

Life Is Different Now

In my 28 years as a pastor, I have encountered lots of “models for ministry.” First there was Management by Objective, then the image of “Rancher” (Schaller), now it’s all about leadership and being the CEO (that is, before the recent scandals), and Theologian in Residence. I have been to seminary, even earned an advanced degree. I’ve attended some fine church leadership seminars and, at times, the churches I have pastored have grown rapidly. So, I confess, I had been seduced into believing that I had earned the right to give sage advice with sermon series on: “Ten Steps to a Full Life,” “Eight Keys to Happiness,” and “Practical Principles for Parenting. Problem Prodigals.” In addition, I was “called” to lead the church, and to get the people to do what God wanted them to do, so, by golly, I did!

Then everything changed. At 5:45, Monday afternoon, August 13, 2001, we received THE call, that dreaded call many of our parishioners receive, the call we pastors rush to respond to with support and care. But this call had my name on it, Jan’s and mine. It was the chaplain in Daytona Beach. “Your daughter has been in an accident; it’s very serious. She’s at Halifax Memorial Hospital.”

Stunned, my wife and I made the hour and a half drive to the hospital. Our wonderful, 23-year-old daughter, Shevon, had driven into an intersection on International Drive and had been hit (T-boned) by an oncoming driver who did not see the new traffic light that had just been installed. We found her in intensive care, full of tubes, eyes swollen shut, a broken leg, two cracks in her pelvis, a collapsed

lung, and unconscious. We later learned that she came in as a Coma 3. That’s as low as the scale goes. As a doctor later said, “It’s the same as dead.”

We lived and died with the rise and fall of the numbers on the monitor by her bed that measured pressure on the brain. If we can just get through the first 72 hours. It was an eternity, but she made it. Her eyes were swollen shut. Was there any response when we asked her to squeeze our finger? Yes! Are you sure? Well, no. The roller coaster ride was maddening.

Shevon had sustained a severe brain injury; only time would reveal how severe.

Eventually there were tiny slits in her eyes, and we began the search for a rehabilitation hospital for persons with Traumatic Brain Injuries. It was an overwhelming task, even though I pastor a church in Gainesville, Florida, and had innumerable contacts within the University of Florida health system. I can only imagine the intimidation for someone who has no network of help. One place we called – out of state – began the phone conversation with, “We will need \$30,000 up front, and then we can begin to talk.” I couldn’t believe it.

After 17 days in Intensive Care, Shevon was still unresponsive, but was able to be moved to Brooks Rehab in Jacksonville to begin rehabilitation therapy. God bless all therapists! If you know a therapist – physical, occupational, speech, cognitive – give them a huge hug. Over the next days and weeks, our therapists slowly, lovingly, mirac-

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ulously worked to allow our daughter to begin to re-emerge from the darkness. I learned so much from them about ministry. They connected with our daughter right where she was, they were never condescending, always respectful, engaged and loving. God used them in working a miracle.

Oh, the hours we spent massaging, stretching Shevon's limbs, reading healing Scriptures, weeping, holding one another, worrying if her breathing would ever be normal, if she would ever talk again, seeking to breathe life back into our little girl, wanting to give her our very lives. Two months later, in late October, Shevon said her first words. Another month passed and she was able to swallow well enough to have the feeding tube removed. Just before Christmas our daughter was able to be brought home. This past year she has gone to therapy four days a week. Her mind is excellent and her personality restored. She still has difficulty with balance and needs assistance in walking.

Shevon is our hero. She has worked extremely hard, and continues to do so. Her husband of one year and two months at the time of the accident has been awesome. Eric is a former Lutheran from Ohio, with those wonderful Midwestern values and a deep Christian character. He has stood by Shevon with great faithfulness and devotion. Jan, my wife, took a year off from her teaching and nurtured life and health back into our daughter.

I wish I could say that I was strong through this. That would not be true. I could barely function. My associate pastors and our staff led the church for three months. I could barely eat. A doctor friend gave me a prescription for Ambien so I could sleep. (I did come back the first Sunday after the World Trade Center bombings. I knew that I wanted and needed to come back and do for the church what they had done for us: put my arms around them and love them and be with them.)

Life is different now. Some things I thought were important aren't. Family, friends, faith—they're important. Leading a big church? Not even close, not on the list. And life is somehow sweeter. I notice little things: the colors of flowers, people's eyes and what they're saying.

Life has come into clearer focus in these ways.

First The Body of Christ is even more awesome than I imagined it could be. Every letter, note, word, thought, gift certificate and basket became a bridge of love that connected us with the greater reality of God's love, even when we weren't sure it was there. Sure there are hypocrites and irritating parishioners and a nagging lack of vision in our churches. But our experience is that when life is broken, the Body of Christ is there with the healing balm of a Love that passes all understanding.

Second Prayer is powerful. It transcends human words. We are very aware that prayer has been a huge part of Shevon's recovery. We were buoyed by prayer. I had never been casual when someone asked me to pray for them, but now I am always deeply serious and intentional about it, because I know how absolutely important prayer is. And thank God for the Internet which extended the circle of prayer a thousand fold!

Third For most of us, our real heroes are not *Time's* person of the year, or the leading pastors of leading churches. They are people the world will never hear about, but who are there for us in our time of need: Lolly, the nurse who appeared on the scene seconds after the accident, the EMT who was on

the scene of the accident with Shevon (I still have two rolls of tape that were used to secure the tubes as reminders of fragility and grace); Lisa and Jennifer, the therapists; my wife, Jan; Eric; and people in the church.

Fourth Faith is a mixed reality. I remember Shevon was not yet able to formulate the whole sentence, but her question was clear: "Dad, why did God let this happen to me?" I had dealt with that in philosophy class, in my Ph.D. studies, in seminars, and in attempts to answer it for parishioners, but looking into my daughter's hurting eyes, it became a different order of question. Shevon's life verse is Jeremiah 29:11 ("I know the plans I have for you, for good and not for evil..."), she is a person of deep faith and faithful obedience, so the reality of faith presses the questions even more intensely. While we are clear that it is our faith that sustains us, we are also aware that our faith presents to us questions that have no easy or immediate answers.

Fifth People who spiritualize too quickly and too easily really frustrate me. I did not want people to rush to bring spiritual closure. In time I would work through things; just give me space and love. I warned our congregation from the pulpit: "I don't for one second believe this accident was God's will, so don't even think about telling me it was."

Sixth When in doubt... Go! As a pastor, whenever you are in doubt about whether to go to someone, or write a note, or reach out in any way, err on the side of doing. This experience has taught me that any expression of love is most welcomed. We could not receive a lot of people, but the cards, even when we were too exhausted to read them, meant so much—just knowing people cared.

Seventh I have learned that many of us aren't sure what to do with people who are different from us. I am embarrassed at what I felt inside when we first began to check out a rehabilitation hospital, seeing all the wheel chairs and persons affected by accidents. The American Disabilities Act has moved us a long way, but there is still much understanding to be gained. I hope your church has a "Service of Accessibility" each year and that you are intentional in embracing all in God's grace, and engaging all with respect, dignity, and love.

For me, the heart of the Good News, the essence of the Christian message, is that God is with us—not distant, not removed—but, in Christ, God is alongside us. That's what we felt from people; they were incarnating the love of God. When the smoke clears, that's what it really is all about. Not great theological wisdom, not someone who knows the latest irrefutable laws of leadership, just someone who will come alongside in love—you know, like God did, and does. That's what's really important to me now. □

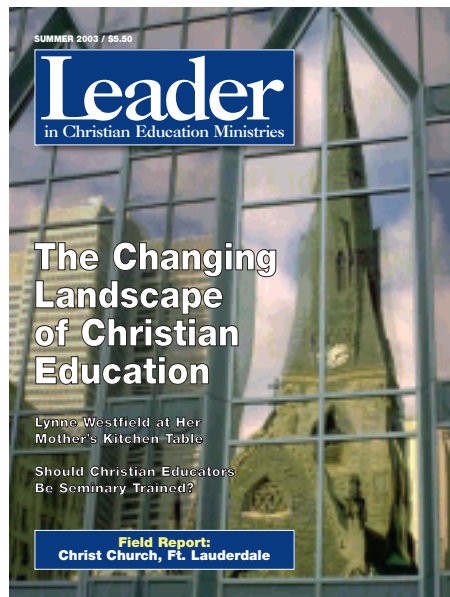


Dan Johnson, pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Gainesville, Florida, shown here with his daughter Shevon.

For additional information about brain injuries, see www.jasonfoundation.org

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