

How can I keep from singing?

Esther Epp-Tiessen

When our eight-year-old son Timothy died of a brain tumour in 1994, my husband Dan and I knew immediately which words should go onto his gravestone. Tim had always loved to sing, and he would sing freely and joyfully throughout the day. We knew he

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was awake in the morning when we would hear “Old MacDonald had a farm” wafting from his bedroom. So this line from Robert Lowry’s 1860 hymn seemed the perfect epitaph: “How can I keep from singing?”

But we had other reasons for choosing this song. It is a song about suffering. More importantly, it is about how God accompanies the frail human spirit through suffering and somehow consoles the sufferer and transforms that suffering. It is about God’s

power to shine light into darkness, and joy and comfort into the deepest sorrow. It is about the resurrection and God’s assurance of a coming age when death and tears will be no more. In the days after Tim’s death, our broken hearts could scarcely comprehend this message. Yet we chose these words for Tim’s gravestone because our church had taught and we dared to believe the promise this old hymn held out:

*No storm can shake my inmost calm
while to that Rock I’m clinging.
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,
how can I keep from singing?¹*

Tim was born two months prematurely in the late summer of 1986. Although the doctors told us that his development would be somewhat delayed, they assured us that he would easily catch

up to his peers. But he didn't, and by his first birthday we had been told that he had cerebral palsy. We learned that his motor functioning would be seriously impaired—permanently.

Just after Tim's third birthday, he became very ill. After a long and excruciating time of uncertainty, we learned that he had a massive brain tumour. He needed surgery, radiation, and a year's worth of chemotherapy to fight the cancer invading his brain. About a year after the completion of treatment, he suffered a major stroke, which left him virtually blind, paralyzed on the right side, and unable to speak. Although Tim managed to recover some of his functioning, he was never the same. We were devastated by the successive losses.

In the late summer of 1994, Tim again became ill. He developed seizures, he lost bowel and bladder control, and his remaining vision vanished. Our deepest fears were confirmed on October 1, when the neurologist informed us that the medulloblastoma had ravaged Tim's entire brain and he had only a short while to live. Tim spent several weeks in hospital as the doctors tried to adjust medications in order to ease his seizures and pain. When his situation had stabilized, we brought him home to be with us. He died peacefully in our arms on October 31.

Taught about living by Tim's dying

Franciscan Richard Rohr writes that those who suffer are teachers: they teach those who surround them how to die and, more impor-

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tantly, how to live.² I resist sentimentalizing or romanticizing suffering—there is too much raw pain in it—and yet I find myself agreeing with Rohr. Those who suffer *do* teach us, often in profound and life-changing ways. Tim taught us much, through his suffering.

Tim taught us about faith. He had a deep and trusting faith in Jesus, which he expressed mostly through song. In Sunday school, his voice could be heard above the chorus of others, singing "Jesus loves me." At summer camp, he mesmerized the counsellors and other campers with his campfire rendition of "Kumbayah." At school, he was known to belt out the Christmas song "Go tell it on the mountain," whatever the time of year. And at bedtime

each night, he would utter a simple but fervent prayer, “Jesus, friend of little children, be a friend to me. Take my hand and ever keep me close to thee.” Tim loved Jesus dearly and truly. My own doubting spirit was often humbled by his childlike faith.

Tim taught us to value the simplest of life’s pleasures. Because of his physical limitations, and because he was so often unwell or in pain, Tim didn’t appreciate the bigger excursions or camping trips for which Dan and I and our other sons, Mark and Chris, longed. He preferred the comforts of home. Tim’s greatest joys were a juicy hotdog, a new set of keys to jingle, a walk to the fire station to “see” the fire trucks, and “wrestling” with his dad and brothers. Tim taught us to find joy and delight in the moment and in God’s gifts right around us.

Tim taught us acceptance of life and what it brings. Although he sometimes whined and complained, he never lamented his disabilities or special needs. Only once did I hear him say, “I wish I could walk,” and only once, after his loss of sight, did he whimper, “I can’t see.” Tim’s level of physical functioning was at its highest at about age two and a half; from then until he died at age eight, the cancer and its treatment made him increasingly disabled. He was able to accept his deteriorating functions with much more grace than his parents could.

Tim taught us that a small, weak, and disabled child can be amazingly strong. The apostle Paul writes that God’s strength is revealed in weakness. At Tim’s funeral, a close friend of ours spoke to all the children about Tim’s death. Ralph talked about the weakness and illness of Tim’s body, but also about the power, strength, and good health of Tim’s loving heart. Tim had an amazing capacity to love, and he showered that love lavishly on others. We, his family, experienced that love many times every day as he hugged us and told us, “I love you.” After his death, we learned how many other people had been recipients of his love—his teachers, therapists, friends, even doctors and nurses. Tim could not do many things for others, but he could love deeply and unconditionally. In that, he was a giant of strength.

Through Tim’s suffering, I also learned much about God’s love and presence. In the last weeks of his life, I had a powerful sense of God’s love and nearness whenever I entered Tim’s room. It was a tangible sensation that I had never experienced before.

When I mentioned it to Dan, he told me that he felt it too. And I was blessed with mystical experiences of God, which were totally new for me. In the weeks leading to Tim's death, I often held him in my arms in the evenings; during those moments I felt such a profound love for my dying child. In the year after Tim's death, I was given a vision of myself being held in exactly that way by God. I realized in those moments that God loves me even more than I loved my son.

Connected with the suffering of the world's children

Finally, Tim's suffering connected us with the suffering of others. In the years before Tim was born, Dan and I served with Mennonite Central Committee in the Philippines. While there, we befriended Jesse and Helen Suarez. Jesse spent many months in the provincial jail, because local military authorities were threatened by the farmer cooperative that he and several others were

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organizing in their mountain village. Helen stayed with us when she came for her bi-weekly visit to the jail. One week she arrived to say that their one-year-old son had died. He had become sick with a fever, vomiting, and diarrhea. Because they had no money for medical care, he had quickly become dehydrated and died. We accompanied Helen to the jail to inform Jesse that his youngest child was gone. I remember vividly his piercing cry

of agony and how he crumpled to the ground in a heap, sobbing. Childless at that time, I had no comprehension of what it meant to lose a child. After Timothy, I knew and I understood.

Tim's suffering has been my window into the suffering of the world, and particularly the suffering of children. The last months of Tim's life coincided with the Rwandan genocide. As I sat at his bedside day after day, I was aware that in Rwanda hundreds of thousands of children and adults were being slaughtered in the most horrific ways. In the months after Tim's death, I learned about the impact of United Nations-imposed sanctions on the children of Iraq, and about the hundreds of thousands of deaths resulting from lack of food, water, medical care, and other necessities of life. In the years since, war has devastated the lives of

children in Congo, Uganda, Palestine-Israel, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq (again). I want to scream, “Why must so many children suffer and die?” My spirit weeps, “Why must sons and daughters be sent into battle to kill or be killed?”

Author Barbara Kingsolver writes that the loss caused by war is “a pure, high note of anguish like a mother singing to an empty bed.”³ My son did not die in war, yet as one grieving mother, I join my cry with the cries of millions of mothers who have lost children through the brutality and senselessness of war. Resisting war and working for peace is a way that my bleeding mother-heart finds solace. It is a way that I have found meaning in my own suffering.

Formed by the faith community

It is thirteen years since Tim died. In the healing comfort of family, friends, and faith community, we have learned the lessons that Tim taught us through his suffering. We have learned about faith, love, strength, joy, and acceptance, and we have learned to see our own suffering as somehow bound up with that of all God’s children. I believe we were equipped to receive these lessons because the church had nurtured them within us long before Tim entered our lives. The church had formed us to see God at work in joy and in sorrow, in strength and in weakness, in life and in death, and to place our experience in the context of the anguish of all humanity. It taught us that the faith and hope we find in Christ is a well that sustains us, especially in suffering. It taught us that the song of God’s love echoes in times of deepest darkness. And so, since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?

*My life flows on in endless song,
above earth’s lamentation.
I catch the sweet, though far off hymn
that hails a new creation.*

*No storm can shake my inmost calm
while to that Rock I’m clinging.
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,
how can I keep from singing?*

*Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear that music ringing.
It finds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?*

*What though my joys and comforts die?
The Lord my Savior liveth.
What though the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth.*

*The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
a fountain ever springing!
All things are mine since I am his!
How can I keep from singing?*

Notes

¹ Robert Lowry, *Bright Jewels for the Sunday School*, 1869; “My life flows on” is #580 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

² Richard Rohr, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 14.

³ Barbara Kingsolver, “A Pure, High Note of Anguish,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 September 2001. This piece was reprinted in Kingsolver’s collection of essays, *Small Wonder* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).

About the author

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