



# SUFFERING HONESTLY, SUFFERING HOPEFULLY

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Judy Squier  
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*SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE*

I am almost down to earth after a taste of heaven at the Bill Gaither Praise Gathering in Indianapolis last weekend. It's been called the World Series for Christians. This year we heard over twenty nationally renowned speakers and more than fifty Christian artists/musicians. Three days. A total of thirty hours of concerts, workshops and praise.

Flying home, I realized the speaker/artist who stole eleven thousand hearts was Sheila Walsh. Sheila had flung open the door of her life for all to see her brokenness. It was in 1992. Sheila says, "My life hit the wall at 200 m.p.h. After five years of co-hosting the 700 Club, I locked my office door for the last time, having been told: 'Sheila, don't do this. If you admit yourself to the psychiatric hospital, you're finished.'"

These are some things she learned about God: "It's just like God to take you to prison to set you free"; "I never knew you lived so close to the floor"; "Some of God's most precious gifts come in boxes that make your hands bleed when you open them."

It was around midnight on the second night of the Praise Gathering. As we returned to our hotel room, exhausted but exhilarated, my thoughts turned to my upcoming talk on suffering. I asked my niece Christie, who is blind, and my daughter Emily if they'd listen and give me their feedback. Interestingly, their response was unanimous: "It's a great talk, but you don't show your pain."

Two nights later, just before flying back home to California, I asked my friend, Rev. Reynen, a man with twenty-five years of counseling under his belt, to read it. His feedback was, "You begin with the facts and end with the victory, but what happened in the middle? Where was the dark night of your soul?"

I usually say I was born without legs. More accurately, my legs never developed. I had no thighs or knees, and I had deformed feet, with two toes on the left and three on the right. Also, I had a webbed left hand. The doctor who delivered me was in shock as he stepped outside the delivery room to give my dad the bad news: "Your daughter is going to live, I am sorry to say."

My dad, who loved challenges, rose to the occasion. He adapted my toys, taught me to climb trees, ice skate, ride a horse and drive a car. He trained me to articulate my words so I could become a public speaker. Mom carried the brunt of the pain. She still does, at age 87. A mother's pain runs deep. We discovered how deep when David and I decided to interview our parents for

a keepsake tape for their grandchildren:

"Mom," I unsuspectingly asked, "What was the hardest day of your life?" As if waiting her whole life to be asked, out popped the dark truth, "The hardest day of my life was the day Judyann was born, and it still is." My sister Tina was three years older. She had long legs. I watched her polish ten toe nails, jump rope, jitterbug, be chased by boys, and be nominated to the homecoming queen's court in college. I watched her growing up years in envy.

My childhood landmarks were surgeries at the Shriner's Hospital in Chicago. The big one was at age ten when they amputated my deformed feet and I exchanged my metal stilts for artificial limbs.

My teen and college years began on a low but ended on a mighty high when in June 1968, I received two degrees, my M.A. in Speech Pathology and my M.R.S. Degree, Mrs. David Squier! Ten years into our marriage we began our family. That's where we're at today, with three girls and three boys—Emily, Betsy, and Naphtalie, our teenage daughters, and Joshua, Chester, and Buck, their dogs.

Where did God fit in? Everywhere! He was there while I was being formed in utter seclusion and saw me before I was born. He had his foot in the door for praise when mom named me Judy, which means praise. He wept when my parents were too numb to weep, and felt the slap in the face when someone in dad's congregation said, "You know, Rev. Rieder, your daughter's condition is because of your sin."

It was God, not Cupid, who stirred the love between a boy named David and a girl named Judy and between the two of them and himself. And Elohim, the Creator God, filled every spellbound atom in the delivery room at the birth of each of our daughters as they and their fully developed legs slipped through the birth canal.

And somewhere in the incredible journey, at different places for each of us, the hundreds of family and friends touched by my disability exchanged the no longer needed hankies for helium balloons. Unbeknownst to us, God had made my life a celebration. Together we had learned that suffering is a potential delivery room for the extraordinary, the unprecedented, the inconceivable.

It was near midnight as Rev. Reynen repeated the question, "Judy, where was the dark night of your soul? How did you feel when your mom said the hardest day of her life was the day you were born?" "You're asking

me how it felt?" I thought. "It's not unchristian to feel? You care?"

Three vivid memories popped into my mind. Three times when it wasn't OK to feel. Three times when someone didn't care:

Being wheeled into the operating room at age ten for the amputation of my feet. The cold, sterile green room. "I'm afraid," I told the anesthesiologist. "Shut up, Judy. You talk too much," she said.

My father, my cheerleader through hoops and milestones. "Dad, I'm going under." "Judy, I'm so disappointed. You've lost your song."

A Christian woman after church in Palo Alto. "I'm not doing well." "Judy, motherhood is difficult for everyone. You're no special case!"

"Judy, how did it feel?" Rev. Reynen didn't give up. Suddenly, I heard myself say, "The dark night of my soul was my childhood. The dark night of my soul was my teenage years! My marriage was not the dark night of my soul, because David is a saint! My first job at Stanford Hospital was a dark night of my soul! Motherhood, with three kids five and under, was a dark night of my soul! And mothering three teenager daughters is a dark night of my soul!"

Fifty years of silence was broken. That was less than a week ago. Lord, what comes next? I don't know, but I do know that God does not require us to be strong. He invites us to bury our face in the mane of the Lion of Judah!

Gordon MacDonald tells a story of his daughter's struggle choosing a college. She got the choice down to two, and assured her parents she didn't need their help. After weeks of watching her agony, they couldn't take it anymore. Gordon moved alongside her as she stared out her bedroom window. "Honey, see that strong oak tree? Sometimes we can manage life alone. Other times we're more like the tulip over there, which could easily be run over or trampled. Which one are you?" "I'm the tulip, daddy." "Then your mother and I will build a fence around you."

Do you ever feel that the distance between the truth that you know and the faith you don't have is as far as the East is from the West? Have you ever had trouble thanking God? Our God takes full responsibility for bridging the great divide. This could be his greatest work. But instead of running to him and hiding our faces in the mane of the Lion of Judah, we go down in the basement and get beaten up by guilt or disappointment in ourselves.

There was something my dad would never allow me to say. It made him furious if I said, "God allowed my handicap." "God had nothing to do with you having no legs, Judy." But one day, maybe I was twenty, my dad and God went down in the basement. Dad came back up with my orthopedic shoe. He had spray-painted it gold!

I could talk for a week of Sundays about the truths I

have learned thanks to this orthopedic shoe. But the *Rhema*, God's words to my soul, tucked inside on a wrinkled gold paper, says it best: "The affliction you gave me, Lord, is the best thing that could have happened to me, for it taught me to pay attention to your statutes. They are more valuable than silver or gold."

Nothing is as sweet as when God's Word hits the bull's eye of our pain.

Some days, the words, "Thank you, Lord," pop right out of our mouths; other days, they're nowhere to be found. It was on one of those latter days that God was gracious to send a reminder. Almost a year ago, I was preparing a talk for Young Life's Capernaum Project. Nick Palermo had invited me to be the inspirational speaker for the Winter Bash. I'd visited the year before, so I knew to gear my talk to teenagers. "What should I be sure and include?" I asked one of my daughters. "Mom, be sure and tell them you're thankful for your disability." "I don't know if I'm thankful," I confessed. "Mom, you wouldn't be the woman you are today without it."

Suffering is a surgical knife applied to our souls. It hurts. Every time we submit to the knife, we become a little more like Jesus.

But honestly, I still hate suffering. I'm a tulip, not an oak tree. I'm even afraid to pray for patience. You'll never ask me back again, but let me tell you something. Why is this so hard for me to say? I'll tell you why. I told a Christian friend I was preparing a talk on suffering. Looking down at me in my wheelchair, she said: "Judy, Christians don't talk about suffering. They talk about the joy of suffering."

To me, suffering is a vice. It makes me feel like I'm in a vice. And yet, my spirit knows: Suffering is a redeemed vice. Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! Jesus plucks it out of the liability column. He accomplished history's great reversal with his finished work on the cross. Suffering becomes an asset.

The 90's began with a big bang at the Squiers. Autumn 1990 was definitely a dark night of my soul. You ask, "What hurt?" Actually, David was the one who was hurting. Diving off a ladder onto the blacktop, he shattered his ankle in seventy pieces as he dodged a falling Monterey pine branch and his chain saw. Arriving at the Stanford Hospital emergency room, his message to the nurses (they thought he was delirious) was, "You have to restore my leg. My wife has none." God did just that and in the process made me a woman of prayer. David's accident threw me totally off balance. His legs were my legs. How helpless I was without them! "God," I told him, "You're going to have to take care of me now."

Enter Kay Arthur's book, *Lord, I Want to Know You!* I met El Shaddai eyeball to eyeball and he proved his all sufficiency, so much so that the lintel over our front door has a plaque that says, *El Shaddai*, instead of The Squiers. My soul connected deeply with Elohim, the Creator God, the God of a thousand ideas when we

can't think of one. And Jehovah Raah, Raah, Raah, our Cheerleader Shepherd. "What is that, a joyous choir I hear? No, it is the Lord Himself exalting over you in happy song." And Jehovah Rapha, the Wounded Healer, whose style is to inhabit our suffering, our brokenness.

Have you ever been surprised by the Truth you didn't know you knew? Something swimming around in your soul may jump out and you say, "Who said that? That was good." I was at the swim club a month ago, and as I wheeled out of the women's dressing room I overheard a conversation between a mom and a custodian. She was nursing her aching back in the spa, and I winced as I heard the custodian say the unspeakable, "You know, when I hurt my back, I prayed, and God healed it instantly." Sitting legless in my wheelchair, ready to jump into the pool, I jumped into the conversation. Flinging my arms heavenward, I looked the uninformed, I mean uniformed, man in the eye and said, "When God doesn't heal us, he inhabits us!"

Speaking of inhabit, the name Joni Eareckson Tada is pretty much a household name in the Christian community. I can almost tell you the color of Jesus' eyes as I see his habitation in Joni. Her God is so big. Why? Because she and God grew real tight in the cesspool of suffering. I am convinced that her Rock of Gibraltar strength took a hold when a high school friend, Steve Estes, visited her week after week at the rehabilitation center. He opened God's Word and disciplined her. Though paralyzed, she grabbed hold of truth and it grabbed hold of her. And God built this woman into this generation's icon of God's power made perfect in weakness.

About forty of us had the privilege of sitting at Joni's feet last Thursday night, listening as she shared a story about her recent trip to the Holy Land. She told how she and her wheelchair sat beside the Pool of Bethesda: "I flashed back thirty years, to a body newly paralyzed. How I wished Jesus, the all powerful Healer, would touch me. But this day, with thirty years of quadriplegia and thirty years of God's faithfulness under my belt, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I thanked God that he hadn't!"

I watched her shriveled, lifeless hands wave back and forth mid air as she spoke, hands that could no longer brush her teeth, scratch an itch or apply lipstick, and I realized the secret of Joni's joy: her limp hands had no will of their own. "*Just to be clay in the potter's hands, willing to do what his will commands.*" Hands open to God. It doesn't matter if they're limp. It doesn't matter if they have only three fingers. Bring them. But what if my hands are gripped tight in fear or my fists clenched in anger? Bring them. Jesus said, "Come." No need to gussy up. Come just as you are.

Ever since John Hanneman invited me to give this talk I've been wheeling around, saying, "Lord, how do

we comfort those who are suffering? What is the right thing to say?" Job's friends taught us the wrong thing to say. About that time, I was watching a high school soccer game with two long-time friends, Bill and Marilee Clauson. "You two are doctors," I said. "What do you think Job's friends should have said to him?" Bill, with his usual Swedish twinkle in his eyes, met the question head on: "They should have said nothing and just hugged him." Driving home after the game, I realized Marilee hadn't said a word. Then I realized she didn't need to.

From the first day we had met at a prayer workshop, twenty years ago, she had hugged me, so to speak. She was finishing her residency in anesthesiology at Stanford Hospital, working ninety to one hundred-hour weeks. She dropped everything and rode into San Francisco with me for a one o'clock appointment at the Legman's.

It was Marilee who cheer-led me into motherhood. "I could never be a mom," I would say. She would reply, "Judy, you'd be a great mom." She never gave up. She was there for me during my three pregnancies. She figured out my gallbladder pain when the doctors couldn't. She has never required I be cheerful. She's always accepted me as I am and walked alongside me.

This may surprise you, but for years I thought physical disability was the only kind of suffering there was. I thought all able-bodied people were pain-free. But now, fifty years wiser, I see we all have handicaps. And you know what, I think mine is one of the easiest. It's visible, out front. It's predictable, and it doesn't get worse. I can go to the Legman's and get it fixed!

But loneliness and loss are not easy to fix. Neither are barrenness, baldness, shyness, being single and wishing you were married or being married and wishing you were single. Maybe you've lost your job or you have a job you hate. Maybe you've struggled a long time with depression. Perhaps you're disappointed with God. My heart weeps with you. I know I cannot fix your pain as you cannot fix mine, but we can walk along together, arm in arm. I'll hold your hankie if you hold mine.

*"And then after we have suffered a little while, our God, who is full of kindness through Christ, will give us His eternal Glory. He personally will come and pick us up and set us firmly in place"* (1 Peter 5:10). The apostle Peter said it. He knew, didn't he?

I'd like to close with an ever so simple word picture of "Suffering Honestly, Suffering Hopefully." Mary Verschuyl, the pastor over the Care Ministry at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, shared her comfort as she remembers her mother's response in crisis. Her mom would sit down in her rocking chair, open her Bible, and rock and cry and pray. She knew the simple truth: Life is difficult, God is faithful.

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