

Why to Celebrate When Your Loved One Is Fighting to Live

Next week Steve and I will celebrate our 30th anniversary. It looks nothing like I thought it would, but I am learning that while expectations feel realer than real in my heart, they contain very little in the way of actual substance when life kicks in. Expectations—especially those that deal with love and romance—are often airbrushed beyond recognition. And maybe that's good.

Many of us would never bite the bullet and say the vows if we could see clearly into the future, and one thing I'm more certain of than I have ever been: *God loves marriage*. He loves happy marriages that shoot fireworks and fairy tales all across the night sky. And He loves hard marriages that dig deep and grow through faithful, stubborn hanging-on-by-the-skin-of-our-teeth because we just can't let go while there's still a heartbeat determination. Please know and know it well: Steve and I have lived both. Sometimes we've lived both in the space of one day.

So, I can't really remember what I thought my 30th anniversary would be like. Those dreamy days are pretty far in the rear view. And it doesn't matter anyway because we're here and this is now. This year of our life has not surprised God.

He knew our 30th anniversary would be spent in the valley of the shadow of death. He knew our home would be filled with caregivers and hospice professionals and machines and meds that help Steve live as comfortably as he can in this season of the battle. He who lives outside time and space knew how this moment on the timeline of our marriage would play out and He has already equipped us to face it with faith and not as victims of a cruel disease. (Brief aside: He knew what your marriage would look like right now too.)

Last week Steve asked me what the traditional gift was for year 30. I can't remember him ever asking that before, so I immediately Googled it and found: pearls. Pearls are the gift for year 30. As silly and commercial as the traditional lists of gifts are, this information has stuck with me because of this one verse:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt. 13:45-46).

We who take the leap and say the words and promise our lives to another frail human are also like jewelers on the lookout for the finest pearl. We believe that, though it will cost us everything, there is treasure inside that person ... there is untold, unseen beauty and it will be worth everything we have to spend our lives finding it.

We know somewhere in the deep places that it won't *only* be beauty, but we are willing to take the sad with the happy and the hard with the good, believing all the ledgers will balance in the end and we will find ourselves the proud owner of a pearl of great price.

This marriage, this life, these three decades have been the most difficult, exciting, amazing, rewarding, frustrating treasure hunt. Steve and I have both had to sift through a lot of junk in ourselves and each other.

We've had to fight and love hard. I'm not proud of how we've done everything, but I am proud of this: We know the value of the pearl. In spite of how much the past four years have cost, I know that I am the big winner here.

The treasure inside of Steve Stern shines more brightly than ever before. His love for me is my hidden portfolio, my offshore bank account, the cash buried under the mattresses.

Knowing him has made me richer, stronger, smarter and more secure. Serving him has made me softer, safer and more compassionate. Loving him has made me happy. And these things that have grown inside of me are treasure in themselves. I am better because of the battle and brilliance of marriage to the man of God's dreams. And I am thankful.

Happy 30th, Steve Stern. I love you madly.

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