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A Measure of Grace

A Publication of Where Grace Abounds

Dealing with Loss

by Roger Jones

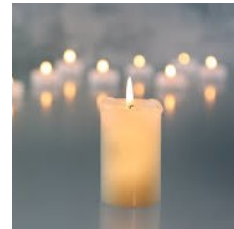
“We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, 'Blessed are they that mourn,' and I accept it. I've got nothing that I hadn't bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination.”

— C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.

The past few weeks have been difficult within our community here at WGA. We have lost four friends -- to addiction, suicide, and cancer. Each of these losses has been hard in its own unique way; life has been cut short too soon. There is emptiness left where these dear ones once resided.

For our community as a whole, perhaps the most poignant loss is that of our friend and leader, Kari. Kari had been around WGA for about ten years when she died on October 6th

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after a brief, six-month battle with ovarian cancer. She first came to WGA as an intern wanting to learn more about the ministry here. Over time, she became part of our family, involved in a number of ways. She was a small group facilitator and a regular teacher and speaker at our Thursday night group. She was instrumental in developing WGA's group on addiction, ReNew. Serving as a leader of the leaders, she was an officer of the WGA Leadership team. We will feel her loss deeply this month, at the annual leadership retreat she has helped to coordinate for the past several years.

Of course, Kari's volunteer activities do not really communicate who she was. The reason she did the things listed above is that she cared deeply about other people. She worked so diligently on her own issues over the years and wanted to give back to others some of the help she had received. Kari had a history of abuse and an eating disorder, along with some attendant relational consequences. She struggled with her self-worth and her identity. One of the saddest

things about Kari's plight was her inability to see her own value. She often apologized for what she said or did, as if she was taking up too much space in any conversation. My common reply to her was, "Kari, it is okay for you to exist." Sometimes she would get angry at my response, but mostly she would laugh when she realized she had been minimizing her own thoughts and opinions.

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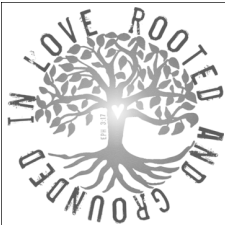
I have thought of that statement a number of times since Kari passed away: "Kari, it is okay for you to exist." I do not understand why she left us at such a young age (38). I do not understand why God allowed her to get terminal cancer, particularly when she worked so hard to help

others. It does not make sense to my earthly way of thinking.

"Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are in a mile? Is yellow square or round? Probably half the questions we ask - half our great theological and metaphysical problems - are like that."

— C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.

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Rooting and Grounding

By Mary Heathman

Part 1 of a series reprinted from February, 2002

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul makes a statement that, when I first really thought about the implications, radically shifted my understanding of and approach to evangelism and discipleship. To meditate on this section of scripture can still take my breath away with its power. To apply the concepts in ministry is the hardest thing I have ever attempted. To succeed, even for a brief moment, is the purest joy I've known since first I met the Lord.

Paul tells the believers in Ephesus that his prayer for them is that "Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that you might be filled with all the fullness of God." Ephesians 3:17-19

If I understand this prayer of Paul's, it was a given in his mind that, as Jesus dwells in believers' hearts, they will become rooted and grounded in love. When this foundational grounding is accomplished, then they may be able to understand (with all

other believers) the limitless love of Christ, and they then can be filled with the fullness of God's presence.

This restatement of the verses may not seem so startling to you. It wasn't for me either, when I read it at face value, as I had many times before. But this time, the words caught my attention and I couldn't get them out of my mind.

Just the week before, I had prayed and fasted, asking God for specific revelation about how people come to a knowledge of His love. Years before, as a youth sponsor, I had observed that some young people just didn't seem to comprehend God's love. Then in 1986 I was in ministry and seeing the same phenomenon in adults.

I remember telling God, as I prayed for the men and women in our ministry, that it felt like loving them was like pouring water through a sieve. Nothing stuck. They seemed nourished during prayer and Bible Study, and they soaked up love and attention they received from leaders *in the moment*. But week after week they would come back to group in the same condition they were in the week before: feeling cut off from the love of God and doubting our love for

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Reflections: Thoughts from a WGA leader

By Nancy Hicks

Salsa

It's a jungle out there, even in my vegetable garden. We finally finished a raised bed for me in early summer, and I filled it with tomato plants: Heirlooms, big, small, purple, red, orange, yellow. The pictures on the plant tags promised a robust and abundant harvest. And over the course of the summer, tomato shoots shot up and out and over and through and around. It became a leafy wonderland as high as 8 feet tall in some places. My daily safaris revealed bunches of globed green fruits hanging expectantly deep in the interior. I dreamt of salsa and sauce and Caprese salads. But week after week there was not the tiniest blush of color.

Then snow was forecast in early September and I panicked. "All that potential fruit and I'm not going to get one!!" I went out in the freezing drizzle and picked dozens and dozens of green tomatoes, shoving them disconsolately in brown paper bags. "The end of great potential," I thought, "No harvest despite all the hope and

expectation." I couldn't help but add this botanical evidence to the feelings of futility in my life. "Remember all that early potential when you were young? Remember the hopes, the vision, the dreams? Remember how impressed everyone was with all those leafy shoots going out everywhere? And now you enter the autumn of your life and it is turning out just like those damned tomato plants -- all leaves and no fruit."

I tried my hand at fried green tomatoes that night. They were OK. They were nothing like the big, luscious, vine-ripened fruit I had hoped for. I put tomatoes out of my mind and went on with life.

A week later I remembered the bags and opened one to check before I threw them all on the compost pile. Sitting on the top of the pile was lovely, lemon yellow, fully-ripened tomato. When I pulled it out, I could see purple, red, and orange starting in the fruit below. Eventually every single one of those tomatoes ripened.

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I resumed my daily visits to the tomato jungle and discovered that not only had it survived the premature breath of winter, but the green fruits were multiplying. My hope revived a bit and I waited again, and waited, and waited. Days and days went by with no ripe fruit.

Finally, in a fit of frustration one morning, I grabbed the shears and started whacking. "If only some light and air could get to those tomatoes, I just know they would start to ripen." I attacked with Edward Scissorhands intensity and branches landed in piles. "Light and air," I chanted as I slashed. When I stepped back to survey the carnage, I was pleased. The bed no longer looked like a jungle paradise; giant caves had been carved out and lovely sun-reaching suckers lay on the grass. "It's not pretty," I thought, "But there will be fruit."

In the smallest of voices I heard, "Yes. There will be fruit. I've always intended that there will be fruit. I'm cutting and pruning to make room for light and air. There will be fruit."

I guess we take hope wherever we can get it: even if it's in trimming tomatoes and hearing something

in the wind. I am picking giant bowls of tomatoes everyday now. The best ones are the small, purple cherry tomatoes that burst as soon as I carry them into the house and they warm up. Those never make it to the freezer; in fact, they barely make it in the door. There is a harvest happening at my house, and there is hope of harvest happening there too.



(Rooting and Grounding continued from page 3)

them as well.

It wasn't that they had changed their minds. They still believed He loved them because the Bible told them so; they readily acknowledged that other people felt God's love as real. But for them, the love of God was just a concept, an idea, a theory they believed because they couldn't face the alternative. Yet, they yearned for it to be real for them.

As I thought about Ephesians 3, I prayed that God would help me "lean not to my own understanding," (see Proverbs 3:5) and that he would teach me what I needed to know in order to help people come into a knowledge of His love. He answered that prayer in the next few weeks as I continued to meditate and ask for wisdom and understanding.

One day, as I was journaling, a question occurred to me, "What if someone isn't rooted and grounded in love; what then?" I did a mental backward somersault through the verses, and concluded, "Until a person is rooted and grounded in love, they cannot understand God's love!"

My mind raced, "So, some people don't get it because they aren't able?" "But what keeps them from it?" "If Christ is in our hearts, we are rooted and grounded in love, aren't we?" "Isn't that what happens to a believer at the point of salvation?" "How did it happen for me?" "When did I first feel secure in God's love?" "How did God get it through my thick head

and hard heart?"

In response to the questions, memories came rushing forward.

After the initial relief of connecting with God and surrendering my life to Him, I still had no tangible sense of His love. It was a mystery to me how the people at church and Sunday school seemed so relaxed and happy. Week after week, month after month, I showed up at various gatherings with a gaping emptiness that felt like it would swallow me up. I devoured the company of my new brothers and sisters. Their attention, their teaching, their witness fed me -- but just enough to help me make it to next time. By the time we gathered again, I felt as empty as before.

As I relived my first few months as a believer, understanding dawned: I was rooted and grounded in love through the ministry of the Body of Christ, and it didn't happen all at once. As one of our leadership likes to describe her experience with WGA, "I was allowed to marinate in God's grace."

For me, the dispensing agents of God's grace were the men and women of First Denver Friends Church. As they allowed me to join their community, as they loved me in Christ's name, I became rooted and grounded in His love. And in the process, He that is in me became greater than he that is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

From my own experience and think-

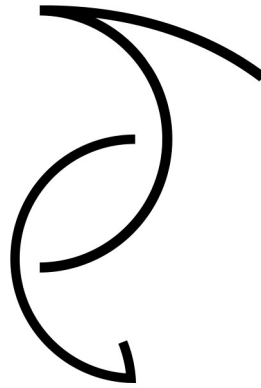
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ing through that of others, and with continued prayer, it became clear to me that WGA was to be a “rooting and grounding” ministry. A place where people can experience God’s love. The main raw material for this process is the loving attention and involvement of WGA staff and leadership: men and women who are willing to take the love they have experienced and offer it to others in the same manner they have received it -- freely, without condition.

It is our prayer that the WGA environment, activities, and the leaders who participate, whether at support group, leadership meetings, in our publications, will be ever-present

dispensers of God’s love and grace. Please pray with us that this will be so!



(Dealing with Loss continued from page 2)

On October 10th, there was a memorial service for Kari at her church. It came as no surprise to anyone that the sanctuary was packed full of people. She had been involved in a number of communities in addition to WGA. Friends from her college and seminary days, as well as her more recent Zumba classes, attended; teachers and parents from the preschool where she taught did too. Many people from church, where she served on the Christian Education committee, also came. Her out-of-town family members experienced the

blessing of seeing so many people gather to honor Kari’s life. Kari impacted many people.

As I remember Kari and the others we have recently lost, I can take comfort in the fact that “it is okay for them to exist.” In fact, they do continue, and not just in our hearts and memories, but in eternity with Christ. We will see them again, whole and complete. They will be free from sickness, addiction, and depression. Oh, what a glorious day that will be!



September In Review

September 13th: WGA presented at Tree of Life Church

September 17th: WGA Board of Directors meeting

September 21st: WGA Leadership meeting

October And Beyond

October 17-19: WGA Leadership Retreat

October 19th: WGA is participating in a missions event at Cherry Creek Presbyterian Church.

November 1st: Intercessory Prayer meeting, 8:00 am at the WGA offices. Come join us as we pray for the needs of the ministry.

November 8th: Family and Friends Gathering.

November 15th: WGA is presenting at Tree of Life Church.

WGA All-Night Prayer Meeting

**November 21st
9:00 pm – 6:00am**

**Please contact the WGA office if you
would like more information
303-863-7757
info@wheregraceabounds.org**

Thursday Night Group

**September 4th: 32 people
September 11th: 29 people
September 18th: 37 people
September 25th: 27 people**

Orientation meeting: 4 new people

WGA Staff

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Scott Kingry
Program Director

Mary Heathman
Founding Director

Steve Huston
Chaplain/Church Liaison

Jill Huston
Family & Friends Coordinator

A Measure of Grace
is edited by
Elodie Ballantine Emig

*Where Grace Abounds exists to
guide and support men and
women who seek to understand
sexuality and relationship, and
to inspire all people to know
and personally appropriate
God's plan for their sexuality
and relationships.*

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