

Take a Break From the Battle

I found myself face down in the Land of Burnout and that admission led to the chance to get away from home for a night and think and breathe and, most importantly, *sleep*.

I woke up on Saturday morning nearly bursting with excitement about my upcoming adventure, but—as with any big attempt at escape—there were some serious obstacles between me and my front door.

Obstacle #1: It's a lot of work to leave. I made lists and lists for my family who would be caring for Steve. When and how to give meds. When and how to move him from bed to wheelchair to bathroom, etc. How to get through the night. So many lists. Having made the lists, I did a some cleaning and sheet-changing. It's just a lot of work to leave the house and Steve, when someone else is going to be stepping in to my spot (but I'm not complainin'—it was every bit worth it.)

Obstacle #2: This is the big one. The bad one. The one where I thought for sure my survival getaway was teetering on the brink of disaster. My sewer flooded. Not even kidding. This has happened about a half dozen times in the past 13 years—so it's not a regular occurrence, but it is a wretched one. Think: raw sewage flooding the floor of my laundry room. My heart sank when I realized what had happened. I can ask people to do a lot of things for me, but I cannot ask them to clean up raw sewage. I don't feel I can even ask my kids to do that. It's just ... beyond. Beyond the boundaries of favor-asking. I'm not proud of the text I sent Whit, but I'm going to share it with you so you understand my mental state at the time:

My sewer just backed up again. No breaks. No breaks whatsoever in this dumb life.

Do you sense a little drama there? I assure you, I felt every inch of that despair. At the same moment of the sewer

explosion, Steve had an urgent need and so I went to help him and I could not stop the tears. It was just the worst moment. And I know he felt every bit as bad as I did, but he had no words. He just shook his head sadly. I often forget how hard it would be to feel like you cannot help the people you love—especially for someone like Steve, who has always *lived* to help the people he loves. Truthfully, I don't actually forget; I just try to block those ideas from my mind because I can't even bear to think about all my husband is losing in this process. I went upstairs to change from get-out-of-town clothes into muck-out-the-laundry-room clothes, but Tori followed and sat me down and said this life-changing thing to me: "You need to leave. Right now. You need to grab your suitcase and get in your car and go. This is not your problem, it's OUR problem and we can solve it without you." I protested weakly and she put on her firmest voice and said, "Please don't take this wrong, but we are already losing one parent, we can't lose two. You need to leave and let us deal with this."

And I felt a flood of gratitude and relief so great I cannot describe it with words. So I did it. I left. I left my disabled husband and children sitting in a house with fundamentally yucky problems and I got the heck out of Dodge. This would not have happened four years ago, or four months ago or even four weeks ago. Until I reached this level of desperation, I would have let the obstacles win. I would have said, "Not gonna work this weekend." I would have felt noble and strong. And I also would have secretly resented all the weight that fell on me and no one else. And that resentment would have led to ... oh, OK—I guess we're caught up now.

I drove to Sunriver in a literal and emotional fog. First I turned on some music, then I turned it off and then on again. When I got there, the skies were pouring rain and it felt just like my heart. I checked into my room, turned on the fireplace and sat staring out at the meadow and mountains for

I-don't-even-know-how long.



View with a room.

I fell asleep on the bed at four in the afternoon. I woke up and left long enough to grab some dinner at a wonderful brewery and bring it back to my cozy room. (Interesting: I told Steve as I was leaving that the one thing I didn't feel ready to do on my own was eat dinner at a restaurant. I can do breakfast or lunch. And I can stay in a hotel room alone. But eating by myself at dinner, with all the couples on dates and families on vacation? Nope. Not yet.) I know that pictures of food are boring. And I know my steelhead sandwich means nothing to you. But still ... I have to memorialize the beauty that was THIS SANDWICH.



Because Oregonians love steelhead.

After dinner I did a lot of nothing. I read a little and watched some really silly TV. I mean, QVC at five in the afternoon? I have no explanation for this except it was something that required no brain activity on my part. Upside: If you're in the market for a VitaMix and need to know the five colors available, I'm your girl! I fell asleep a lot of times for little bits of time and come 9 pm, I decided it was time to do some processing (and this is the paragraph you'll want to skip if you do not share my faith. Or you can read it. Just don't say I didn't warn you.)

I prayed and read and thought and, slowly but surely, I felt some layers falling off. Layers of grief and anxiety and confusion ... just sort of falling there onto the floor of that pretty little room. I believe so strongly that our Good Father showed up to help shine a light into the murky, hurting places of my heart and reveal some ways I'm not seeing straight. I thought about sharing with you what those revelations were,

but in the end decided it was enough to say: He came. He spoke. I heard. And it changed me. Really ... it changed me. I woke up the next morning feeling differently about my role in this battle. And I just need you to know that getting away—in and of itself—would not have been that effective for me long-term because my responsibilities are still here when I get back. But getting away and experiencing this intersection between my pain and His purpose was really, *really* important. And it will impact the days and years to come. That's how powerful it is to place our hurting hearts in front of the One who can actually heal them.



This is how crazy things got.

I went to sleep and it would not be an understatement to say: *I love sleep*. Really, really love it. But I kept wondering how Steve was sleeping at home and wishing I could know for sure he was OK. That doesn't make me feel sad or sorry; it just makes me feel married.

In the morning, I woke up early and read my Bible by the fire looking out on SNOW! So pretty. Such a fun gift. I took a long time getting ready, had a beautiful breakfast in the lodge and then went to church and worshipped with the people dearest to me.

All in all, my short getaway was beyond what I could have asked or imagined. It both emptied and filled me. It freed me and firmed my stance. It was a game changer. A million thank yous to my kids, my sisters and brothers-in-law and all the friends who have made our lives possible for four long years. We are humbled by your care and determined to some day pay it forward.

If you are a caregiver, can I implore you to take some time away to refuel? It's the best thing you could do for the one you love. And if you know a caregiver, this is a good time to

think about ways you could help make a little escape possible for him or her. As the holidays near (yikes!) I'll be sharing lots of practical ways you can bless the people around you who are facing a difficult battle.

Finally, let me say: Your outpouring of love and support yesterday was a marvel to me. And the emails I received from other caregivers—well, they're tender and priceless and I cherish them. Thank you is the smallest and biggest thing I can say. I love you.

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.