

## **WHEN A CHILD DIES**

### **Chapter 1: EVERYONE LOSES SOMEONE**

To lose a parent is to lose the past; to lose a spouse or close friend is to lose the present; to lose a child is to lose the future. While the loss of a loved one is never easy, memories of the parent, spouse or friend help fill the aching void. But when a child dies, our dreams are snatched away, leaving an empty yearning for what could have been. I know this yearning in the depth of my soul, for my cradle of hope was robbed of its dream. I have faced every parent's worst nightmare and now stare into the haunting eyes of what never will be.

For the first thirty-three years of my life, I was spared the agonizing pain of loss that befalls so many people when they become victims of personal tragedy. Although I knew firsthand the agony of a disappointing loss in sports, a broken heart in romance and a guilty conscience in sin, these were skinned knees compared to the loss of my dream.

In my work as a pastor, I often assist people in walking through the valley of the shadow of death. When I preach at funeral services, I discuss how death is the constant shadow of life. Like our own shadow, it follows us persistently. But when death closes the gap and strikes its victim, it catches those who are close to that person off guard. The shock is as startling as if our own shadow had reached out and slapped us across the face.

In the Advent season of 1985, I was preparing my congregation for the celebration of Christ's birth when the shadow of death raised its hand over me and began its back swing. It did not strike this time, but soon would.

As Christmas in our Connecticut home approached, my wife, Beth, and I were filled with anticipation and apprehension. We were in our seventh month of pregnancy with our second child, and we excitedly awaited the February due date. However, we also anxiously awaited the results of a series of medical tests on our firstborn child, Laura.

Laura always seemed to be connected to testing. Over the three years that Beth and I had tried to become pregnant, we had pursued many types of medical tests. When Laura was born, we were ecstatic. We named her Laura Grace – Laura, because the name was beautiful like her, and Grace, because we saw her as a gift from God. If Laura was a gift from God, then how could her life be taken from us? Was God an Indian giver?

Laura was two-and-a-half years old that Christmas as we awaited her test results. For several months we had taken her to various doctors seeking an answer to her walking and balance problems. The initial diagnosis of mild cerebral palsy due to umbilical cord strangulation at birth proved erroneous as her condition worsened. One neurologist ordered a CT scan of the brain and questioned us about our family backgrounds. I sensed he was concerned about a possible genetic problem that might also affect the child Beth was carrying. His questions heightened our already soaring fears.

I will never forget the phone call I received from that doctor. He said, "Reverend Hans, I want you to listen very carefully. The child your wife is carrying will be a healthy baby." I replied, "Thank you, but what about Laura?" His silence was foreboding. He then told me that the CT scan revealed a tumor the size of an orange at the base of her brain. The impact was like a hand grenade exploding in my chest. He used the term "medulloblastoma" which, if I had known then what I know now, would have felt like two hand grenades. Medulloblastoma is a very aggressive cancer with a bleak survival rate. The doctor recommended immediate brain surgery.

As we transported Laura to nearby Yale-New Haven Hospital, I remember a double terror gripping me. I feared prematurely losing one child while prematurely gaining another. As concerned as I was for my daughter, I was equally concerned for her pregnant mother. Laura was admitted to the hospital that evening with surgery scheduled for early the next morning. The date was Friday, December 13<sup>th</sup>.

That night sleep escaped me. In the early morning hours of darkness, I began to think about Laura and death, family and love, God and hope. My thoughts took the form of a letter I composed to Laura. It read:

*Dear Laura,*

*You are sleeping now, although not here with us. Your Mommy and I are awake and missing you terribly. As I look back on yesterday and the discovery of the tumor, I can only describe it as the worst day of my life. I think it's the worst that could happen, and yet it isn't.*

*When the doctor told me that they found a tumor inside that smart little head of yours, my worst fears took the witness stand. Soon they will shave off those Goldilocks curls of yours. Do you remember how you describe Goldilocks' hair in the story? You say, "She has beautiful blond hair just like me." Well, not anymore princess.*

*When they start cutting your hair, you will begin a journey. You will not discover anything, because you will be sleeping. The doctors will be the explorers. They will travel below your golden locks to try to make you better.*

*Mommy and I know that the coming days and weeks will be difficult for you and for us. We are haunted by "the worst that could happen." Fear causes this, and fear has such power. We fear losing you. It's the worst that could happen to us...and yet it isn't.*

*For all the fear that drives our hearts and minds to work overtime, we can also feel a calm. It is the calm with which we put you to bed at night as we remind you that Mommy and Daddy love you and God loves you, too. We are putting ourselves to bed with the reminder that, no matter what happens, God loves all of us.*

*As you sleep now in the hospital away from us, we fear the worst. Yet we are awakened to the comfort that God's great love conquers our worst fears.  
Goodnight, Laura.*

*Love Always,*

*Daddy*

The neurosurgeon told us in no uncertain terms that Laura might not survive the surgery, due to the extent and location of the tumor. He also told us that if she survived, she would not be the same child. Certain physical and mental capacities would certainly be lost to the scalpel. She did survive the operation. However she lost many of her verbal skills as well as the ability to pull the

red wagon she requested that Christmas. She also lost the entire back of her skull when it was removed during surgery, then covered over only with scalp. This was the surgeon's way of leaving the door open for a return visit. He was right; we did not get back the same child we delivered to surgery. But she was alive along with our hope.

After a four-week hospital stay, Laura came home, bald and battered, for a belated Christmas celebration and a new red wagon. I returned to my pastoral duties from a leave of absence. My first Sunday back in the pulpit, I spoke about hope. To the church family that had supported us with their prayers, loving notes and phone calls, I tried to offer something solid to grasp in a sea of uncertainty.

Drawing upon a verse from the Old Testament in which God promises, "I will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope" (Hosea 2:15), I began my message with this thought: Most of us have been there already, although we did not plan to take the trip. Some of us have yet to wander into its disturbing terrain. All of us will journey there sometime in our life. It is an uninviting place, terrifying, depressing, ominous. The Valley of Achor, loosely translated, means the valley of trouble.

My congregation was familiar with the Valley of Achor. Like any group of humans, they had their litany of troubles: deaths, divorces, loss of innocence, losses of friendship, losses of abilities. All of us suffer some type of loss at some time in our life. Therefore, we all need assistance navigating the journey in which loss and grief are inevitable. However, one loss sinks below most other tragedies in the valley of pain and confusion: there is something so unnatural, so untimely and so unsettling about losing a child that it shakes our very foundation. The magnitude of pain and fear surrounding my daughter's illness made our valley of trouble a canyon with walls so steep and high that darkness covered the quaking floor, where we groped for direction and meaning.

In that dark valley, hope became my resource. It began to take on new meaning as never before. Until Laura's diagnosis, I had felt in control of my life and future. However, as I anguished through her six-hour surgery aware she might not survive, I realized that her life and future were completely outside my control. Parents feel threatened beyond words when control over the well-being and safety of their children is denied them. There was not a damn thing I could do to help Laura. All I could do was hope there was a purpose to this and a presence, unseen at the moment, yet greater than the moment.