

HomeWord

Dedicated to household harmony & family faith

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Bearing the Bad News by Jean M. Buell

“Is cancer always bad news?” Something in me bristled when the homily challenged our assumptions. Kidney cancer killed my dad. Yes, cancer is bad news. Bad news is bad news, and it’s too easy to assume it’s not! Our challenge has been to deal with the forces of denial.

Nine years ago, my mother-in-law died unexpectedly. She was like a cornerstone that collapsed. Literally. We didn’t know how to bear the bad news—who talks about loss? We were too busy to feel our feelings. Months later, sarcasm and stubbornness stepped into our marriage, and we didn’t recognize them as grief. Later, we learned that grief gets our attention. It’s better to give that attention intentionally than to have it taken. Beyond the bad news, we learned that life is elusive. We must cherish the ones we love.

Just over a year ago, my dad died. He was another crumbled cornerstone. During his illness, bearing the bad news meant acknowledging a painful reality—my husband and I were losing our dear friend and father, our boys were losing their beloved “Papa.” We visited and assisted frequently. As his illness progressed, we became more involved. It was tough to keep up with work and school assignments and tempting to let other activities determine our plans. We stood against the status quo. When would our family learn life’s lessons, if not when life is teaching them? We brought communion. We welcomed relatives. We supported my mom. We hugged. We cried. We prayed. The love was unfor-

gettable. Papa once told our boys, “You are like sunshine in the middle of the night.”

He died a week before Christmas—who can say the holidays are always happy? Bearing the bad news meant acknowledging grief in all its feelings and forms. We prioritized family time but processed individually. One of our sons lost focus at school. The other lost sleep. My husband also mourned his mom. I retreated inward. Grief got my full attention, but I gave it willingly. Why shouldn’t I take care of myself? I attended support groups and sought spiritual direction. I questioned and explored. I discovered unresolved grief and worked through it. Ultimately productive, it was intense work that left me disorganized and distant at times. We lost our rhythm of routine for a year. Grief affected all of us as it affected each of us.

Beyond the bad news, I’ve heard, relationships continue. Loved ones become present in a powerful new way. I hope to feel that someday. Will I ever stop missing my dad? Ironically, his absence nudged me into God’s presence. In family and beyond, God’s presence radiates through a newfound attentiveness, patience, forgiveness, and compassion. Healing affects all of us as it affects each of us.

Bearing the bad news begins a process of rebuilding. Its foundation is our tears, its supports are the people who acknowledge those tears, and its structure gives us strength to share.

Recently, my father-in-law died. Yet another crumbled cornerstone. Bearing

“One of the most poignant of our community customs is the *Celebration of Memories* ceremony. The night before a sister is buried the community gathers at her coffin to remember together the moments of her life that taught us all something about life. The simple ritual turns death into life at the very moment we feel its loss most. It is a model, this finding life in loss, for dealing with death of all kinds.”

—Joan Chittister in *In a High Spiritual Season* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1995)

Recommended Reading: *Praying Our Goodbyes* by Joyce Rupp. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1988)

the bad news means acknowledging grief once again. Finally, we’re learning how, but we’re not always sure who we’re grieving for. My husband hit the nail on the head when he said, “It isn’t just about my dad. It’s about your dad and my mom. It’s about our grandparents. It’s about us and our mortality.”

Is bad news *always* bad news? Yes. Is bad news *only* bad news? No. That was the point of the homily. Imagine the potential if people started bearing their bad news! For Jesus, it meant carrying the cross of suffering. For us, it means carrying the cross of grief. What could it mean for you? I am confident that bearing the bad news will bring us to the Good News. How long will it take? Surely, more than “three days.”

We Remember Those We Love Who Have Died

by Jennifer Christ

I miss my friend Barb who died of breast cancer last August. Rarely a day goes by without my thinking of Barb or her family who is learning to live with their loss and with Barb's newly transformed presence. My husband, Jason, often mentions his dad who died almost twenty years ago. Jason still feels his dad's influence in his life and often peers into the mirror, wondering if he isn't growing to look more like his dad.

We believe that death is a part of life. Yet how do we recognize and nurture our special relationship with those who have gone before us? As we remember our loved ones who have died, we often tell stories that call to mind their special gifts or things they have taught us. On a down day, memories of Barb's perkiness and positive attitude stir me from my slump. The warmth and hospitality of Cele, another departed friend, are extended to my own family as I serve them from her oval platter.

Prayer also connects us with our beloved dead. The following family activity is a simple prayer service and ritual of remembering that keeps those precious connections strong.

Family Prayer Service

For this session you will need: a candle, a Bible, pictures and keepsakes of loved ones who have died, paper, pencils, crayons, and a snack (something round such as doughnuts, doughnut holes or any round, sweet bread).

Gather as many family members as possible to a central spot such as the dining room table. Light the candle as a sign that Jesus is present in your home.

Opening prayer: Lord, today we gather to remember those we love who have died. Bless our time together as we thank you for the gift of life both on earth and in heaven. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture: 1 John 3:2 and 1 Corinthians 13:12

Discussion: Talk about death with your family on a level they can understand. Speak of it as a reality and as a fulfillment of the Resurrection. Have each person share what they miss or remember about a deceased loved one and pass around the pictures and keepsakes. Explain how we stay connected to our beloved dead by praying for them and trying to follow the good things they taught us. Explain that we believe we will all be reunited some day in heaven.

Activity: All family members draw their version of the great family reunion in heaven.

Closing prayer: Compose a family litany to remember your deceased loved ones.

Example:

LEADER: Let us remember all the special people who have died and wait for us in heaven with Jesus. For
Grandma Murphy . . .

ALL: May she rest in peace.

LEADER: For Tommy Johnson . . .

ALL: May he rest in peace.

LEADER: For Aunt Helen . . .

ALL: May she rest in peace.

LEADER: Give them eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. And may the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

ALL: Amen.

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Snack: Your sweet dough is a "soul cake," baked in a circle, symbolic of heaven, where beginnings and endings meet.

A Funeral Reflection

by A. J. Wagner

His dad never spoke much. He almost never showed his feelings, with the exception of anger. So, when Jim rose to the pulpit to deliver his father's eulogy he admitted that the stories he would tell of his dad were mostly hearsay, mostly told to him by someone else.

We heard of a World War II veteran, a patriot, and a father whose most poignant moment with his oldest son came during the Vietnam War, when the son got a draft notice. With only a look, his son felt his father's fear, his pride, and his love all at the same time.

We heard of a man who worked for years as a corrections officer inside some of New York's toughest prisons with some of New York's toughest criminals—criminals who needed to know God. This quiet man helped lead a fund-raising drive to raise enough money to build a permanent chapel inside the prison—a place for Mass to be said, a place for God to be found.

We heard of a man who attended daily Mass, often acting as the server when the altar boys failed to show.

What we saw was a son struggling to hold back tears as he provided strength for his newly widowed mother. We saw him as a husband looking to his wife for comfort and support. We saw his family dealing with grief as they accepted the joyful message of the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

Then, as he left the pulpit to return to his seat, we saw him go to the side of his tearful ten-year-old son and offer a look filled with love and pride.