

Holy Envy in a Hospital Room

It happened on a cold December Sunday as he was getting ready for church. My younger brother Jim, 62, passed away suddenly from a blood clot that hit his lung. His wife Stephanie was with him for the few minutes he had while the paramedics attempted to revive him. Fortunately, my cousin Andy, a local police officer, happened to get the call and was able to be there for my sister in law.

When my youngest brother Brent informed us of Jim's unanticipated passing, it felt like a huge frozen icicle had cracked off a tall roof, abruptly piercing and shattering me. I felt shocked. Disoriented. Broken hearted for Stephanie, their children, my siblings...and me.

Given the suddenness of this tragedy, there were no goodbyes. No warnings. No time to prepare for the shock of a relatively young, active brother leaving us. My deep conviction of the big picture plan of salvation was a huge comfort, but nonetheless I still felt dangerously disturbed. When my parents passed, including my father at only fifty two years old, I was sad and missed them. But somehow my kid brother's passing was much more difficult.

I thought of the basement bedroom and wooden bunk beds we shared till I was a teenager. The summer clover through which we ran barefoot. The huge construction pit we used as our own private amusement park, including sliding down the smooth dirt ramp on our wheel-less, cardboard box, self-imagined roller coaster. The frog pond to which we escaped on warm summer days. The forest that was our home's backyard, where we spent countless hours hiking along the meandering creek, picking wild blackberries from thorny canes, building and spending countless hours in a tree fort constructed of discarded wood, and sledding among the barren winter oaks and maples.

We were about as opposite as two brothers could be. He was practical, pragmatic, wiser, stockier, and quieter than me. He very much had an engineer's mentality and liked to fix things, which I dreaded and was hopelessly useless at. Though very different, we got along fabulously well and enjoyed each other's company. While we had not seen each other as often the first couple decades of adult life as we were both busy building families,

homes, and careers, the past decade or two we had visited more often and always both enjoyed it.

I felt a deep pang as I recalled the times teasing Jim when he was four or five and I was eight or nine. I told him I was going to run away from home and walked out the door with him wrapped around my leg, crying and begging me not to leave. How could I have been so cruel? Then there was the time I “taught” him how to ride a bike. After a few brief minutes of instruction and holding him up while he rode, I launched him solo down the street, but without teaching him how to turn or brake. My lack of instruction resulted in him running into a parked car and breaking his arm. Yet he seemed to forgive me, as brothers do.

Oh, how I missed my brother, my buddy, my wrestling, partner, my best friend of our early years. I have never been so emotional. For weeks after, if the sun came out, I cried. If it was cloudy, I cried. If a dog barked, I cried. If it was, you name it, I cried.

At my brother’s viewing, I literally could not approach the casket until they announced they were about to close it. I knew I did not have the emotional strength alone to say goodbye to him. I asked my wife and siblings to approach the daunting casket with me arm in arm. As we unitedly approached him and I stood at my brother’s side, I did something I have never seen or heard happen at a viewing--I bellered, loudly. I could not help it. I hurt so badly and missed him so much.

Despite the touching memorial service, my understanding of the Gospel plan, and much love showed by family and friends during this tender time, I continued to be emotional. And the overwhelming grief began to affect my body. Though I previously had felt fine physically and was an active runner, a few weeks after my brother’s passing I was diagnosed and hospitalized with a blood clot in my left calf where his had started.

How was this possible? Had my mind or grief somehow mimicked the cause of my brother’s passing? More than thirty years earlier, I had experienced some blood clots, but was on blood thinners and had been fine since.

When they checked me into my ICU hospital room, my loving, wise, concerned wife Evelyn asked if the hospital had a counselor since she knew I also was

suffering emotionally. The hospital responded they did not, but there was a pastor who could visit me. As soon as they said those words I had a warm, good feeling come over me and I said “Yes, please send them.”

A day or two later a woman who looked like a hippie version of Mother Teresa appeared at my hospital room doorway, announced herself as the pastor and warmly asked if I would like a visit. I welcomed her in, hoping that she could help provide some relief to my emotional and physical trials. I had received several blessings from my own Church’s priesthood holders and much support from family and friends, but was desperate for additional help from wherever I could find it.

As the pastor quietly entered my hospital room, my caring wife Evelyn was sitting on one side of my bed holding my hand. The pastor sat on my other side and took my other hand in hers. She had a very kind, longing look as she tenderly, almost in a whisper, asked how I was doing. In response I asked about her, partly because I was tired of all the attention on me and partly because I was genuinely curious who she was as a gauge as to whether she could possibly help me.

She explained that she had been a pastor for many years and had been the head pastor nationwide for the United States Veterans Administration. Her humility, sincerity, kindness and ability to truly minister, empathize and love were clearly evident. She had obviously consecrated and dedicated herself to a lifetime of serving God and his children, and it showed. I felt I could trust her with my heart.

After she politely and briefly responded to my question about her background, she turned it back to me and again asked how I was doing. I responded that I was really struggling with the passing of my brother and had somehow developed the same medical condition that took his life. She quietly asked, with exquisite tenderness, “Are you grieving so hard because you do not know where your brother is?” I felt comforted and strengthened to be able to answer, “No, I know where he is. He is in a good place with our Father in Heaven.”

I once had a high school psychology teacher, not a member of my faith, who shared her opinion that we all previously have been taught and inwardly

know the answer to all questions. She said, “We just need someone to ask the right questions in the right way to pull out what we already know.”

This obviously experienced pastor’s sincerity, humility, and genuine concern somehow opened my heart, mind and spirit. As I pondered her tender question as to why I was grieving so hard, the answer came to me as clearly as if the hospital ceiling had opened up and light had poured in. I was given to know that it was because I loved my brother so much! The understanding that an out of touch with his feelings, hardened lawyer and marathoner who compartmentalizes emotions and endures opposition and pain could care this deeply was pure revelation and a tremendous comfort to me--to know that I could love my brother this much. I hurt because I loved!

For the first time since Jim’s passing, with this hippie Mother Teresa and my beautiful wife holding my hands, I felt comforted, whole, at peace.

The pastor then left me with brief counsel reminiscent of President Russell M. Nelson’s, which also came to mind--“To take the pain out of death is to take the love out of life.” And as the Prophet Joseph Smith tenderly taught, “Thou shalt live together in love, insomuch that thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die....” Doctrine and Covenants 42:45.

In the midst of my deep excruciating emotional and physical pain, this female angel of an unknown religious faith’s genuinely Christ-like demeanor and insightful question helped heal me and strengthened my existent faith in God and His plan. I finally was at peace.