

Foreword

I remember when I first sensed there was a fuller experience of being alive than I was living. Until that time I'd been living life primarily in my mind and imagination—always thinking about things, but seldom present to what was actually before me. I'd created a narrative of a good and just world, and in this story life was predictable and made sense. There were rules. There was a clear way that things should be. This image of life was my unquestioned reality.

I never guessed there was a difference between my image of life and life itself until life intervened in my narrative when I was twenty-seven years old. Without warning my young husband and daughter were killed in an accident involving a drunk driver. I literally blinked my eyes and everything I knew was gone: dreams, hopes, and anchors—especially my story about what life should be. There was the life I'd planned, and the one that was now unfolding. It was a tremendous jolt. But alongside this great loss was a remarkable pressure not to turn away from the experience, no matter how difficult it was to go on. Something in me knew that this was my opportunity to stop imagining life, and finally meet it face to face.

In the pages that follow, Janet Davis describes the moment when her own picture of life was replaced by life itself. She learns that her son has a serious and potentially grave medical diagnosis, and she wants to deny those words, even as she makes plans to insure her son's care. She writes from the heart of the experience about the fear that rises up. Life never stops to ask her if she's willing or ready to bear these hard truths. There are no considerations.

"Maybe I need to come up with some new language," she writes, searching for a way to describe her sense of isolation and fright. Then,

with vulnerability, humor, and a striking honesty, she sets out on this unbidden journey, entering the proverbial dark wood where the pilgrim encounters the things that cannot be changed, regardless of your deepest wishes and fervent prayers. Janet walks into the dark woods with hands outstretched, feeling her way forward. “Will someone please clarify the rules for me?” she asks. In that single sentence she gives voice to the powerlessness and sense of bewilderment that characterize the path.

Her first solace is found in the smallest detail: She continues to water the marigolds in her garden. The ordinary task becomes an anchor against all that is rapidly shifting. While the future remains stubbornly uncertain, watering marigolds is manageable. Her entries continue, encompassing many salient steps of the journey: the frightening sound of alarming medical options given to someone you love; the search for inner and outer equilibrium as the things you’ve counted on prove to be moveable; the complexity of life; and then the surprising and perplexing existence, simultaneously, of pain and grace.

Scott Peck begins *The Road Less Traveled* with the memorable words, “Life is difficult.” Crises arise without warning, and we’re left to cope as best we can. It’s like being at sea while high waves batter a small craft that is your only refuge. You cling to the rudder and face the wind and spray. As Janet endures stormy seas she continues to write and pray and search for answers. One day she considers that “[perhaps] whatever comes my way is the flow of my life.” That realization is her gold: Whatever lies ahead, my way is the life being held out to me...the only life there is.

In the pages that follow, Janet allows us to stay in the boat beside her as she rides the storm. These particular circumstances are hers, but sooner or later we all face our own rough seas. As Janet’s illusion of control falls away, she begins to find new compass points. There is blessed calm and grace as she returns over and over again to sit for morning and evening prayer at a beloved monastery, comforted by the familiarity of the psalms and chants. The ancient verses are a reminder that we are all here so briefly—yet these fleeting hours have power and meaning.

In Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, a young woman who has died returns to earth to re-live just one ordinary day. Overcome by the beauty

of life she finally asks, “Doesn’t anyone see what they have while they still have it? We never even look at one another.”

In sharing Janet’s journey we are encouraged to look more closely at those whom we deeply love, and perhaps see them through a clearer lens. These are the very people who’ll teach us necessary lessons about life’s brief and precious beauty. These are the ones able to move us closer to life’s deeper teachings.

Throughout the journey Janet welcomes us to become more aware of life’s ordinary moments. Her words suggest that all the ingredients we need are on our path; it’s a matter of seeing. In the end life asks us to let go of our terms for life, and simply meet what is. Following her example, we keep walking forward, day after day. We pray, and water the marigolds. We become frustrated, lose our focus...then regroup and begin again. We slip into the monastery and watch slants of light filter through stained glass. One day life will hopefully succeed in breaking through in us. Then a door we never noticed opens wide.

 Paula D’Arcy

Preface

Crisis and loss come in many forms: death of a loved one, illness of a child, divorce, financial ruin, relational betrayal, diagnosis of cancer, incarceration, a car accident, sexual abuse, job loss, chronic disease, lawsuit... to name a few. In the midst of such painful moments, we tend to conclude that the love of God has vanished from our lives.

Yet, oddly, in one such season, I found the opposite to be true. When our oldest child and only son was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor several years ago, I found myself experiencing God's love in myriad new ways. Within the text of this book I offer you the details of that journey: some funny, some sad, some wise, some just plain ugly, and some full of beauty.

The kind of healing offered within these pages is not based on platitudes or easy answers. Instead it is a healing that trusts daring authenticity and the unseen yet sacred healing rhythms God has built into our souls. My prayer is that somewhere in the midst of these stories of MRIs and marigolds, you will glimpse your own experience of pain and loss and for some brief moment, not feel so alone. My confident hope is that in that moment of honesty and connection abides the gentle, healing presence of God.

Can you top this?

At the end of this last summer, I was at a wedding reception visiting with a friend's son, Andrew. I was excited to discover that he had just graduated from the same law school our son, Bob, was to begin the following Monday. He told me all about his first day.

"I had a ninety-minute drive and left in plenty of time until I realized thirty minutes out that I had left my briefcase with all the briefs I had prepared for class. It was the worst day. I sweated out every minute of class, hoping no one would call on me. I sure hope Bob's first day is better than mine."

"I'm sure he'll do fine." I was comfortable and confident inside and out. "After all," I thought, "he's gotten himself into law school (no small feat), arranged for the money to pay for it, and found a place to live. What could go wrong now?"

About noon of Bob's first day, the phone rang. "Mom, Dr. Ramon's office just called. They said some of my lab work was off and they want me to have an MRI. They think there might be something wrong with my brain."

The mom in me was calm, reassuring him and telling him I would handle the details and let him know when and where. The former nurse in me was frantic.

That nurse part of me had insisted on a check-up before Bob started law school. It was the prudent thing to do every four years or so, no matter how well you were feeling. It was also the nurse part of me who knew this doctor well enough to know that he would never order a pricey test like an MRI without a very good reason.

We scheduled the test for Friday.

Next time I see Andrew, I imagine the conversation will begin something like, "Can you top this?"

- ▶ Can you recall the first moment when you had some sense that trouble or loss might be headed your way?

God, as I begin this journey of remembering my pain and loss, grant me strength for the journey.

One drop at a time

For several years now, I have worked as a hospital chaplain, first full time, then part time, and now relief. One of the bits of wisdom I encountered along the way was a new definition for a common stage of the grieving process: denial. An experienced hospice worker once told me, “My definition of denial is ‘absorbing things a drop at a time.’ Sometimes that’s the only way hard truths can be absorbed.”

We got the results of Bob’s MRI the next Monday. Our son had a brain tumor in the center of his head, near his pituitary gland. The tumor was 2.9cm x 1.4cm x 1.5cm, about the size of an unshelled peanut.

“So what does that mean? What’s next?” I asked the doctor.

“Well, we’ll try to get him in to some specialists in Houston as soon as possible. And we’re going to run more tests while we wait.” That’s all I heard that day...not because it was all that was said, but it was all I *could* hear.

Later, as unwelcome realities continued to persistently unfold, I recalled that there were other things said that day like, “Well, it may not be an ordinary pituitary tumor.” And, “I think he should go ahead and withdraw for the semester.” I just wasn’t ready to hear what I wasn’t ready to hear.

So, we began to research pituitary tumors. The news was not all bad... in fact, technically speaking, they weren’t even considered to be brain tumors. Most can be removed with endoscopic surgery, with little more than an overnight stay in the hospital. It seemed doable. Hey, we can handle this one.

Later that week, as we prepared for the additional tests, I collected Bob's films and the report from the initial MRI. I pored over the computer. Neurosurgery was not my field of expertise, never mind the fact that I had not practiced nursing for almost twenty years! Oddly, the terms were different than those in the pituitary tumor information I had been researching...an observation I made on some level and completely ignored in every other way. One drop at a time, just one drop at a time.

- ▶ Reflect on your own process of absorbing new, frightening, or painful realities "one drop at a time."

God of all compassion, grant me patience with myself and those in my world who simply need more time.

So this is the abundant life?

Many years ago, when our two girls were ages three weeks and three years and Bob was six years old, our family took a long car trip from Texas to Minnesota. (Yes, I said three weeks old...but that's a whole other story). One of the kids' favorite things on that trip was to listen to a cassette tape by a Christian comedian, Mark Lowry. About the twelfth time through, I began to realize that he was not only funny, he was also wise.

He pointed out that we usually interpret Jesus' words about abundant life as if He were promising us a good time, all the time. *Life* is not always a good time; instead, it is like a roller coaster, with high and low points. To live the abundant life meant to live fully present to it all, the highest highs and the lowest lows. Adopting that definition in theory turned out to be a whole lot easier than living it in reality.

The same day we found out Bob did indeed have a tumor was also the day I signed my first book contract, a very big deal for a first-time author. Life was getting just a bit too abundant for my taste. In fact, I felt quite

crazy. How in the world could I order all this emotion? How could I celebrate? How could I *not* celebrate? I was all over the map!

Of course, if I could—if life worked that way—I would give back the contract if I could also give back my son's tumor. Bargaining: another stage of grief. Life just doesn't work that way.

Left in the chaos of all my emotions, I began to notice that trying to order them was of no use whatsoever. My best option, perhaps my only real option, was just to feel them, to agree to be wherever I was at any given moment. Authenticity became my gathering point, the place where all things fell together rather than apart, the location of my sanity.

I began to surrender my need to prescribe or conjure or explain a way to cope with my life as it was, and became more concerned with accurately describing it in the moment, whatever that moment might hold. Rather than controlling my life (hopeless!), I wanted to learn to engage it and *live* it...the good, the bad, and the ugly. So, this is the abundant life.

- ▶ Spend ten minutes free-writing your thoughts and feelings: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Dare to believe that authentically living what you feel is a more healing path than trying to shape your internal responses into a prescribed, acceptable, tidy or comfortable form.

God, you may not be afraid of my feelings, but sometimes I am. Courage, God, I want courage to live this journey through.



Free fall

The best description I can offer of our first few encounters with specialists is that of a free fall. Though I have never leapt from an airplane or dared to bungee jump, I have experienced such a rapid onset of disappointment that my stomach felt as if it rose into my throat.

Our first appointment was with a neuro-ophthalmologist, Dr. Stedman. She was a kind and curious soul, and the first thing she did was to pop Bob's MRI films on the viewing box and begin to "ooh" and "ahh." The second thing she did was to call her partner and all available students into the room and proceed to explain to them that this was *not* a pituitary tumor.

"Ping" went my eyelids, springing open. "Thud" went my stomach. I suddenly remembered what I had chosen to forget about the MRI report. There had been no mention of a pituitary tumor. So, what was this?

No one there seemed to know. What was clear from the tone of conversation was that this was going to be significantly more complicated than we had originally thought. All they could determine after a full seven hours of testing was that whatever it was had miraculously spared Bob's vision for now. Though the tumor was touching the optic nerve on three sides and shifting one of his optic tracts, his vision remained unimpaired. Not even my gratitude for such grace removed the heaviness in my gut.

The free fall continued with our first visit to a neurosurgeon. In spite of our experience with Dr. Stedman, we were still hoping to hear that this tumor would qualify for the "quick fix." After all, she was not a neurosurgeon.

I knew the news was not good when Dr. Robbins prefaced his remarks with recognition that we had just met him and had little personal reason to trust his judgment. "Ping" went my eyelids. "Thud" went my stomach.

He went on to say that he did not believe the tumor was operable. It was centered above the pituitary, integrally entwined with exquisitely sensitive endocrine structures in addition to the optic nerve, and surgery could do more harm than good. He recommended biopsy alone. Unfortunately, even that diagnostic procedure would require a mini-craniotomy, shaved head and all. Is there any such thing as a *mini-craniotomy*?

Will this brick in my stomach ever go away? When will we reach the bottom of the bad news? When will we reach the end of this free fall?

- ▶ Have you had “free fall” moments in your journey, moments when the depths of your pain and loss were increasing with every breath?

Save me, O God.

When words won't come

As you might imagine, as this story began to intrude into our lives, prayer was a large part of our response. One evening in particular, when anxiety was high and comfort low, my husband asked me to spend some time in prayer with him.

His request was reasonable. For decades, we had prayed together about the various concerns that life had brought our way. In fact, years ago we had hosted a small group of fellow church members for a weekly prayer meeting in our home, repeatedly asking God to bless the small Bible church we were attending at the time. Conversational prayer had been a part of our lives for a long time.

But, for me, in that moment, on that particular evening, the words simply would not come. The openness in my heart and my deeply felt inclination toward God were definitely present, they simply could not be expressed, or perhaps better said, contained by words.

Though my silence was unsettling for my husband, I was more intrigued than upset. There was a real sense of freedom and a deeply seated peace as I let go of words. My longing, fully and authentically experienced in the presence of God more than expressed to God, was enough. For the first time I knew that prayer of supplication happens even when words do not come.

A few days later, I went shopping for a pendant necklace in celebration

of my book contract. I enjoy celebrating such milestones in a sacramental way, connecting them to something ordinary that can become a physical part of my life, a concrete reminder of God's faithfulness to me. Months before, some Venetian glass pendant necklaces had caught my eye and seemed like just the thing.

The one I chose was a large aquamarine-colored glass bead with a beautifully reflective silver core. Interestingly, it was about the size and shape of our son's tumor. Ahh, a point of intersection in this crazy, abundant life of mine. Only this dual symbol could contain all that was in my heart. That glass bead became my prayer...an image of both the celebration of, and the longing for, beauty even when it comes in the unlikely shape of a tumor.

Prayer happens. Prayer cannot help but happen. Prayer is within and all around me, even when words won't come.

- ▶ Is your approach to connecting with God changing in the midst of this difficult season? What is working? What is not?

"Your face, Lord, do I seek." Psalms 27:8b

Caught by the rhythm of life

I wasn't prepared to get that kind of a phone call that morning. I had gone to San Antonio on a short business trip with my husband. On the medical front, we were waiting to hear about appointment dates to see other specialists and get a second opinion from another neurosurgeon. I was looking forward to some time away to work on my book. I was hopeful that perhaps a different setting would allow me to leave behind some of the grief, pain, and fear of home.

Bob called just before noon, utterly distraught. My easygoing son had hit a wall. He said he could not even decide whether to go to class that afternoon or not. He was completely overwhelmed, utterly paralyzed.

Though it was tempting to become the mom who simply took it from there, took over all decision-making capacity, ordering his world with specific direction, something within warned me of the danger of assuming that course with this twenty-three-year-old man who happened to be my son.

Instead of making decisions for him, I encouraged him to take the next thirty minutes to journal in a non-stop, stream of consciousness kind of way and see what decision floated to the top. He was to call back in an hour.

Thankfully, God brought clarity. At least for now, Bob needed a break. Though he had been able to keep up with his law school homework through these four weeks, a very significant accomplishment, everything else in life had become undoable: laundry, meals, even keeping up his apartment. There was no space or place for the ordinary rhythm of life.

As we spoke, I began to recognize the importance of that rhythm for me. It had been those ordinary tasks of groceries and laundry that had kept me moving forward during this time of great internal challenge and chaos. As I listened to the pain of his heart and his disorientation, I began to imagine how the lack of that kind of rhythm in his life had perhaps multiplied the anguish of this experience. A path of healing began to take shape.

He called it “mom’s rhythm therapy.” Having made the decision to take this week off before making a decision about continuing this semester of law school, the focus became sleeping and eating, cooking and cleaning, resting and exercising. We both learned the healing power of the ordinary. In our current state of free fall, we were both blessedly caught by the rhythm of life.

- ▶ Are you finding comfort in any moments of ordinary experience? Tasks, smells, places, relationships, touch, hobbies, tastes?

Open my heart, God, to experiences of comfort from both unexpected and utterly ordinary places. I need all I can get.