

Relinquishing the Burden

by Carolyn McKinnon

2003 Senior Professional Fellows Class

Carolyn McKinnon is a 2003 C.S. Lewis Fellow, Senior Professional Women track. The following is a reflection paper written in response to one of the Fellows' reading assignments on the topic of suffering. In 1998, Carolyn's husband Don died after a one-year battle with cancer that began as a brain tumor. He was 50 years old, and Carolyn and Don had been married for 20 years and had two children, then aged 17 and 15. Just before Don's diagnosis of cancer, their youngest child suffered a serious head injury from a fall and then in a separate accident a year later suffered a ruptured spleen and came very close to death.

I initially thought the reading assignment on suffering would be a slam-dunk. After all, I'd read countless books on suffering, including C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* several times. But as the Lord so often does, He had further growth in mind.

I found myself digging deeper than ever with each book. Memories from the past six years washed over me, with healing insights coming as I continued to read. I had not anticipated that this year in the Fellows Program would initiate a process of letting go, of relinquishing to the Lord this last stronghold of feeling sorry for my situation and myself.

Even though I had done some of the hardest parts of grieving, I still clung to my sorrow, not unlike a dieter who has reached that plateau of stubbornly holding onto those last familiar pounds, finding an ironic pleasure in refusing to complete the process. To finalize the grieving would leave a scar that I feared would be more painful than nurturing my sorrow.

I began to see that I had unwittingly become quite good at the martyr role and hosted more pity parties than any one person should be allowed. I began also to recognize the tentativeness of my friends' inquiries into how I was, afraid to delve too deep lest the "broken tapes" be played yet again for their patient and loving hearts.

I knew it was way past time to be whole again, but even so, there seemed to be such a wide gulf between my pleading with Jesus for the wholeness and gaining its reality.

As I continued to read and pray, I sensed the Lord

prompting me to do more than write a reflection. This was to be "the big assignment." I pressed forward and found a growing excitement in my writing, hopeful that compiling these thoughts in an organized fashion might lead to my final liberation from this bereavement I had clung to for the past six years.

My thoughts went back to the beginning of the Fellows year and Tom Tarrants' talk on our retreat. I remember his stating that the Fellows Program was intended to raise up a cadre of committed believers to dramatically impact the Washington, D.C. area for Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. He told us that, as we went deeper in discipleship, we would discover a growing love for our neighbors as we knew more of the Lord's love for us. Indeed, I think the Lord has revealed to me a glimpse of what love really is in this past year, and I have continued to see this work in my own life in profound ways.

I was part of a remarkable marriage, because I was fortunate enough to have married a remarkable man. His deep and unshakable faith shone through in the final letters he wrote us, urging us to claim Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Don was as courageous in death as he was in life. It was so important for him to "finish well." His admonition to never question God's love or sovereignty in what was happening was a wonderful gift of assurance as we entered the uncharted waters of life without him.

As our family began our journey of pain during the year before Don died, we watched the Body of Christ spring into action in a way that was overwhelming. We almost felt physically lifted, as we were able to cope serenely with horrific circumstances. I know all too well that serenity is not my natural personality and so such serenity could have only come from God. I have never felt so loved by so many. The sweetest blessing of this experience was knowing these folks were sent by God, being obedient to Him in sharing love and being there for us. I thought how pleasing this must be to Him, for His body to function just the way He intended. I have learned so much about how to care for the hurting by

the example I experienced first hand.

I can say unequivocally that the Lord has not forsaken nor abandoned us for even a second since the trials started. There have been times of silence when I couldn't hear His voice, yet He has loved us, protected my children so graciously, provided for us spiritually, and has used every tough situation for His glory and our growth. I would not be willing to give up any of the blessings that have come our way because of our circumstances. Growth seems to be greatest in times of trial, because, I suspect, it is the time we are most apt to look up. In *A Grace Disguised*, Jerry Sittser said it best:

Brokenness forces us to find a source of love outside ourselves. That source is God, whose essential nature is love. It seems paradoxical to put brokenness and love together, but I believe they belong together.

All of these thoughts have been able to surface because of all the reading and discussion we have had in the Fellows Program. I've learned so much from our group as we have shared our stories. I have caught a new glimpse of discipleship and desire it to be a vibrant part of my life now. This is surely what God intends for us! Thanks be to God that He doesn't expect us to suffer alone.

The readings have also reminded me just how much we are part of a bigger story, that life is not about our personal happiness or comfort. For too long I've pleaded with God to heal my sorrow and make personal life good again. But as I draw closer to Him and desire to be available to Him in the big picture, I realize He is giving me a genuine peace about where He has me just now as well as a satisfaction in learning how to be a disciple and experience the joy of working together within the Body. I'm gradually developing a heart for evangelism, feeling burdened for the lost around me. In *A Grace Disguised*, Sittser writes,

In the experience of loss, we come to the end of ourselves... Finally, we reach the point where we begin to search for a new life, one that depends less on circumstances and more on the depth of our souls.

I am beginning to understand just a little bit how much we were made for eternity and that the journey here on earth is more a preparation time, learning to love as He loved.

In the oncology department where Don went for his radiation treatments, there was a sign which read "Make today count... Life is not a dress rehearsal!" I understand the intent behind the sign, but in a sense life is a dress rehearsal, preparing and refining us for a wonderful eternity with the Lord. My soul seems so much

more at rest as I gradually accept that the here and now is not the be-all-and-end-all!

I have always liked the visual image of the Quaker's prayer: opening our hands to let go of the burdens the Lord wants to carry for us, and then turning our palms up to receive what He wants to give. There must be the relinquishing first, before the filling can happen. I can honestly say I am excited to see what the Lord puts in front of me next, and, yes, I trust Him for it.



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