

When a Loved One Says Goodbye

On Sunday night, my family gathered around the table as we've been doing every Sunday night for no one knows how long. We laughed and shared amazing stories from our morning in church. That may sound silly, but most of us work at our church and we love it dearly. That day was just a really good church morning, filled with people we love and care for and the God who cares for us.

Steve doesn't eat around the table with us, and hasn't for a long time. He eats downstairs in the one chair that possesses just the right proportions for the herculean effort that is lifting a spoon. You just wouldn't believe how difficult eating can be when you have no muscles in your arms and neck. It's impossible for him to both eat and talk, so he prefers to focus on the meal and then be with family.

After dinner, we took our dessert downstairs to be with him. We usually do this, but this night was different because we knew he had words to say.

So, on an ordinary Sunday, just like all the Sundays before it (and yet not at all like the ones before it), my husband said goodbye. He used simple, deep, honest words. No hype. No revisionist history. Just real. Like Steve. Like we all would hope to be, I think. It was ... excruciating. And beautiful. Just exactly like the last three years of our lives.

Steve's surgery has been rescheduled for Thursday in Portland. He is not expecting the worst, and our doctor there has given us lots of hope that this procedure can turn out OK, even at his level of progression. So, it's not that he sees Thursday as an expiration date, but he knew the conversation had been waiting too long. He knew in his heart there were words sitting like jars on a shelf, waiting to be taken out and given like gifts to those he loves most, and he's at a point

in his life where the jars had become weightier and weightier. It was time to pour them out.

There are some jars in my life too. I feel them in the background, mostly invisible, but sometimes they pop up out of nowhere and call to me. The thing is, I hate awkward conversations. And I'm discovering that while this world we live in is full of words, words, words, it's easy to say pretty much nothing with them. I fill a day with *how are yous* and *when in the world is it going to stop raining*, and I forget to tell people how much they matter. How deeply, inestimably valuable they are to me and how blessed I am to be a witness to the beauty they are living. I'd rather avoid the words that might come out schmaltzy or insincere or might land strangely in the space between us.

But the Word became flesh and stormed right into our world. Into our fights and family dinners. Into our insecurity and pride. Into our hurt and heartache. God's words, wrapped in the Word, came into the down and dirty of life to free us from the shallows of relationship and move us into the deep.

My husband is a man who, through the fires of affliction, is learning God's way with words. He will never be sorry, and neither will we. Because the words that were said on Sunday and the tears cried over plates of key lime pie were pulled from the jars on Steve's shelf and carefully transferred to the hearts of Whitney, Corey, Victoria, Tess, Josiah, Casey, Noel and me. No matter what happens on Thursday, those words will live on in us, and they will multiply, and soon our jars will overflow and splash over into hearts that need them outside our Sunday dinner.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly released *Beautiful Battlifields*. 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, Ore.