

A Time to Live & A Time to Die

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member

Editor's Note:

This article was first written in 2002. The writer's godfather has since passed away peacefully in August 2003, from terminal lung cancer.

My godfather turned sixty in November last year. Unfortunately, he may not live to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. Two months ago, his doctors removed a lesion in his right lung that turned out to be adenocarcinoma. To make matters worse, he also had enlarged lymph nodes compressing his trachea and possible metastases to the mediastinum. The word "terminal" wreaked havoc not only in his mind but devastated everyone who knows and cares about him. An email came to us to request for my wife, daughter and I to visit him in the United States for the last time. We could not leave immediately and instead made plans to go in a month's time. Our godmother said that based on the grim prognosis given to him by his oncologist, he might not last till we arrive. We assured them that we were going anyway and we would pray for miraculous healing. Quietly, we felt that my godfather's eagerness to see us might serve as a motivating factor to fortify his will to live.



THE GODFATHER

My godfather, Ken, is an American Caucasian. Some years ago, he and his wife, Bev, had hosted us when we attended a conference in Illinois. Notwithstanding an age difference of two and a half decades, a special friendship developed. By the time we returned for a second visit, they had assumed a godparent approach in caring for us. It then became natural to address Ken as "Dad" and Bev as "Mom".

Ken is known as the tough guy among his friends and colleagues. He has always worked with his hands – building construction, machinery repair, automobile maintenance, home carpentry, church grounds maintenance, crafting of toy cars and bikes for kids. He is built like an ox with powerful arms extending from a muscular torso. Until he had hurt his back severely about five years ago, he had worked long hours in building construction. He has never been inclined to read and has a ferocious aversion towards academic work. Not one leaning toward a college degree and thus a desk job, he found his calling making things with his hands. His home garage workshop has enough tools and equipment to convince a DIY dummy like me that he can make anything in the world. Like many in his trade who lived the philosophy of "working hard and playing hard", he took to hanging out with the guys after a long day's work at the taverns. These guys took pride in their role as breadwinners and felt perfectly entitled to a few drinks to unwind. After all, they really believed in the prevailing social norm that it was the woman's job to take care of the children and keep the house in order.

It goes without saying that life was hard for my godmother. Bev recalled many moments of frustration and despair. It was

not just the sadness of being neglected - she had constantly felt like the least significant person in Ken's life. His alcoholic excesses meant that he would come home late frequently. Even if he were to return earlier, he would be so inebriated that it was not possible to engage in a decent conversation. The romance between husband and wife had long fizzled out.

Years of emotional barrenness and relational strain ended only when Ken began attending church again. Both he and Bev believe that his faith has transformed him. He gave up his cigarettes and drastically reduced his alcohol consumption. He also parted ways with his tavern mates. These remarkable changes happened only in the mid-90s. Their marriage took a turn for the better and they began to enjoy their lives together.

MAKING THE MOST OF BORROWED TIME

Cancer never comes in any other manner than a rude shock. It throws one off the boat. Dreams are shattered and hope is crushed. For Ken and Bev, it effectively terminates their plan to enjoy their retirement together, to watch the grandchildren grow up, and most crucially, to make up for lost time that the earlier years of poor marriage had cost them.

Faith in God grants new vision, they say. It is as if the scales have fallen off the eyes and we see things that we have never noticed before. Miracles are extraordinary things that happen to ordinary people. But some things are only miraculous to those who perceive with eyes of faith. Ken has no doubt that when the huge mass compressing on his trachea shrank to undetectable in a post-chemo and radiotherapy CT scan, that God has sent a miracle his way. He was thankful that



About the Author:

Dr Tan Poh Kiang is a family physician who practices in the public housing estate in the heartland of Singapore. He is privileged to practise the art of healing and enjoys writing in his free time.

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he could eat and gain weight. Even more wonderful was the ability of the transdermal Fentanyl to control his post-radiation throat pain.

The realm of the miraculous certainly includes his new worldview and values. A man living on “borrowed time” does not waste time on trivial pursuits. He begins to really live. What does “really live” mean anyway? Ken says he gets angry less, especially over small matters like being caught in a traffic jam. He appreciates that he wakes up each morning still breathing. He is grateful to soak in his hot tub, drink his coffee and listen to the birds sing. He wants to spend more time with his children and grandchildren. He looks forward to visiting with friends. He seeks every opportunity to serve

others with his gifts from working with his hands. Making coffee for Bev and frying scrambled eggs for his grandsons become genuine moments of pleasure.

Spending time with my godfather and witnessing the deep peace he displays toward his impending death affects me profoundly. “Aren’t we all terminal?” he muses. Yes, we all have to die – that is a 100% guarantee. What is not so absolute is that we don’t all live or appreciate being alive. I learn that it is when we are dying or when we realise that we will die that we begin living.

Our ten days with him were thoroughly enjoyable. They came and went. When we hugged and said goodbye, there was a quiet mutuality of sadness. Yet it was mingled with gladness for I sensed that his dying has helped us all to live fully. ■