

A life too brief

A memorial meditation for Adam Daniel Shantz

Gary Harder

Neither death, nor life, . . .
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38–39)

Right now that is hard to stomach, Lord.

*God will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more. (Rev. 21:4)*

Right now that is hard to believe, Lord. Right now, Lord, the words that resonate in us are those of the psalmist:

*You have broken us in the haunt of jackals,
and covered us with deep darkness. (Ps. 44:19)*

Today we know sorrow of a particular sort. We grieve a baby who will not grow among us, whose personality will not develop in our midst. We grieve a child who will not become an adult. For we have laid to rest today what might have been, a potential that will not be realized.

Dreams. Plans. Expectations. Hopes. The first birthday? Will never be celebrated. The terrible twos? Won't be endured. First day of school? No tears to be shed. First date? Nothing to be anxious about. Graduation? No party. Marriage? No grandchildren.

All dreams dashed. This has been a particularly wrenching time for you, Lisa and Marcus, and for your families and friends, for all of us. High hopes. Then anxiety over a traumatic birth. Adam rushed to Mt. Sinai Hospital. Waiting. Worst fears confirmed. No significant brain activity. And then waiting again,

waiting and praying that Adam might die. And a long time he took in the dying. He had spunk, resilience, stubbornness—stuff to be proud of.

And much, much more than agonizing waiting. So much more. Deep loving. Bonding. Holding. Tender caring. A family and a community holding vigil. Praying. Being cared for and held in the love and prayers of others when your own prayers failed to form.

No words

Adam's life was like a book that is too short. The book has a beautifully crafted cover. Physically, Adam looked perfect. The title is boldly written: Adam Daniel Shantz. Proud authors: Marcus and Lisa Shantz. But when the book is opened, no words are written inside. For Adam's brain had ceased to function. And without a brain there can be no thoughts, no reasoning, no words, nothing that makes sense. To him or to us. None of our questions make sense. None of our nice theological answers make sense. None of our groping for meaning leads anywhere.

The book is too short. Period. Adam Daniel Shantz. A cover and no words inside. We don't know how to deal with life without words.

Except that this too-brief life, this too-short book, has had a powerful effect. Many people have read it and are stunned by its visceral impact. Despite no words. No words in the book, no words to describe and explain its impact on us, and no words to offer comfort to the authors who had envisioned so many words, so many sentences, so many chapters. How can such a thin book draw us in so completely and take us to such depths?

Life will never be the same for you, Lisa and Marcus, nor for your families, nor for the rest of us. We have all been profoundly touched. And in that deep touching we have been grounded again in what is basic, ultimate. Our lives and our faith have been tested and deepened.

And through that experience we find the beginnings of hope and the beginnings of healing. For Adam has touched us to the core, and so, I believe, has God, though we may not know how. It is all beyond words.

You have loved and wept and held and nurtured and fallen exhausted to sleep. And in utter weariness and weakness you have

grown, become stronger, expanded your capacity for loving and for praying, even as words have failed you.

The Word

Life is so much more than words, or the lack of them. And Word runs deeper than words.

*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him. . . .
What has come into being in him was life. . . .
And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–4, 14)*

John claims that Jesus was this Word, who became flesh and lived among us, identified with hurting humanity, loved people with God's kind of love, suffered terribly, and was killed. But God raised him up because such love cannot finally be killed. It cannot die. It rises triumphant, so we believe in resurrection, and have a hope deep within us that cannot be snuffed out, no matter how much we cry out in pain and no matter how much doubt and anger we throw at this Word. This Word cried with Mary and Martha in their grief, and cries with us in our grief, too.

Paul, too, points us beyond words:

*We know that the whole creation
has been groaning in labor pains until now;
and not only the creation, but we ourselves,
who have the first fruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly while we wait for adoption,
the redemption of our bodies.
For in hope we were saved. . . .
Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes*

*with sighs too deep for words.
And God, who searches the heart,
knows what is the mind of the Spirit,
because the Spirit intercedes for the saints
according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:22–24, 26–27)*

Even our praying isn't limited or defined or encompassed by our words, because when our words fail, the Spirit of the Word prays for us. Thanks be to God.

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine,
or nakedness, or peril, or sword
—or oxygen deprivation?
No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.
For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,
nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation
—not a tangled umbilical cord, or grief,
or unanswered questions, or wordlessness—
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35, 37–39)*

The life of Adam Daniel Shantz was far too brief. The words we desperately wished to read will never be written. But the life story is not ended. We will take as promise Paul's affirmation that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, Isaiah's affirmation that God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Promise. And hope. And maybe even praise. Praise for Adam's brief life and its profound impact on us. He was a gift from God. He was a gift of life. He was a gift of love.

And you, Lisa and Marcus and the rest of your families, held this gift gently, lovingly, tenderly, compassionately, prayerfully, until he could die and return to God, from whom he came. Know that in death Adam is not separated from God's love, but is fully embraced by it. And know that in grief, you are not separated from God's love, but are fully embraced by it. And know that

even praise will come again to your hearts and to your lips, like a welcome dawn after a dark night. Praise will come.

You requested that we end this service by singing “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” You said you would probably not be able to sing it. But you needed your community to sing it to you and on your behalf. Praise is the direction of our lives. Praise of God’s faithfulness is the direction of a life of faith even in a time of intense grief.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow

Dear, compassionate God, from whom we come, to whom we return, in whom we live and move and have our being, we are here today with a particular grief, for the brief life and tragic death of a baby. And in our grief, we give thanks for Adam Daniel Shantz, a gift that was precious and is now returned to you. For Lisa and Marcus, their families and community, we pray. Sustain them and renew them with strength and comfort, love and praise.

*See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more.
(Rev. 21:3–4)*

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
praise him all creatures here below,
praise him above, ye heavenly host,
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

About the author

Gary Harder has three children and six grandchildren. He serves as pastor of Toronto United Mennonite Church and was for a long time involved in leadership positions in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. He and his wife, Lydia, are currently teaching a course on pastoral ministry and leadership at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.