



Keeping the Spirit Alive in Times of Death

Lessons I learned after my father passed away



By Sister Leah Churchill

When you think about the word death, what comes to mind? Do you think about a certain person? Synonyms or antonyms to the word? Or maybe you've never had to think about it before, so you don't have an answer.

Death can be a scary topic, especially if you have never had an experience with it. That is, if you've never known someone who has died or watched someone die.

On July 30, 2012, I watched my father die. I sat next to his bed with my sisters and held his hand until he turned cold. My dad was only 57 when he passed, a month away from his 58th birthday.

My dad was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease, in 2007. The gist of the disease is that over time the muscles disintegrate until the body

can't deal with the pain anymore, or, in some cases, the person stops breathing. The rate of progression and severity differ from person to person, and there is no known single cause or cure. I was 15 years old when we found out about the disease. It took me two years to fully process the fact that my dad was dying, and it didn't help that he was progressing so slowly.

Wrestling with God's Will

I have been a saint in the church for seven years, and there hasn't been a day that I haven't felt spiritually weak. I'm sure this is due to the fact that as I got older, my attendance at church became more and more sparse, as I put extra-curricular activities far before God. As my father's disease progressed, I began to lose faith. This feeling peaked in the summer of 2012, about a month before he passed away. The timing was

interesting. I'd gone to GMBA Campout where some people told me to keep praying and believing that whatever happened was God's will.

Well, of course I believe that, but I had mixed feelings about the thought of God wanting my dad to die. It took some time, but I eventually came to believe that maybe God allowed this to happen so that everyone else could learn something from it. We all have different takeaways, but we all grew in the experience. My dad's disease taught me a lot.

Lessons from Loss

I learned that you have to show the important people in your life that you love them because this might be the only chance that you get. We had no idea when my dad would pass away, and everything was uncertain. I told him that I loved him multiple

times a day, making sure that if that day was his last, we would part on a good note.

I also learned that perseverance is key. My dad would stop at nothing to try to heal. Just months after he was diagnosed, he joined a clinical trial in hopes that he would receive the real medicine and not the placebo, and he took many medicines every day. He got ankle braces and eventually had to use two canes to walk around. Later he got a walker to lean on, and after that, an electronic wheelchair that he could navigate on his own. My dad was the epitome of perseverance. He always brought his needs to the Lord. He was anointed every week at church, and even when he eventually could not attend, our elders came home to him.

Breakdown and Turnaround

About three weeks after my dad passed away, I had to move back to college. I was going back early because I was going to be a resident assistant, which required a week and a half of training prior to the start of the school year. During RA training and the first few months of school, I felt like I was letting everyone down in some way. I was unable to finish my homework in the allotted time, complete tasks given to me by any of my supervisors either without assistance or within a given time (I had a second job on campus as well), and I stopped going to church altogether. I was living completely in my head, and I stopped caring about the decisions I was making, as long as I kept everyone around me happy.

Everyone except for God.

I had stopped praying and reading the scripture. All in all, it was pretty ugly, and it took a loud wake-up call for me to realize that I was headed down the wrong path and I needed to get back to where I was supposed to be. That wake-up call was at GMBA Campout 2013, where I had many wonderful experiences and blessings.

Now, I pray all the time, read the scripture every day, go to church every week, and I am fully prepared to be back at school with the love of Christ in my heart. It astounds me that it took my father's death to understand the difference between life with and without God, but I'm glad I went through those trials and tribulations so that I know how to prevent myself from slipping again.



REFLECT

Have you ever experienced a significant loss in your life?

How did you deal with that loss? Did you turn toward God or away from Him?

What did the loss teach you? About life? About God? About relationships?

How would you feel if you lost your parents today? Do they know you love them?

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