

Pieces of Peace: A Journey of Grief and Joy

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Dedication

To Joshua, Daniel, Lisa, Betsy, Reese, Weston, Sawyer, Mia, and Zoe; the joys of my life.

To my sisters, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, nieces and nephews who have carried this grief with us and made sure we were as okay as possible.

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Thank you, Marcia Miles Ramsey, for allowing me to include your poems in this book. I love you, sister.

Thank you to the friends who have encouraged me to write this book.

Above all, I must acknowledge the faithfulness of God in providing salvation through his Son, and comfort through his Holy Spirit. I am forever a grateful worshipper.

Please Note:

This book includes the recounting of the suicide of my son. The topic of suicide is one that evokes strong emotions and rightly so. I know that there are those who get so depressed they honestly believe the ones that love them would be better off without them and their problems. If you ever find yourself thinking that, please reread this note:

- Nothing in the lives of your loved ones will be easier without you. To the contrary, every day for the rest of their lives will be more difficult.
- No matter what you say in a farewell note, they will, at times, wonder if they did something that added to your decision to die.
- According to some research, the ones you leave behind could be 3 times more likely to commit suicide.
- There is hope. Suicide is not the only option to resolve the problems in your life.
- Somebody needs you to be here.
- Please live another day, that day might be the one when everything looks better to you. Stay around.
- God loves you, problems and all.

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, please reach out for help by calling or texting 988 the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline; this service is available 24/7 and provides confidential support to anyone in crisis or emotional distress.

Please know that you matter and you are NOT alone.

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Introduction

This is a story of the events that have shaped my life since Thursday, September 17, 2020, and a testament to the strength that can emerge from sorrow. It is a story of two profound losses: the suicide of my oldest son in 2020, at age 40 and the death of my husband in 2023, at age 65, from Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA), a rare neurological disease.

This is not an easy story to share, particularly the part about Matthew. As any parent who has lost a child will tell you, it is a different grief, and death to suicide is a different death. His is without a doubt the hardest loss and deepest grief to which I have had to adjust.

But this is also a story of the faithfulness of God throughout the pain and grief. It is a story of peace of soul following chaos of mind.

This is not a story of closure—because closure is a myth when it comes to loss and grief—but it is a story of remembrance, reflection, negotiated peace, and lessons learned. It is an exploration of how we learn to survive things that seem unbearable, accept things that are unacceptable, how we grieve deeply and vividly, how we honor those lost by continuing to live, and how we find pieces of hope and even joy in the wreckage of despair. It is my hope that this story will resonate with anyone who has known loss, anyone seeking solace in the shared experience of grief, and anyone trying to find the plan of a loving God in the moments of questioned faith.

Spring 2020

I was having a talk with Matthew. He was struggling, trying to sort things out in his life, still hopeful of “getting it all together” again and being well. In an honest attempt to encourage him and fully believing my words, I said to him, “Matthew one day you will be able to help others by telling your story.”

He replied, “You will be the one that will have to tell my story.”

At the time I said, “Son, it isn’t my story to tell.”

But here I am, and there he is, and now it is my story to tell.

So, here is my story piece by piece because that is how it happened.

Chapter 1: Endings

February 25, 2023: 10:02 a.m. Our Home

In the days leading up to his death, it was clear Mark was seeing things that I could not see. He was so close to the “other side” that he had conversations with friends who had passed away years ago. The last time it occurred, I was sitting by him, and he was looking intently at the foot of the bed.

“What do you see, honey?” I asked.

“Well, one Matthew.” He replied.

“You see Matthew?”

“Yes”

“Matthew is here?”

“Yes”

“What is he doing?”

“Clearing the way.... he’s clearing the way.”

I sat silent as he watched what I could not see but understood.

It made sense to me. After all, Mark’s disease and slow decline had cleared the way for Matt to leave. It was all connected, they were connected, their lives and their deaths. Matt had died 6 days before Mark’s 63rd birthday in 2020. Mark died 6 days before what would have been Matthew’s 43rd birthday in 2023. The circle was complete.

Matthew was our oldest, the first of three sons. At birth, he looked so much like his dad, that people wondered aloud if I had anything at all to do with his genetic makeup. He was intelligent and active, impatient but attentive. From first grade, he had little tolerance for anything that was superfluous, questioning why things had to be done the way he was told to do them if his way was more direct. He loved learning, thinking, and making others think. He inherited Mark's sense of humor and even improved on it. People liked him because he was funny in a natural way, made them feel accepted, and was generally kind. That is not to say that everyone liked him though. He had the inexplicable urge to question and debate those he perceived as arrogant, even if he agreed with their stance. It was an irritating trait to some, but one that endeared him to others. He laughed at himself. Like Mark, he had managed to retain his sense of humor and keen wit, even when he lost everything else.

September 17, 2020: 3:05 a.m. Greenville, SC

“Mom, Dad needs to talk to you.” Daniel stood at the bedroom door, phone in hand, his wife Betsy close behind him. “Oh no” I said, as if I already knew the news.

“Honey, Matt’s gone.” Mark’s voice was both calm and firm but the pain in it was unmistakable.

My throat felt tight, and I thought I would choke. “No.” “How?”

“He took a gun into the back yard.....”

He paused and I think I started crying, but I know I started trembling uncontrollably. Dan and Betsy comforted me as best they could.

My first complete thought was “He is not in pain anymore” and I felt a strange relief. But relief was followed quickly by a tormenting thought- “Where is he, heaven or hell?” When that thought hit me, I said to Mark. “Please, please tell me he is at peace, I have to know he’s at peace.”

“Gloria, honey” his voice broke, “he took his Bible outside with him.....”

My mind went numb for a moment and then I remembered the difficulty I had going to sleep that night. To help me rest, I had picked up the Bible by the bed and started to read. While I do not usually pick random passages, on this night I had picked up the Bible and opened it. It fell open to Mark chapter 5. This is the story of Jesus crossing a lake to do one thing, meet a man full of demons, and deliver that man from his torment. When the man was “in his right mind” Jesus told him “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” When I read that last statement, it was as if it jumped off the page. “Tell them how he has had mercy on you.” I thought of Matthew and how I desired peace for him because he was fighting so hard to regain himself. I had prayed, I had prayed for Matthew and for our whole family. I still had not been able to sleep and was awake when Dan and Betsy came to the door.

I was in Greenville to help Dan and Betsy as they adjusted to the new routine of being parents. Their first child, a beautiful girl, had been born a month before and Betsy's mom and I had taken turns being on hand to help around the house and give Betsy time to recover. It was not lost on me that 40 years earlier I had been in Greenville giving birth to my first child, Matthew David Evans.

It was also not lost on me that Zoe would never know "Uncle Matt." He had called me around lunch time on Wednesday and after our short conversation, he called me right back, "Mom, I know I tease you about all the pictures you are sending me of Zoe, but I love that little girl." I said, "I know you do and she's going to love her Uncle Matt!"

And now, Matthew was gone, his life ended by his own action, but I knew God had indeed had mercy on him. I knew it. Somehow, I finished the conversation with Mark, assured Dan and Betsy I would be okay for the rest of the night and began to plan my three-hour trip home.

There would be no sleep for me after the call, and I decided I would head out as soon as I felt I could drive safely. Mark called me again around 5:00 a.m. and told me that his brother, Tom, could come to bring me home and we would worry about getting the car back from Greenville later. By that time, Daniel had already offered to drive me home, Joshua, our middle son had offered to come get me and my sister, Marcia, had as well. I told Mark that I was okay to drive and that in fact I needed to drive myself because I wanted to be alone.

Mark could not have come to get me, because by this time he was not able to drive. The PCA had advanced to the point where his ability to control his left arm was almost gone. His visual perception had degraded also making everything more difficult and driving certainly impossible. At this point however, and thankfully, his mental capabilities were still as strong as ever. The other component of his personality, the spiritual one, was also anchored as always in his relationship with Christ. When Joshua called me around 5:30, after I had started the drive home, he said that his dad was taking some quiet time to have his usual morning devotion.

That statement did not surprise me. That was who he was, and it let me know that he felt the same peace I had about Matthew's place in eternity. Our world had been forever shattered into pieces we could never retrieve or understand, but the peace of God had held. The everlasting arms had not failed us. As I drove home, I prayed, "Oh, God, please let it hold".

Pieces of Peace from that day: 5:30 a.m. 09/17/2020

I was driving away from a house where a new soul had just made an entrance. Zoe Julia had just begun her days here, part of our family on earth. I was driving toward a house where a soul had left this earth. As much pain as I was in, I knew Matthew had joined our family on the other side of life. In my new grief, I held on to that peace. **Life goes on. That is a double statement. It goes on here without the ones who have left, and it goes on there in eternity.**

Pieces of Peace from my notes:

I do not tell you this lightly, nor do I encourage you to believe anything until I have looked hard and long into the sorrow in my own heart and life. But this I know...

It is difficult, but not impossible....

To have hope when despair hangs in the air

To find a smile in your heart when sorrow lives there

To believe that joy is worth the fight

And that this struggle ends, not in darkness, but in light.

It is difficult, but not impossible....

To live for those still here, while missing those who've gone

To keep walking, breathing, loving as you make your own way home

To believe that joy is worth the fight

And that this struggle ends, not in darkness, but in light.

"The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10)

Chapter 2: Beginning of the Endings

Summer of 2008

“Mom, something is wrong with me.”

I do not know the exact date that Matthew said it, but it was in the summer of 2008. At the age of 28, he was successful in his career, driving a new truck and presenting a broad smile. However, almost overnight, he began experiencing shingles, an uncommon condition for someone of his age. The health insurance company deemed the situation unusual as well and subsequently refused to cover the costly shots required to alleviate the pain associated with Postherpetic Neuralgia (PHN), which resulted from the shingles.

At the time, Mark and I were unaware that the underlying cause of the outbreak was mental illness and stress resulting from PTSD. It would take nearly a decade for us to understand the significance of his statement, “Something is wrong with me.”

In hindsight, I sometimes feel that we should have recognized the signs and taken more action. However, the reality is that we acted based on the information and understanding available to us at that moment. It was not enough, and I know that, but I am not sure anything on this earth would have been enough. Matt was fighting an invisible enemy, PTSD and Bipolar Disorder 2 . They played ‘hide and seek’ in the shadows of his brain and in the depths of his mind. By the time Mark and I found out what was wrong, the Matthew we knew was all but gone.

Did you know: “**Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is a mental health condition that's caused by an extremely stressful or terrifying event – either being part of it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety and uncontrollable thoughts about the event. – [Mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org)

Bipolar disorder can start at any age, but usually it's diagnosed in the teenage years or early 20s. Symptoms can differ from person to person, and symptoms may vary over time.” – [Mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org)

Spring of 2017

“Honey, there is something wrong with me and I think I need an MRI.” It was April 2017. Mark stepped out from in front of the mirror, with his tie in his hand.

“I’ve been tying my own tie since I was 13. I can tell you how to tie it for me, if you will, but I can’t get my hands to coordinate to do it.” I remember thinking maybe it was that he was stressed, because by this time we were doing all we could to save Matthew! I thought “maybe he is just in a hurry this morning” or any number of things that would self-correct.

But I was wrong. He went to his doctor, had an MRI and her face told us all we needed to know. Something was very wrong with him, and she knew it could not be fixed. It would be another 3 years before we had a name for the disease that was slowly taking his life. Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA). This disease also seemed to play games with the brain. Mark could write the word “five” but could no longer write the number. And then, one day he could no longer write at all. On bad days, I wonder why we did not see the small indicators of this disease earlier. I tell myself I should have seen it, maybe if we had known sooner, maybe, maybe what? The truth is, we did the best we could with what we knew at the time. We went to the neurologist that was considered the expert in this field, I joined an international group to find out the latest research. Mark’s neurologist told us that he was looking daily for any updated research that would help us. We did all we could do. It was not enough to save his brain, to save his life or to even extend it.

A Little About Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA)

It is the gradual and progressive degeneration of the outer layer of the brain in the part of the brain located in the back of the head. There are no treatments known to slow or halt its progression. Because PCA resembles Alzheimer’s disease in some patients, it has been suggested that drugs used to temporarily alleviate brain dysfunction in Alzheimer’s disease may be helpful in posterior cortical atrophy, but this is not proven.-ALZ.org

A note from my personal pondering: A prophecy in a picture.

They took a trip, Mark and Matthew, and stopped to take pictures on a bridge. The first one shows Matthew mid bridge, hands on hips, glancing back at where he's been. Mark was next on the same bridge, almost the same stance. They crossed on, Matthew first, finding nothing here worth turning around for. Mark followed seeing more on the other side than this side could offer. I stare at those pictures, and I ponder, 'What waits on that other side and when will I find that bridge?'



Chapter 3: In Between

The drive home accomplished several things and, in the process, taught me something about how I handle trauma. Driving meant I had to focus on something that required my attention in the present. Other than three brief phone conversations that came in, Joshua, Marcia, and Mark, the car was quiet.

My brain went through a list of things, as if checking them off. Matthew would not be there when I got home, he was gone. He did not want a funeral. He wanted to be cremated, and his ashes scattered. He had expressed this wish many times and as recently as his hospital stay the prior December. I knew I would never see him again here. Matthew was gone. There was not one thing I could ever do for him again. There was not one thing I could do to change the ending of his story.

“Oh God, help me, God help us all!”

Refocusing, I knew what I had to do in the present. I needed to get home and concentrate on Mark. He was the one with bladder cancer, prostate cancer and PCA. He was the one who had been making changes to our property, preparing all legal documents so that when he passed our sons and I would not have to worry about such things. He was the one preparing us for what to do without him. Matthew had been helping Mark in those preparations, and now Matthew was gone.

In the silence of my car, I cried, and I asked aloud the only question that made sense to me at that time, “Matthew, What are we supposed to do without you? How could you leave us?”

From the Mayo Clinic (Mayoclinic.org)

A loved one's suicide can trigger intense emotions. For example:

- Shock. Disbelief and emotional numbness might set in.
- Anger. You might be angry with your loved ...or angry with yourself or others for missing clues about suicidal intentions.
- Guilt. You might replay "what if" and "if only"
- Despair. You might be gripped by sadness, loneliness or helplessness.
- Confusion. Many people try to make some sense out of the death or try to understand why their loved one took his or her life. But you'll likely always have some unanswered questions.
- Feelings of rejection. You might wonder why your relationship wasn't enough to keep your loved one from dying by suicide.

Matthew moved in with Mark and me in April of 2017. It was supposed to be a temporary arrangement. He had sold his condo and was looking to get a new start with his own IT business. While we did not have all the information that I have now, we did know he had been diagnosed in 2012 with Bipolar Disorder 2, adult ADD, chronic insomnia, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

We did not fully understand everything that was going on with him. He had hit a very low place in his life. The best thing that happened was on March 3, 2017, his 37th birthday, he had rededicated his life to the Lord as Mark and I had prayed with him. While he had always been a believer, his faith had taken a hit. He readily admitted that he was struggling and yet he prayed for others and believed for them. He struggled but he knew Christ loved him and had died for him. He struggled, don't we all at times? He knew he was fighting something that was bigger than he was, but I am not sure he even understood all the reasons why. Mark and I certainly did not know then about the event that had precipitated the PTSD. What we did know was that in 2008, beginning with the shingles outbreak, his health began to be of concern and while he had periods of improvement of symptoms and productive days, the physical pain always returned, and his mental health was suffering.

Pieces of Peace from a note Matthew sent to a friend in 2008..

.....I've heard all the arguments about the Bible being changed and twisted by the Vatican over the centuries, but I still choose to believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and that He is the only way to heaven. I fully understand that me praying to a Jewish carpenter who was executed by the Romans over 2000 years go seems as outlandish to some people as reincarnation sounds to me.One of my favorite Bible verses lately (and I don't know many of them at all, a fact that I'm ashamed of) is Philippians 2:12 "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"... that's what I've been trying to do for last few years.

The following notes are in Matt's words from an account he left behind:

3/2/ 2009 "I had the MRI done today, I've gotta go back to the Dr. next week for him to tell me what exactly can be done for the pain and numbness. Hopefully the answer won't be more painkillers, I've stopped taking them because I hate feeling like I'm thinking through mud all the time." -

2/3/2010 ". I had shingles again in December, lasted for 2 weeks, I'm not taking the drugs this time though. They didn't do much good the first time around, so what's the point?" -

4/14/2010 "...I went back to the Dr today because the pain in my shoulder/arm has returned with a vengeance, luckily, it's not full-blown shingles again. Back on pain killers and nerve meds. I was "drug free" for almost 6 months and doing much better, they don't know or seem to know why this keeps reoccurring...oh well, I can live with it."

By 2012 he was fighting mental and physical health issues. After multiple trips to medical specialists, he was diagnosed with all the illnesses mentioned above. The doctor prescribed two medicines and referred him to a mental health counselor. We thought he was on the way to recovery. So did he, as his personal notes indicate:

02/26/2013

"...started taking (medicine in November of 2012). It's been very helpful with curbing the anxious feelings. I've also started seeing a therapist / counselor. It's very therapeutic to just talk with someone about all the thoughts bouncing around in my head. Having a neutral third party listen and give insight has been a relief that I've needed for some time. I think I bottled up stress and negative feelings for too long and they later manifested themselves in anxiety attacks and depression"

Shingles can cause nerve damage, leading to a condition called postherpetic neuralgia (PHN). PHN is characterized by persistent pain in the area where the shingles rash occurred, even after the rash has healed.- Cleveland Clinic (myclevelandclinic.org)

Unfortunately, every medication he was given provided only temporary relief. Sadly, if there was a negative side effect to the medication, he would be the one in 100,000 it affected. Some of the side effects were worse than the disease symptoms. Additionally, while the counseling did help, it would have been more beneficial if he had been totally transparent with the therapist from the beginning.

03/12/13 From Matthew's Notes:

“I had an overwhelming sense of dread. It quickly grew into a panic. I was afraid that something horrible was going to happen at any moment. I had to pull over on the interstate and call dad so that he could talk me through what was happening. It was terrifying, my heart was pounding, and I was sweating profusely. I eventually made it home after stopping several times to take a break from driving. It took me almost 3 hours to make a 1.5-hour trip.I went to the doctor again ...and he prescribed (two medicines). For the first few days everything was fine, but then I started hallucinating and having irrational thoughts and fears. I would wake up in the middle of the night and think that something terrible had happened to my parents or friends. During these nights I would drive long distances and have no memory of doing it. I came to my senses in a parking lot in Conway one night and had no memory of driving from LC to Horry County. It was terrifying.... I thought I could handle it myself but over the next few weeks my behavior began to terrify me.....I went to the doctor again.. He took me off (one medicine) and prescribed (another medication), the black outs stopped immediately”.

Matthew had a secret that was killing him, and he had signed papers that bound him by oath to keep that secret between only those involved in the operation itself. Suffice it to say that he, along with some other young men in the IT field, had been tasked with a good and legitimate assignment: locate and help authorities apprehend someone who was a dangerous criminal. Eventually they completed the task, however in the process innocent people died.

Mark and I would never have known even part of what happened if there had not been an incident where the information was leaked along with other sensitive documents relating to that and similar events that had taken place at the same time.

What we learned later was that Matt's anxiety attacks, and depression became unmanageable when he was called to a meeting and told that people with criminal intentions had access to the personal information of those involved in the 2008 event. The names, relatives, addresses and other sensitive information had been compromised in the leak, and he was informed that there was nothing they (the ones who authorized the task) could do to retrieve that information. The upside of that was that he could talk honestly to a therapist because his involvement had been leaked. However, we know that he chose not to disclose to the therapist. The obvious downside was that he felt that he had put us in the sights of dangerous people with unlimited means to extract vengeance. He became extremely protective of us to the point of paranoia. He then began to think that because innocent people had died due to the event, God was going to punish him by taking some of his family. I learned later that he thought maybe giving his life in exchange for his dad's would somehow pay that "debt" to God.

Matt had become an alcoholic which only added to his problems. Of all the things he faced and fought, this brought him the most shame and left him feeling the most helpless. The alcohol use had started as self-medication to help him fight anxiety and to aid in sleep. Ironically it was the one drug he felt he could control. That is a fact. His goal always was to be "drug-free" and that included alcohol. He was fighting on every level to crawl out of the darkness that had slowly taken over his life.

Alcohol may temporarily relieve PTSD symptoms, but it eventually worsens them in intensity and frequency of episodes. One reason is that alcohol alters your brain and central nervous system, preventing proper responses to coping with anxiety, depression, and other symptoms. In addition, alcohol interferes with sleep. - alcoholhelp.com

Like most everything about his illnesses, we learned this in pieces. What we knew for sure was that what happened in 2008 was the beginning of the end for Matthew. God forgive me but I have said, "They may as well have put a bullet in his head that day because that is when he started dying."

The drive home had brought me to Columbia and a rest stop. I knew I needed to take a stretch break and brace myself for the rest of the trip.

It was a strange feeling because 4 days earlier I had stopped there on the way to Greenville. Four days earlier, Matthew was at home with Mark. Two weeks earlier, he had completed another course in the degree program he had started. Three months earlier, he had told me he wanted to finish his master's degree. Five months earlier, he had said, "I am getting my confidence back." Six months earlier, he was sober. Six months earlier, he had gone to his first AA meeting. Joshua, who was attending as part of a class he was taking for his M.A in Counseling, had ask Matt to come with him. To Joshua's surprise, Matthew had followed through and introduced himself, "I am Matt, and I am an alcoholic". That would be the first and last AA meeting, because COVID restrictions shut it down. He looked for one online. He was trying. He prayed. He read his Bible. He memorized Psalm 91 and prayed it. We prayed with him; we prayed for him. Nine months earlier, he had survived an 18-day stay in the hospital, including 6 days on a vent. He came out with a new resilience, a new view of life, he was sober. He had hope. We had hope. But something had changed.

For one, Mark's condition had changed. He had come through bladder cancer and every checkup since the surgery had been clear. As a precaution, he was having regular tests done by the urologist and his primary care physician. Tests done in February of 2020 showed some troubling blood work, biopsies followed, and by March of 2020, he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer and was facing 45 radiation treatments. In addition to these problems, we knew that he was having increased issues with his vision, the use of his left arm and overall coordination issues. He had retired at the end of 2018, on the advice of his neurologist, who was trying to delay the progression of "whatever we are dealing with, because tests were inconclusive".

Mark and I were concerned about Matthew and tried to be as positive about Mark's condition as possible for as long as possible. We did not want to cause a relapse in him. It was complicated, but it is what you do when you love each other, and you want to protect each other. It was easy to share the good news with him that the oncologist felt sure the radiation would be successful in the prostate cancer because we caught it early and the full body scan had shown no cancer anywhere else. However, the neurological prognosis was dismal.

With the latest round of tests and consultations, we had learned that his condition had a name, Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA), sometimes called Benson's syndrome. One by one a line of specialists had come to the room to talk to us only to end up by saying, "This is so rare, and we think it may be a variant of Alzheimer's disease although some research shows it may be a disease of its own". The lead physician said, "There is no cure and as far as we know today, no effective treatment. We can prescribe medication that may help with the symptoms, such as the tremor in your left arm, but it will not slow the progression of the disease. I am sorry." He then asked Mark if there was anything he wanted to ask them, and Mark, being Mark said, "Well it would really help me if you would write me a prescription for chocolate chip cookies, my wife seems to think I don't need them and I think they would really help me. Could you do that?" The neurologists, all of them, looked at me as if to say, "Oh this disease has done more than the MRI showed." I smiled, shook my head and Mark started laughing. He said, "You know what, you neurologists have no sense of humor." They all smiled then and shook their heads. He continued, as only Mark could and let them know that this was all in God's hands and he would live each day the best he could and not worry about the next. They had compassion in their eyes. He told me later he felt sorry for the doctors that had to tell him such bad news.

Mark asked me to not share the details with Matt "just yet". He wanted to give Matt more time to get his bearings and to build up mentally and physically. He knew what this would do to Matthew. So, I kept it.

Matthew was not fooled. Of course, he saw the slow but steady progression of the disease in his dad. One day he had a talk with Mark and told him he wanted to know the truth. He could see what was happening and he wanted to know it all. He wanted to help. So, Mark told me to send him all the notes from the doctor. I did.

Stages of Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA).

Mark was between stages 4-5 by this time.

Stage 1: No impairment (everything is normal)

Stage 2: Very mild decline -may include problems only recognized in hindsight

Stage 3: Mild decline -something is wrong; there are things that one cannot do

Stage 4: Moderate decline -problems are debilitating in everyday activities

Stage 5: Moderately severe decline problems are now serious

Stage 6: Severe decline significant problems with thinking and sensory abilities

Stage 7: Very severe decline (many basic abilities are lost, and care needs resemble those of individuals with end-stage typical Alzheimer's disease)

From: Rare Dementia Support online information

Once he knew what Mark was facing, Matthew spent a great deal of time trying to find things that would make life easier for his dad. He joined in the discussions regarding the legal things that needed to be done so that Mark would have complete peace of mind about me, after he was gone. We made an appointment with our lawyer to put some things in Matthew's name, and we were to be in his office the Monday after I returned from Greenville. Matthew was researching details about the disease, and reaching out to people he thought might know something that would help us.

Still, something else had changed. I knew before I left for Greenville on Monday morning that he was struggling with something. I thought that it may have been because of a recent suicide in our community. The man was about the same age as Matthew. While he did not know the man personally, he knew some of his family. He had asked me how the man's children were doing but before I could answer he said, "Never mind mom, I know how they are doing, they will never get over this. Suicide is the death that keeps on killing." He had lost friends to suicide, it seemed every death was personal to him.

On what would be the last Sunday night of his life, he said to me, "Dad doesn't deserve this. I deserve anything bad that ever happens to me, I deserve it. Dad doesn't deserve this."

I replied, "Matthew, this isn't about what we deserve or don't deserve. This is life and bad things sometimes come to our lives."

In retrospect, I can understand that his "irrational fears" about something bad happening to his dad, had started to have "factual evidence" and in his mind, maybe God was indeed punishing him for the loss of life in 2008.

My mind had retraced these pieces of the past 12 years as I continued my trip home. I was almost ready to pull into the driveway, and I mentally prepared myself for the reality I knew awaited me. I could no longer have the quiet of the car, the focus of the highway or the privacy to scream. I was home, Matthew was gone, and Mark would be waiting for me as we faced the darkest day in our lives.

Chapter 4: “What Shall We Then Say?”

When I stepped in the door, I looked at the place where Matt usually sat and began to cry. Mark’s eyes had a look that I had never seen in the 40 plus years of our marriage. I wanted to comfort him, and I could see that he wanted to comfort me, but there were no words that were going to ease this pain. We had faced many difficulties together and often joked about the fact that when he was going through a rough time and felt ‘down’ I was optimistic and when I felt ‘down’ he was the one hopeful. In our naivety we had said to each other, “Let’s never be down at the same time”. It had served us well for over 40 years but today was different.

This was not just a “Difficult time, things not going well, rough day” event. This was a “Where do we go from here; How do we survive this?” This was a “What did we miss; What should we have done, Where did we fail, What happened? We are never going to be the same and our hearts are shattered!” event.

September 19, 2020, From my personal notes:

Matthew, my precious son, you fought a valiant battle. While I prayed, hoped and believed for a different ending to your story, this is the one that is written. You were greatly loved, a gift from God in all ways and I will not rest until I see you again. May our Lord wipe away the tears from your eyes and give you the peace that so eluded you here. Forever you are loved, and missed, forever my heart is torn!

Mark told me we were to be at the funeral home later that day and I needed to get an obituary prepared. We knew there would not be a funeral. Matthew did not want one and besides that, with Mark’s health conditions, and COVID restrictions, it would have been almost impossible anyway. So, we decided Joshua would eulogize him later online in a video Facebook post and share it to our page. Joshua did a great job under the most difficult circumstances.

When we scattered Matthew’s ashes, at the place where he had been the happiest and carefree, Joshua read the scriptures Mark had picked out; Romans 8: 31-38 and I Corinthians 15:51-58 (KJV) and I read the poem, “Death Be Not Proud”. We said our farewells and left to begin the rest of our lives without Matthew.

“What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (KJV-Public Domain) Romans 8: 31-38 and I Corinthians 15:51-58

Death Be Not Proud- Holy Sonnet 10- John Donne

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow

Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well

And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,

And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die. -(Public Domain)

Chapter 5: The Things People Say

We believed Matthew was covered by the saving grace of our Lord. We had peace about it. Thank God we did because some “Christians” found it necessary to express their opinion as if God was relying on them to pass His judgement. Let me say again, I believe Matthew died covered by the grace of God. But even he had not, God is the one who will determine his place in eternity, and I can live with that!

Pieces of peace from my notes: October 1, 2020

If there has not already been, there will be a day when all you say you believe will be tested. That is not the day to falter, that is not the day to listen to the enemy of your soul, that is not the day to decide to re-evaluate your life’s philosophy. That is the day to straighten your shoulders, look deep into the darkness and say, “I may not feel it, I may not see it, I may not understand it, but I step out on it.” On what? On the faith that has sustained so many others through like circumstances, the faith that places the planks in the bridge one step ahead of your foot, the faith that is the life blood of hope! No, this is not the day for sinking, this is the day for standing.

“Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. “
Ephesians 6:13

I do believe that most folks mean well when they say things after a sad event or a death, but the Southern saying “Bless their heart” was made for times like this. Mark’s sense of humor carried us through some of the comments we heard. On occasion I would say. ‘Bless their heart, they meant well’. Mark would say, “Bless their heart? No, kick their butt!”

Someone said to Joshua, “It is really too bad about your brother, anyone who commits suicide goes to hell.” I do not understand the motivation behind that statement, but it is what it is. It is unkind and unnecessary.

Two years later, when we lost Mark, someone suggested that perhaps we were cursed because of the loss of several family members in a short period. Seriously, they meant it seriously. I wondered out loud if that Christian ever read the book of Job? Not that we considered ourselves “Jobs” but you know what I mean.

As for me, I fought the urge to ask on occasion, “Did that comment even go through your brain before it came out your mouth, or did you just hear it the same time I did?”

Other grievors have shared similar encounters. I wondered if I have made the same blunders in my attempt to comfort others. So, I will restate my original premise that most folks mean well, bless their heart!

By far, the comments and cards we received were of a different, more compassionate and helpful nature. Matthew had good friends who shared from their hearts how his life had made a positive impact on their own. Many of them were surprised to learn that he had been struggling, because he managed to hide it from them, sometimes by just pulling away. The ones that knew had walked with him in his struggle, tried to pull him out, and felt the same disillusionment , shock and disappointment we felt in the way it had ended.

Friends who had lost children said the right things in the right tone and hit a chord that somehow increased our peace and comfort. Some of them sent their phone numbers and told me to call them anytime. They assured me that they could listen and do so with understanding. I knew they could, because they had walked this same road. That gave me hope. They survived, somehow; they survived and so we could too.

From my personal notes and my Facebook post on 10/06/2020.

A few days ago, a middle-aged man died after suffering from several different types of cancer. Over a period of 10 years, he sought and received treatments from some fine dedicated doctors and facilities. He took medicine some of which had worse side effects than the cancers he was fighting. He prayed for healing and was prayed for by others, but in the end, he lost this battle. He left a testimony that he had seen the other side and was at peace there. Nobody questioned that testimony.

Now, go back and re-read this story and replace the word “cancer” with “mental illness.” When you do, keep the last sentence as it is. This is the story of my son and the sons and daughters of many others.

Pieces of Comfort

First: The comfort from wisdom.

A longtime friend, someone I consider a wise, prayerful and gracious lady, sent a card with these words. “Gloria, I have no words, just lots of love and prayers.” I so appreciated that this friend who had suffered many things in life, but not the loss of a son, did not try to tell me that she understood my grief, or that God knew best (although I know He does), or that I would one day be okay. She spoke the greatest wisdom from a loving heart.

Second: The comfort from acknowledgment.

Matthew had the best friends. He really had friends that loved him. Some, despite his many battles, and others maybe because of his many battles. Some because he hid his battles from them and focused on their battles with them. Whatever the reason, his suicide was in no way connected to lack of friends. With all the cards and messages we received, many contained notes about how Matthew’s life impacted the life of the writer. They validated his existence. They acknowledged what Mark, and I knew; he was a ‘good and kind’ man. He left a positive imprint on their lives, and they would be forever grateful for having known him.

Third: The comfort from shared experience.

I received a letter from someone that I previously considered an acquaintance, and co-worker. Our paths rarely crossed. Now I call her a good friend. Our sons knew each other very well and Matthew called her younger son a best friend. Her letter was absolutely a lifeline for me. Why? She was a mother who lost an oldest son 20 years ago, the same way I lost Matt. She took time to share with me truth and comfort. She could say she understood how I felt, she could be honest and tell me that yes, the loss is permanent, but that there will be good days. Life will go on, but the grieving will pop up along the way. The grief will be there always, but it will become bearable. Her words offered experience and comfort. She sent me her phone number and offered to listen when I wanted to talk. In addition to her letter to me, her husband sent a message to Mark along with a poem he had written about his own son. He could share with Mark the experience of such a loss from the heart of grieving father.

Pieces of Suggestions: Recently in a group grief session, we discussed how awkward or uncomfortable trying to talk to someone who has had a loss can be. We all agreed that at some point we have thought “I don’t know what to say to you, but I feel as if I need to say something!” when in a line to comfort families at a memorial service or funeral. We began to make a list of things the group members thought would help in such a situation:

1. Keep it short. We all agreed, we could not begin to remember the condolences that went beyond “I love you” “I am praying for you.” “I am so sorry.” Those we could remember.
2. In the hours and maybe even few days, after the loss, if you text your condolences, please add, “Don’t worry about calling or texting me back, I just had to be in contact. Love you, Praying for you”
3. In the first few weeks if you are going to call, unless you are a close relative of the person experiencing the loss please text first and ask, “Is this a good time to call you, if not I understand, and you can call me later.”
4. Be specific about your offers to help and follow up with a card, or a text, in the days that follow the funeral. Example: “I know your children may need a break from all the stress since your mother’s service. Would you like for me to take them to the park with my kids for a couple of hours?” “You probably have not had time or wanted to cut your grass; I can be there on Tuesday evening to cut it if that is convenient. I don’t have to come in the house.”
5. Christians who suffer a loss know God is good, they know God has a plan, they know the loved one is better off, they know God knows what he’s doing, they know it and they believe it. They just may not be able to reconcile what they know with what they may be feeling at the time. They just need to have some time to work all that out with God. Just pray for them and love them.
6. Be there. Let them cry ashamedly, listen to their grief. If they do need someone to cut the grass, water the plants, take the car for an oil change, or go out to the cemetery with them, please do.
7. Be kind, be patient, and when in doubt about what to say, be quiet and just be there.

Chapter 6: Fragile Pieces of Peace

If Mark was going to precede me to Heaven anyway, and I was going to lose Matthew anyway, I am so thankful God left Mark here to help me survive those first months after Matthew's death. Yes, I realize how selfish that makes me, but Mark was my safe place, my calm voice and my strength in those first days, weeks and months.

One day after I returned from a counseling session, I told him that my counselor, Paul, had listen to me explain that I needed closure, I needed to put Matthew to rest. Paul had questioned me about how closure would look and feel to me. Eventually, he had said, "Gloria think about what closure means and how it would look to you in grief. We will talk about it next time." He knew what I would discover, there is no closure to be found in grief, not closure as I was hoping for. This is especially true in a grief where the life was one "cut short". Paul reminded me that, like most of life's events, grief is not linear. We want it to be, we want to think that we will move past the event and leave it in a neat package behind us. Not much in life works that way and certainly not loss.

Our past experiences shape our present and our future. Too often we pack up the grief, the sorrow, the losses, the trauma and instead of recognizing the long-term impact they hold, we put them in a bundle. Then, not being able to lay them aside, we strap them to us, and they weigh us down. The truth is those things, that "stuff" will accompany us forever, but we can find ways that are less destructive to weave them into the rest of our journey. We can find ways that make those losses enrich and enhance our usefulness to others, we can allow them to cripple our potential, or worse, we can allow them to cause bitterness that taints everything else we will do forever.

I was pondering all of this when Mark interrupted my thoughts: **"Gloria, We are having to accept the unacceptable. We must come to terms with this. You are looking for closure, honey, and there is no closure. Sometimes, the best we can hope for is a negotiated peace, God knows what He is doing."**

Of course, God knew what he was doing, but I didn't. It did not make sense to me. It was not long before the questions and the second guessing overtook my mind. Why didn't we...? What if we had...? We should have..., We could have..., If only I had. The "would've, could've, should've" trio occupied my thoughts and always ended in "But we didn't," "Why did this happen?" "Why?"

This is a common theme particularly among grieving parents. The underlying causation is guilt. How did we miss this? There is another component as Christians that we are almost afraid to acknowledge, but it floats to the top of the grief and cannot be ignored.

It is the weighty question that always plays around the edges of our minds whenever a tragedy occurs. You know it, you have heard it too. It rushes from our numbed minds and broken hearts, out our lips, "Why did God, whom we love and serve allow this to happen?"

Many years ago, I stood with a close friend beside her husband's casket. She hung on to me like a frightened child and out of the pure honesty of her broken heart said, "Why, Gloria, why did this happen to him, to us? Why?" I did not answer her. I did not even try. I just held on to her until she cried it out for the moment.

Recently, my son Josh had a similar experience, he found himself kneeling in front of a broken-hearted woman who had just become a widow, and she asked the same thing. He had an answer, the only true answer in most cases, "I don't know, I don't know. I only know I'm praying for you to have peace."

After Matthew died, some who knew him asked us, "Why?" I know there are others hurting, others who have lost their loved ones to suicide, and who can spend a lifetime asking the tormenting and endless questions starting with "Why?"

In our case, yes, we know some reasons that may have contributed to Matthew feeling that he could not go on. He was being treated for a variety of illnesses, physical and mental. Still, we also know he had never scored high as a suicide risk on any of the psychological evaluations he took. The only real answer to "Why?" is now in eternity with Matthew.

The struggle in my spirit, however, turned to a different and maybe more difficult question. Not “Why would God allow this?” but “How could he have allowed this?” We were seeking help in all areas: physical, mental and spiritual. We were sure Matthew was going to find himself and reestablish his connection with a good life. He had a good life once, with all that meant. He had been successful in his career, he had many friends, he had been in a relationship with a beautiful, intelligent woman, he was the epitome of a caring son and annoying older brother, and aggravating uncle. He invested in the church with his time and his resources. But he had lost so much of that life. I was disappointed for him and us, I felt let down, but I did not dare voice that.

As a matter of fact, I had a journal I was keeping. In it I recorded prayers, thoughts, scriptures, pleas, anything related to interceding for Matt. I had “reminded” God of all the parents in the Bible that approached Jesus for help, and I would say, “Lord, I am every parent that ever asked you to have mercy on their child. I am that parent. Please have mercy.” As if He needed reminding, I told him, “Your son died and defeated hell, so my son and others could come to Heaven.” “You paid too great a price for his life to be wasted.” “Lord, Matthew’s life is important, but his soul is more important. He belongs to you. We gave him to you as a baby, he asked you to save him as a child, was baptized and rededicated his life to you as an adult. He is yours.” I poured all I had to pour, I thought, into that journal. After Matthew died, I burned it. At the time, I did not want Joshua and Daniel to find it and think God had failed to hear me. I wish I had not burned it because I know now, my sons may well be wiser and more mature in their walk with Christ than am I. They would have understood that my prayers and thoughts were more about preparing my heart for what was to come, than for preventing it.

It came as a great surprise to me therefore, when my 7-year-old grandson innocently voiced that heaviest question of my soul:

“Mimi, What happens when God lets us down?”

This question caught me off guard, especially because it came from the backseat of my car. My first thought (after a very long silence) was to say ‘that will never happen ‘ but I could not say that because I knew I had been “let down” myself.

How could I answer this seven-year-old in a way that he would know I was not just giving an easy, shallow answer? I wanted to give him something that would carry him through those times when he will feel that God has let him down. After some more reflection, I had an answer. “God is a good father and if He has to let you down by not doing or giving you something you want, in order to do what is best for you, then he will allow you to feel that He has let you down!” As I answered his question, I realized I was answering out loud the very question I had not dared to speak myself but had carried in my heart for some time now. He may “let me down”, but He will never fail me!

Since September 17, 2020, I have come to understand more fully the concepts of faith and trust. Like all good parents, God is not afraid to disappoint us if that means doing what is best for us and those we pray for. Also, I have studied in scripture times when God said, “No”.

No is an answer. Like a good parent, God is not afraid to say, “No”. While one of the most difficult times to trust God is when He has disappointed us, it is the most important time to trust Him. He is not afraid to hurt us, but he will never harm us! “Disappointed by His answer” does not equal “disappointed in Him or His will”. Our Loving Father will never fail us. Jesus lived this out in the Garden of Gethsemane.

From my personal notes:

I prayed for an answer. I wanted a ‘yes’, even a ‘maybe’, or a ‘wait’ but I did not want a ‘no’. I wanted a healing, a cure, a restoration, anything but a ‘no’. I wanted an answer.

‘No’ is an answer. It is a hard answer.

God says "no" to prayers and requests for various reasons. His ways are not my ways, I may never understand. To rephrase an old quote: Father, I must trust your Heart in this, because I cannot see your Hand.

Your heart is love. God help me, help us. ‘No’ is hard.

Pieces of Peace:

One of Matthew's friends sent us a note: "I pray your faith will withstand this loss". Precious words to us. Jesus had prayed that same prayer for Simon Peter and told him "... I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail." - Luke 22:32

The morning Matt died, Daniel had to call my sisters to let them know before the word started getting out. When he called Marcia, she said following the initial shock and trauma she felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and a calm assurance in the words that entered her mind, "My compassions do not fail." (Reference Lamentations 3:22-23)

Rhetta shared that in her prayer she felt the Holy Spirit said to her, "I hold the power of life and death in my hands. Matthew was tired and wanted to come home, I let him." This was before we had read his letter.

Nelwyn also felt the peace and assurance that only God can give at such a time to his children.

My peace and yes, my faith may have been fragile at times, but it was holding. Thank God, it was holding.

Pieces of Peace from the Bible (KJV-Public Domain)

"As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause, who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number" Job 5:8-9

"I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." 2 Timothy 1 : 12-13

Pieces of Peace from Matthew's last letter to us. 9/16/2020. 11:45pm

"Please forgive me. I am tired... I am so tired... I have seen the other side and I am at peace. Find solace in Psalm 91. I am in His resting arms.... I love you"

Pieces of peace from my notes 11/2020

Healing for Mark and me continues, and part of that healing is to remind ourselves every day of the life Matthew had and lived despite the illnesses he fought! We will not let the way he died overwhelm the way he lived and loved and cared! He was greatly loved, is greatly missed and will never be forgotten. God is good, life continues, and joy always comes in the morning. We remain thankful and blessed!

‘Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them.’ – Leo Tolstoy

According to Justin Baker, clinical director of The Suicide and Trauma Reduction Initiative for Veterans at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. “Researchers still haven’t nailed down how to better predict who’s at risk for attempting suicide, and whether or when vulnerable people will do it. Unfortunately, we are no better able to predict who will die by suicide than who will be in a car accident. Additionally, there isn’t always a long timeframe wherein someone is considering suicide and showing signs – and there can be as little as 5 to 15 minutes between someone deciding to attempt suicide and doing it. This does not help to alleviate the grief or pain for those who have lost loved ones to suicide, but hopefully it helps remove some of the guilt and responsibility.”

Chapter 7: Sorting Pieces of A Life

In the days following Matthew's death, Joshua and Daniel cleaned out his office and living area. Later, Mark and I went through the boxes he had stored in a small tool shed behind our house when he moved in. As we began that task, I remembered saying when he was a child that Matthew had kept every piece of paper he'd ever written on. This seemed to be the case! He kept things.

As we sorted through the boxes, I found journals written when he was in third grade, pictures he had drawn in sixth, notes scribbled when he was studying for his IT endorsements, certificates from his induction into the Beta Club, and Honor Society, his diplomas, and mail that had been read and placed back in the envelope and stored.

Mark, ever the practical voice, helped me make a small collection of things to keep, and a larger stack of things to shred. It took me a while to realize that he had included, slowly, things of his own in the stack to be shredded. He was accomplishing two things at once, he was sitting with me as I went through Matthew's things, and he was guiding me through his things too.

I am amazed still at how gently, intentionally and almost covertly he directed that sorting process to prepare me for the day when he was gone. He literally walked me through the aftermath of his death without saying, "You won't need this when I'm gone, but you will want to keep that." When he did take his leave of this life, I did not have to go through anything except a few pieces of clothes. He had divested himself of all the things that weren't needed, so I wouldn't have to. But I did not realize that until after the fact.

It is not lost on me that he did in that tool house, what he had helped me do with all the baggage of Matthew's death. Gently, intentionally and without notice, he helped me find, repeatedly, the peace that could rise above the chaos in my own heart, mind and soul.

We had made an appointment with our lawyer for Monday, September 21, but I called and rescheduled it after Matt died. We needed to rethink our plan and hopefully not be too fragile emotionally to make sound decisions.

Our wills needed to be updated, we needed to make some deed changes too and Mark felt it needed to be done soon. Time was running out for him not just to be alive, but to be able to be in control of some things that were important to him. He wanted to make things as simple for me as possible when he was no longer here physically or in case his mental capabilities failed him. It was especially urgent now with Matthew already gone.

We made it to the appointment with the lawyer and took care of all the necessary details, updating our living wills, to include a DNR (do not resuscitate) order. Mark did not want me, Josh or Dan, to have to make that decision. He was taking control of what he still could to make his remaining days and passing as easy as possible for us. It reminded me of what my daddy said to us as he was getting closer to his own death. “I don’t want my home going to traumatize y’all”. He was welcome to try, but still, death is traumatic to those remaining.

At any rate, we had checked that off our things to do. We already had a plot and a marker at Mount Hope beside his parents. We had decided a few years ago that we wanted to be cremated and both of us could be placed in the same plot.

The way things stood now, there would be nothing to probate, unless I went first. I kept saying “But life is such that I could go before you, Mark.” That wasn’t the point though. The point was that he was taking care of me. If I went first, he and the boys would deal with the legal stuff, it would not matter to me, I would be safe in eternity, no worries. But, if I survived him, and he was sure I would, he wanted me to have everything as settled as one could. That was Mark.

Having moved through all of that “stuff”, it was time to go back to MUSC Charleston for one more round of tests and then to his primary care physician for follow up.

The trip to Charleston was more complicated than ever due to COVID protocols, my having to drive, grief, and the progression of the PCA. The PCA distorted Mark’s visual perception to the point that oncoming cars seemed to be in our lane, no matter how far away they may have been.

It created anxiety in him and that was a foreign feeling to Mark. He had always been so calm. Mark was the person everyone wanted to be around in case of an emergency. He was the clear thinker in any chaotic situation. Anxiety was new to his mind.

Not only was being in the car a challenge but now getting to the car and in the car was a chore. He could not distinguish how he was supposed to position himself to sit in the seat. On more than one occasion I would have to guide him by putting my hands on his arms, turning him around, telling him when to sit and then turn his legs so they could swing into the car. That also created anxiety because he felt like he was falling instead of sitting. All that being said, we made it to the visit.

The doctors were, as always, compassionate and tried to keep us updated on anything they found that might help him, but the bottom line was still, “There is nothing we can do at this point. We just do not have any other options to offer you.” That was our last trip to Charleston and that was okay. He had a wonderful primary care physician here in Lake City, his primary neurologist in Florence, as well as the research group we were a part of. We would be notified about any breakthrough in treatment of this disease.

There was one more piece of ‘taking care of things’ that needed to be sorted out. Mark surprised me when we went in August of 2022 for what would be his last “in office” follow up visit with his primary physician.

The doctor had just finished going over the latest blood work results and paused, Mark spoke up:

“I am concerned that Gloria is hurting her health looking after me. I do not want to endanger her. I had rather go into a nursing home first. What services would you recommend?”

I opened my mouth to object because I, well, because I was still in enough denial, or whatever, to be sure that I could handle the progression of this and that we could cope.

I had a plan, granted I was not exactly sure how the plan would work, but my plan was to take care of him at home, myself, with some help from Joshua. I also knew that Richie was just a call away and if he could not come, he would send somebody to help me if Mark had fallen.

Mark did not know that I had looked at taking CNA classes so I would have a better understanding of how to maneuver a patient that could not move on their own. I had a plan, but so did the doctor.

She looked relieved that Mark had asked. “Mark, we can bring in hospice.”

“No” I said, “We are not ready for hospice, no. He’s not there yet.”

She looked at Mark and he took a breath and said, “There is more to hospice care than end of life, honey.”

The doctor spoke up and asked, “What kind of assistance do you think you need Gloria, so you are able to keep Mark at home? We can look at Home Health Care, at least you can have some help with daily things.”

That made sense because it was getting more difficult to manage mealtimes, bath and bedtime. It was harder for him to stand up unattended and once up, it was difficult to remain standing. He could no longer go out to get a haircut, and I knew this was probably the last “in office” doctor’s visit we would have. We were losing this battle, I knew it, but I was not about ready to give up! There had to be something else to cope, to manage, to change this.

I was realistic enough to know I could use some help and advice on what the best way would be to help him stay at home comfortably.

“Home health it is”, and with that we began the paperwork.

“One more thing”, he told me shortly after everything there was settled. “I want my ashes, at least part of them scattered where we left Matt.”

“Okay” I replied. “Same for me.”

On the advice of his neurologist, Mark had retired from the school district at the end of December 2018. The decision had been made thinking that less stress may slow the progression of the symptoms he was displaying. At the time, we did not know what disease he was facing, only that he was experiencing some visual perception and hand-eye coordination issues. He was continuing to serve as pastor at GGM. By late summer of 2020 after the two cancer diagnoses and continued physical decline, he had been considering retiring from pastoring, as well. When he mentioned it to the church board, they suggested bringing on an associate pastor to share the duties so he could continue to preach on Sunday mornings. He was still able to prepare and present a sermon but holding and opening a Bible was difficult. His coping strategy had been to have me tape his scripture references and brief outline to the front of his Bible, so he didn't have to fumble trying to locate a scripture. His mind had always been so sharp that he had never had to take many notes to the pulpit having memorized them. He was already using an audio Bible at home instead of trying to read from a printed text.

Still by September of 2020, his coping mechanisms were falling short. He would often turn the Bible with his notes secured to the front, upside down, then around, then again, finally just placing it on the podium. His mental acuity was still intact, but his visual perception and coordination were declining quickly. He had talked to me about how unfair it was to the church for him to remain as senior pastor when he was no longer able to fulfill his duties. We had already discussed that he would talk to the board representative and prepare to resign, maybe staying on until the end of 2020. Then, Matthew died, and his death accentuated, if not hasten the already progressing decline in Mark.

Mark had never been one who wanted to call attention to himself. He was the one who checked on others, deflected personal questions with humor and truly wanted to be humble. It made him extremely uncomfortable that more of the time people were having to take care of him and make sure he was doing okay.

After praying and talking it over, we decided he would resign from his duties as pastor, to allow the church a chance to move on without constant health concerns for him. “It should not be about me, my health and our loss,” he said when he resigned to the church on October 4, 2020.

That was the last Sunday Mark preached, and it was the last Sunday we attended church together. Our Sunday morning routine would become one of sitting together in the den, after his devotional time and attending church online by casting the service to our television. We watched faithfully. Occasionally, I would see him wipe a tear but mostly he listened intently and truly soaked in the word of God as it was preached. It had to be done, it was the best thing for the church, and it was the right thing to do, but it was another loss and another sign that his declining health was dictating his life and choices.

We were continuing to sort through the things that we were to let go and the things we were to keep as we moved forward. It was also another reminder that we had lost much of the purpose-filled and peaceful routine that we once took for granted.

Our Last Sunday at Grace and Glory Ministries -October 4, 2020



Chapter 8: Pieces of the Past

When you are young, 40 years sounds like a long time. I suppose it is a long time on a calendar, but when it is being played out in real life with people you love, it passes quickly.

The Baldwin family and the Evans family connections go back to the early 1920's. My great grandfather, Reverend Hilary Baldwin was a Holiness preacher in the Lower Florence County area. He and his wife, Annie, owned a large farm where they lived and raised 8 children, 4 sons and 4 daughters. One of those daughters would become my grandmother Vina Anderson, my mother's mother. My granddaddy Baldwin preached on the weekends and started at least 5 community churches within walking distances of the congregants who attended. That was important in the days when most folks in this area traveled by foot or horse.

His obituary written, March 26, 1948, says "He was a man of deep Christian faith."

Reverend Thomas O Evans, Sr. was a Pentecostal Holiness preacher who also owned farmland in Lower Florence county and preached on weekends. Reverend Evans and his wife Edna had 12 children, 4 sons and 8 daughters. One of those sons would become Mark's father, T.O Evans, Jr.

At some point in the 1920's, my great granddaddy Baldwin met Mark's granddaddy Evans. They seemed to have much in common. One difference though was that my Great Grandfather and his churches were not affiliated with any denominational organization. Mark's Grandfather was a member of the Pentecostal Holiness Church Conference in South Carolina.

By 1927 he was the newly elected Conference Superintendent of what is now the South Carolina Conference of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. Before long, their friendship resulted in my granddaddy joining the Conference bringing those churches with him and becoming Pentecostal Holiness in doctrine and name. Mark's granddaddy would serve in that capacity for over 30 years and would deliver the eulogy at my great grandfather's funeral.

It would be many years before Mark and I met, but still we knew each other's family. My dad was a Pentecostal Holiness (PH) minister; Mark's dad was a well-respected layman who taught Sunday School for years and was often elected as a delegate to represent our Conference at National Assemblies. Our families shared a common faith and a tie to a particular denomination and location.

That location was the South Carolina PHC Campgrounds in Lake City, South Carolina. We met at a summer youth camp where we were serving as camp counselors, in Evans Hall, the building named in honor of his grandfather. It was not love at first sight, but it was like at first sight. He was funny in a natural way. He was not loud or boisterous but sooner or later in most conversations someone would be laughing at something Mark said. His wit was quick, and he picked up on regular topics and made them humorous. We became friends. We knew family history and had an appreciation for the sacrifices our grandparents had made to help build our denomination.

We started dating in July 1976. We were married August 14, 1977. He was licensed as a Pastor the following September in the Conference where his grandfather had served so faithfully. In July of 1980 we began our lives as pastor and pastor's wife. Matthew was 4 months old. Joshua was born in 1982, Daniel in 1987. For 40 years we were blessed to pastor some wonderful people who loved us and added so much to our lives.

Mark never lost that natural wit. He never lost his ability to make people feel special. Now in 2020, we were retired. That part of our lives was over. We had lost Matthew, but we had each other, Joshua, Daniel, Lisa, Betsy, Reese, Weston, Mia and Zoe! We were blessed.

From my personal notes: 10/04/2020

"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: "- Ecclesiastes 3:1

Today, a season of our lives ended. After 40 years of pastoring, Mark and I retired. Thank you to all the good people who have loved us, listened to us teach, shared our lives and blessed us with your prayers! We leave the good people at Grace and Glory Ministries with love and prayers for the days and years ahead.

Ever thankful for all the blessings, but acknowledging the changes, it would not be long before I realized that my life would now become one of constantly seeking and living in a negotiated peace.

Think about it, chaos can exist on its own, it takes nothing to leave things scattered emotionally or physically. Peace takes effort, negotiated peace takes concerted effort.

In our case it was a matter of sorting through the questions and emotions left behind by such a tragic ending of life while holding on to the memories that would forever be a comfort in the years ahead. We were never going to have the answers that would “fix” Matthew’s problems. Matthew was gone and any problems he had here were of no consequence to him. They were in the past. We were the ones left with the consequences.

On the other hand, he had lived, and his life had made positive impacts on us and others. Those are the things you want to keep, to cherish and to rehearse. It was so easy to rehearse the things I wish we had done differently, the things I wished he had done differently, but all those things were moot points now. What was not moot was his life and the great things his life had meant.

The extended moments of peace were those when I reminded myself that we did the best we could, with what we knew, at the time. Then I would look for things, productive things that Matthew had done that I could continue. He was a good-hearted person, quick-witted, with a generous spirit and a troubled mind. There was much peace in remembering that he was more than his death. Mark, as always, did a great job of helping me refocus when the peace wore thin.

As the holiday season in the Fall of 2020 approached, the peace and joy that usually flowed freely in our hearts and our home at this time of the year was hard to find. That may be an understatement.

Chapter 9: Broken Holidays

Those that know me even a little know I am a Christmas nut! I have been known to leave my Christmas tree up all year. I mean the Christmas tree, not like the tree that gets a refreshed theme every holiday, I mean the full-blown Christmas tree. Although to be fair, I have done the holiday of the month theme tree at least once. But that's only happened one year. I was not thrilled with that like I always was for Christmas.

One year when I had left it up, we were having some work done in the house and Matthew called me early one morning before the contractor was due to arrive. The conversation went something like this:

“Hey mom, listen do you still have your tree up?”

“I do”

“Mom, mom, I’m going to give him a call before he gets there.”

“Why?”

“Mom, he’s going to think you are crazy, I’m going to tell him you are just a bit eccentric”.

“Well if it makes you feel better. But other people leave the tree up..”

“Other people change the decorations to match the season...”

“Okay granted I’m not other people...”

“I’m calling him... love you mom!”

That was Matt!

Our Christmas celebration 2019 had been a mixed bag. We celebrated as a family on December 21, and we were all there, Matthew, Josh and Lisa, Dan and Betsy, Reese, Weston, Mia, Mark and me. It would be the last time all of us were together.

Dan and Betsy had news, after almost 7 years of marriage, they were expecting their first child, due in August. Before they could share their news, Matthew had slipped out of the room and in a few more minutes we realized he needed to be taken to the ER.

He had a stomach ulcer that ruptured, and he was bleeding internally. As sick as he was, he could not miss an opportunity to make a joke. When Dan went to help him into the car, he told Matt he had some news. Matt answered, "I know what it is, you and Betsy are either getting a divorce or having a baby and since I doubt you'd be sharing and celebrating divorce news with the folks at Christmas, it has got to be a baby! Congrats."

He ended up being transported by ambulance from Lake City ER to MUSC Florence. On the trip to the ER, he was so sure he was going to die that he reminded Mark about his final instructions, he wanted no funeral, he wanted to be cremated, and his ashes scattered.

He called me as they were putting him in the ambulance.

"Mom, I wanted to talk to you, and I don't know if I will be able to once they get me into the ambulance there may not be good cell reception. I love you, mom."

"I love you too, I will see you soon."

By the time I got to MUSC, they already had him in ICU and vented.

I spent Christmas Day 2019 and New Year's Day 2020 in ICU with him. I remember asking God to please let him live, because we really were not sure that he would. It was touch and go. In addition to the ulcer which required surgery, he had many other complications. The doctors were careful in their assessments of his chances but finally told us, "He will make it through this, but we cannot promise that he will if this happens again."

We were so blessed, and he made a good recovery. January 7, 2020. we headed home. He was weak but he felt like he had a new hope for life. His biggest concern was that he had ruined Christmas 2019 for the family. He told one of the nurses that he was looking forward to Christmas Day 2020. Now, it was almost Christmas 2020, and he was gone.

Isn't it amazing that we humans are able, in retrospect, to reassign events and even feelings? On Christmas Day 2020, I would have loved to know that I was spending it with him, even in ICU at MUSC. Now I see that 2019 was not the worst Christmas Day I would ever spend! Imagine that!

I could not bear to think of planning a family dinner without him. Besides that, Dan and Betsy were still processing the loss of her dad, who had passed away unexpectedly on September 28, just 11 days after we lost Matt. In the middle of all of this, they were still adjusting to being parents. We decided we would do things a little differently for Christmas but first, we had to get through Thanksgiving.

Several years ago, I started a tradition of giving the grandkids a pre-Christmas gift at our Thanksgiving dinner. Usually, I would have them wrapped and at their dinner plate. For several reasons, Thanksgiving 2020, I didn't have seats assigned and marked by gifts.

As soon as they walked in Weston, who was 8 years old then looked at the table setting. He turned to his dad and said, "Can I ask Mimi a question"? I knew what his question was going to be, but I didn't let on then. Joshua quickly answered Weston with a "No".

Reese then age 11 just asked, "Mimi, where do we sit.?" I knew then they were both aware I had failed to place their gifts marking their seating arrangements. I continued getting the food set out and told them where Pops, Aunt Marcia and I would sit, and they could sit anywhere else they wanted to.

At least twice during the meal, I heard Weston ask "Dad, can I ask Mimi a question?" Each time I saw the look Josh gave him and heard the "No".

Finally, I looked at Josh and said, "Let him ask."

“Okay Mimi, I’m just going to tell you upfront, that this question will reveal how selfish I am but..”

When he took that breath, I interrupted..

“Wait, don’t ask me, let me tell you what you want to know ... will you get one of your Christmas presents tonight? The answer is yes, after the table is cleared, you all will get a present.”

That brought an immediate smile and glow to two little faces. Reese and Weston realized happily that some things do not change just because grief entered the holiday and Mimi slipped up.

I have laughed to myself several times over Weston’s totally transparent evaluation of what he called “selfishness”, I’ve marveled at Reese’s more subtle “Where do we sit?”

Since that night I have often reflected on how we as believers approach God the same way at times. In grief and loss, I have been both Reese and Weston.

“God, where do I “sit”? I don’t see your gift in this situation, I don’t know where to go, what do I do? I am used to knowing your direction, seeing the blessing. Just tell me what to do.”

And then there is the very frank, open “ Father, in all of my selfishness, I ask, give me the gift you always have given, grant me the peace, the calmness, the assurance that you’ve always given before without my asking. Oh God, if ever I needed the gift of peace and assurance I need it now!”

And you know what? That Thanksgiving night, the grandchildren got their gifts, I already had them, I didn’t have to go to the store at the last minute to get them. They were already on hand, wrapped as usual, just out of sight.

Our Heavenly Father does the same for us. He never changes and even when the blessing in a situation is out of my sight, it’s still in his hand.

The 2020 holiday season was different for many families. COVID had upended daily routines not to mention special events and it had been the cause of loss in many families we knew. So, ours was not the only Christmas that was out of the ordinary. However, it would have been different in many ways and for a variety of reasons without COVID's influence.

Our Thanksgiving had been scaled down, but we enjoyed the time with Josh, Lisa, the kids, and Marcia. Mark had recently completed treatment for bladder and prostate cancer in addition to coping with the decline in his physical abilities due to the PCA. Add to these complications, grief and it was a tough call as to how to celebrate at all.

In those early weeks and months after Matt died, I read just about everything I could find on grieving the loss of a child and how it affects us and how people cope. I especially focused on losing someone to mental health issues or suicide. At some point, I read an article by Jill Smoot, that hit me in a good way. She had lost her 43-year-old son, Aaron, and was facing their first Christmas without him. She was struggling to get through normal days much less celebrating. She shared with her son, Jeremy, that she did not think she would put up a tree that year, even though they usually went to a tree farm to pick one out. As she told him this, he quietly reminded her, 'Mom, Christmas is still Christmas'. As a Christian she said she realized that she was the recipient of the great grace of God and that she could celebrate that grace even with the hole in her heart from missing her son.

That spoke to me. If I really celebrate Christmas as the time to be joyful and grateful for the incarnate presence of our God with us, then Christmas is still Christmas.

We had Christmas, a different Christmas, but we celebrated the reason we as Christians say we celebrate. It was not easy. It will never be easy, it will never be the same, but it will always be a joyful time to remind myself that God so loved the world, God so loved Matthew and Mark, God so loved all of us that He gave the greatest gift. I can celebrate that, I can be joyful at that thought!

Pieces of Reflection:

In my memories, I have often revisited Christmas Day 2019. I spent that day, as I had the previous 4 days sitting beside Matthew's bed in MUSC ICU. He was on a vent and did not know he was in the world, but I knew. I was begging God to let him have more time, to let us have more time. In addition to Matthew's condition, Mark and I were trying to come to grips with Mark's most recent diagnoses. On Christmas Day 2019, I had to leave the room so the doctors could perform a procedure on Matt. I walked into the spacious waiting room and was the only person in there. An early morning Christmas Day program was on the television. The only thing I remember about the program is that a well-known singer was asked to sing a Christmas song. To my surprise, he sang "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and I broke down and cried, sobbed. It was as if God himself had picked that moment for me, among all the humans suffering that morning... I felt special. It was perhaps selfish and certainly arrogant of me to think so, however, isn't that the whole meaning of God's love for us? He can love and take care of one hurting soul at the same moment and level of compassion as He does every soul that has ever lived or will live. Billions, billions of cares, billions of hurts, billions of cries. He is Faithful. His mercies are renewed every day.

Matthew was given extra days. We were given some extra days, a few months. I know people ask, "Why did his life end then in a few more months?" I gave up asking "why". I ask God "what?" "What do you want me to do with this life, this sometimes very difficult life now that Mark is also gone. I ponder what I can, or should do, with whatever time is left to me on this side of eternity. And every time I do, I re-affirm my belief in His Faithfulness. He is Love. Whatever He does or allows is done toward us in great love and compassion! I resolve to use every day He gives me to help others embrace His goodness. I rest in His commitment that what we commit to him, he keeps and keeps forever.

Great is His Faithfulness.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." -Lamentations 3:23 (KJV)

Chapter 10: Facing Reality

Mark had the enviable quality of being an optimistic realist in addition to possessing a rock-solid faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew the facts about the posterior cortical atrophy, and he was living with the symptoms. He had faith that God could heal him, but he had never been one to deny symptoms thinking that was a display of faith. "Faith is not denial", he would say.

In the 45 years we were married, I could probably count on one hand the times that he said, "I feel like the Lord has told me..." or "I believe the Lord has shown me." So, when he said it, I took note.

One morning he told me he had a dream the night before that he believed was from the Lord about PCA. He said that in the dream he thought he was awake and looking into the eyes of a large tiger that was standing on his chest. He heard a voice say, "Mark this is not going anywhere, it's not going away." He was as calm about that as if he were telling me that God had told him he was going to be healed. I never doubted that he had indeed received this from the Lord.

He continued trying to live as full a life as he could under the circumstances. He just lived it with an increased peace. Years before he had memorized a poem, entitled "The Weaver". There is some confusion as to who wrote it because sources credit different authors or list it as unknown authorship. Whoever wrote it, this poem became almost a life motto for Mark and would recite it often and he requested that it be read at his memorial service.

"My life is but a weaving Between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors He weaveth steadily.
Oft' times He weaveth sorrow; And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper, And I the underside.
Not 'til the loom is silent And the shuttles cease to fly,
Will God unroll the canvas And reveal the reason why.
The dark threads are as needful In the weaver's skillful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver In the pattern He has planned."
-Unknown

The reality of this disease, and all similar diseases, is enough to bring one to depression. Remaining hopeful and even joyful in the face of it sounds improbable if not impossible, yet he pulled it off. He did. I was there; he was not faking it. He was not just putting on a brave face, although he was brave. Mark lived in the same peaceful assurance and the same humor he always had.

I had to remind myself sometimes, that he was carrying the grief of Matthew's death as he was slowly losing control of his own life and indeed losing his life.

When it became clear that Mark's mobility issues were getting worse, and the falls were getting more frequent, Joshua began to work from our home office so that he was there to help me. Richie Miles, a trusted friend who had helped us several times when Mark had a fall, was able to locate a device made to facilitate the easier lifting of someone from the floor. I learned how to operate it and was grateful to have access to this. We adjusted to this "new normal", and I was just grateful to have him here, on this side of eternity. We could still talk things out together, he was still able to be a voice of reason and humor.

He decided at some point that he wanted to re-read several books. They included: Moby Dick, biographies of several presidents, a biography of Winston Churchill and Dune, the whole series in order. This was a problem because even though his memory was amazing, he had lost the ability to write, even to sign his name some months before and now, he could not read at all because he could no longer follow text.

To make matters worse, if that was possible, he could no longer distinguish right from left. Part of the cruelty of this disease is that he still retained his mental acuity to the point that he was cognizant of what abilities he was losing. He would tell the home health nurses and therapists when they were giving him directions "You will just have to guide me; I don't know my right from my left."

This just crushed me for many reasons, but one being because he had always been the one giving explicit directions. He would jokingly have to tell me, "No, honey, not that left, your other left!" And now he didn't know which way was left or right.

This function of his brain would eventually degenerate to the point where he did not know if he was standing or seated. I know that sounds impossible, but it happens. There is a medical term for body awareness, and for the loss of that function. The physical therapist first used it to me when he was evaluating Mark's condition. "The PCA has caused impaired proprioception." My puzzled look was all the question he needed,

"Dr. Evans, your brain does not recognize where your body is in relation to your surroundings."

"Okay, so how do we handle that? What do we do to cope?"

"Tell him he is going to be sitting down and put his hand on the chair before he tries to sit. You cannot use terms like behind you or in front of you or to your right or to your left. They do not mean anything to his brain as far as the movement of his limbs. He needs to see the chair and hold on to the chair before he tries to sit."

"Okay" I said, but in my mind, I thought "His visual perception is so off that we will have to rely on his touching the chair."

But we made it work for a while. The parameters of his life were getting smaller, but our coping strategies were expanding. I was being realistic, but I was still thinking, we have more time, we can adjust, we can try this, we can do that. He could live for many years. I was selfish in that thought.

Lisa, Joshua's wife, thoughtfully gave him an Amazon Echo as an early Christmas present in November. We initially mounted it to the wall beside his chair. He could listen to his books, and more importantly make hands-free phone calls from it. Later we moved it to the bedroom for him when it became necessary for him to be in the hospital bed. We made it through the list of the books he wanted to hear, except for the last Dune book.

The ability to make calls and receive calls was important to him, because that meant he could do what he did best, take care of people. He never got tired of listening to people and asking them how they were doing and then letting them know he was praying for them.

What is proprioception?

Proprioception is your body's ability to sense its own position and movements. It is an automatic or subconscious process.

Proprioception allows your brain to know the position of your body in space without having to rely on visual input alone. It lets us know where our body is in relation to the immediate space around us. It is also crucial to maintaining balance.- Clevelandclinic.org

The year 2021 seemed to pass quickly, while our days were passing slowly. I learned that there are many blessings to be found in facing and accepting the reality of things one cannot change. Mark had always been one who lived in the present. He made plans, but always with an eye in the present, and he never looked back at the past with nostalgia or regret. A decision made, whether good results or not so good results, was a decision left in the past. He knew he had made mistakes, we all do, but he asked for forgiveness if it was warranted, he tried to correct if needed, but then he moved on.

At one point I reflected that I wished we had never left Manning and the church we were pastoring there. It seemed to me those were the best years of our lives and the lives of our sons. He quickly said that while he enjoyed those years and cherished the friendships we had made, he had no regrets about leaving. We had made the best decision we could, at the time.

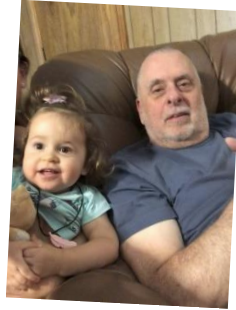
He lived in the present and in the reality of his life. The months following Matthew's death and the steady decline of Mark's health, taught me the value of that philosophy. Jesus had said as much when he told his disciples "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day *is* its own trouble." Matthew 6:34 (KJV)

The understandable and rare exception to his living in the moment was when he allowed himself to imagine what he could have done to change the outcome of Matthew's life on that last night. Matthew had helped him get ready for bed and had returned to check on him twice, before going into his part of the house. Mark tried to remember if there was anything Matthew said or did that might have signaled what was to come. But after a careful review of that night, he put it to rest.

Matthew was gone, Mark and I were here, coping, day by day.

As the holiday season of 2021 approached, our family was hit with another devastating loss. Ed Hanna, the husband of my youngest sister Rhetta, passed away after a short illness on November 1, 2021. Ed was as perfect for Rhetta as Mark was for me, and he was greatly respected and loved by our family. Ed had been able to leave his final requests with Rhetta and realizing that Mark was not able to help with the service, he told Rhetta to ask Joshua to do so.

Our family faced a second holiday season with yet another empty chair. But Thanksgiving was still worthy of its name and Christmas was still Christmas. We all had much for which to give thanks and much for which to have joy!



Mark with our
Grandchildren:



Pieces of Gratitude and Joy from my personal notes:

Christmas Day 2021:

So many thoughts and feelings. Memories crowd in and create a collage of happy moments and sad reminders, but the overwhelming theme is gratitude.

Gratitude:

- for the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ.
- that Mark is still here with me despite two rounds of cancer and his other health issues, he is still here!
- for Josh, Lisa, Dan, Betsy, Reese, Weston, Mia and Zoe
- for Nelwyn, Dana, Marcia, Rhett, Meredith and Whitman
- for the lives and memories of Dana Ramsey, Ed Hanna, Momma, Daddy and Matthew
- for family and friends that love us!

And tonight, as I wrote out my prayers, I thanked God that his son came to earth, so that my son, my dear Matthew, could go to Heaven.

Oh, I'm so thankful for the real meaning of that first Christmas!

Facing reality includes acknowledging the joys that are a part of this wonderful experience we call living. This was certainly true of the life Mark and I had, and he was the champion of expressing that.

Grief, and especially the grief of losing a child, distorts the perception one has of the other parts of life, and rightly so. Before Matthew's death and Mark's diagnosis, joy surrounded us and our life like the atmosphere. We didn't have to think about joy or happiness. We just breathed it in! Beginning in September 2020 and continuing for years, I cried every day. Every day! However, I have looked for and found joy every day as well, because life is multi-faceted. Those we love that are still here, with us, deserve to be valued and given as much of our time and energy as those who have departed.

We are often guilty of not recognizing the true value of what we have until it is gone. If grief teaches us only one thing let it be that while we cannot bring back those gone, we can love those here more intentionally and enjoy the reality of what we have in our lives now.

I once read a prayer written by John Van Schepen: “Lord, thank you for coming into our world to save us and give us hope even in our pain. Fill us with joy and amazement! Amen.”

Joy and amazement, that is what I want to regain. Joy and amazement often hide in the shadows of our grieving hearts, as if afraid to show up for fear of offending our sorrow. But joy and amazement are worth looking for. They are worth the energy required to mine them from the depths of what is left in our lives after loss.

Be amazed- even if it's just for 30 seconds. Be amazed at God's great love for you and all humankind. Be joyful that you have loved ones and friends who like you have suffered but survived. Feel the awe that Christ is always with us even in the middle of grief, trouble or sorrow. Acknowledge that accepting reality is accepting the blessings that fill this life even as the pain of grief and loss share the same space.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” - Romans 15:13

“Courage is when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway, and you see it through no matter what”

- Harper Lee via Atticus Finch

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

Chapter 11: Pieces of Goodbye

Just so you know that I am aware of how difficult joy can be to find and live in, the brave words above about joy and amazement were written in my private notes and I remind myself of them often. In the real world of life, Mark and I were running out of time. It is that simple, that sad and that real. By August of 2022, Mark was completely homebound, and most of his days were spent in his recliner. He no longer had the freedom of walking down the hallway on his own, as a matter of fact, he could not stand or sit without assistance. But I was so thankful that he was still here. His memory was okay, his reasoning ability okay and he was still able to encourage other people when they called, or when he called them.

Joshua was working from our home office every day, we had a CNA coming several times a week, a nurse on call 24/7, therapists coming in, and we were coping. We lived, as we all should really, one day at a time. Most of the doctor's visits were conducted via telehealth portals and we continued to attend church via live streaming from the relative comfort of the den.

Private notes Summer 2022:

After the visit with doctor today.... we are awaiting appointments to have CT scans done to check blood flow into his feet and legs. Also, an arterial study. He has chronic inflammation in his bladder. Could be a side effect of radiation or could be another symptom of PCA. The doctor noted his decline in short term memory and he self-reported increasing disorientation and dizziness at times. He said he could tell he's getting worse. He has lost another 7 pounds. So, not a great day.

Mealtime had become a real challenge. He had little or no appetite and even when he did, swallowing was not easy. He still enjoyed a milkshake once in a while and Joshua made sure he offered to get him one almost every day. Mark had continued to come to the kitchen and sit at the bar at meals for as long as he could, but one day as we were helping him get up, he said calmly, "I will not be able to come to the kitchen to eat anymore." His legs were not working properly and the sensation of falling rather than sitting was just overwhelming.

Josh and I looked at each other and I said, "No problem, honey. We will bring your tray to the chair."

Later that night Mark said “Gloria, this is getting worse. The symptoms are getting worse.” He was right, I knew it. Our coping strategies were not keeping up with the progression of this disease.

The home health care therapists had done all they could do, meaning he was not showing progress in regaining muscle strength or use and so they no longer could justify providing services. I must say here that we were blessed with a great team of home health care providers and they tried everything they could think of to help us cope and keep him moving.

The physical therapist, the occupational therapist, and their assistants had never heard of PCA, but then again neither had many of the doctors we saw. It is hard for me to explain to anyone what this disease involves, because it is so complex and while it does have components that are common with other neurological disorders, such as Parkinsons, Alzheimer’s, Lewy Body Disease (LBD) or ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), it has its own set of symptoms as well. It is a very rare disease, with no determined cause yet.

As a matter of fact, at MUSC Charleston they had asked Mark if he was okay with them introducing his case to the neurology students there and allowing them to interview him and conduct tests to measure the progression of the disease. The lead physician told us that most of them would never have an opportunity to treat a patient with PCA because it was that rare but the information they gathered may help with their research into this disease. He, of course, agreed.

To the credit of our home health team, they returned each time having researched for any new material or therapies they could find. We tried everything they suggested. They were as disappointed as we were when they reached the end of their available resources.

The nurses and the CNA were still allowed to help us, but things were changing and of course Mark voiced it before I was willing to. He was worried about me and I was worried about him and at this point, my primary concern was to keep him at home and as comfortable as possible.

He had fallen several times, even with my being there to help steady him because his muscles just gave up and it was like watching someone go limp without any warning. We were using the aids that the therapists had given us, but he could not physically use a walker or a cane and could not sit at times in a wheelchair, even though we had one.

At that time, Daniel was working for a company that did the IT work at a retirement village. He was impressed by the layout of the facilities as well as options for care. They had a plan that would have allowed us to have an apartment or condo where Mark could receive 24/7 access to medical care. Dan asked me to at least get the brochure and look at what they offered. Mark and I agreed it was worth looking into, even though it would mean moving to Greenville. I went to visit the place. It has a beautiful layout and even has a community of small houses with medical accessibility for those living there. However, if one needed hospice type services where mobility was an issue, the company required that person to live in the nursing home area of the facility. That meant I could not share the room with him, even though I could have a nice suite in the same building.

From a note to my sisters:

On September 17, 2022, I wrote my sisters and asked for prayer: “Sisters, I need prayer for wisdom. Mark’s daily needs are increasing and even with Josh here it’s a lot, because Josh does have to work. We’ve talked about selling the house and both moving into a retirement home that has 24-hour medical care availability, but I really don’t want to do that. We have talked about Mark moving into assisted care without me, and I’m **very much not** in favor of that. We’ve discussed trying to remodel the house so that he and I have an apartment and Josh, Lisa and kids could move in here with us.... I need wisdom and I know God has a plan. Please pray. Love you all!”

Pieces of Information about PCA

Source: National Library of Medicine

Posterior cortical atrophy (PCA) is a rare heterogeneous, progressive neurodegenerative condition that primarily affects the occipital and parietal cortex, leading to visuo-perceptual, visuospatial, praxis skills, and literacy impairment. Typically, the age of onset is between 50 to 65 years. D. Frank Benson and colleagues first described the clinical and neuropathological features of posterior cortical atrophy (PCA) from patients in the UCLA Neurobehavior Program. Benson and colleagues originally introduced the term *posterior cortical atrophy* in 1988 while describing the deficits in higher-order visual processing that are similar to Gerstmann and Balint syndromes with relatively preserved episodic memory. Though considered a visual variant of Alzheimer disease, PCA is a distinct clinical syndrome.

Source: Cleveland Clinic

In posterior cortical atrophy, there's a disconnect in how your brain makes sense of what you see. That disconnect can disrupt your daily life, making it difficult for you to do things like read letters and words, understand numbers or judge distances. PCA can cause difficulty with coordinated movements, such as walking and eating, increasing the need for assistance with mobility and basic tasks. This may be hard to hear but healthcare providers can't cure this condition or restore the abilities that you've lost.

We talked it out and even though Mark suggested that I place him in a nursing home, that was never on the table for me except as a last resort if his comfort and safety had become more than I could provide. So, we adjusted. Mark's brother, Tom and his wife Mamie, a retired nurse, had told me they would come over anytime and stay with Mark so I could go to Greenville for a visit or if I needed to run errands, so forth, Tom had helped us out so much with Matthew's hospital stay and I knew they meant it when they said it was not a problem. Tom did come several times so that I could do those things and it made a difference in my being able to stay healthy and to keep Mark at home.

Thankfully we were able to find a certified CNA that was willing to come early morning or late evenings 2 or 3 times a week to assist with bathing, shaving, etc. in addition to the other assistance we were getting. Mark was more comfortable in the recliner, even at night so I started sleeping on the couch to be near him. We listened to audio books, watched and rewatched our favorite shows: Gunsmoke, Star Trek, Star Wars, Stargate, Once Upon a Time, The Man in the Santa Claus Suit, The Muppets Christmas Carol, Emmett Otter's Jugband Christmas. We talked about our lives together, and how blessed we were. I listened to him encourage others on the phone and marveled at this man I had been blessed to share life with.

He never complained, but I could tell he was getting weary. Everything took more effort, and many things caused pain. Still, we were blessed. We were now at two years without Matthew and much of our conversation still revolved around him. We had decided that we would celebrate our family Christmas 2022 on Thanksgiving Day since Dan, Betsy and Zoe would be here and that way they could be home for Christmas Day and not have to make another trip from Greenville. Also, my sisters and I decided to have the Miles sister's Christmas gathering at our house in December so that Mark could take part. Marcia had hosted them at her home since Momma had passed away.

At the Thanksgiving celebration, once again, Dan and Betsy had news. They would be welcoming their second child in June of 2023. We were so happy for them. After everyone left when we were getting ready to go to sleep, Mark quietly said, "I hope I live to see the new baby." I hoped so too. However, there are some moments in life that remain with you forever, a picture engraved in your memory. Mark, in his recliner at that last Christmas celebration is one of those for me. I knew it would be the last one, and he did as well. He asked me how long it had been since he was first diagnosed, and I knew why. He was tired and just living was getting more difficult.

I have learned more about this disease including how slowly it starts and progresses in the early stages. I have pieced together information about when Mark's symptoms first began. This was enlightening to me only because when the first neurologist had tested Mark in 2017, he told him he may have another good 10-15 years.

He thought we had caught it early, that it was MCI- mild cognitive impairment. He was encouraging us because he felt it was progressing slowly and would respond to the medication, Rivastigmine (Exelon). However, within a few months other symptoms were presenting outside the pathology of MCI or Alzheimer's.

In retrospect, I have been able to trace the earliest symptom to 2012 when Mark began to have difficulty using his computer keyboard. He had learned to type in high school and had always done his own keyboarding in college and at work. His secretary never had to type or prepare any presentations for him. Suddenly he said his fingers wouldn't always work right. I did not think much about it at the time because he managed to cope somehow. It took me a long time to connect the small changes that were steadily taking place over those years to the disease that had been there for at least 10 years by the time it took him. I could feel guilty about that, except that I know there is nothing that we could have done differently, even if we had known in 2012 and I know now what to look for. Hindsight, you know.

Besides that, in 2012 Matthew had just been diagnosed with bipolar and PTSD and we were focusing on how to best help him. As I said earlier, the two of them and the challenges they would face were connected in a way I cannot explain.

In early January 2023, we were ready for hospice care instead of home health care. We had moved Mark to the bedroom, ordered a hospital bed and knew this was the ending of the ending that we had been facing since the diagnosis. It had been a slow decline, until it was not slow anymore. Even so, I was thankful that he was still with me.

When the hospice nurse came, Mark told her he wanted them to re-evaluate his medications and take him off anything unnecessary and just concentrate on his being comfortable, not on any life extending treatments not even the blood pressure medication. He said he knew that is what hospice at end of life could do and do well. He reminded her that he had a living will and a DNR and just wanted to be as little trouble as possible. He answered all the questions they normally ask and then the nurse asked him how long we had been married. He told her "45 years this past August 14".

She was young and she said, “Wow, that’s a long time. So many folks give up on marriage before then.” She went on to tell us she was engaged and hoped her marriage would be as successful.

He went into counselor/pastor mode and said, “Well, let me give you a secret to that. You and your future husband agree to picture yourselves on a front porch in rocking chairs holding hands 50 years from now. Rehearse that scene again in your minds and determine with each other that nothing will threaten that outcome. Talk to each other. Love each other, protect that love. Walk away from anything that threatens that outcome.” She looked at me, and she had tears in her eyes. I did too, but for a different reason. We had made it to 45 years, but I wanted more.

The nurse placed an order for a lift to be delivered that would help us move him and hopefully make it easier for bath times, and so forth. The truth is Joshua could have picked him up and carried him by that time, but movement hurt him sometimes and we hoped the lift would help alleviate some of that. We were coping I was trying to stretch our time together and keep him comfortable at the same time.

He, in the meantime, was trying to tell me to please let him go. I knew it and at times, I even prayed for God to take him because I knew Mark was tired and he was hurting but he was not about to complain. He was not like that. He continued to use humor to deal with this most difficult time.

Things took a noticeable turn the first of February and on top everything with Mark, I awakened one morning with extreme nausea due to vertigo. I was so sick I could not stand up. Joshua was in the home office working and I called him to come to me.

Joshua asked me what he could do to help. “Call Tom and Mamie and ask them to pack a bag. I need them.” It turns out I was dehydrated, sleep deprived and exhausted. They came quickly and within a few hours, Mamie told me they were here to stay as long as I needed them. In a couple of days, they realized Mark only had a few weeks left and they assured me they would not leave me “until this is over.” They arrived on February 1, and both stayed until February 25, with Mamie staying with me until March 5.

Joshua and I could not have kept Mark at home, and comfortable if they had not stayed. Tom, being the engineer he is, re-worked the lift so that in the night, if needed, I could adjust Mark on the bed using the lift by myself and not create more pain for Mark. There were other things with his care that required two or more people to operate the lift, adjust the bed and reposition Mark to ensure that we did not cause more discomfort, but they were right there for it all. They took care of everything to help me be able to focus on him. Tom sat with Mark, sometimes watching Gunsmoke, so I could eat or take a walk outside. It was special time for the two brothers who used to ride horses, hunt rabbits and aggravate each other as children. It was also a difficult time for Tom, I know, but he never let it show.

Occasionally, one of them would go back to their home to check on things there and return right back. Josh and I were amazed at how much we needed their help and how much more at ease Mark was with Tom around.

While Mark's body was giving up, his mind was still clear most of the time and he was able to talk to Joshua and Daniel and express things that he felt he needed to share. He talked about his funeral and said he would like me to sing at the service, if I felt that I could. I told him right then I could not. I sang for him in the days that he was here, but I knew I was not going to be able to sing at his funeral. I am a strong person, by the grace of God, but I knew my heart was going to be in a million pieces and all those pieces would be pouring out of my eyes. So, no, I did not do that for him. He was okay when I said I could not do it. Once he had talked to the boys and the grandkids, he settled down to rest.

Joshua shared this story at his service illustrating that Mark kept his sense of humor. On one occasion, Dan and Josh were with him and his breathing got so shallow and he seemed to be just quietly leaving. Josh was monitoring him and was sure "this was it". Suddenly, Mark opened his eyes, looked at them and said, "I'm still here? I guess I just can't die!" and he laughed. That was Mark.

As the days passed by, I tried to create a calm, quiet place for him to rest as his soul prepared to depart. I sang to him, quoted scripture and told him how much I loved him. So many cards had come in and I read them to him, telling him whenever someone said they were praying for him. I reminded him that he was best person I knew and that I had been blessed to have him as my husband and best friend. He told me how pretty I was, to which I always replied, “Well, you think so and that’s all that matters”. He told me he owed me a debt that he would never be able to pay, and I told him he owed me nothing because everything good I had was due to him and the goodness of God. He began to visit with those on the other side of eternity and have conversations to which I was not privy except in his responses. He shared with me that he was able to see and review his life. I prayed with and for him that God would receive this good and faithful servant into His rest.

The last words Mark spoke to me were, “You are so pretty, I love you, thank you.” Could I have asked for a better goodbye?

On Saturday morning February 25, 2023, with his brother Tom by his bedside, Mark took his leave. He waited until I stepped out of the room to take a quick shower. I knew that is what would happen. But it was okay, we had said everything that needed to be said. I had peace about his decision to slip away while I was out. It seems Matthew had completed clearing the way and Mark joined him. It made sense, they were so connected.

Many years ago, my dad had said to someone, “Every family needs a Mark”. Later when we bought this house and moved in to help take care of momma, she would tell people, “Mark Evans is a good man.” She never got used to the fact that he washed his own clothes, helped me with the dishes and watched “Wheel of Fortune” with her.

He was a good man, he was the best person I have ever known, and I am not saying that in my grief. I came to learn that years before he died. I am so blessed to have had him in my life.

Pieces of Lasting Friendship: Mr. George Lawson and Mark.

Mr. George and Mark worked together at ACE, the alternative school in our district. They quickly formed a true friendship and mutual respect. We visited George's church and he and his lovely wife, Dot, visited ours. Years passed and George, who had already retired once, retired again. That did not end the friendship though. He and Mark would meet for breakfast in Turbeville or Sumter, where George lived. More years passed and George moved into an assisted living home. That did not end the friendship. Mark visited him at every opportunity. They shared memories and encouraged each other until one day, George no longer knew who Mark was. But the friendship did not end then. Mark continued to go and sit and talk and pray with George. He said to me one day "George does not know me, but I know him." Time passed and Mark could no longer drive and I drove him over to see George. Then 2020 came and nobody could visit anybody. In April of 2020, George went to Heaven. Mark missed him and often spoke of his friend and brother. In February of 2023, Mark was facing the end of his life. He was on a hospital bed in our bedroom and had been asleep. I was about to fall asleep myself when Mark said with excitement:

"Hey George!"

I listened carefully and heard a one-sided conversation that still plays in my mind. Following the greeting, Mark said:

"Well, I am hoping he will tell me to get up and walk wherever I want to go"

(Pause)

"Yes, Well, I just don't think I want to go right now"

(Pause)

"Okay. See you later George."

Believe it or don't. It happened. A friendship that never died.

Mark left this earth a couple of days later.

I have no doubt George was glad to see him.

Chapter 12: Different Loss, Different Grief

“Grief is grief” I have heard that, I may have even said it before, but it is not a true statement. Not all grief is the same because not all losses are the same and not all people react the same way to a loss. Grief and grieving may be as different as the persons experiencing the loss.

In the years that Mark and I served as pastors, we walked with many families through the “valley of the shadow of death”. I was at the bedside of a mother as her children gathered to say goodbye. I held my father-in-law’s hand as he took his last breath, and I saw the look of relief on his face when he crossed. I walked with my sister, Marcia, as we looked for the last clothes that her only daughter, Dana Michelle, would wear on her sweet body, her soul having already departed. I have seen my sister, Rhetta, walk away from the grave of her dear husband, Ed. I have said goodbye to my father, my mother, my oldest son and my husband. All of this is grief. All of this is painful, but there are losses that cause different grief and therefore bring different grieving.

Have you ever wondered why certain people grieve one way and others another, or why it seems as if some people “move on” after a loss and others “get stuck” or “shut down”? Or sometimes, there are those who “bounce back” at first, but a year or more down the road they are physically and mentally fighting to live with peace and joy?

Believe me, I have pondered these questions through the years, as Mark and I tried to help our parishioners cope with the death of their loved ones. I made mental note of how some of them seemed to find closure, be at peace and return to the new normal that life had brought. Many times, I attributed this to their faith, and it may have been that, in part. Paul the Apostle said:

“But we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, concerning those having fallen asleep, so that you should not be grieved, just as also the rest, those having no hope.”

– I Thessalonians 4:13 (Berean Literal Bible)

There are also people of great faith that struggle to regain any sense of peace and joy after the loss of a loved one. I always felt compassion for them, but until I lost Matthew, I was never able to empathize with them. You know I mean to be as Christ is with us, “touched by the feeling” of their loss.

My observations in those days were that:

- People who lost children grieved longer and perhaps more intensely, I could mentally grasp that.
- People who felt guilty about the loss, suffered a prolonged, questioning grief.
- People who had a very dependent and close relationship with the deceased grieved longer, so it seemed.
- People who had watched their loved one suffer, grieved, but also had a sense of relief for the sake of the loved one.
- People who lost someone suddenly and especially to suicide struggled to find a way to say a goodbye that never came and grieved that as well as the actual physical loss.
- People who had suffered other losses, grieved more deeply every loss or seemed not to grieve subsequent losses as much.

Mind you, this was not a well-researched scientific observation. It was more a philosophical theory on my part. However, in the 40 plus years of pastoring Mark and I could almost always pick out the people in the congregation who had lost children.

Parents are not supposed to outlive their children. Historically, that sentence is ironic because most parents in earlier centuries lost one or more of their children. As a matter of fact, in those days, economic standing had little to do with the mortality rate of children. As a point of reference Queen Anne of Great Britain buried 17 children, the oldest one lived to his 11th birthday. She died at 49 leaving no heir.

The emotional toll of losing a child is evident in the eyes and face of the parent. I know, I have identified that look on others and since September 17, 2020, I have seen it looking back at me in my own reflection.

Add to any loss, losing that person to suicide and you have an additional component to the grief that would already encompass the rest of your life. I am not being overly dramatic nor am I saying no one else who has lost someone has suffered less. I am saying that losing anyone to suicide adds another weight of grief to your emotional scale.

In the months following Matthew's suicide, Mark and I dealt with all the questions I have mentioned in the previous narrative. We were fortunate that we did have some answers, and we did have a letter he left us. But still, we had no 'goodbye' and we had lost our battle to save his life. We had lost not just his life at the time, but the future we had hoped he would build. All of that is gone. That is a different grief than losing a parent who has lived 85 years and is asking God to take them home. The loss of a loved one is painful in all situations, I am not diminishing that, I am just explaining why parents that outlive a child may never be the person you knew before that loss. It is a different loss and it creates a different grief.

As a society, we value "goodbyes", we value last words, and we value a peaceful departure from this life. When those things are denied us and our loved one, the grief at their loss is only part of the grief we are left to deal with and to sort through. I am speaking from personal experience as well as the experiences shared with me from other grievers.

Closure is the word that I keep coming back to. Overall, there is no closure in grief because as long as we live the person we have lost is missing. They are missing in the sense that they are physically removed from our lives. They are also missing in the sense that our lives are creating new events, and our loved ones are missing out.

What am I trying to convey here? The grief I have about Matthew's death is different from the grief I carry for Mark. I have tried to explain it in counseling sessions and to myself. Every time the waves of grief arise, Matthew's death is the overwhelming wave. I do not feel guilty about that fact, but it took me a while to admit it. Why is it that way? I have concluded that it has much to do with how the death's occurred and the fact that I was not expecting Matthew's death and certainly not expecting his suicide.

Daniel once said that Mark's death was like a punch to the face, it hurt, but at least you saw it coming; Matthew's death was like a punch in the gut that caught you off guard. I agree. The manner of death mattered. How we leave this world matters to those we leave behind. We find a measure of comfort when someone dies "doing what they loved", "saving another life" or "peacefully, surrounded by their family". It matters to us how our loved ones leave this realm.

Being able to stand around the bedside of a loved one and help them leave this world surrounded by love and peace is a gift to them and to those they are leaving. We lost much of that when people stopped dying at home or when families were blocked by protocols from being with hospitalized loved ones as they died.

When someone we love dies suddenly or away from us, we feel cheated of that gentle goodbye, that releasing of their soul from our grip and it hurts more. It takes longer to let them go. It takes longer to find that peaceful place in our core where we can say "all is well".

We often say to those who can no longer hear us "rest in peace" when what we are really looking for is that place where we can "live in peace" with their loss.

I had that peace immediately with Mark's passing and it never wavered. The grief hits in waves as grief does but there is a steady calm with the grief. With Matthew, peace comes and goes like the waves of grief. I want to tell him, I am sorry I failed to see what was happening, I want to ask him to wait one more night, because the world might have looked better the next morning. I still pray that God will help me to not cry when I run into certain people because to see them, is to see Matthew. Sometimes I remind myself that Joshua, Daniel, Lisa, Betsy, Reese, Weston, Mia, Zoe and Sawyer deserve my full attention without my mind thinking "Matthew should be here."

This is a different grief because it was a different loss. I knew it from the beginning, but it took me a while to accept that I was not missing Mark less than I missed Matthew, just because I was grieving their absences differently.

Chapter 13: Displaced Pieces

Who are you? I mean that literally, take a moment and answer that question, Who are you? What did you say about yourself, how do you define you? How we answer that question reveals much about what we value in ourselves and in our lives. More important than how we answer that question aloud is what we internalize about who we are.

For 40 plus years, I was a wife, a pastor's wife, a minister of music, mother to three sons, then a mother-in-law and eventually a grandmother. In two and half years, I lost a major part of my identity, and I could not verbalize the feeling that was created in me. What I did know was that it was more than grief. It took questions to bring it to light, and it took my son, Daniel, to name it for me.

In retrospect the first time this vague unfamiliar feeling surfaced was when I heard the question: "How many children do you have, Dr. Evans?" The question was routine enough and part of the family history section of a medical form. The occupational therapist that asked it was professional but pleasant and was typing in the answers as Mark gave them. However, no answer came forth when that question was asked. Mark looked at me and I looked back. It was the first time since Matthew died that we had to answer that question. The therapist paused, almost puzzled. Mark stammered a minute and then said,

"We uh.. We ..We have three sons, but our oldest one is deceased. But three.. we have three"

Caught off guard, I am sure, the therapist looked at me and responded, "Oh, my I am sorry. What happened?"

Mark responded, "He was depressed and....he committed suicide".

Again, the shock showing, the therapist said, "Oh how do you take it, I don't think I could face that."

In a moment of God-given composure, I am sure, I replied, "I hope you never have to face it, but by God's grace, you can take whatever you have to take." Mark echoed my answer.

The therapist said, almost to himself, "I don't know, I have two daughters and I just don't know if I have enough of that grace."

After the therapist left, Mark and I talked about how to best respond the next time we were asked. I mean, we have three sons, we will always have three sons. Is it necessary to designate that one of them lives on the other side of eternity? We decided to figure it out based on the circumstances and our comfort level if the question was asked again.

Still the question and its answer left me with an unidentifiable feeling. I am still a mother, but one of my sons is not where he is “supposed” to be.

That feeling was reinforced a little over two years later when I had to go to the doctor. The receptionist handed me a clipboard and asked me to update my information. For the first time, the ‘spouse’ question had to answered “widow”. Who am I? I am a widow. No longer a wife, but a widow. A widow missing 1/3 of her sons, a widow. Blessed with remaining sons and a growing family, but still, nothing will ever be the same.

Three months after Mark died, our family was given a reason to be joyful, Sawyer Luke was born. Once again my journey in life took me up to Greenville as I tried to help Dan, Betsy and Zoe adjust to being a family of 4. What a wonderful joy new life is and especially if you get to be the Mimi of that new life!

But Mark is gone, Matt is gone. We should be a family of 12, but we are a family of 10. That nagging feeling that I could not identify kept slipping in. It wasn’t grief, grief represented the missing pieces of our family. Grief was the blatant sadness at the lost pieces of our family. What is this feeling? I could not put it into words.

Daniel knocked on the door of the bedroom and asked if he could come in. He entered and sat down in the chair and asked “Ma, how are you?” It was the first time since Mark died that Daniel and I had talked at length about the changes our family had been through in the past 2 years. As we were discussing the future, Dan expressed that he just wanted me to be happy and to be able to enjoy the grandchildren in both places. We talked about selling the house and a variety of other subjects. I am blessed that both of my sons and their wives have welcomed me into their lives and homes, even to the extent of asking me to live with them.

I thanked Dan for the invitation, but I told him, as I had told Joshua, my house holds memories, and I was not ready to break from all of that. It was then that Daniel put a name to the feeling I had not been able to define.

“Mom, I want you to do what brings you peace and happiness. I do not want you to feel displaced!” There it was. That was it.

“Dan, that is exactly how I do feel. Displaced. I am the one that has lost my place in my own life.”

It was true. To some extent, it is still true, almost 3 years later. I know where Mark and Matthew are. And while Joshua and Daniel, have lost a brother and a father, they have their own place in their growing families.

Losing Matthew and then Mark made me feel as if I had awoken in a different version of my life. A version that I was still trying to accept. In this version I had 2 sons, not three, and I was a widow. Except in my heart, I have three sons, and my husband is just away, for a while. He is waiting for me somewhere here and I will join him some day.

But that is not reality. It is not. The reality of my life is that this is my life now. The old life is not coming back. While I may feel out of place, this is not a sci-fi movie where the person has crossed into an alternate universe. This is my universe, this is my life, with changes.

I cannot bring back the “missing pieces”, but I can find my place in this life. I must find my place in this life because I am still here.

God has his reasons; he has his plans. Who am I? Certainly not one to challenge the God that has been so faithful to me in every season of my life. Who am I? I am still Gloria Miles Evans, a person with a purpose. I am no longer a wife, no longer the pastor’s wife, no longer a minister of music, but I am still a servant of the Lord, a mother, a grandmother, a sister, a friend. I am still alive and this is my life.

Once the feeling was named, I felt somewhat empowered as to how to navigate the emotions it brought. To be honest though, it took my 6-year-old granddaughter to further shake me back in place.

I had made a habit of not crying in front of the grands, so if I felt a cry coming on, I would go to the bathroom and cry quietly, or so I thought.

One day I was doing just that, when I heard a knock on the door. It was Mia.

“Mimi, are you in there?”

“Yes”

“Mimi, you are crying, aren’t you? I know you are.”

“I’m okay”

“Mimi, you are an old lady now and you should not be crying every day. You should be happy! Papa is where he is supposed to be, and you are where you are supposed to be. You gotta stop this.”

That is what happened. She said it.

Who am I? I am an old lady now who still has a purpose and a place.

Thank God for blunt, truthful grandchildren.

Chapter 14: Negotiating

Seeking and finding that negotiated peace in the aftermath of grief has become a way of life for me. It is something anyone who grieves does if they are going to survive. They may be doing that intentionally or just stumbling upon it. When something traumatic happens, even if one survives the ‘something’ relatively okay, a form of anxiety can develop in the person. This is not necessarily PTSD but rather a hyper alertness which may not be evident initially. It is often referred to as *“waiting for the other shoe to drop.”* Despite my deliberate efforts to grieve in a healthy manner, including going to a therapist, I was taken by surprise on two occasions with a shattering of that peace. One time was shortly after Matt died and the next incident was since Mark died.

A few months after Matthew passed away, I went to Greenville to spend some time with Zoe and perhaps give Betsy a little break. Tom had come to spend the day with Mark. The day was amazing, as are all days with grandkids! Zoe and I had stepped out into the yard to collect leaves and maybe see a duck! In a little while, I saw Dan drive up in that familiar burgundy truck (Matthew’s last work truck). At first, I didn’t feel or think anything unusual. He got out, greeted me and Zoe, received the leaves she gave him and went into the house. A few minutes later, Zoe and I went in. Dan had his phone in hand and left the room to take a call. All normal, right? Well, suddenly I felt an old feeling in my chest, rapid heartbeat, breathing got hard. I recognized it as anxiety! On the heels of that, the thought came: “Something bad has happened to Mark, Nelwyn or Tom have called Dan, because they didn’t want to upset me and”.... You get the picture. All of this happened in less than a minute. Then, I did the only reasonable thing one could do. I called Mark. He answered, and I did not tell him why I really called. I just told him I would be heading home shortly. Whew! I never told Dan what my mind had created. Looking back, I understand the chain of events that created my anxiety.

1. I’m in Greenville at Dan and Betsy’s, a place of joy but also where I was when Matthew died.
2. “Matthew’s “ truck pulled up.
3. Daniel was the one holding the phone when he came in to tell me Mark needed to talk to me on the morning Matthew died.

In that flash, I almost crumbled over an assumption of an event that had not happened. I know that one day something else “bad” is going to happen. That is life. In my personal notes about that day, I wrote:

“I do not want the fact that bad things will happen again in the future to stop me from enjoying the good things that are happening now.”

You may think I would have learned after that incident to stay in the moment and not anticipate that all news was bad news. I would have thought so too, however, in the past two years since losing Mark, I have heard the panic in my own voice when I answer a call from Joshua, Daniel, Lisa, Betsy or Reese. Many times, instead of saying “Hello” I find myself saying “What’s going on?”

In fact, a few weeks ago, Joshua called and when I answered, he said, “I love you mom!” Don’t ask me why, but immediately, I mean in an instant, my brain interpreted that as “He’s preparing me for bad news,” I responded, in a panicked voice, “What’s wrong!”

He was as puzzled as could be, and quite frankly by that time, so was I. I apologized to him and thanked him for calling. After I got off the phone, I cried, no, I sobbed! Irrational thoughts, I told myself.

When one phone call or one moment has torn from you all that was safe, sure and secure, couldn’t another call do the same to whatever safe places are left?

Where do we go? What do we do? We, who will never breathe fully and completely again? In my grief, this is what I have done at times, I have held my breath, as if this will stop the clock on any future tragedy. How futile, but how human!

However, the faith in me reminds me that my times, and the times of those I love, are in the hands of God. This I believe! This I rehearse! It is not a resignation of “whatever!” It is a shout of victory...”Whatever happens, He knows the way I walk. He knows the path, He knows where the tragedies are, He knows the outcomes, He is not cruel, He is Love and will never leave me. My God is faithful.”

So, dear grieving friend, speak peace to your troubled thoughts, speak healing to your hurt. The hurt is real, the loss is deep and life changing, but His peace is possible. His promises extend beyond life into eternity. Do not doubt that life can and will be joyful and blessed again. Hold on. Trust on. Live on.

“For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities” Hebrews 4:15 (NKJV)

My search for peace has taught me that while there is no wrong way to grieve, there are healthy and unhealthy ways to grieve. There are ways of grieving that bring relief and there are ways of grieving that complicate the process, cause us more pain and threaten the relationships we have with our loved ones that remain.

This is not my finding alone, it is documented by those that study thanatology, the multidisciplinary field that examines the biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of death and dying, including the process of grief and bereavement.

How we grieve matters and affects our lives as much as the grief itself. I have already stated that people are affected by loss differently, but key in that statement is that we **are** affected. According to multiple sources the effects of grief are evident in all areas of our lives, and we may not always be aware of these, because our focus is on the sadness or emptiness we feel and our missing loved one. However, it is important that we acknowledge the presence of these factors and be proactive in doing things that will lessen the impact of them. This includes letting those around us know that we are not okay sometimes and that we need patience and understanding as we process all that has changed. I realize what I am saying goes against the “I can handle this myself” or “All I need is prayer” philosophy many have, however, God put within us a need for community and His word supports our bearing our own burden as well as bearing the burdens of others. (Reference Galatians 6:2).

Further, we are told to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). Too often we forget the last part of that and after the funeral we leave the mourning to those immediately impacted by the loss. I understand that from both sides. Sometimes, we who are mourning think we just want to be left alone. But sometimes that is because we do not recognize the effects of grief in ourselves.

After almost five years since Matthew's death and over 2 years since Mark's, when the peace and joy in my life and soul feel threatened, I turn first to my heavenly Father, next to my family and then to my habits to see if I am taking the steps needed for self-care.

“Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation.”

– Pastor Rick Warren
His son, Matthew, died by suicide in April 2013

Chapter 15: Pieces of Understanding

"The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it."

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

As I shared earlier, after Matthew died, I read many books on grief. I was already familiar with the works of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, having studied her research on the stages of dying in my psychology and counseling courses, when I was a college student. She had co-authored a book on grief, written in a similar style as her earlier work and it was one of the first books I downloaded and read. I added another list of books on grief which I read and then shared my thoughts in a Facebook group I started, "Pieces of Peace: Surviving the death of a loved one."

I read the Bible and my devotional readings of course, but there were books based on the grief experiences of others, that helped me during those early days and weeks. In my mind I would often feel like I was in the middle of sea and that my boat would sink at any time because the waves of grief were coming in faster than I could bail them out.

One thing that helped me more than reading the books, however, was talking with other people who had experienced a similar loss. I found that many of them were open to talking to me as well because we have a shared grief. I know now that no one can honestly say to another person, "I know how you feel" because we do not, we cannot ever fully know how another person feels at a loss. What I can say, and now I do say is. "I understand why you feel the way you feel."

There is something therapeutic in realizing that someone else understands the feelings you have and that there is no reason to explain why you feel that way. I am thankful for the friends and family that have allowed me to share some of their thoughts on grief written in poems and prose. As you read these, I hope you will find that shared grief creates a safe place to grieve openly and to accept a way to incorporate the losses into a productive life.

I also hope that you give yourself permission to grieve aloud and share the pain that comes from such losses as this life brings.

No More Basketball Games in the Driveway
~Bruce Floyd

No more basketball games in the driveway:
someone dunking pulled the backboard off
and I with hammer ripped the supports away
and so, no one hears the slam of the ball
on the concrete in the fading afternoon--
nothing on the concrete now but oil stains.

No more basketball games in the driveway,
games where graceful you rose into the air
and delicately dropped jump shots through the net,
where you'd fake right and then drive left around me,
leave me musing, my hands reaching helplessly
for you as you tenderly laid the ball in.

Those loud afternoons of ours are gone.
I am older now, even slower than I was then,
and you are gone forever, resting quietly
in the grave on the little rise,
it's simple marker noting your sudden leaving.
No more basketball games in the driveway.

In the dusk, though, I sit in the porch swing
and remember your elegant form gliding by me,
your slender and musical hand full of ball,
your beauty illuminated by the autumn sun
setting behind the tall trees behind the house.
You feinted, eluded me, and leapt into your grave.

You Were....
~Bruce Floyd

You were a drop of dew upon a blade of grass.
Now you lie on that little rise, Lie, perhaps, in peace.
While the fury and misery of your leaving
burns in my blood and scalds my heart.
You, yes, it's you: the ineffable riddle of my life.
I am a child trying to spell "closure" with the wrong blocks.

Rob

~ Bruce Floyd

I will not see him in middle age,
And he will not see me in my old age.
I meet him in the long shadows of dusk,
Meet him as he is preparing to leave.
In my memory he stands in the doorway,
Looks at me with those bright brown eyes
And with that crooked smile,
He forever says to me, "See ya later, Pop."
But he is falling into that grave on the little rise,
Even as I say, "Take care of yourself, son."

The Boy...

~Bruce Floyd

The boy did not break my heart with a stone,
but with a "See you later, Pop," and he was gone,
leaving me for good on Valentine's day,
leaving a sorrow seas can't wash away,
a sadness burnt into my marrow bone

To Rob

~ Bruce Floyd

Some day will I understand
why I had to lose you,
my heart at long last
come to reconciliation?

Will the May night fall sweet,
without the sadness trailing
along in ebony robes
of its great grieving gown?

Oh, but the red rose on the trellis,
the tender flower, the many-lidded rose,
will forever remind me of you,
my heart's red rose till it beat no more.

The Dead Boy Dreaming

~Bruce Floyd

If dead boys dream while they lie in the cool earth,
you perhaps dream that thousands long for you--
notice that I am one of the crowd.

If in your endless dreams in damp darkness you guess
that a score or two of persons long for you--
see me there in the middle.

If you dream that only a handful of mourners long for you,
recall that I am one of them—
the one in the center of the palm.

If you dream that only two persons long for you,
see my face there and know I am one.

If, dreaming boy in your grave, you see no one
who longs for you, no one who remembers
your brown eyes and your crooked smile,
then you will know, my son, that your father is dead.

On The Loss of Matthew

~ Josh Evans

Loss is hard to define.

Sudden unexpected loss is even harder.

What about loss that was not expected but not all together surprising? Loss
that could have happened sooner and it wouldn't have been a shock.

However, the hardest to understand is loss that occurs after the person comes
back from the brink only to take a running leap off the edge.

No chance to catch them. The jump lasts but a moment for them, but the fall
feels like forever for those left. The moments, days and months pass but it
sometimes feels like a free fall. Is all lost?

No, but you are. Not lost for good but lost in our midst.

Loss is hard to define.

Rescued From the Tide (For Matthew)

~Marcia Ramsey 9/17/20

Some people wear their hurts
inside their hearts; not on their sleeves.

They hemorrhage deep inside, where
no one sees how much they bleed.

Until one day they're emptied of
the strength to 'stand the tide,

Then down they fall still fighting on
this battlefield of life.

But blessed those eyes when opened see,
that golden shore beyond,

And there the very Son of God
with loving open arms

Are raised by Him to brand new dawn
where only Light resides;

And there's no bleeding,
save The Blood that rescued from the tide.

The Pot On The Stove

This is a story that was shared with me by a parent who had experienced the loss of a son, in similar circumstances as I lost Matthew. In the course of time, a counselor at their workplace inquired as to how they were doing. The person replied that they were “okay”. They were “coping”.

Counselor: That’s good, if you realize “that pot will always be on the stove”.

Person: What?

Counselor: This loss will always be there. You have moved it to a back burner and other pots have your attention, but this pot will always be there!

The Storm

~Marcia Ramsey

(At the loss of her daughter, Dana)

Whence came this storm that shakes my soul
and hurls toward foreign coasts?
Where are you thoughts of comfort
When I'm needing you the most?
Whose sermon bears the Shepherd's heart
for wounded sheep like me?
Whose kiss will come to touch my face
When love abandons me?
Whose laughter haunts me with its joy
for life born perfectly?
Whose blindness boasts of deeds achieved
before the age of three
What shall I do to help myself
When no one else can save?
What can I do when life demands
the fearful to be brave?

When will I taste and see that life and love are good?
When before my prayerful path misfortune firmly stood
Where are you now my prayer of faith, with hope and strength to cure?
Alas! The storm inside goes on.... I simply must endure!
When all of Hell is reaching out, my soul will not be caught.
When friendships turn to empty words, I'll not give loss a thought!

Whose Presence now awakens me to beauty on the sea?
Whose song is sung and fills the air above my tragedy?
Whose breath of life stirs rippling waves beneath a vessel torn?
Whose Peace is chasing fear away within a soul reborn?
Whose Promise rings inside my head in strains of future bright?
Whose wings become my sure escape as heart and soul take flight?
What matters where the answers are, or where this pain belongs?
For I have stepped out of the boat...and I AM NOT ALONE!

Thank you, Mr. Bruce, Joshua, and Marcia, for sharing with me these pieces of your grief and for allowing me to share them with others.

When I listen to people in grief now, I listen with different ears and a different heart. We know that grief is always there. It may be on the back burner, but that is one pot we will never empty and put away. We have a shared secret that those untouched by grief do not yet know. We know that grieving is universal but also unique, we know that it will always be a companion to us, but it does not have to be the tour guide. We know that grief and joy can co-exist in the same memory, the way the rain can fall when the sun is shining. We understand the hurt in the heart that feels like an emptiness and yet fills our complete being. We are the grievers; our own death does not repel us anymore for we have already made deposits of great treasures on the other side.

We are the ones challenged not by death but by life. We know sorrow, but we seek joy. We are the ones who see in each other the strength to move forward and create a future in hope, when behind us is the familiar. We keep each other going, we say “you can do this.” We assure ourselves and those around us, “Life is beautiful, keep drawing on its pages. Your book is not finished; you still have much to say.” We are the brave ones who lift others even when we are down. We know this is important, we know we must not give up. We are here to give comfort but also to receive comfort and to believe that our loved ones are proud of what we will do with this package of grief.

More importantly, we believe
and find strength in the promise of our Lord

**“Weeping may endure for a night,
but joy comes in the morning”
(Psalm 30:5).**



MMEFC RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

The Matthew and Mark Evans Foundation and Center

The MMEFC has provided a way to honor the lives of Matthew and Mark while serving the present needs of others. We provide support in these areas:

Mental Health Services

Rev. Joshua Evans, M.A, LPC-A
Center Administrator (843) 373-5588

Clergy Care Program

Rev. Dean Morgan, M.A (843) 598-0413
Clergy Care Director
Mrs. Annette Morgan B.A
Events Support and Administrative Assistant

Community Care Services and Support

-GriefShare Groups
-Benevolence Support
-Homeless Outreach/Support
-Educational Supplies Support
Contact: gevans@mmemf.org

Kindred Hearts Widow's Group

Coordinator: Mrs. Rhettta Hanna, AIB
Contact: rmhanna89@yahoo.com

MMEFC Executive Director

Mrs. Gloria M. Evans, M.Ed.
gevans@mmemf.org

Foundation Board of Directors

Mr. Dana Welch, Chair
Ms. Dawn Hucks, Treasurer
Mr. J. Brent Lee
Mrs. Angela Miles
Rev. Trey Watkins
Recording Secretary
Mary K Miles

From the beginning processes of forming the MMEFC, I have been amazed at how God brought the right people at the right time to pull it all together and to give it the proper direction. I cannot take credit for the MMEFC, but I am so thankful to be a part of it. Thank you, Richard Miles, Brent Lee and Joshua Evans, for seeing the potential in something such as this and continuing to work to keep it growing. Thank you, Dean and Annette Morgan, Dawn Hucks, Dana Welch, Angela Miles, Trey Watkins, Mary Miles, Rhett Hanna and all our donors. The MMEFC makes a difference every day, because of you!

FROM OUR WEBSITE www.mmemf.org

Our purpose, mission, and vision:

The purpose of our non-profit organization is to bring donors together to provide services for families and individuals experiencing a life crisis, including educational, medical, emotional, and mental health needs, through a variety of means, including coordination with established charities.

In addition, our mission is to provide a Center, in coordination with the Christian Fellowship PHC, where services are provided to help families and individuals in stressful situations by providing counseling, support groups and life coaching. A major focus of these services is to provide support to clergy members and their families.

Matthew Evans

Matthew “Matt” Evans was the oldest son of Mark and Gloria Evans. He excelled in school and was a 1998 honor graduate from Lake City High School. With a gift for computer technology, he was working for a local computer company before graduation. He graduated from Florence Darlington Technical College and began the course of study for Cisco Systems Engineering. He obtained many industry certifications, including one as an Instructor for Cisco Systems. He spent most of his career working as a computer technician and network engineer. Matt made many friends through his humor, which was quick, sarcastic and perfectly timed! He was also known for his polite manner and acts of kindness. His favorite phrase was “How you treat people matters!” Sadly, Matt’s humor hid a long-term battle with Bipolar Disorder 2 and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He became alcohol dependent and while he fought to overcome these problems, he succumbed to his illness, ending his life on September 17, 2020. We miss him and everything he was, but we do not despair. His favorite scripture was Psalm 91, which he memorized. We honor his memory and know he would be pleased that this foundation and center will help others fighting to remain here awhile longer.



Matthew with his niece, Mia.

Mark Evans

Rev. Dr. Mark Evans graduated from high school at Holmes Academy in Greenville, SC, and went on to earn degrees from USC Coastal Carolina (now Coastal Carolina University), Francis Marion University, and a doctorate from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. He was a Licensed Professional Counselor and held various certifications in the field of education in the areas of teaching, counseling and administration. He served as the Director of Alternative Education in Florence County School District Three until his retirement from the district in 2018. In addition to his work in the field of education, Mark was an ordained minister in the SC Conference of the IPHC. He served as the Pastoral Care Counselor for the Conference and was instrumental in establishing the Pastoral Care Counselor Program for the International Pentecostal Holiness Church Denomination. He was a man of great generosity, wisdom, integrity, intelligence, and kindness and was highly respected in the community at large. He was a true and noble man of character and courage. Between 2016 and 2021 he was diagnosed with two different forms of cancer, which he met with his usual calm. In 2020, after experiencing unusual visual perception problems, he was diagnosed with Posterior Cortical Atrophy (PCA). Even with this disease, Mark continued to help others and lived in the same calm assurance that exemplified his entire life. He remained a faithful witness to the peace of Christ and kept his humor until the end. He passed away peacefully with family members at his bedside on February 25, 2023. He left behind his wife of 45 years, Gloria, sons and daughters -in- law, Joshua (Lisa) and Daniel (Betsy) and grandchildren, Reese, Weston, Mia, Zoe and Sawyer. We miss his wisdom, his calming presence and laughter.



Reese, Matthew, Mark and Weston
Easter Sunday 2017

Information and Resources

Effects of Grief

Emotional Effects:

- **Sadness and Depression:** Intense feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a sense of loss are common. In some cases, grief can develop into clinical depression.
- **Anxiety and Fear:** Grief can trigger anxiety, fear, and even panic attacks.
- **Anger:** Blame, resentment, and anger towards oneself, others, or even the deceased are also common emotional responses.
- **Guilt:** Feelings of guilt or regret over things said or not said, done or not done, are also frequently experienced.
- **Shock,** disbelief, and confusion are typical initial reactions to loss.

Physical Effects:

Grief is physically draining, leading to persistent tiredness and exhaustion.

- **Sleep Disturbances:**
Insomnia or excessive sleep, along with changes in appetite and weight, are common.
- **Disrupted Digestion:**
Grief can disrupt the digestive system, causing stomach pain, nausea, or other gastrointestinal problems.
- **Suppressed Immune System:**
Stress hormones released during grief can suppress the immune system, making individuals more susceptible to illness.
- **Cardio Problems:**
In some cases, severe grief can even trigger temporary heart problems, such as stress-induced cardiomyopathy
(Harvard Health)

Other Impacts:

- **Disrupted Routines:**
Grief can make it difficult to maintain daily routines and responsibilities.
- **Social Isolation:**
Some people experiencing grief may withdraw from social interactions and isolate themselves.
- **Cognitive Impairment:**
Grief can affect concentration, memory, and decision-making abilities (**American Brain Foundation**).
- **Spiritual Distress:**
Loss can raise questions about life, death, and spirituality, leading to spiritual distress.

Strategies for Healthy Grieving: (Dana-Farber Cancer Institute)

Prioritize Physical Health:

- **Maintain a routine:**
Establish regular sleep and mealtimes to provide structure and stability.
- **Eat well:**
Focus on a balanced diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and lean protein to support your body during this stressful time.
- **Stay active:**
Engage in regular exercise, even if it's just a walk, to boost mood and manage stress.
- **Limit unhealthy habits:**
Avoid excessive alcohol or drug use, as these can worsen grief and hinder the healing process.
- **Get enough sleep:**
Grief can disrupt sleep patterns, so aim for a regular sleep schedule and consider short naps if needed. See your physician if you are having difficulty sleeping.

Acknowledge and Process Emotions:

- **Allow yourself to feel:**
Don't suppress your emotions. It's normal to experience a range of feelings, including sadness, anger, and confusion.

- **Journal or write:**
Expressing your feelings through writing can be a helpful way to process them.
- **Talk about it:**
Share your feelings with trusted friends, family, or a therapist.
- **Remember the person:**
Look at photos, share stories, or engage in activities that remind you of your loved one, if this helps.

Seek Support:

- **Connect with others:**
Reach out to your pastor, friends, family, or support groups to share your experiences and find comfort.
- **Consider professional help:**
A therapist or grief counselor can provide guidance and support during the grieving process.
- **Engage in activities you enjoy:**
Participating in hobbies, spending time in nature, or listening to uplifting music can help improve your mood.
- **Faith and spirituality:**
Staying in contact with your faith community can be a source of comfort. Talk to your pastor.

Be Patient and Kind to Yourself:

- **Grieving takes time:**
There is no set timeline for grieving. Be patient with yourself and allow yourself the time you need to regain a sense of peace.
- **Avoid major changes:**
Refrain from making significant life decisions until you've had time to process your grief.

Know when to get extra help with your grief:
(Source: Mayo Clinic)

	Uncomplicated Grief	Depression
Prevalent Emotions	Loss and emptiness, longing for the deceased loved one	Persistent sadness, hopelessness and/or despondency
Distressing Emotions Experienced as:	Waves that tend to decrease in intensity and frequency over time	Constant and unrelenting
Experience of Positive Emotions	Moments of humor, comfort, peace, hope, and happiness still occur	It is uncommon for a severely depressed person to be able to experience positive emotions
Thoughts	Focused on the deceased and/or related losses	Focused on being self-critical and hopeless/despairing regarding life in general
Self-Esteem	Not usually affected	Feelings of worthlessness, shame and self-hatred can occur
If there are Suicidal Thoughts	The underlying reason is due to wanting to be reunited with the loved one	The underlying motivation is to escape pain and despair, and/or feeling worthless and unworthy of living

Recommended Reading

I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One (A Compassionate Grief Recovery Book) by Brook Noel , Pamela Blair PhD.

Son, We Need to Talk: Coping with My Son's Suicide. by LeRoy Lawson and Mark A. Taylor

When Mountains Crumble: Rebuilding Your Life After Losing Someone You Love by Danita Jenea.

On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler

Finding Peace When Your Heart Is In Pieces: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Other Side of Grief, Loss, and Pain.
by Paul Coleman, Psy.D