

RECOVERING PEACE AFTER TRAGEDY



Any consideration of peacemaking without referencing a real-life story would be incomplete. Peacemaking is more than a theory; it must be understood in the context of human-life drama in order to have any useful application to the lives of our students. Darold Bigger's journey to forgiveness and inner peace offers the classroom teacher just such a compelling story drawn from the life of Christian parents who, in the face of their daughter's murder, struggled to find inner peace through the justice system and, ultimately, forgiveness.

The story raises many questions that can bring children and youth to grips with the challenging journey toward peace after suffering a profound injustice: Am I entitled to express anger in the face of such an injustice? Isn't that the right way of honoring the victim? Can courtroom justice help provide inner peace? Besides the legal system, how else can I get justice for a wrong committed against me? Is it right for me to contact the one who wronged me or a loved one? Am I not dishonoring the victim by seeking out the wrongdoer? Will this help me achieve inner peace? What Bible verses will help me move from anger to peace?

What is the role of forgiveness in recovering inner peace? Does forgiveness let the offender off the hook and tacitly approve of the wrong perpetrated?

—Editors

I was asked to write about peace after a tragedy and to share some of what we've experienced after our daughter's murder to show how the peace principles discussed in this issue of the JOURNAL have brought us some level of comfort.

Shannon was in her mid-20s when she was killed. She was finishing an internship in the development office at Washington Adventist Hospital in Maryland and had accepted an offer from Gem State Academy to join their staff as alumni director and fund-raiser. We were excited that she would soon be close enough for us to see her on occasional weekends and during vacations. I was to pick her up and help her move West, but that move never happened. Those weekends and vacations brought only loneliness and sad reminders of our loss.

The stranger who got into Shannon's apartment and brutally murdered her was apprehended 36 hours later. The police found him in his bedroom watching her television set and in possession of several other items belonging to her. To avoid the death penalty, he pleaded guilty to murder in the first degree, attempted sexual assault, and armed robbery. He was sentenced to

BY DAROLD BIGGER

life in prison without the possibility of parole, plus life in prison, plus 20 years.

Initial Reaction

Surprisingly, I wasn't initially filled with rage. I believe God protected me from my anger so I could deal with my deep and profound sorrow. The experience of losing my daughter changed me in many ways. A pastor for decades, I had conducted many funerals and visited with survivors at times of tragedy and loss. I knew many verses and songs and truths intended to bolster humans in these moments, and had used them often. But now I, the verbal extrovert, was silenced by my own grief.

It was not that I disbelieved those things I had repeated so often. Nor had I forgotten them. But they faded from the level of rational, conscious

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thought, leaving me in a non-verbal world, beaten back by my personal confrontation with disaster. Usual responses disappeared. Acknowledging that there are no adequate answers

to explain such tragedy bankrupted all words, leaving me speechless.

Life isn't fair or just, that's the truth of it. Tragedies tear away at stable, peace-filled people and leave them stunned and groping to recover. For us, it was facing Shannon's murder and several months later her grandmother's death from pan-

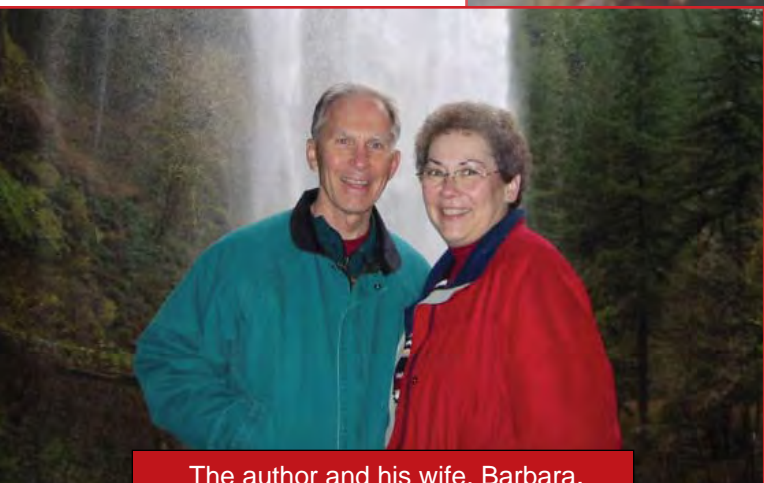
creatic cancer. For others, it's a divorce or sexual abuse or physical beatings or war or genocide or starvation or HIV/AIDS.

After the Sentencing—An Appeal

Several months after the perpetrator's sentencing, the state's attorney phoned. Shannon's murderer had filed an ap-



Shannon Bigger



The author and his wife, Barbara.

peal. He wanted to change his plea to “not guilty” and to have his sentence reduced! This man who had admitted to stabbing and slashing my daughter to death now wanted to escape the consequences for what he had done! I was livid!

For days, I clenched my jaw and felt knots in my stomach. I tried to let go, to trust the system to take care of this, to relinquish my rage and recover a sense of trust in God and hope for a better eternity. But I could not make it happen. Even the relaxation exercises I taught in stress management class and the meditation I taught in Christian spirituality class did not work. I wanted him to pay for what he had done! I wanted justice!

Sabbath morning found me in my usual pew at the Walla Walla University

WE’VE LEARNED . . . THAT FORGIVENESS IS MORE FOR THE VICTIMS THAN FOR THE PERPETRATOR, AND THAT ONE CAN FORGIVE WHETHER OR NOT THE PERPETRATOR CONFESSES, REPENTS, OR APOLOGIZES.

church, still in misery over my inability to change my reaction to Shannon’s murderer. Knowing nothing about my week, Pastor John Cress based his sermon that day on Jesus’ command to His disciples: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34, 35, TNIV).

It took only seconds for me to remember other things Jesus said about loving others. Not only are we to love the good people, but our enemies, too! “You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43, 44, TNIV).

That I was certainly incapable of! For days I had tried to relinquish my rage and my wish for revenge. But I was locked in my emotional passion, unable to free myself! I was a miserable model of the Christ I wished to emulate, an

unworthy and bankrupt professor of Christianity! I was, at the core, an angry, vengeful man. I was as far from God as was Shannon’s murderer in his cell in Jessup, Maryland!

Recognizing the comparison between us plunged me into despair. I was a sinner, incapable of doing anything to help myself!

Then Paul’s ringing proclamation came to mind: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, TNIV).

What a message! For this moment in my life, Christ died! At the time I am most ashamed and humiliated, God loves me! In spite of being as needy as Shannon’s killer, Christ died for me!

With that text in mind, I was able to let go of the fate of Shannon’s murderer, as well as another major hurt in my life that I had carried for several years. It was God’s gift to me.

“Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me;

“Died that I might live on high, died that I might never die;

“As the branch is to the vine, I am His and He is mine.”

—William McComb

What peace there is in that! Now I could face the truth—about an injustice and tragedy, about myself as a helpless sinner, and about a God who loves me in times of tragedy and in spite of the truth about me.

Our catastrophe and the subsequent flood of despair and forgiveness transformed our lives. We relate to others with a new level of empathy. My wife, Barbara, and I stood side by side on the tarmac with their families as the bodies of sailors killed by the attack on the *U.S.S. Cole* were carried off the transport airplane. I’ve performed and attended funerals for the victims of 9/11, and buried Marines killed in Iraq. We’ve locked eyes and arms and hearts with other parents whose children have died and with sib-

lings suffering with survivor guilt. We’ve voiced and vented our grief together and then shared the reason for our hope:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, TNIV).

Is the application too obvious to state? To the degree that I openly face the truth about my life, myself, and my experience of God’s forgiveness and restoration, my students will be more likely to face the truth about their lives and themselves—and experience God’s forgiveness and restoration.

Epilogue:

Shannon’s murderer exhausted his appeals. All were denied. He remains in prison, serving his original sentences.

A couple years after he killed Shannon, when I was ready to consider contact with him, I phoned the prison. A staff psychologist explained that Maryland had experimented with a victim/perpetrator program several years earlier, but it had not gone well. As a result, the state did not allow contact between victims and perpetrators.

Barbara and I have stood on the outside of that prison fence staring at the buildings that house him, prohibited from having any direct contact. For the rest of his life, he will be there, and sadly, our family will have no opportunity to make peace with him.

We’ve learned, however, what many have found: that forgiveness is more for the victims than for the perpetrator, and that one can forgive whether or not the perpetrator confesses, repents, or apologizes. So our experience of forgiveness and restoration continues, based on our relationship with God. And in this, we have found peace. ✍



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