

Faith in Grief

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It is so easy for many of us to think of faith as a feeling, an awareness of God's presence, something we experience and so on. In fact, it is not so according to scripture. But the following tells of my own journey of discovering this.

In 2005, approaching 60, I had my spiritual life, I thought, in pretty good shape. Growing up in a Christian home, I have loved God all my life. After making my Cursillo in 1977, I learned to love Jesus. I also learned about Rule of Life and have practiced my faith intentionally ever since then. My rule has changed, grown, and developed over all these years. Much like a long lived friendship or marriage, Jesus and I have had a wonderfully mature relationship in these last years. Devoid of the highs, and mercifully, the accompanying lows, it was steady and sound and very comfortable.

On January 25, 2005, my beloved grandson, John Carlo, died of SIDS. And with him, the faith that I was so comfortable with died also. In those early days of excruciating pain, I hated God. What kind of God allows this horror? Why would I even want to know such a God?

After a time, the anger and inconsolable pain gave way to a complete sense of numbing pain and emptiness. Where was God? I didn't necessarily like him or want to be in a relationship with him. But, like Peter, I didn't know of any other way but to follow Jesus. I knew the only way I was going to survive was to turn to my faith. However, I didn't "feel" anything – not God's presence, comfort, or peace. In the words of Teresa of Avila, it was a total lack of any sense of "consolation" from God. As I reentered my Christian practices, the Eucharist, the daily readings and prayer, it was totally without any feelings usually associated with my spending time with God. Yet, to face this tragedy, I knew I had to keep going through the motions of my practice whether I felt anything or not.

As the weeks and months went by, I began to understand my faith in a whole new way. I was keenly aware of the many people praying for me and my family. I knew that all those people hoped and believed in the healing power of God. While I didn't feel it myself or believe it was even possible, I knew that others believed in God's healing and comfort for us. I began to sense that the faith of my community would, in fact, sustain me until I could experience it for myself again. I also knew deep within that I needed to keep "showing up" – daily in my quiet time, weekly at the altar with my community. I needed to let myself be carried along on the faith of others.

Eventually, over time, I began to sense the presence of the Lord in my life again. As anyone who knows grief finds, a “new normal” happens. Life is never the same again, but it does begin to take shape. As with everything else, my relationship with the Lord is changed. Jacob wrestled with the Lord and walked with a limp afterward. I, too, walk with a limp spiritually and emotionally. But, indeed, God is a God of healing and peace, and we have found healing, comfort and strength once again. The faith of my community did carry us and their prayers were actually answered!

Looking back, I began to realize the truth in the words of the author of Hebrews that I was experiencing the “belief in the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen” – and that is what faith is. It is believing in spite of the reality surrounding us.