

A Father's Day reflection

On Father's Day, 1986, it was hot, and Tim, our 13-year-old-son, wanted to go swimming. We hesitated because Tim had a seizure disorder, and the frequency and severity of the seizures had increased recently. We knew the risk of him having a seizure in the water, but he was a good swimmer, and we decided to take the risk. We decided that I would go with Tim and keep a close watch on him.

It only took a momentary distraction. When I turned to look for Tim, I could not see him and immediately feared the worse. A frantic scan of the bottom of the pool located him. As quickly as possible I dove in and brought him to the surface. He was rushed to the hospital, and after a glimmer of hope that he might be revived, he was gone.

Father's Day has never been the same. A son lost on my watch.

The days and weeks following that day are a terrible blur. Well-meaning words of consolation and assurances of God's love and mercy fell on deaf ears. I was angry with myself for failing

Tim—and at God, who seemed to have failed us both.



A son's death

by Keith Harder

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During the days after Tim's death, friends and family stayed close and surrounded us with their love. Slowly I came once again to trust and experience God's grace and love. But even now I am aware of an ache and an emptiness that never goes away.

At the memorial service for Tim, the person we asked to preach began his message with: "Keith and Judy, God loves you." That was hard to accept or believe at that moment. But this assurance stayed with me. In retrospect it is clear that God's love was surrounding us during those days, even when we could not recognize or receive it.

Several months after Tim's death, his older brother was baptized by immersion. Before the baptism, these familiar words from Romans 6 were read: "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

As Scott went under the water, I thought of Tim. At that moment, it came to me that his drowning was a kind of baptism, renewing my hope that he would be raised to newness of life through the resurrection of Jesus. Death, denied the last word, began to lose its sting.

These past 20 years have been a journey of healing and coming to grips with what took place that day. The question Why did this happen? is less intense but still present and still a mystery.

I have struggled with the idea that "God is in control" in light of Tim's drowning. Was God somehow responsible for what happened? Was this God's will for Tim and for our family? It seems contrary to the nature of God revealed in the Bible to attribute all of our losses and tragedies to God. If God is with us in our grief as our comforter, it's hard to think that God is also the cause of our grief.

A cruel net: It has been more helpful to think that Tim was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The sentiment in Ecclesiastes 9 is strangely comforting: "No one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like a fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity when it suddenly falls upon them." Abetted by my lack of attention, Tim was inadvertently caught in a cruel net.

In some mysterious sense, all the calamities that humans endure may be part of God's unfolding purposes. It seems clearer now that God was with us in our suffering and grief. God has used this experi-

ence to teach me about my limits, grief, forgiveness and hope, but this is different from making God responsible for this tragedy.

On this Father's Day we will again remember what happened 20 years ago. We will grieve that Tim is not with us and we will gratefully remember him with stories, laughter and tears. We will remember his love for baseball and table games. We will remember his saying with a twinkle in his eye that he would marry a girl who also had seizures and how they would both have seizures at the same time when they would say, "I do." We will remember the awful unpredictability of the seizures and their lingering aftermath. And we will wonder what he would be like if he were still alive.

It's important for us to remember who Tim was and that he is still part of our family. We will visit his grave with its rough, hewn limestone marker. We will cherish our other three children and grandson and remember how our family has been sustained by God's grace and mercy. What happened 20 years ago forever marked and changed us, for better and for worse.

Surrounded: On this Father's Day, in the midst of picnics, reunions and good times, others, too, will grieve the loss of fathers and children. Some will grieve broken relationships and separations. There are those who will grieve the loss of whole families. Our loss was grievous enough; it's hard to imagine losing my whole family or going through this experience alone. We will remember Tim's memorial service and recall how we were so graciously surrounded by family and friends but also think about those who because of war or famine do not even have the chance to care for their children in death and who have no graveyard where they are able to remember and grieve.

May we always cherish our memories of parents and children—living and dead—and connect with those whom we love and cherish. May we often tell our children and parents how much they mean to us. May we be reconciled with those in our families from whom we are estranged and be renewed in relationships that have grown distant. May we experience the mystery of God's ways with us humans and God's comfort and love in times of failure and loss. May the wondrous mysteries of life, death and resurrection graciously inform how we live.

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