

Eric

The cold dark, dreary December day was appropriate for a funeral. A few people arrived early at St. Stephen's Church. Many members of the Youth Group gathered to express their condolences. They felt my pain. Eric stood with Steve (the Youth Group assistant). We all cried during the past couple of days. However, anyone who knew Eric also knew that he was distraught.

Very few conversations stuck with me during those difficult days as I mourned my youngest brother's death. I recall that Eric gently touched my arm. As tears began to form, he said with sincerity, "I'm not used to my friends dying." I did not have to comment. Eric turned, and then walked to where the Youth Group sat. His words echoed in my head. He and David got along well. They were a lot alike, yet distinctly different.

A few months after David's premature death, I resigned my position as Youth Pastor. My real job and college night classes occupied my time. Leaving the Youth Group did not end friendships. Many of the "young adults" frequently stopped over to see "Mom" and myself. Eric and his sister, Judi, were always welcome. I was still a part of their lives.

Several members of the Youth Group graduated from High School that Spring. Judi invited me to her graduation party. The party gave me the opportunity to meet her older brother and sisters. Judi and Eric have a great family. The siblings made Judi's party fun and Eric joked and clowned. We all laughed. Eric stole the show even though it was not his gig. Judi did not mind. She laughed at his antics. There was an obvious absence of sibling rivalry. Judy's family had a unique and genuine kinship.

A few weeks after that party, Judi and Eric called to ask if they could stop and talk. Within minutes, they were at my door. They told me their father accepted a position on the opposite side of the state. Eric would be leaving (Judi already planned to attend college at MSU).

I was saddened by the move, but wanted the best for them. More perplexing news followed. Eric visited a doctor about a sore throat. His discomfort and irritation was a tumor...cancer. My mind reeled. Eric and Judi quickly mentioned many medical prospects to curtail the growth or eliminate the cancer. They asked that this be kept secret. Eric was strong and courageous for a young man of sixteen. He wanted to leave the area with hope and good wishes, not foreboding and grief. I understood.

God does work for the good in every situation (Romans 8:28). Eric's comfort in a time of anguish when my brother died proved to be an inspiration over the years of Eric's struggle. There were many times when my mind pondered God's goodness and sovereignty. Fairness baffled me. Why did it have to happen to Eric? My heart ached. Eric's words reverberated in my mind constantly, "I'm not used to my friends dying." Internal anguish roared over Eric's health. Questions to God continued.

Eric was so likeable, so much fun to be around. He was intelligent, sincere, and amusing all at the same time. Eric also possessed many other positive attributes and talents. He made his parents proud. Aside from all this, Eric had a strong faith in a loving, kind God. Somehow, I knew God was using Eric as he used David to touch the lives of others in the midst of difficult struggles. However, I could not distinguish an exact reason for all this pain.

During this time, Eric tried almost every conceivable drug, treatment, and prayer to vanquish the cancer. And, I moved to Big Rapids, Michigan to attend college. The move brought me closer to Eric and Judi. We visited each other frequently. Each time we met, hope was renewed. Eric was trying something different. There was always reason for optimism. Eric was even on TV when he volunteered to test a rather new (perhaps somewhat skeptical) treatment to impede the cancer. He was a star shining brightly even in those low moments. We all hoped and prayed for Eric's recovery. He struggled relentlessly against a formidable foe.

Early in the Spring of 1982, Judi, Eric and I ventured to a park on Lake Michigan. It was a typical Spring day in Michigan...partly sunny, cool, and breezy. However, Glory to God...the snow was gone! As we meandered along the primitive paths and trails, Judi and I (though not obviously) paced our walk with Eric. He did not want to be a burden. The natural beauty of the park was awesome as we slowly climbed an observation platform. The height offered a grand view. However, the blast of frigid air blowing across

Lake Michigan chilled us to the bone. We braved the cold as long as we could. It was time to go. Hastily we sought the Nature Center with hope of catching the next nature show and warmth.

We arrived a few minutes before the show began. Judi and I took seats up front. Eric sat several rows behind us. I kidded him about being anti-social. Judi whispered that he needed to be alone. As the lights dimmed, I turned and saw that Eric had fallen asleep. The walk exhausted him. Judi and I watched the captivating slide show. When it ended, everyone filed out. Judi and I lingered. We explained to a park employee why Eric was sleeping. The staffer tried to understand. An unfamiliar sound startled Eric. "Oops...what a great show!" Eric said as he arose. We knew he was exhausted.

We promptly walked to my car. Judi's parents expected us for dinner, and I was anxious to get Eric home. Eric found a better place to nap once we arrived. Judi and I took another walk. We talked about her brother, and my friend, Eric.

Before leaving, I promised Eric that I would send him a copy of Dr. Peale's book, *Imaging* (that I had inadvertently forgotten...the book is inspirational...for God's wondrous power). My trip home brought mixed thoughts of Eric's struggle. The trip seemed to take longer than usual. I fulfilled my vow. I mailed the book on Monday.

The amount of pollen and mold that Spring was horrific. My head, eyes, and body did not want to function. During one of several days I spent in bed (medicated to the max), the phone rang. It was Judi. Eric died. I remember sinking to the floor. Judi choked on every word as she relayed details about the funeral. I offered to bring my guitar and play a few songs. We hung up. I felt more miserable than before. However, all was well with Eric, he went home to be with Jesus. My consideration was for his family. They were in anguish. I'd been there.

The day of Eric's funeral I rose early, took a shower, and prepared to make the trip. My heart ached, but so did every other part of my anatomy. The pollen, dust, and other air borne pestilence were winning. I could not see to drive. I knew I could not attend the funeral. A hasty call to Judi's home did not raise anyone. They were gone. I needed to be there. I wanted to be there. I had to be there. However, it was not meant to be. I collapsed on my bed extremely discouraged, yet I knew, Eric would understand. He was a very empathetic person.

A few days later, the pollen and my agony decreased to where I could function. Judi and I talked and planned to meet. Judi said the funeral was nice (as nice as they can be), and I was missed. I felt awful. Within a week, my spirits lifted when I got a short note from Eric's mom. She told me of the renewed hope Eric derived from the book by Dr. Peale. Eric finished reading it just before he died. Reading the book did help him during his difficult time. Her note comforted me. She also expressed her understanding about me not being at Eric's funeral, and knew I would have been there if I could have.

Eric had been there for me. I wanted to be there for him and his family. Eric, the young man who inspired without prompting...the young man who wanted to live life to its fullest...the young man who strove for the best in himself...the young man who wanted to be an ordinary person...the young man who wanted to use his God-given talents...must know he did not live his short life in vain. Eric left a profound mark on many people. His valor and courage lives on. Eric's words of comfort, "I'm not used to my friends dying," still inspires and stirs my heart. I thank God for the privilege of knowing Eric, and the encouragement Eric gave me.

Through my youngest brother's death, and Eric's struggle, I realize more than ever that we do serve a loving, kind God. Meditating and contemplating about those hurtful and painful experiences always restores my faith, hope, and trust...all things do work for good.