

A Dance With Miracles

One of the most miraculous things to come out of our ALS Fancy Dance was this photo.



Miraculous, because I didn't think Steve would be able to get out of his wheelchair at all that night. It never occurred to me that he would even try—so this moment was entirely spontaneous and, on his part, unbelievably brave. Dancing with my sweetheart to *You Are The Best Thing* will live forever in my memory as one of the most beautiful, meaningful 60 seconds of my life.

I'm so glad some quick-thinking friends grabbed their cameras and captured it because behind every photo are layers and layers of life. The picture shows one story, created from many, woven together and wedged into a 3×5 frame.

The story behind the story is this: Marriage is hard. We are on year 30, and I will tell you honestly that there were some seasons when we didn't know how we would go on. We knew we *would* go on—we're both too stubborn to quit—but we didn't have the first clue *how*.

Hard times and dark nights conspired to sink our ship. Kids and money and mortgages and distractions and failures circle like vultures around even the stoutest hearts and surest vows. We have not been immune to these things, nor have we handled them perfectly. But I'm learning that the beauty in marriage is not in doing it perfectly, but in responding to the imperfections with grace and grit. It's in the getting up and trying again, believing again, hoping again, dancing again. That's where the real magic is.

Also? Terminal illness is hard. It's hard on relationships. Hard on romance. Hard on expectations. Just really so hard in

so many ways I could never have imagined before we walked the road.

For much of our quick spin on the dance floor, I helped to hold Steve steady while simultaneously sobbing into his chest. And I have never felt more privileged or qualified to do anything in my whole life. But at 3 a.m., when I am emptying the suction machine and fixing his covers for the third time and wondering if I'll ever sleep through the night again, I do not always feel privileged. And many times, Steve can feel it, too—he feels, not through my words but through my way, that his needs are an intrusion on my life.

Caring for him is the greatest honor; it really is. But I would be lying to say I feel that way 100 percent of the time. As much as I'd like you to believe I have figured this thing out, the truth of it is that sometimes I feel selfish, suffocated and entirely insufficient for the job. As I was writing this post, Steve had a crisis choking situation, and I rescued him (and I know *rescued* is a dramatic word; believe me when I say it's the right one) with shaking hands and frantic prayers, and I did not in that moment feel at *all* qualified.

I felt desperately in over my head and hopelessly inadequate to care for a frail body with so many needs. This is our reality. Terminal or chronic illness is hard, and I understand why many couples don't survive it. That we have survived, and in so many ways are healthier relationally than we have ever been, is not a feather in our cap—it is a testimony to the sustaining power of God and to the ways His grace smooths and softens selfish hearts and holds us up when we've done all we know to stand and still can't get our legs to work.

When I look at this picture, I see a third pair of arms. While I am holding Steve up, I am being carried by a bigger God than I knew existed before I needed Him this much—and also by Steve, who has not stopped loving and caring and cheering for me during his battle with ALS. Turns out you don't need strong

arms to hold your wife's heart. He is just as strong for me as he has always been, and that's why he's my hero.

The stories behind it make this photo a miracle because it is life that snuck through our dying. It is joy that seeped through our sorrow. It is hope in heartache. The love you see is every bit real, but it is not perfect or polished or even particularly brave. It's mostly just rugged survival, fueled by the relentless mercy of Jesus Christ. That's marriage.

And that's a miracle.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of *Beautiful Battlefields* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends, and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Oregon.