

Nothing is as we thought it would be...



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What do you do when your life is turned upside down by something unexpected and beyond your control? How do you remain hopeful? How do you not become embittered and resentful?

Liz Smith (not her real name) has found healing in tending her spiritual journey in the months and years following her son’s brain surgery.

Will was a Junior in college when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The surgery to remove the tumor was successful, but significantly impacted his short-term memory. Even today, two years after the surgery and following extensive rehab and therapy, he cannot remember events that happened earlier in the day.

“We came home after Will’s surgery and inpatient rehab and I went back to my job. We had every reason to believe that in six months he’d be back to who he was. And, quite quickly, we realized nothing is as we thought it would be. It’s pretty devastating. Here’s your son, who’s 21 and has just finished his Junior year of college. We thought he’d go back. And then at some point we recognized that wasn’t going to happen. It took me a long time to realize I’m going to need to reframe this and I need some help figuring that out.”

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Liz had moved to Goshen about one year before Will’s illness, and during one of her family’s exploratory visits to the community, she had a chance meeting with Julie Stegelmann, one of the co-directors at Pathways. They were seated together at one of the shared tables at a local restaurant.

Liz explained, “I said that I was going to be moving to the area and mentioned that I was a teacher. She shared that she worked at Pathways. I filed that away. I knew it was important. I didn’t know when it would be important, but I knew that that was something that I was glad I knew about. “

After that chance meeting, Liz plunged into her new life in her new community. She didn’t connect to Pathways because she was too busy with her new job. Then Will got sick and everything changed.

“In order to make meaning of it, not why it happened, but to make meaning, I needed something more.”

For the first months after Will’s surgery, Liz and her family were dealing with diagnosis, surgery, recovery, and rehabilitation. Everything was changing, and changing rapidly. Then about nine months in, Liz realized she needed to change her approach.

“I’ve never had a moment where I blamed God. So God is where I gained my strength. And for the first nine months it was just my own life of prayer that sustained me. And then I knew that in order to make meaning of it, not why it happened, but to make meaning, I needed something more. I really can’t explain it. There was a day when I decided to Google and see where that retreat center was. And the minute that I pulled it up, I knew this that was the help that I needed with my journey.”

Liz started attending morning prayers and the (then) monthly Iona Healing Prayer service whenever she could.

“I started right away to attend morning prayer. And I was very intrigued by Linda’s (Gestalt Pastoral Care) credentials.”

Finding words to describe the help Liz was looking for, and found, at Pathways is not easy.

“The biggest gift I would say was that I was introduced to the concept of healing versus cure. No one had promised that Will would be cured, but you don’t really know that when you leave. I’ve always known that we would receive very good medical care and the doctors would do everything they could. But in the end it feels like ‘Here you are. Find your way.’”

“And a lot of my friends, especially with less of a faith life, dwell on the questions: Is it cancer? Is it not cancer? Is it going to go away? And although that’s really understandable, those are not the right questions. They don’t lead anywhere.”

What are the right questions? Viktor Frankl observes in his classic book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, that we can endure almost any trial if we can find meaning in it. That impulse echoes in Liz’s comments.

“It’s not that Pathways said, ‘Here’s the meaning...’ It’s more that there were people who could be along the journey with me because it is so painful.”

When pressed about whether she has found meaning in this journey, Liz is quick to say, “I haven’t found it yet.”

“I’m feeling and knowing that Will will have a fruitful life. But it will be so different, obviously, than what we thought. His faith is developing and I wouldn’t have known that would happen. And I can’t even explain it.”

And yet, she has found solace in how this experience has united her family. “Will’s brothers, both of whom live a distance away, call him every night. We have deeper relationships because of this.”

And Liz has rekindled a friendship with another mother whose son has a significant physical disability. This friendship has provided tremendous emotional support and connections.

Finally, she is surprised to see Will’s faith developing. “I’m feeling and knowing that Will will have a fruitful life. But it will be so different, obviously, than what we thought. His faith is developing and I wouldn’t have known that would happen. And I can’t even explain it.”

“It’s funny because even on the days that I can’t go, it’s important to me to know that prayers are being said.”

Through this, Liz has come to appreciate how Pathways has helped.

“I love the creative energy and how it’s not reductive. It taps into the faith journey and spirituality that can be hard to find. It runs really deep.

“When you’re going through something difficult, it sits there on your shoulder. You go to Sunday church, then what do you do? So to have a sustaining prayer experience in the mornings is amazing. Where else does that happen around here? It’s funny because even on the days that I can’t go, it’s important to me to know that prayers are being said.”

Liz’s journey of faith through the dark night of her son’s illness is still in process. But with the help of a few key friends, her family, and Pathways, she has tapped into her own capacity to experience love and compassion, turning away from bitterness and resentment.

“I feel God’s presence on a continual basis throughout the day. I couldn’t get through our days if I didn’t have that.”

Story by Evan Miller

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