

Heart Lessons

By Miriam Jerome

Heart Lessons

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*Dedicated to my Lord,
my sons and their families.
Because of them my heart is still beating!*

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January 1997

The air felt cold and heavy as I trudged through the snow to where my husband's ashes lay. It was two and a half years since Dan's death, and I came not so much to talk to him, but to God. I needed to fulfill a decision I had made before Him in the previous week. I dug through the snow, uncovered the marker, and carefully laid a dozen red carnations beside it. Through blurred eyes, I saw the brilliant red against the pristine white. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow." (Isaiah 1:18). I knew that in his last hours Dan had come somehow to know and accept the grace of God – a grace greater than sin and its consequences. Now I was in need of that same certainty of grace. So as I lay the flowers down I began singing, "Blessed be the name of the Lord, who gives and takes away..."

The Unthinkable

I grew up as the daughter of a pastor in a home that overflowed in ministry. I dreamed of always serving God and having a home filled with the love of Jesus. When I met Dan at Houghton College, I thought my dreams had begun to come true. We dated for three years and married a month after we graduated. We wanted to minister to others and were thrilled when God led us to serve as missionaries in Japan. Dan taught in a Christian school there and I poured my heart into our marriage, our four sons, and into many foster children who passed through our home. God had granted my heart's desire; my cup overflowed.

But in the spring of 1990, a slow unraveling of our lives began. I was in the U.S. for my oldest son's wedding when I received a call from a hospital in Tokyo saying that Dan was seriously ill with meningitis. After the wedding, I rushed from the airport in Japan

straight to the hospital. Dan looked like he was dying. He regained some strength but the doctors were still concerned. After further testing, the doctor quietly told me that Dan was HIV positive. Within hours, I too was rushed off for blood tests.

The next day was our twenty-second wedding anniversary. As I faced Dan, I was stunned as he revealed secrets from his childhood. When his older brother, David, was ten or eleven years old, his piano teacher began molesting him. David, in turn, began molesting Dan. He repeatedly warned Dan that if he told anyone, he would drop dead. Ironically, five years later, David was giving a piano recital and suddenly died of a ruptured pancreas. Fearing that David's death was related to their dark secret, Dan lived with an intense fear of death. For years, he believed his life depended on never revealing the truth. This, along with his feelings of anger and shame, gave Satan a foothold in

his life and set him on a path of self-destructive behavior.

The pain of his secret intensified over the years and Dan tried to erase it by being outgoing and striving for perfection. But, this didn't work. Eventually, he began to seek out relationships with men. There were no emotions involved or faces remembered. It was a form of escape and relief from pain – a sexual addiction. Despite his secret life, I felt Dan loved me very much. Later, I often wondered how I had been so deceived, why I hadn't picked up on any signals, why our marriage seemed so solid and healthy. Now I realize that this can be true in cases of sexual addiction.

The doctor said Dan had only two months to live. It was a sad time, but the first mark of God's mercy and grace was that neither I nor my children tested positive for HIV. But, a blur of decision-making began...who to tell and how to tell them, when to leave,

what to pack, where to go – and what about finances and housing? We sorted through years of possessions, closed down the ministry, and said our goodbyes. The boys did not want to leave and were not cooperative. Loving friends helped as best they could. We arrived in the States numb and devastated. Within a week, Dan was admitted to a hospital for psychiatric care. I had never bought a house or car, or made decisions about where to live, how to support ourselves or how to pay hospital bills. I felt very alone. We gathered our immediate and extended family together and told them the truth about his illness. When we told our two oldest sons, they could scarcely comprehend – and I had no way of easing their pain.

Defying the doctor's predictions, Dan's condition stabilized and we both found part-time jobs. There was still a great deal of stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and we felt we were carrying the heaviest of secrets. To prepare for the

future, I returned to school to earn a Master's degree. There were times when the only way I sensed that God was still with us was through His provision of people who cared and helped. I had never been in a place of such utter helplessness and dependence on Him. His Word became very precious as I held very tightly onto Psalm 112:7, "He will have no fear of bad news. His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord."

For the next four years, I experienced the extremes of almost every emotion possible. I felt betrayed. I grieved for the loss of our life in Japan, our friends and ministry there. I was filled with terror of the future and felt shame for the secrets. I had nightmares and each day was an exercise in survival.

Dan was often hospitalized and with each illness grew weaker. In June of 1994, the day after our second son's wedding, Dan gathered our family together to say goodbye. He told us he

was finally able to accept forgiveness from us and from God, but would never be able to forgive himself. Two weeks later, his temperature escalated and his mind began to go. As I sat next to him and swabbed his lips with wet cotton, I pleaded, “Dan, please forgive yourself.” On July 10th, at 2:15 in the morning, he took his final breath. There was a smile and a miraculous light on his face when he saw Jesus. In death, he experienced the truth that there is no evil that God can’t forgive and transform. I knew that Dan had seen Jesus and heard Him say, “You’re forgiven.” God’s amazing grace.

Through the Valley

I thought that when Dan died, life would slowly return to normal. But I didn't realize how deeply my foundations had been shaken. I had always had an optimistic personality, but now I became haunted by fear. Each day I expected that another tragedy might strike. I feared each routine HIV test would be positive. There was also an intense, unacknowledged anger. It was as though both Dan and God had betrayed me. I had trusted God and felt He had abandoned me. I had loved and served Him faithfully and with real joy, but it seemed as though He had turned His back.

A year later I was engulfed with debilitating fears and was barely eating. Depression and suicidal thoughts increased. My sons, my pastor and my counselor intervened, wanting my consent to be hospitalized. But I said, "No way, I'm fine." My sons

replied, “We watched our dad die before our eyes and now we are watching you die.” I conceded and agreed to intensive outpatient care.

It took time, work and the prayers of family and friends to get me to Dan’s graveside that wintry January day in 1997. The song, “Blessed be the name of the Lord” wasn’t a song I sing daily. Recovery is not a linear process. As I inched forward, a small stress, a misspoken word, or a flash of memory flung me back down into a pit. But the healing continued. At times God pierced my heart through a Sunday School lesson, the words of a friend or the chapter of a book. At other times, He allowed me, surprisingly, to be His instrument in the healing of others. He demonstrated the truth that nothing He allowed to happen in my life would be wasted.

It is now over a decade since Dan’s death and there have been miracles far greater than our testing negative for

HIV. There was the miraculous light on Dan's face when he saw Jesus and experienced the truth that there is no evil that God can't forgive and transform. There were miracles of God's faithfulness and provision for our family. And, I have been able to move on. Satan's intent was to wreak havoc in my life. He wanted to "steal, kill and destroy" (Jn. 10:10). But "where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20). The evidence of His grace has been seen not only by me, but by those who are closest to me. The Lord has brought healing in my life. I have seen the evidence of God's promises in many areas. He has bound up my broken heart, given me joy instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of despair.

Isaiah 61 describes a sinful and broken people in the process of restoration. God promises that they will grow to be "oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendor...All who see them will

acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.”

Heart Lessons Revisited

September 2014

The weather is quite different than when I visited Dan's gravesite in January 1997. Now, 20 years since his death, I am here again. This time I bring fall flowers to lay next to his marker. The sign of change, from brilliant fall colors to later dark dead leaves. Death is like that but we cannot remain there. Life goes on and life must be lived to the fullest.

“O my child, you have crossed a bridge, reach not back...it is waiting for you to step forward and receive...I will send you no place as I have gone before.” -Francis Roberts

“No Place as I Have Gone Before”

The Lord has gone before me on this road less travelled. After the news on our 22nd wedding anniversary that Dan was HIV+ from a sexual addiction, my life fell apart. I knew nothing about his secret lifestyle. But here I am, now able to allow this devastating situation to bring honor and glory to Him, by the grace of God. Grace carried me through the valley and God's grace has been with me as I travel up the mountain.

The area around the marker is green. In 1997, I couldn't find it under the snow. The green has come, ministry has returned. I cannot let my old identity stand in the way of transition. The value of being Dan's wife and missionary in Japan has been replaced. My significance now is a child of Our Father, widow and empty nester. The joy of the Lord is my strength as I

travel and live in a place where I can minister to women, couples and children. God is good.

*For my torn and bleeding
heart:*

*Please dear Lord
Take the place
Of what You've taken away.
I cannot survive
I cannot endure
Unless You grant this request.*

-taken from The One Year
Book of Bible Promises and
Writings (May 27), Ruth
Harms Calkin

Transitions

As I traveled from South Carolina to Michigan recently, I was reminded of another anniversary. October is the month that my Mother died 10 years ago. She was a pillar of strength, had an incredible relationship with the Lord and me, and was gifted with amazing discernment. There were many words of her wisdom that are etched in my mind. When I was in an outpatient hospital for psychiatric care seeking to get rid of my pent-up anger, I thought, my Mom must have been outraged towards Dan. Her response was, "I stayed awake for two nights seeking the Lord after I heard about Dan's secret lifestyle. The Lord told me this was not just about Miriam but also about Dan. I knew that he could become more of the person I wanted him to be with Miriam by his side." Yes, Lord, yes.

Another situation was in the fall of 1994, Aaron, my second oldest son had gotten married in June, Dan had died in July and my third son, Ethan was off to college. I was sitting by myself at Nathan's (my fourth son) first football game of the season. I was crying uncontrollably. I called my Mom when I got home and her godly response was, "Would you wish any of them to come back from where they are - marriage, Heaven or college?" Again my Mom opened my eyes to truth.

"It is important for us to grieve our losses. It is the only honest thing to do. For in grieving we admit the truth: We lost something very dear, and it hurt us very much. Tears are healing. They help to open

*and cleanse the wound...
You are loved. You are not
alone. God does care.”*

-The Sacred Romance
Workbook and Journal, by
John Eldredge, pp.45, 47

It was very traumatic when I started traveling by myself. I did not like being alone and was petrified at the idea of making plans and many decisions on my own. Before each trip God always brings before me the verse from Joshua 1:9, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (ESV)

Every transition begins with an ending.
My passion is to be His instrument in

the healing of others. He demonstrated the truth that nothing He allows to happen in my life would be wasted.

Along the way, I have met many people living through much pain and great healing, going through many transitions, many endings. The beginnings are when people decide to process the secrets in their lives, help them to find freedom in their heart and soul and come to wholeness physically, emotionally and spiritually. I want to provide comfort and hope to others who are in the raw stages of pain. Selwyn Hughes writes, "But anything buried in our subconscious is never buried dead, it is buried alive." These lies must be rooted out and processed. Only when we face reality can we overcome it. In order to do this, we need to be still and hear from the Lord. "The Lord will fight

for you, you need only to be still.”
(Exodus 14:14, NIV)

One of the lies that I had to work through was that I kept asking God, “Why me?” It was a huge transition for me when I was able to change my thinking to “Why not me?” I wanted to thrive and not just survive, move from victim to agent. Again, Selwyn Hughes writes, “His wisdom will bring from every trial that comes our way something that will enrich our character and make us more like Jesus Christ. Infinite power is ruled by infinite wisdom.” Continuing on with Selwyn Hughes' quote....“when we have no experience of pain, it is rather hard to experience joy!”

As I left the cemetery, I looked at the flowers. I was going to leave them and then decided not to but I noticed a red carnation. I thought that was rather

unusual in a fall arrangement. Then I realized there were 6 red carnations, representing our nuclear family. I laid them down and was reminded of the song I sang the last time I visited Dan's grave, "Blessed Be the Name of the Lord!" while laying the red carnations on the snow. This time, another song spoke powerfully to me as it played on the radio as I left the cemetery: "Whatever tomorrow brings, we won't be shaken."

*Whatever will come our way,
Through Fire or Pouring Rain,
We won't be shaken,
No we won't be shaken
Whatever tomorrow brings,
Together we'll rise and see,
That we won't be shaken,
No we won't be shaken
-song by Building 429*

Stones of Remembrance

In The Circle Maker, Matt Batterson writes, “I go back to places that remind me of God's faithfulness because they renew my faith.” On New Year’s Day, January 2015, I wrote *Stones of Remembrances*.

By the grace of God, I loved being a wife, mom, foster mom and missionary in Japan.

By the grace of God, I was able to return to the States, bought a home and second hand cars, tried to be the best wife and mom I could. Not always pleased with the way I acted and reacted.

By the grace of God, while in severe depression I was able to keep going, got my master's degree, worked part-time as director of a crisis phone line while dealing with my crisis at home in caring for my husband and sorting out my many different emotions!

By the grace of God, I was able to release my husband to my Lord and watched him die before my eyes, continued being a mom and grandma although I was not emotionally healthy.

By the grace of God, the family and I decided that it was time to go public with

our tragedy, wanting to give glory to God that we had made it through this crisis, but still limping.

By the grace of God, the Lord brought healing in my life, evidence of God's promises of process and restoration.

By the grace of God, I was able to write an article, "Heart Lessons," and started ministering to women in the States and overseas.

These Stones of Remembrances are not about me but about how my Lord has been so faithful to me. He has supplied my needs

over and over again. I am thankful that He is my Father and I am so thankful for my family that is there for me.

It can be well with my and other souls even when great pain is a part of our lives. I pray that you can make the courageous choice to process your pain so that you can encourage and not damage those around you. The Lord speaks to us in deep ways and healing can take place. God's grace and provision will be there for you.

In the End

God, it is not always easy

To know and do Your will.

But of this I am wholly convinced:

In the end, nothing else matters.

-Calkins, December 18

“I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you.”—Proverbs 3:5-6, LAB

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<http://thriveconnection.com/2005/01/01/heart-lessons/>

It has also been published as “Lessons for the Heart” in Reach Out Columbia, editor Anne Buck, (Vol 2, Issue 1: January 2006)

www.reachoutcolumbia.com.

This current version was formatted and edited by Liz Stuart.

Miriam wants to help women whose husbands or loved ones are struggling with sexual addictions and grief and loss. You may contact Miriam at miriamjerome@gmail.com.

Suggested Reading for Sexual Addictions:

An Affair of the Mind, by Laurie Hall, 1996, Focus on the Family Publishing. *One woman's courageous battle to salvage her family from the devastation of pornography.*

Every Heart Restored, by Fred and Brenda Stoeker, Stephen Arterburn, Mike Yorkey, 2010, WaterBrook Press. *A wife's guide to healing in the wake of a husband's sexual sin.*

Living with Your Husband's Secret Wars, by Marsha Means, 1999, Revell.

Don't Call It Love: Recovery from Sexual Addiction, by Patrick Carnes, Ph.D., 1992, Bantam Publishers.

The Sexual Man, by Archibald D. Hart, 1995, Thomas Nelson Publishing. *A book which provides a psychologically sound and biblically respectful view of what men secretly think and feel about important sexual issues.*

Restoring the Fallen, by Earl & Sandy Wilson, Paul & Virginia Friesen, Larry & Nancy Paulson, 1997, InterVarsity Press.

Recommended Websites:

Character that Counts. This website offers an excellent article on pornography:

www.characterthatcounts.com

Website that blocks pornography:

www.bsecure.com

Suggested Reading for Healing from Grief and Loss:

The Circle Maker, by Mark Batterson, 2011, Zondervan.

Draw The Circle, by Mark Batterson, 2012, Zondervan.

The Divine Embrace, by Ken Gire, 2003, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Calm My Anxious Heart, by Linda Dillow, 1998, NavPress Publishing Group.

