having a relationship with God was all about. I know that God heals us, spiritually, physically, and in all ways. I used to rely on my own knowledge of my bodily needs and now I first ask what God would have me do then I use the knowledge of my body to promote healing.

My hip healed perfectly without surgery, but a couple of months later, when I was still having pain, I went back to the doctor. I was diagnosed with avascular necrosis, which meant that my hip (the femur head) was dying. The doctor told me that the only cure would be a total hip replacement.

I was devastated with this diagnosis. I decided to wait and pray. A few days later, after a powerful laying on of hands for a friend, God spoke to me, "Be encouraged, daughter. Your faith has healed you.

And the woman was healed from that time on." I had to go home and look up the scripture from Mark 9:22.

Somehow, even though I knew I would be healed, I also knew that I must do everything I could to promote healing. So I worked with my chiropractor to determine alternative treatment options. Many, many folks prayed for me and a healer laid hands on me and prayed for healing. A few weeks later, I was attending the United Methodist Women's Assembly in Louisville, Ky. I realized that my hip was vibrating. I was encouraged but at the same time I was in some pain. I became a little frightened at first that I might not heal. Over and over the message I received from God was, "Trust me." Many days doubt crept in but each time I asked God to release me from my fear and doubt. I felt peace about my healing every time.

Today, just less than a year after the original diagnosis of avascular necrosis, I am pain free, I have complete mobility in that hip and I feel I am healed. I believe that God can heal us instantly and I also know that sometimes God does not give us the healing we request. I believe God heals each of us in the way we most need to be healed. In my case, it was physical healing so that I might share my story to encourage others to be proactive in their healing journeys.

On March 17, Lisa Bachman shared, "I recently found out that my hip is completely healed. No more evidence of avascular necrosis! To God be the glory!"



CUMe alongside

Morven Baker

For many years, most Tuesday evenings would find me huddled in my little office with a small band of the bravest women on the face of the planet, all survivors of sexual, domestic, verbal, emotional and/or spiritual abuse. Initially, most were reluctant to participate in these group therapy sessions, but within just a few hours of being together, these women had become a healing place for one another.

For centuries, churches were seen as uniquely safe places where fugitives were immune to arrest as long as they remained near the altar. Being a place of healing is part of the church's ancient DNA. Over the course of almost thirty years of working as a mental health counselor, I have heard countless stories of pain and suffering. At present, I facilitate an online support group for survivors of abuse who know too well what it is like to feel lonely and afraid. From all these stories I have learned what makes a church a healing place.

The church began with Jesus. He literally was a "healing place." The unloved and unlovely flocked to him because he listened to, comforted, challenged and welcomed wounded people. His love was unconditional. He protected the vulnerable and stood up to the bullies. He was not afraid of breaking with convention.

For the church to be a healing place, first impressions are important. The greeters have to be the very warmest and welcoming of people, willing to make eye contact, smile and share their first name. For some people, any physical contact is an intrusion, so just a kind welcome instead of a handshake might suffice. Introduce newcomers to others who can show them child-care facilities or restrooms, or tell them where they might hang their coats. Your church might consider having other friendly faces around to offer a smile or a welcome. I will never forget the first time I attended a church in Cleveland,



Ohio, where it seemed that literally every single person welcomed me. I felt loved and cared for without knowing one soul in the place.

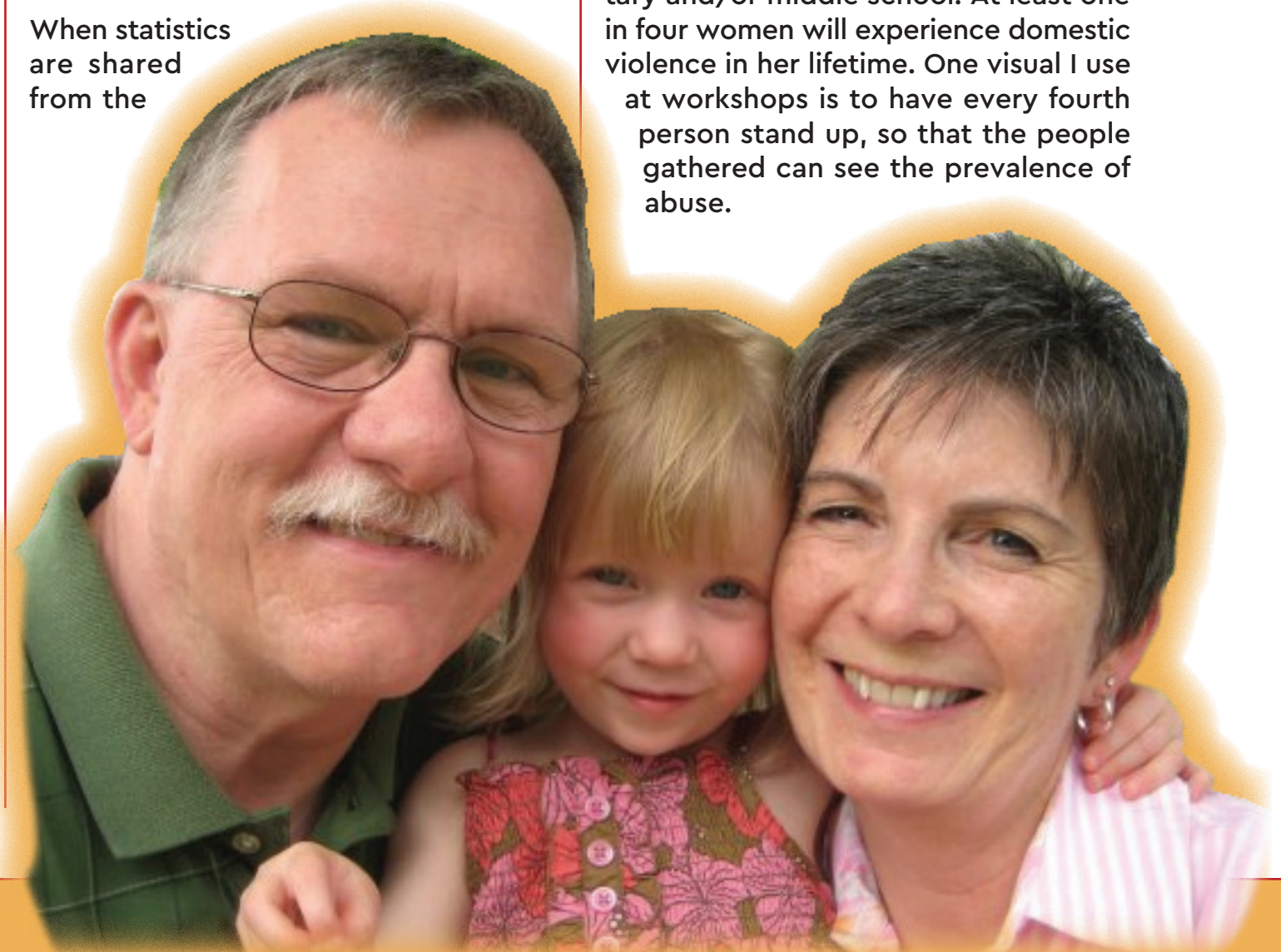
Victims of abuse are often hyper-vigilant and need to feel safe. They often survey a room before they enter it, making sure they know how to escape. Do not take it personally if they want to sit in the back row of the church, as they need to know they can leave quickly if they have to. In addition, make sure that the building and parking lot are well lit and secure.

All of us need to know that we can talk about anything at church. One of the churches I visited had a bulletin board which listed all the different classes and support groups it offered throughout the year. From this list I learned that alcoholics, drug addicts, compulsive gamblers, women who have had abortions, victims of sexual and domestic abuse, single mothers, and many others gathered there, felt welcome there, and shared their stories there. It was a place of healing! All were welcome and everything was discussed. Pain was brought into the light of discussion, and shame no longer existed.

Encourage your pastor to share how the church can respond to those who have been abused. People want to help, but without the right tools they can unwittingly end up hurting a person even more by saying the wrong thing. Consider doing a book study on recovery, or host a morning workshop and learn how the church can minister to survivors.

When statistics are shared from the

pulpit, victims of abuse no longer feel alone. At least one in every three to four girls and one in every five to six boys have experienced some form of sexual abuse before the age of eighteen. And those are just the ones that are reported; most incidents of abuse are not reported. Nearly one out of three teens reports having been bullied in elementary and/or middle school. At least one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. One visual I use at workshops is to have every fourth person stand up, so that the people gathered can see the prevalence of abuse.



Most of us have heard sermons based on the first half of Malachi 2:16, the part that tells us that God hates divorce. Many years ago I heard my pastor preach a sermon using this text, encouraging people to stay married, no matter the circumstances. Later that week I met with him and shared statistics on the prevalence of domestic abuse. He realized that there probably were abuse victims in his congregation. The next week this good man preached another sermon which also encompassed the second half of Malachi 2:16, which addresses the fact that God does not condone violence. Imagine the affirmation these women experienced when they heard their pastor acknowledge their pain and give them permission to leave a battering relationship. This pastor's church became their place of healing.

If abuse within the church community comes to light, please protect the victim. The person who has shared her (or his) story of abuse needs to be believed, validated and sheltered. She and/or her family may need practical help in establishing a new home or finding employment. If the person who has done the offending is in a leadership position, they need to be removed from this position. Abuse is also against

the law, and if the victim is a minor, it must be reported to the authorities. If the victim is an elderly person, again mandated reporting is the law. If the victim is an adult, please encourage her to take legal action. Despite the discomfort of the subject matter, the situation must be discussed within the church body. The innocent need to be protected. It is imperative that there are no more secrets, as secrets cultivate shame.

Encourage conversation on the subject of forgiveness, whether in the classroom or from the pulpit. Forgiveness is a term often misunderstood and misused. If I learn that a friend of mine has betrayed my confidence, I can choose to forgive her but it may be a long time before I can trust her again. If this friend is remorseful, and in time shows me that she is a trustworthy person by not gossiping about others, reconciliation and restoration may be possible. For the person who has suffered abuse, if there has been no genuine remorse from their offender(s), trust may never be recovered, so reconciliation may not be possible. Instead of encouraging a person who has been abused to "forgive and forget" when friends at church share that they understand how hard it is to

recover this trust, the abused person feels validated and safe.

The Greek word for 'counselor' is *paraclete*, which means "one who comes alongside." Healing the church begins by simply listening to the stories of the survivors. Come alongside.

Resources

- Focus Ministries (<http://www.focusministries1.org>)
- Lundy Bancroft books
- Rapha's Touch: Healing from Sexual Abuse, by Dr. JoAnn Shade (available through Amazon)
- Safe Sanctuaries For Ministers: Reducing the Risk of Abuse in The Church, by Joy Thornburg Melton

Workshop availability, contact Dr. Morven Baker at morvenbaker@gmail.com

OPEN OUR EYES

Rosanna Panizo

Food and commensality are extremely important in many families and cultures. I learned this when I was a child growing in my first homeland, Peru. In my family, feelings of care and affection are demonstrated with a delicious meal at the table.

The ritual of care and affection begins with selecting the ingredients of each dish in a special way, the fresher the better. We always think first of what could be the favorite dish or ingredient of a special person, whom we would seat in a special place. The ingredients can be found in the open markets of any big or small city, town or village.

My two grandmothers were excellent cooks and we keep their recipes in our hearts. My father and mother were also great cooks. They were always competing and we, their children, were the judges.

When we were children we were not permitted to come into the kitchen area because of all the dangers there: fire, sharp knives, boiling pots, etc.

I remember that I liked to watch my parents cooking from a distance at the kitchen door. The rich aromas coming from that sacred space were ingrained in my senses. When the time for the meal came we sat around the table and during the blessing Mom or Dad always prayed for food for the ones who were hungry and we always remembered this reality around the table. It was evident that when we sat around the table we didn't do it just to satisfy our hunger.

The family table and the ritualizing I describe are part of a wider reality that we experience as human beings. It's not only part of my childhood memories but an ancient ritual born centuries ago. We give deep meaning to a simple animal act: eating. In my culture, we call this practice of eating together commensality.

First we serve the children and the elderly, then the special guests, and then everybody else. We are glad that everybody is at the table and we miss the ones who for different reasons are not with us.

Food, love and memories. The meal has a sacramental role. Sacrament, a visible reality of an invisible realm.

I grew up in the Methodist Church. As good Methodists in Peru we come to the Table of the Lord to receive the sacrament of Communion at the beginning of the month. When I was a child I was not conscious of the connection between the everyday breaking of bread and the Communion of the Lord. I remember that it was during a Maundy Thursday worship that my eyes were opened to the breaking of the body of Christ during Communion. Peru was in the middle of an intense social unrest. A huge national strike was in place. You were able to see students, peasants, housewives, and workers of all sorts organizing and demanding justice. Many parishes and congregations were part of the demonstrations. At the time I was a thirteen-year-old high school student. And during that Maundy Thursday service I made the connection between the brokenness of our reality and the

possibility of unity in the body of Christ. Each time we celebrate Communion we are proclaiming that a different reality is possible. For a few moments, we at the church forget our differences, imperfections, contradictions, heavy burdens and sin, and focus on the One who loves us and reminds us that we need to love each other.

I also made the hunger connection. In a single day 16,500 children die of hunger around the world but this doesn't occupy the front pages in our news sites. Sometimes, we spiritualize the Gospel to such an extreme that it loses all incarnational dimensions, and we lose sight of all its materiality. Is there anything more material than bread? More material than hunger in our stomachs? We need to remember that the material is sacramental. We can only perceive and live and celebrate the spiritual through our bodies and senses.

I've been involved in ministry for 30 years now. At the beginning of this year Rev. Donna Banks, my district superintendent, invited me to join the vision and journey of Life Around the Table. I had met Rev. Grace Hackney, who serves as Executive Director for Life Around the Table, more than ten years

ago in a conference training for clergy. We were roommates at the event, had shared our call and journey, and had become friends. So when Rev. Banks asked me to work with Grace and her team I was elated! To wrestle with the sacramental dimensions around eating practices, justice issues, who is missing around the table, food, cooking, and sharing bread and friendship is a blessing in my life and ministry. We will have old and new guests for sure because it is God's table. There is a place for everyone!

I mentioned that my eyes were opened during a Maundy Thursday evening service when I was thirteen years old. During that same Easter my eyes were opened one more time when the gospel was read and proclaimed. After the crucifixion some disciples went back to their everyday activity as fishermen. Jesus, the Sacrament of God, showed up at the lake and instructed them where to throw their nets. Then he went to the shore and put together a fire at which there was already fish and bread. He invited them to join him. Then the eyes of the disciples were opened.

Simple gestures, simple meals. In the simple gesture of cooking a meal, breaking bread and remembering, those disciples experienced the presence of the Author of Life in their midst. Lord, open our eyes that we may see...



When i was hungry

Bill Haddock

When there is a war, people try to survive. Finding food becomes more difficult as vendors do not go to the markets to sell their vegetables or meat. Hiding becomes an expedient survival skill.

Children and the elderly seek the strength and the wisdom necessary

to make it another day with hunger and fear ever present. Every day, there are stories of heroism from nameless individuals who face their fears and mobilize whatever resources they have in order to fight the enemy.

The Liberian people know something about war. But how does a country battle a virus that is unseen? In the beginning, there was little acknowledgment that Ebola was real. Even if the virus was real, people said, it would not affect them personally. But as the virus spread, everyone understood that they were fighting a war. The effects were similar to the previous wars. Hundreds of people were dying from the disease itself and from its ripple effects upon families who gathered food daily. What was a fragile economy collapsed upon itself. The health care system was ineffective in its public health outreach and in its clinical responses. The enemy, it seemed, was winning. To make matters worse, the enemy could not be seen.

People tried their best to combat this enemy. They set up buckets of bleach to



wash their hands before entering homes or places of business. People who are naturally expressive huggers and backslappers greeted one another with hands across their hearts and bowed heads. But the enemy raged on.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president of Liberia, asked the world for help on October 17, 2014. As a United Methodist, she knew that her global faith community was already helping. Some United Methodist missionaries had been told to leave the country during the crisis for their own protection. Dr. Albert Willicor, a United Methodist missionary, remained in the Ganta community. His calling, he said, was a divine one – and one that he HAD to fulfill by staying with his people. He would teach the few health professionals who remained not only how to properly gown up, but he taught them all to put on the whole armor of God and show forth love, compassion, and respect for all people.

But the church could not possibly save everyone. Despite heroic efforts, there was a shortage of proper equipment for medical personnel. No one in the health care system had experience treating an Ebola patient – or properly disposing of a body that carried the virus. To make matters worse, villages throughout the country were continuing practices that enhanced the spread of the disease.

Meanwhile, many Liberians who have family in other countries, or who have partners in ministry throughout the world, let it be known that assistance was not getting to people who needed it. Containers of supplies were blocked in the port. On-the-ground transportation services shut down out of fear of literally transmitting the virus from one place to another. Many workers throughout the country were told to stay home in an effort to contain the virus from spreading, further reducing the ability of workers to pay for basic necessities.

As leaders in Liberia begged the world for help, The United Methodist Church reached out to do its part. Grants were given to the Liberia Annual Conference's radio station to get the word out about the fact that Ebola was real (a fact not believed by many people at first). As the reality of the crisis became accepted, the radio station became a source of factual information and of comfort during the darkest days.

As much as the Liberia Annual Conference staff wanted to help, they too, had families in need. Many of those staff members also were told to stay home. On November 6, 2014, missionaries Mary Randall Zigbuo, Helen Roberts-Evans and Priscilla Jaiah returned to Liberia, where they supported efforts by Liberia Annual Conference and its health board to help contain the Ebola epidemic. Within days, these three women

were able to do what was necessary to get containers out of the port and the items distributed throughout the country. Staff members, pastors, and laypersons from throughout the country helped to distribute rice, buckets of food, and medical supplies. These missionaries found the economic situation to be at dangerous levels for the most vulnerable in society, but they were determined to offer the love of Christ to those who felt as though they were among the least, the last, and the lost.

As time has gone on, these missionaries re-established important communications that had broken down during the crisis. The right people were connected to each other and to partners throughout the United Methodist connection, so that the ministry of the church could have a ripple effect of good throughout the society. The church supported the efforts of health care professionals from around the world by offering hospitality whenever possible. Global Health support and individual partners strengthened UMC health facilities, so that they could remain open, even when government clinics closed. The North Carolina Conference of the UMC specifically sent three containers, each filled with food and medical supplies. Among these supplies were, "food buckets" put together over the course of one weekend by church people in NC. Each bucket had enough food to feed a family of five for 2–3 weeks.



Stop Hunger Now partnered with the Conference to send medical supplies as well as food packages. Other partners used container space to send particular emergency gifts to homes for the elderly, orphanages, and isolated communities.

Using United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) grants to purchase food in country whenever possible, along with the food buckets from NC, the three missionaries on special assignment went to the southeastern part of the country. The southeast region has historical access challenges due to very poor and/or non-existent road

infrastructure. The region experiences the highest poverty rate, lowest populace access to health facilities, and the lowest access to employment opportunities, education and commerce. Meanwhile in the Gompa District in northeastern Liberia, United Methodists reached out to survivors with food and prayers during a time when the contraction and death rate placed the entire town of Gompa in fear and panic. Taking precautionary protective measures, and emboldened by Christ's Holy Spirit, church members visited the homes of the survivors, providing food, water and sanitation supplies and openly praying with the survivors and their families. This helped foster hope and courage among the survivors as well as encouraged acceptance among the communities of the work of the community health workers.

When it seemed as though there was no way out of this crisis, and when it appeared that all hope was lost, when it seemed that an unwinnable war had come upon the land again, God put the right people in place at the right time. The people of The United Methodist Church in Liberia leveraged the help that they could get from their partners like the NC Annual Conference to bring light into the darkness. On this date, Liberia was declared Ebola free. Once again, the darkness could not overcome the Light.

SOMEDay, THE FULL banquet

Belton Joyner

When I was thirteen years old, my sister came into my bedroom, woke me up, and told me that my daddy had just died that night in the next room. I was confused. I felt a new loneliness. At the time of the funeral, all the stores in Siler City were closed so everyone could come to the service. We sang, "I love to tell the story of unseen things above..." Yes! As the funeral home car carried my mourning family back home, I heard a shrieking yell, someone calling my name. I looked out the window and there stood my classmate, Ben Stanley. "Hey, Belton!" he yelled. "How ya doing?" And I knew that life went on. Yes!

Just after midnight on September 21, 2011, the phone rang and the doctor said I should come immediately to Duke Medical Center where my wife, Toni, had been struggling with the shutdown of normal systems. I got there in time for Toni and me to exchange some private words. Our son, B.J., came in

from Williamsburg, and together he and I watched the fluctuating patterns on the blood pressure monitor. Then the patterns stopped. Blood pressure: zero. The nurse looked at the clock and made a note: 7:55 a.m. After almost fifty-two years of marriage, I had a new emptiness. My tears seemed only to water the garden of my grief. Three days later, on my birthday, the funeral began as we processed, singing "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise!" Yes! Row after row of family and friends shared Eucharist with Toni, who now, we said, ate at a heavenly banquet table. Yes!

But "Yes" does not take away tears. "Yes" does not answer all questions.

On the day I started writing these reflections, I got word that my older sister was going into hospice care. On the day I started writing these reflections, I had suspicious sniffles and I nervously

heard that flu deaths in North Carolina this season had moved close to two hundred. On the day I started writing these reflections, my right knee hurt, the one that was supposed to have been fixed with knee replacement surgery.

None of us has to go very far before life hits us with questions of why...how...and who is in charge here? None of us is exempt from wondering about how a loving God has let illness and decrepitude and death creep into this world. None of us can go very far in life's roller coaster journey without saying, "I just don't understand."

Theologians will argue about free will versus predestination (Joshua 24:15). Students of the Bible will note that all of creation is broken (Romans 8:20). Some draw satisfaction from the fact that the way the sun shines or the rain falls does not depend on how happy God is with the way you live (Matthew 5:45b).

But even after I put all of that into the hopper, I am left to ponder: Why was my friend Pat declared cancer-free while my friend Rosalie died with cancer?

Why does one family member succumb to the disease of alcoholism while another family member celebrates victory over that illness? Why did one loved one remain shackled by depression while another one found freedom from that sickness?

Is it a matter of who has the most faith?
Is it a matter of who is closest to God?

Consider this story:

A woman told her pastor, "I was born blind. I have always been blind. It is the only life I know."

"Yes," the pastor replied. "That must have been difficult."

"Not really," the woman said. "It is not so much that being blind bothers me; it is what my friends say to me. They tell me that if I had more faith, I could be healed."

The pastor paused for a moment and then asked, "Do you have one of those white canes that blind people sometimes use for walking?"

"Yes, I do. Why?"

"The next time someone says that if you had more faith you would be healed, hit them over the head with that cane as hard as you can. Then tell them that if they had more faith that wouldn't hurt."

So, what are we to do with this mystery of how faith and healing and illness and God all mix and mingle?

One lens through which to look at these issues is the account of Jesus and Lazarus (John 11:1–12:11). The gospel writer must have thought it had more than passing significance because he devoted sixty-five verses (a couple of pages) to telling the story. In brief, Lazarus was very sick and his sisters sent word to Jesus. The Lord did nothing to heal the man. Lazarus died. A few days later, Jesus showed up at Lazarus' home and Lazarus' sister was bent out of shape because Jesus had not come and healed her brother. And then comes that famous verse quoted often by hungry children who have to quote a Bible verse before supper can be served: "Jesus wept."

Jesus went to Lazarus' tomb and yelled, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did. It was not all a happy celebration, however,

because some religious leaders were so upset by this irregular act by Jesus that they began plotting to kill both Lazarus and Jesus. The next thing in the account is Palm Sunday.

In this text, I first notice that God is not in the mail-order prayer business: "Fill out the request form and receive your immediate answer." It doesn't work that way. Can you imagine the chaos of a world in which every prayer thought got an immediate "yes" from God? (For example, a farmer prays for rain and his next door neighbor prays that it won't rain on the daughter's wedding day.)

Then, I see that death is for real. Resurrection has no meaning unless death is real. The text is clear: Lazarus is dead unto very dead. The King James Version does not beat around the bush: "He stinketh." (John 11:39)

Philip William Otterbein once noted that Hebrews 2:14 is about destroying the one who has the power of death; he pointed out that there are two words that can be translated "destroy." One means "obliterate or do away with." The other means "render useless." In this Hebrews text about destroying death, the writer has chosen the word that means "render useless."

In other words, we still die, but in the ultimate scheme of things, even though we die, death is impotent. Lazarus was really dead, not pretend dead.

And I am grateful that in this story of Lazarus I get a glimpse of the kingdom of life. As Jesus went about his ministry, He gave us a glimpse of what God's reign is like. Brokenness is re-knit. Health is restored. Death is defeated. But now it is only a glimpse. Even in the walking, talking ministry of Jesus, it was only a glimpse. The fullness of God's gift of re-knitting, of healing, of life, is yet to be. We pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" in acknowledgment that so far we have only gotten a taste of God's ultimate will. Someday, the full banquet.

My daddy is still dead. Toni is still dead. But there is a good tomorrow and even today we can glimpse that "yes."

My sister died. My sniffles are better. My knee still has an unsettled soreness. And although I am grateful for the glimpses of the kingdom, there are still a few questions I want to ask the Lord on "that great waking up morning."



WHEN THE ROLLER COASTER STOPS

Marty Cauley

In July 2013, I was as healthy as I had been since I was in my twenties. In the preceding eighteen months I'd lost seventy pounds and ten pant sizes. I was exercising every day, eating right, and managing my stress. Then I got on the roller coaster.

My wife and I were visiting family in Pennsylvania and we decided to spend the evening at Waldamere, an aging but well-maintained amusement park near Lake Erie. Waldamere is home to a great, old, wooden roller coaster: the Ravine Flyer II. The Ravine Flyer II is a classic coaster that begins with a slow, clicking climb that launches you on a ride and tosses you back and forth, up and down. On that ride as we went around a hairpin curve I slammed into the side of the ancient coaster car so hard I thought I might have cracked a rib.

I woke up the next day sore, but nothing a couple of ibuprofen couldn't handle. By Sunday morning my side really became inflamed. By Sunday afternoon I was in the hospital. What was thought to be a bruised rib or gall bladder attack turned out to be terminal neuroendocrine cancer. We discovered the cancer had already metastasized to the liver and lymph nodes. The emotional

and spiritual roller coaster began its slow, clicking climb.

This was hard news. How do you grasp what it means to watch decades of your life evaporate? How do you grapple with your life span shrinking from twenty or thirty more years to four or five? In the twenty-four hours after my diagnosis my wife and I began sifting through our priorities, refocusing our lives, and reevaluating everything. We prayed for guidance and, amazingly, felt God's presence with us. Some people say they feel abandoned by God at times like this. Don't get me wrong, it's tough on your faith to get pummeled this hard out of the blue. Rather than feel abandoned, however, we have felt as though God is in the room with us holding us together. I felt that God was moving from divine controller to gracious companion who would be with me on the last ride of my life. We crested the hill and were suspended, waiting for the catch to release and send us hurtling down the first steep drop.

The roller coaster of wholeness I've been on ever since that day in July has never stopped. It has slowed occasionally, but just when you relax, another punishing turn hits you or

another sudden drop throws you off balance. Three things arise over and over again: the unjustness of the disease, the uncertainty of my future, and the presence of God amidst all of the life's difficulties.

It seems unjust. I was as healthy as I'd been in my adult life and now I am dying. What is even more frustrating is that my father, a heavy smoker and long-term alcoholic, lived to be seventy-two, and my mother is still smoking at age eighty-six. And I am the one with terminal cancer.

I grew up in a denomination that viewed God as master controller and harsh judge of all transgressions, always ready to administer the hand of correction any time you stepped out of line. I struggled with a God whose hands were on the controls of life's roller coaster who would, seemingly randomly, send the lives of the faithful into turmoil through accident, disease, and even death. In the world I watched the unjust prosper and the contrite suffer and it challenged my understanding of God.

I now understand God as companion. God has moved in my understanding from master manipulator to one who enters into the pain

with me. The brokenness of the world is a manifestation of the brokenness of our relationship with God. We hurt our neighbor, creation, and ourselves and then are surprised when the brokenness invades our lives. Now, in my life, the disease within me manifests the brokenness of creation. Now more than ever I understand the words of scripture that promise that God will never leave me or forsake me. That in the midst of this body-crippling, soul-haunting ride on life's roller coaster, God is with me, bearing it with me, enduring the pain and bringing light to the dark nights of my soul.

I also struggle with the uncertainty of my future. We all acknowledge that our future is uncertain, but with this new understanding that my life will end far sooner than I had planned I am painfully aware of all that I will miss. There will be so many celebrations as well as sorrows that will elude me as I drift

into eternity. I am also aware that my life will ebb away slowly, and perhaps painfully, like erosion on the banks of a slow-moving river. That my ride on the coaster won't end abruptly, but will slowly roll to a stop. This realization forces me to stop trying to exert control and to simply live every day as if it were my last. I strive to savor every moment with friends, every hug from my family, and every kiss from my wife. I am forced to consider the fleeting nature of life at a whole new level and leave tomorrow to God rather than to my own plans and schemes.

One of my heroes, John Wesley, is reported to have said on his deathbed, "The best of all, God is with us." It is my prayer that my words,

as my life's roller coaster comes to a stop, may echo his. Even now, looking at my life in the rear view mirror, I can see all the places where God was with me. How God was present in the most difficult moments of my life. That is a life of wholeness, it is a life that acknowledges that while the ride is unrelenting and often devastating, God is with me. I don't ride alone, and neither do you.



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