

CHAPTER 8 – A TIME TO WEEP

On the morning of Thursday November 12, 1987 Steve did not come to work with Roy in the shop as scheduled. We didn't think much of it right at first because he often rolled out late or not at all, if his joints were giving him too much trouble. After a bit, Roy went down to his room to check on him but came back upstairs saying that Steve was not in his room. We looked out the front window and saw that Steve's car was there parked in the front of the house. He had to be home.

Roy went back down stairs to check Steve's room again. Then he called up the stairs to me that Steve was in his closet and seemed to be dead. I told him to double check while I called 9-1-1. The operator kept me on the phone until the emergency people arrived, which kept me from going downstairs. They told Roy to join me upstairs and we were to stay there, not to come back down the stairs. Over and over as we waited pacing the floor, Roy kept repeating the phrase, "God never gives us anything we cannot bear", from I Corinthians 10:13. I began to tremble, God never gives us anything we cannot bear?

The emergency people quickly confirmed that Steve was indeed dead. A couple of the policemen asked us to sit with them in the living room and they began asking us questions. They took the names of Steve's friends. Windows and doors of the house were examined for possible forced entry, which might indicate a possibility of foul play. I am sure this is a routine exercise in the event of any unexpected death. No forced entry was found. But a large can containing a chemical that had been used in the print shop was discovered on the patio. It was a chemical that was no longer in use and had been put away in storage. A gallon jar was also found in Steve's closet on a shelf. Steve was lying on the floor of his large walk-in closet.

The jar was removed from the house for testing. Because we were not given much information by the police, medical people or by the coroner when he arrived, we thought that Steve had been very depressed and committed suicide by drinking the chemical. None of the authorities told us any different or offered any alternative speculations on what might have happened.

After we answered questions for the police and the coroner was finished with his investigation, Steve's body was removed to the coroner's vehicle and the authorities began to leave. We began to phone family members and close friends. The worst call we had to make was to Missouri where Ruth was attending training at the Child Evangelism Fellowship Institute. One of the staff there had the awful responsibility of pulling Ruth out of class and telling her that her brother had died.

Somehow arrangements were made for Ruth to fly home immediately. Norman Avery, who worked at Stapleton Airport, and his wife Eleanor, friends from church, came to our home so Norm could drive Roy to the airport to meet Ruth when she would arrive.

Norm wrote about that day, "I had dropped Eleanor off at your house and picked up Roy. I took him and Ruth back to your home. I do remember that Roy and Ruth were in the back seat of the little Toyota and they talked all the way back to your home. I could not stay as I had to go to an NTSB review on the CAL-1713 (plane) crash that had happened on Sunday. That took an hour or so and then I came back to your home and picked up Eleanor. Roy and I talked a lot on the way up to Stapleton (airport). We have always had good visits, despite the topic."



Norman and Eleanor were a comfort and source of strength for our family that day, as I am sure they always are to all who talk with them.

It wasn't very long until we had a steady stream of friends from church, neighbors, and the kids' school friends filling the house all day every day and late into the evenings. We asked everyone to sign our guest book and record for us there anything they had brought to us. It would be impossible for us to remember everything later to be able to write thank you cards. Many brought meals, bags of groceries, money and flowers. Others came empty handed but full of love, tears and hugs. Each one was a source of help and comfort to the five of us in facing those first days.

Paul and Pat Giles were home from their summer in Canada and Pat had broken her leg not long before. She was such a dear to sit by our phone for the next four days with her casted leg propped up on a stool. She took messages for us and informed those who called about what had happened. She listed all those who called, got phone numbers for us and even called some people for us to tell them about Steve.

On Friday, the next morning, we had to go to the mortuary to make the arrangements for a memorial service and for cremation. Paul Barnes, our pastor from Grace Chapel, accompanied us to the mortuary. As part of it, we were asked what we wanted to do with Steve's ashes. It was a thing we had not yet thought about. We sat there, our minds blank. Finally, I think it was our youngest son Vernon, who suggested that we take the ashes up to the Continental Divide to scatter there in a spot overlooking the ski areas. That sounded perfect, so we agreed we would do that.

After all the arrangements had been made, Pastor Paul told us that the church had decided to pay the entire bill for us! That was a huge blessing since we had no finances in place to pay for a funeral.

There was a viewing at the mortuary on Sunday afternoon. We were surprised how many folks came to that and how many brought their children. Steve had known and enjoyed younger children, siblings of his friends and other neighborhood children.

The memorial service was held the following day on Monday. My mother came from Washington for the service.



Dolly McDaniels, whom I had lived with during my senior year of high school, came from California. The day of the service was a cold one with snow on the ground. It was actually one of those very lovely, sunny but cold Colorado winter days. It seemed too bright, hard, a day too difficult to be borne. How could one get through it? The service was very difficult for us.



A further note about Dolly, she died about five years later from breast cancer. We had a couple of opportunities to see each other again before that time.

Pastor Paul Barnes from Grace Chapel and Hal Molloy from Holly Hills Bible Church both spoke at the memorial service. In addition Bob Strauch, the Youth Director from Grace Chapel and Herb Sanford, Steve's former Sunday school teacher at Holly Hills also spoke of their interaction with Steve. The service was followed by a very nice luncheon at Grace Chapel. Some neighbors and many friends from both churches were in attendance, many bringing their children to the service. Following that day both Ruth and I had very stiff necks from hugging so many tall folks!

As I said before, from the moment word got out about Steve's death, our house had been overflowing with visitors all day and late into the evenings. They stayed to visit with us, to share our tears and reminisce about our son. However, when the memorial service was over on Monday, we suddenly found ourselves alone with each other. No visitors came any more. It was too quiet, a time to face grief head on and try to put life back together.

For all of us life now became a nightmare!

Vernon vacated his bedroom next to Steve's room in the basement, moving upstairs to sleep with Ruth and sometimes in his sleeping bag on the floor of Tait's room. Being an avid reader, Tait took to reading aloud to Vernon. He often read a long time after Vern fell asleep.

We chose to close up Steve's bedroom in the basement, leaving it as it was at the moment. We just could not bear to touch his things, or to try to decide what to do with them. Roy went in there long enough to put all his clothes into bags. Donna Giles, daughter-in-law of Paul and Pat Giles, took all his clothes to wash for us.

A TIME TO MOURN

The first holiday on the calendar that we had to get through was Thanksgiving, just two weeks after Steve's death. Roy's parents had purchased tickets for the six of us to fly to Phoenix to be with them for the holiday weekend.

I will never forget that flight. It was snowing, all flights were delayed and our plane had to be de-iced three times while we sat on the tarmac for an hour and a half waiting for our plane to have its turn to take off. Flying is not one of my favorite things to do, and being in a sad frame of mind already, I secretly felt that we were sure to crash in the storm! It was a miserable experience to sit there so long with one empty seat among us!

Meals and groceries that so many people had graciously brought to the house for us ran low as the days passed. The first things to run low, were the perishables such as dairy and produce. I made a brief trip to the King Sooper grocery store where I had shopped for ten years. Tina, the checker who rang up my items, asked after the family. I mentioned to her that Steve had died. Shortly after I arrived home, King Sooper delivered a very large, beautiful basket of fruits, cheeses and crackers to our home with a sympathy card tucked in. It was a very touching expression of their kindness.

Another event that we had to get through was our 25th wedding anniversary on December 7th.



To help us celebrate and to show their love for us, the families of Steve's best friends, the Odalen and Wells families and their children, planned a party for us. We met at the home of the Odalen's where Steve had lived for a time after his lung surgery. It was a wonderful party with a lovely meal and gifts, but pictures taken at the time though



smiling, reveal the pain of grief in our faces and the heartache in the faces of our friends.

Even during the worst days of our lives we must earn a living! Having work to do can be a wonderful help in getting through our trials, but it can also be real tough to keep on working when you are burdened down! We had a large printing job for our church and were about half way through it at the time of Steve's death. The deadline on the job had to be met early in December. It was a cookbook with recipes from the ladies at church. It had to be printed, the pages collated in numerical order, holes for binding drilled on the left side of all the pages and the cover, and then each book had to be bound with plastic spiral binders.

As part of the Christmas holiday celebrations at our church, the ladies were having a Christmas dessert and tea with a program of special music and a speaker. The cookbook was to be available at the tea for everyone to purchase as Christmas gifts. Somehow with the help of our employees, our children, and probably a few friends we were able to complete the job in time for the tea.

Arriving at the church for the tea with the boxes of cookbooks, at the last minute I was asked to be a hostess at one of the many round tables set up in the fellowship hall. I would be the person from that table, to go to the kitchen to get the desserts and serve them to each lady at my table.

When I went to get the first couple desserts, I became confused about where my table was. My mind went blank and I could not think at all. I felt confused, sick and panicky. I spoke to someone close to me saying, "I can't do this, I can't do this!" Someone sat me down in a nearby chair and took over what I could not do. I sat all evening through the program unable to think clearly.

I don't know how I got home, if I drove or if they called Roy to come for me. I guess I was on overload with stress. Being the hostess at a table that night was just one thing too many! This episode may have been the first panic attack of the many that I had in the years to come.

At first we did not know what was happening to me when I began having anxiety attacks. A couple of trips to the emergency room explained it. I began taking antidepressant pills, which helped me function a bit better.

To live through a grief is to live through each day with the details that it brings. From time to time those details become more than a person can bear. Time or place may have no bearing on when tears may start or panic take over, as it did for me that night.

Of course, before very long there was another need to get groceries. We were running out of many staples. It was time to do a serious shopping. I went to King Sooper, stopping first at Tina's register to tell her how much we had enjoyed the basket, and thanked her for her part in the store sending it to us. She told me that a fellow named George who worked the produce department had made it up for us. She said that George understood our sorrow because his son had been killed accidentally. I went on my way, filling the grocery cart with all the things on my list.

As I looked over the meat display, I began to feel very shaky. As I looked at each package of meat, I put it back, unable to tell if it would be the right size for my family. Steve had been a huge meat eater. Now I had to downsize the amount to leave out what would be equivalent to his portion. Once again I couldn't think, panic gripped me tighter and tighter. I felt that I would start screaming any second. "Find George", my mind said to me. I took off, almost running toward the produce department. A man was there stacking fruit on a display shelf. "George?", I said. He turned, took one look at me and said, "What is it? Tell me".

I was able to say that my son had died and that we had gotten a basket. He said, yes, he had made it. I don't know what else he may have said, but it calmed me down. The panic lessened. I told him that there had been one fruit in the basket that had been our son's favorite. He said that, yes, he knew which one it was.

How could he know such a thing, I asked. He said he just felt that he knew because it had been his son's favorite too. "It was a pomegranate, wasn't it?" he asked. And it was! We talked for some while longer. He told me about how his fourteen-year-old son had been shot four years earlier by his best friend who was playing with a rifle.

After a bit, I was able to continue with my shopping and even to purchase some meat. I saw George only a few times after that. He was soon transferred to another store and I have not seen him again. I believe that our loving heavenly Father had George there at that store just at that time in both our lives, so he could be a help to me that day. Such is the compassion God has for those who trust in Him, often expressed in small details that mean so much at the moment.

It was about a month after Steve's death, maybe just before Christmas that the coroner came to our home to talk with us. He said that the autopsy on Steve had shown his system was clean of any illegal drugs but there were traces of the chemical that he had sniffed. Sniffed? We thought he drank it as a way to commit suicide. No, he assured us, it was not a suicide. Steve had been sniffing. The coroner said he had seen many accidental teen deaths by sniffing and that this had surely been another one.

Based on Steve's past medical history and after talking with Steve's friends, he told us that he was certain Steve may have been in physical pain that night so that he could not sleep. Steve may have remembered getting a "buzz" when using that chemical in the print shop and had then gone after it to sniff as a means of relaxing so he could sleep.

A big factor in the coroner's thinking, was that Steve had diluted the chemical with water, probably as a way to cut the effect it would have on him. Perhaps with his history of lung problems it had hit him harder than it might have hit someone else, taking his life when Steve had not intended that to happen at all.

This information caused us to experience some sense of relief, but also some mental confusion because now we had to rethink the event and how it had happened. We had to try to imagine all over again just what Steve had been thinking at the time and why and how exactly he might have felt and what he had imagined would happen as he did it. It was sort of like experiencing the whole death over again!

Christmas day was another painful holiday to be gotten through as best as we could. Gifts had been sent for Steve and we had purchased gifts for him, but now none of them were put under the Christmas tree. It was a subdued, unhappy event that we tried to enjoy, but mostly just endured.

Ruth had plans to move into her own apartment after the New Year, so her gifts included things she would need to set up housekeeping, such as a set of dishes. Watching her open those dishes is my only clear memory of that day.

Daily life has a way of forcing you to function, in spite of the pain that grief presses you down with as you draw each breath. I had other children and a husband. They needed clean clothes. They needed meals. They needed to do homework. I did what had to be done each day. It gave a semblance of normalcy in an abnormal time. Our children were suffering as deeply as Roy and I were. All of us were more or less shut up with our own grief, trying not to hurt each other by showing it too much. It was not a good situation.

There were details other than holidays to face along the way. For a long time I hated to go down to the basement, but the office for our print shop was there, so I had to work there. I avoided it as much as possible, working in the office as little as I felt I could get away with. The laundry room is there, so going down to do the washing was unavoidable.

Being down there alone was frightening. I was haunted by the feeling that Steve would come up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder, or jump out from someplace yelling, "Boo!" like the joker that he was.

I was so used to Steve being there with us in the house. I understand now why people sometimes think that a deceased person's spirit lingers in the environment after the death. Realizing how complete the separation of death really is, is a part of the grieving process I think, and that takes time.

It was six months, or more, before we gathered as a family to go through Steve's things. Each of us chose something to keep for ourselves, and the rest went to one of the charity organizations. We kept his camera, a very nice one, but did not use it for a very long time, more than five years. When I did decide to try using it, it still smelled so strongly of him that it was shocking to me. Fascinating, how our personal odor stays with our belongings for so long! A powerful sensual reminder of the person!

The last pictures of Steve that we have were taken at the wedding of his closest friend Jon Odalen who had gotten married a month before Steve's death.

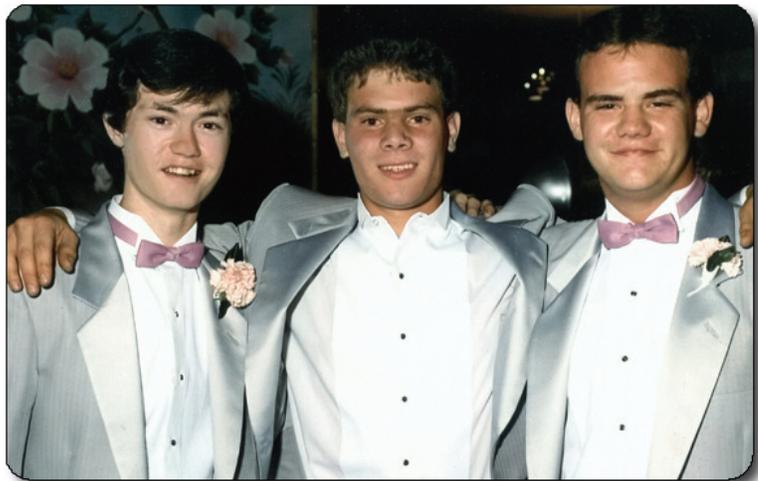
The picture shows Jon with Tim Hall and Steve, who was Jon's Best Man, standing with their arms thrown over each others shoulders. A copy had been made of that photo and put in a lovely frame for our family, but I could not bear to hang it on the wall!

Some months later, a friend saw the photo and scolded me for not hanging it on the wall so I could look at it and remember Steve.

But that was just what I could not bring myself to do. I didn't need anything to remind me of him, I thought of him constantly.

His high school graduation picture had already been on the wall for some time so that I was used to it and it didn't bother me. Something new on the wall would have caught my attention constantly; I just couldn't bear for that to happen.

It was a number of years before I finally hung the photo in a place where we were able to enjoy it.



Stephen Smith, Jon Odalen and Timothy Hall

At some time in the years ahead I came across the following poem:

A CHILD OF MINE - by Edgar A. Guest

**I'll lend you for a little time, a child of mine, He said.
For you to love the while he lives and mourn for when he's dead.
It may be six or seven years, or twenty-two or three,
But will you till I call him back, take good care of him for me?**

**He'll bring his charms to gladden you, and should his stay be brief,
You'll have his lovely memories as solace for your grief.
I cannot promise he will stay, since all from earth return,
But there are lessons taught down there I want this child to learn.**

**I've looked the wide world over in search for teachers true
And from the things that crowd life's lanes, I have selected you.
Now will you give him all your love, nor think the labor vain,
Nor hate Me when I come to call to take him back again?**

**I fancied that I heard them say, "Dear Lord, Thy will be done!
We'll shelter him with tenderness; we'll love him while we may
And for the happiness we've known, forever grateful stay;
But should the angels call for him much sooner than we've planned,
We'll brave the bitter grief that comes and try to understand."**

We survived the Christmas holidays and in January 1988 Ruth moved out of our home, into her first apartment and Vernon took over her room. Looking back, I think the timing was wrong for Ruth to move. She suffered many lonely hours trying to tough it out on her own with her grief for Steve. There were a few times that she phoned in the night in tears, asking me to come to her. Getting up from my bed, I drove over, crawled into bed with her, and held her as we cried ourselves to sleep.



As the months passed, I began to attend a support group. It was a suicide support group called Heartbeat. As I said before, we had thought at first that Steve had taken his life, until the coroner told us he did not believe that was the case. So why did I decide to go to a suicide group? Because another couple from our neighborhood was going to it, and had invited me to go with them. Their daughter and only child had taken her life at the age of 17, just a year and a half before Steve had died.

Steve had known her in school. I had met this couple and their daughter and now had grown closer to them, sharing many of my feelings with them. I found that they understood me and all the thoughts that were running through my mind. I was able to empathize with others in the group who had lost friends and loved ones to suicide. I discovered that death by any means brings about the same sorts of pain and sorrow to those who are left behind.

A number of other things occurred during the first couple years after Steve's death, to complicate things and keep death in front of us.

There were two unexpected deaths within the Grace Chapel church family, where we were attending. A young husband and father committed suicide. Another man was bludgeoned to death while working in his office after hours late one evening.

We did a lot of printing for real estate agents from several companies. There came a day when one of our long-term customers committed suicide. Then some months later another realtor, who had been with us almost since we began in printing, did the same thing!

There never was a time in our lives before or since Steve's death that we were so aware of, and surrounded by, deaths as we were during those first several years. It seemed like life just kept producing more unexpected stress for us over the next couple years.

I will pause here to give you a summary of how our work situation was affected by all of this. The financial headaches at Acorn Press increased over 1988 until we had to end Acorn Press Inc to stop the accumulation of interest assessments by the IRS. We endured a seizure by the IRS of all our equipment. Not being a quitter, Roy got a loan from his dad and went to the IRS auction to purchase enough of the equipment to start up again. We re-incorporated under the name Acorn Printing, Inc.

Most of our customers tried to stay with us, but as the months passed we lost more and more. One of the main problems for the work at the time was that every time Roy worked on a job he would come across Steve's handwriting on earlier work orders. It was very hard for him to keep on working each time he encountered that and deadlines were not being met.

After a time Roy just needed to rest from doing the sound system for Grace Chapel. We left there after ten years, and began to attend Cherry Hills Community Church, a mega church. It was a place where we could be somewhat anonymous and just sit. We needed space to be quiet and think and not have to answer any questions people might ask about how we were.

Letting the printing die slowly, Roy took a job with a security company, working as a security guard for a number of years. This job was one with no stress attached. After driving himself night and day for years, Roy really needed an absence of stress! Eventually in 1998 he took tests for and was hired by Lucent Technologies, which later spun off Avaya, Inc. He worked there for the next eleven years using computer remote access to troubleshoot and repair the Avaya phone systems.

Getting back now to what was going on in my heart, God had always been my rescuer, my friend. He had done marvelous things for me. I had called to Him and He had answered me, showing me some of the great and mighty things that Jeremiah 33 verse 3 speaks about. He had been my confidant, my strengthener, my guide. Now suddenly He was different. Or so I thought! What I should have understood by that time in my Christian life is that God is not a Candy Man, who promises only lovely things to us in this life. In fact Jesus said, "In this life you shall have tribulation".

God had become a sort of "Humpty Dumpty" to me! He had fallen off the "wall" and lay all smashed to bits on the ground. I could no longer understand Him, I was afraid I would not ever get Him "together" again. And fearful that if I did, what would become of ME if He should fall off that "wall" again! Would I ever be able to arrive at a concept of God that was not subject to crumbling under the pressures of what earthly life might throw at me in the future, of which I was now, terrified?

My coping abilities, if you want to call it that, had all broken apart into nothingness. I was hurt and angry. I was now jealous of other Christians, whose lives seemed so perfect from my viewpoint. They would stand around after church talking about things that I now thought of as minor trivia, but what were in fact the things I had previously talked about with them. Such as what to fix for dinner, where they were going on vacation, the wonderful things their beautiful children were doing!

I couldn't take it. I pulled away socially. I couldn't relate to what they talked about as problems in their lives. My heart screamed, IF YOU ONLY KNEW WHAT REAL TROUBLE IS! Several times I got up and walked out of church because I wanted to scream the same words to the pastor as he preached about how God comforts and helps us in our troubles.

I had read stories of suffering and death, persecution and trials. But nothing had prepared me for this loss of Stephen. After many years, I can look back now and know that God had not become Humpty Dumpty, I had! I was grieving more than the loss of a very dear son. I was grieving the loss of the concept of God that I had created in my mind, and whom I thought I had come to understand.

Over the months, I felt isolated from people around me by the pain inside and the changes within our whole family. I became so sad, crying whenever I could get some privacy. In the shower was a good place; no one would interrupt me there. After the family was all sleeping I would often get out of bed, go to the dark living room or out to the back yard to cry and ask my questions of God. Sometimes the grief was so heavy; I would slide to the floor and lay prostrated pouring out my heart's pains to God. But the heaven was silent. It was as if my words, echoed back to me, not rising any higher than the ceiling or the clouds. Over and over I asked why. How had we failed? Why didn't you stop him, God?

Some people leave the church, turning their backs on God and their Christian faith at a time like this, why didn't I? I don't think I ever really considered that an option for myself. I continued to go to church to worship God with others because, whatever He might really be like, God is worthy of my worship just because He IS. Even if I don't like Him very much, worshipping God whom I could not understand was better than not worshipping God at all.

Mankind in general tries to make God accountable to itself. We think that God is like us. That He does things the way we do things. I would not have let Stephen do what he did, if I had known he was doing it. Why did God let him? Did God stand next to Stephen with His hands in His pockets and do nothing? I was so confused and angry! The inner turmoil wore heavily on me.

THE FINAL GOOD BYE



Now we are five

As the months dragged along, we began to feel uneasy about not yet having taken Steve's ashes up to Loveland Pass in the Rocky Mountains to scatter them at the Continental Divide. Trying to decide on a date when we would all be available, plus discerning whether all of us were ready mentally to face doing it. Finally, we decided to go ahead and do it before the snows of winter hit the mountains again. We chose a day close to what would have been Steve's twentieth birthday in August 1988.

It was a very emotional experience for all of us. We were all dreading the action of doing it, as well as dreading the feelings that would arise within us. We had chosen the top of the Continental Divide on old Highway 6 that by-passes Eisenhower Tunnel. It is a spot that overlooks Loveland ski area and Arapahoe Basin ski area, both of which were places our boys had skied.

While working at Keystone ski resort, Steve and other guys had driven up to the Divide and skied down toward A-Basin on their days off from work. It is the spot where my cousin Gini and I had played in the snow 27 years before when we had traveled across the country by car with her parents.

When we got to the Divide, we felt confused and hesitant. Roy was able to think clearly enough to lead us all out into the grass away from the well-worn path. There on the mountainside he chose a spot. It is a good sitting place with a magnificent view. Roy said some words and we prayed. I do not remember if any of the rest of us said anything. Tears were shed, and no doubt all of us wished we were not there at all.

As the years have passed, the site has become very precious to each of us. We visit there almost every summer after the snows have melted off. The ashes being more like grit than fine ash, we are still able to find traces of them as of the time of this writing. Snow run-off, chipmunk and insect activity, and time are doing their work to slowly erase them, but this is all right because all of us know where the site is. We do not need a headstone.

ON THE ROAD

Ten months after Steve's death, September 1988, my parents made a trip back to New England to attend mother's 50th high school reunion. She had never been back to her childhood home since she went west after World War II. She planned to see some cousins, all that were left still living of her family, and wanted very much for me to go along. So I did. I am sorry now to admit that it was a sort of escapism on my part. It would release me from the daily grind and get me away from the sadness that seemed to hang over our home constantly. Actually, I had been secretly thinking about running away, but couldn't figure out how to do it without inflicting more pain on my family. Some way, something had to give! Here now was a chance to at least change my circumstances for a while. So I went with my parents on the trip and my family suffered badly without me there to coordinate the details of daily life!

We traveled for nearly a month in their large motor home. We saw so much of this country and I enjoyed it very much. We covered a lot of miles and I got a lot of naps along the way. No doubt I needed the extra sleep.

Our route took us through South Dakota to Mt Rushmore; North Dakota and Minnesota to the little town of Isle on Mille Lacs Lake where Dad was born and the home they had lived in. No family lived there any more so we visited the cemetery in Malmo to see graves of his ancestors. Then onward through Ohio and Indiana; Pennsylvania and New York to Niagara Falls; then north through Vermont and New Hampshire; and east through Maine to the small town of Machias where Mom had spent summers as a girl. No family was left there anymore so we visited the cemetery and she pointed out the houses where her relatives had lived.

Following that we traveled south to Braintree near Boston, where both my Mother and Father had grown up and attended high school, then on to Cape Cod where her high school reunion was held in Falmouth. That was an exciting weekend for her, seeing several old friends! Afterward, we went through Rhode Island and Connecticut, then New Jersey, Washington DC, across Chesapeake Bay by way of the under water tunnel, and finally to Virginia Beach, VA.

As the weeks of travel passed, I realized that I had slipped back into the role of the daughter. The emotional tensions that had been in the house when I was growing up were still there! I found myself trying hard not to say anything that would "rock the boat". I began to miss my own home and family more and more as the miles passed under our wheels. I realized that I could never leave my family; it would not only break their hearts but mine as well. Running was not an option as a means to get through grief!

More than anything else, I now wanted to be home! Rather than take a plane immediately however, I stuck it out a bit longer, so that I could meet one more of mother's cousins who lived in Virginia Beach. After a couple days there, I finally took a plane home. Dad said later that they had been amazed I stayed with them as long as I did. But my parents had not known all the battles being waged in my heart and mind as we traveled. God was teaching me things I needed desperately to understand about the life of our family and my place in our family group.

It was good to return home! I was glad to be there again, but at the same time, the grief and pain were still there. None of us had "gotten over" our loss of Steve. We were to discover that you do not "get over" such a loss. You learn to live in spite of it, just by living and healing coming bit by bit into your soul from God who loves to bless us. The healing takes time, something we wish were not true. We long for it to happen quickly, "OH, PLEASE!", even overnight! But such is not the case.

A TIME OF FEAR

Sometime in late 1988 Tait, our second son, developed grand mal seizures at about age 15.

We first became aware of it when Vernon slept in Tait's room one night for a "sleep over". He was awakened by a banging sound caused by Tait hitting his head on a metal desk that stood against the head of his bed. Vernon came running into our bedroom to wake us saying, "Something is wrong with Tait!". As soon as I saw how Tait was thrashing in the bed, I thought it might be a seizure. We called 9-1-1.



Tait was taken to the hospital for tests, which showed a little bit of extra brain wave activity but nothing else. I do not remember being given any real information about his condition, or any medication being prescribed or being advised what to do to prevent any more from occurring.

Tait was always a very quiet child. He let others talk for him. He did not raise his hand to answer questions in school, even though he was able to do the schoolwork easily enough. Tait was not comfortable in groups nor did he socialize easily. His best friend was his brother Vernon, but with so many boys living on our street and spending so much time at our house he was never alone for long. Ruth too had friends who came over a lot. Our home was hardly ever quiet for long.

More than a year had passed. How could it be that Steve had been gone for so long already! So quickly, and yet so slowly had the months dragged by, full of pain and misery. It was in January of the new year of 1989 and now we discovered a very serious problem.

Stephen had been the older brother, teaching the younger boys so many things, sticking up for them if they were bullied by any bigger boys at the school bus stop. Now suddenly Tait, who was quiet and gentle by nature, had become the older brother. His “place” in the family had been altered by Steve’s death. This was a thing we had not thought about as a possible complication for Tait.



The guys take up archery

One evening in January 1989, I went into Tait’s bedroom to find out how he was doing on homework. He was sitting at his desk with books open. The cuff of his long sleeved shirt was unbuttoned, allowing his sleeve to slip down, away from his hand as he leaned on his elbow. There was a red line on his wrist. A cold terror gripped my heart as I asked him, “What have you been doing to your wrist?” He admitted to experimenting with slitting his wrists, saying that he missed Steve and wanted to go see him.

Tait had been carrying a knife to school in his backpack for several weeks. He had tried several times to cut his wrists in the boy’s restroom after school was dismissed. It had hurt more than he had thought it would so he had not completed the act. Thank you God!!

This discovery put us into a whole new kind of horror. All of us embarked now upon a road of counseling. Tait was hospitalized for three weeks, until the insurance ran out and he was discharged. He was better for a couple months but then began to slowly slide back down into depression again.



Eventually, he was taken to the Colorado State Hospital in Pueblo where he stayed for five months. We visited him there every weekend and were in family counseling sessions there. After some time, he was allowed out on short passes for a few hours. Later he was allowed weekend passes to come home. I do not remember if he had any seizures while in the hospital. It seems like we never talked about any during counseling.

There were many things to learn during all these months, for each of us in our family. I will not speak for my husband nor my children about what they learned. Those things are theirs to tell. What I will say is this. In counseling we began to learn to talk more openly as a family about everything instead of keeping so much to ourselves.

Speaking only for myself, I was learning that I could not guarantee my own faithfulness to God as a strong Christian, or that I would not doubt His purposes in my life. I was being reduced to my true weakness, forced to know myself. All my strength of will, all my determination, all my efforts at spiritual growth and private worship as a means to achieve comfort and mental peace were without result. My soul felt like it was being devoured.

For the first time in my life I realized the reality of what God meant when He wrote that Satan is like a lion seeking whom he may devour, as in First Peter chapter 5 verse 8. I knew I was not in danger of losing my salvation because of the promises in the Bible about this for those who put their faith in the death of Jesus on our behalf personally and individually. But I felt very vulnerable and became glaringly aware of my personal spiritual weakness as I doubted God’s goodness. I felt like I did not know Him any more. I lived in fear of what Satan might be able to cause to happen next in our family. It is very hard to keep on living with such terrible fear filling your mind day and night!

Now it seemed that in a long ago and far away past I had known God well, that I had been a strong Christian. Now I was faced with my own spiritual weaknesses in a way I had never been faced with them before. I felt that Satan was a very real and present enemy who was taking advantage of the pain in my life. What does a lion do? It picks out the weak and sickly, it stalks striking terror into the heart of its prey, and then attacks viciously to tear, mutilate and devour.

Ephesians chapter 6 verses 10 through 16 say that Satan has a variety of methods that he uses against us. I believe he hates those who love God, and does all he can to cause us to doubt God's character of love, His care for us and His faithfulness to us. I had a very keen sense that Satan wanted to destroy my personal faith and was taking advantage of the grief and events in our family to attempt to do it.

In the scripture our loving God provides us the way to overcome the methods and strength of this enemy of our souls.

In Second Corinthians chapter 2 and verse 11, we are told not to be ignorant of his devices so that he cannot take advantage of our circumstances. James chapter 4 verse 7 tells us to resist him and he will flee from us. These are "tools" for spiritual battles and they have been given to us in the Word of God.

Even so, in our human frailty, our strength to "use" the tools may be lacking. What to do for that?

I recognized that the happiness and joy I had known thus far in my Christian experience had been destroyed. I was filled with sadness and terror of what might happen next. What if another of our children died? Surely I would lose my mind; I could not endure such a thing again! A mother's concern for her children, which is natural, became obsessive to me.

Somehow I had to come away from these inner horrors of fear but knew I could not unless God Himself brought me away from them. There was no strength within me to rid myself of them. I could not manufacture any peace of mind for myself. My soul was in bondage to my imagination!

Fears would grip me at the sound of an ambulance. Driving the car alone, I would have to pull off the road to avoid causing an accident because of bursting into tears. Sudden uncontrollable weeping would grip me in the shower or anyplace where I was alone. Church was the worst place because there I could not get away; there was no place to go for privacy! I would retreat to the car to cry.

I would like to include here a quote from a book I read a number of years later. The author says so many things that put into words much of what went on in my mind and soul during the first couple years following Steve's death. In the following quote the author tells of Mee-Yan, another woman who grieved for her two lost children.

"When we're not sure about God—about his goodness, his love, or his control over our circumstances—when we begin to believe our lives are meaningless and beyond hope, when we lose the energy or the will to face another day, unbelief has set in. It confronts us every day in a hundred different ways.

It was the hidden battle Mee-Yan faced daily as she went about her business and attended to family matters. It assaulted her openly as she wept beside two small graves in an English churchyard.

Unbelief never travels alone but brings bitterness and other sins of the heart. It exposes us to all sorts of temptations, gives advantage unto all disheartening, weakening, discouraging considerations, and clogs and hinders us in our constant course of obedience. Like the bowler's lead pin, it has the power to make a lot of other things in our lives topple over. Unbelief drains us of hope and undermines our courage at the very moment we need it most. When this happens, it is time to shed everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."

- from "When Life and Beliefs Collide", by Carolyn Custis James.

I had been reading in the Old Testament books of Job and Psalms for a while prior to Steve's death, using a red pen to note verses that seemed to describe depression. I had been in a mild state of depression to some extent even then because of the "on-goingness" of Steve's illnesses and our business troubles. It was amazing to discover how exactly the inner feelings of depression are described in the Bible, and how the Bible hits the nail right on the head when you are in the midst of that state.

I now went back to my "tool", the Word of God, to those verses about depression in Job and Psalms that I had previously underlined in red. I felt again the personal nature of them. Gradually the Word of God put within me a new assurance that God knows intimately my sufferings and that He could and would somehow bring me slowly through the darkness of depression and into a bright, new day of hope and joyfulness.

Slowly my prayers began to take on a different format. I began to ask God to restore to me the joy of His salvation, an expression that is found in Psalm 51 verse 12.

It became a time for me to examine my heart carefully and admit that I was full of doubt, anger, and a stubborn refusal to accept what cannot be changed. I did not like being "broken" like Humpty Dumpty. I wanted desperately to be whole and live in joyfulness.

In John 16 verse 24 Jesus is quoted as saying that we need only to ask and our joy will be made full! My life lacked joy in the worst way, but I wanted it!

During this process of serious introspection, I gradually came to appreciate in a very real sense, what it means to be "carried". I had never much liked the Footprints poem; it seemed maudlin, weak and sentimental. Our faith as believers in Christ, is supposed to stand on truth and wisdom drawn from the scriptures. Not on feelings of any sort! But as time crept along I began to have a growing sense that I was indeed being carried! Saying I believed this or that about God or any of His ways, was not enough to take me through the fears, terrors and sorrows that surrounded me at this time in life. I needed to be carried!

FOOTPRINTS - version by Carolyn Carty

**One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
One belonging to him and the other to the LORD.**

**When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand.
He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints.
He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times of his life.**

**This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it,
"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life
there is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me".**

**The LORD replied, "My precious, precious child. I love you and I would never leave you!
During your times of trial and suffering when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you".**

As I pondered how helpless and vulnerable I was I understood that God Himself was the One Who was sustaining me! Just as the poem says, that the one set of footprints in the sand truly were His, rather than my own. I truly came to understand what I had only thought I understood before, that God is the One Who is faithful to me, not the other way around. Being carried is truly a gift of mercy from our God!

At one point, I went out and purchased a new Bible, a different version than the King James that I had always used. Maybe it would help me to read in an updated English version, without the underlining and notes that I had put in the old one over the years. To start from scratch all over again, with no pre-conceived ideas or thoughts jotted down next to any verse.

That lasted for a time, but eventually I gravitated back to my old King James Bible. Coming back to it was like coming home. Now I am over the age of 60. It is torn and the pages are dog-eared. There are pen markings from my small children who scribbled on it while sitting beside me during church. I handle it gently; afraid it will not last the 20 or so years that I may have left in this life. It is impossible for me to leave it for another version for very long!

It was while these things were going on within me that we returned to Holly Hills Bible Church, where we had attended for the first ten years of living in Colorado. We had maintained some contact with folks there so it was like returning home to be among them again. We had truly missed them, and the wonderful depth of teaching from the Word of God that takes place there.

Things that I had read in the Bible over the years but never fully understood before now became alive to me. One is Philippians 4 verses 6 to 8 which says that we need to purposefully turn our minds toward things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report; anything that is virtuous, anything that is praise worthy. These are the things our minds should dwell upon if we want to have good mental health and be free of depression.

However, it can be very hard to come up with such good things to think about when we are in a really tough spiritual battle! The verse is describing the character of Jesus Christ, which we can read about in scripture and thus focus our minds upon these good things. We cannot control, and often cannot change the circumstances that come into our lives. But we can control what we fill our minds with. It is all about our mental focus, and mine had for too long been very negative.

Christians are fond of I Corinthians chapter 10 verse 13 which says, “there has no (trial) taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be (tested) above that ye are able; but will with the (trial) also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” What a wonderful promise this is! But no where does it say that God will change the circumstances!

The circumstances of a death cannot be changed. Many other kinds of circumstances cannot be changed either. So what then, is the way of escape? I believe from my experience that the way of escape is God Himself. What He gives to the believer is a relationship with Himself; an intimacy of the spirit, mind and soul. He loves us so much more than we realize or are willing to accept. Thus we cannot understand that He can Himself be the escape from pain that we seek.

Instead we look for a tangible change in our circumstances but usually there is none. When I discovered the magnitude of the escape from pain that an intimate relationship with God gives me, THAT was the real healer of my broken heart and cure for my depression. Praise God, I can sing again!

Dear Reader, whoever you may be, if you are saying I was very weak, not fully understanding what the Word of God says to us, not trusting God as well as I should have, especially for someone who had been a Christian more than 30 years by that time! You are right. Yet perhaps someone who is reading this will one day find themselves in an unbearable place, a place that has no light, no safety, and no answers to some terror that has come into life. It is for that person that I open my heart and reveal my weakness.

Please do not stop reading, for the story is not done yet by any means!!

A wonderful truth in the Word of God became clear to me now! Romans chapter 6 verse 11 tells us to do something, “...reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

“Reckon”, what IS that? To consider a thing to be true, to rely upon it, to trust it. When the Word of God tells me something about Him, or about me, I am to consider it true and rely upon its truth! This is another “tool”, a major “tool”!

This is the spiritual watershed, the great turning point in the life of the growing believer.

Knowing and counting upon the fact that he is “alive unto God in Jesus Christ”

— that he is free to turn his full affection and faith upon the risen Lord Jesus

— in Whom he is; yes, with Him where He is before the Father in glory.

- from “Imag-ination 14”, page 29 by Miles J. Stanford

Alive to God! Free to turn my full affection and faith upon the risen Lord Jesus! Nothing between us, not even the sin of doubting Him can destroy that!

Dead to sin, the fact of it, the consequences of it, none of this can destroy what He has done for me and within me!

“...in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- from Romans 8:37-39.

Reckon!! And depression flees!

THE LOVE OF GOD – by F. M. Lehman

**The love of God is greater far Than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star, And reaches to the lowest hell.
The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled, And pardoned from his sin.**

**Could we with ink the ocean fill, And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill, And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Tho' stretched from sky to sky.**

**Oh, love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure The saints' and angels' song.**