

Theologian Tries to Make Sense of Son's Death

Nearly eight years ago, professor Richard Lischer got a call on his cell phone that would tear at his heart and test his faith.

It was his grown son, a successful lawyer, telling him his cancer had returned.

The ensuing 95 days in which Lischer—a man used to offering pastoral advice to others—stood by his son, Adam Ewers Lischer, as he lost his battle to cancer is now the subject of an eloquent memoir, “Stations of the Heart.”

Grief as the subject of memoir is now commonplace. But this volume, written by a professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School, conveys not only the anguish of grieving families, but also offers testimony to a faith that is tested but survives.

The journey, Lischer writes, took him from “the bitter gall” of feeling his son’s death was a “robbery” to a “settled sorrow” that proclaims: “He was my son, and I give thanks for him.”

Lischer, a gifted writer who has chronicled his earlier life as a Lutheran minister in “Open Secrets,” is among a new crop of theologians writing about faith in a different way.

These writers aren’t interested in the formality of doctrine or in abstract theological argument. Instead, they write about how faith is lived day to day and in times of crisis.

“Because this felt so terribly significant to me, I wanted to write it down,” Lischer said, speaking from his office overlooking the Gothic gray Duke Chapel. “Silence was never an option. I felt as if I needed to make a testimony.”

At its core, "Stations of the Heart" is a love story of a father and son. That son was a onetime assistant district attorney in eastern North Carolina, a husband, a recent Roman Catholic convert and an expectant father when a three-month checkup revealed a recurrence of melanoma, this time in the form of multiple, inoperable lesions. He was 33.

The father, a longtime professor at the divinity school and an expert on the preaching of Martin Luther King Jr., was supposed to be the guardian of the faith. And yet, the book recounts, as Adam's disease progressed, their roles reversed. In his final three months, Adam and his wife attended daily Mass, read the Bible, recited the Psalms. His father, meanwhile, replaced the prayer book in his cabinet with an unabridged dictionary.

It's not that he lost his faith, he said; but "the lights went down for a while."

"I can't use the familiar platitudes certain religious people use," Lischer said. "'God will take care of him,' and 'God's plans are always the wisest.' It sounds like hollow speech. But that doesn't mean you don't trust in the love of God."

At a time when believers and nonbelievers are locked in extreme polarities, Lischer offers an alternative: A faith that permits doubt.

"He's willing to be publicly vulnerable, and that's what makes the book powerful," said the Rev. Heidi Neumark, pastor of Manhattan's Trinity Lutheran Church and the author of "Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx."

The ability to put words on paper helped Lischer cope with the grief. Within eight months of Adam's death in 2005, Lischer was writing about those harrowing days following the diagnosis.

During that awful time, he scribbled notes at the end of a

long day, usually after he returned home from the hospital. "I simply felt that what I was writing was representative of what so many people must feel in similar situations," Lischer said.

Much later, he began to fill in the gaps. He researched Adam's disease and interviewed friends and colleagues to round out his portrayal of his son.

Lischer avoids the cheap sentimentality that often accompanies depictions of the dearly departed. Adam's quirks, his wry sense of humor, and practical jokes are realistically drawn.

But the book is not intended to be a biography or a definitive account of what happened to the Lischer family. It's a personal account of a father's grief.

After their son's death, Lischer and his wife, Tracy, read the letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in which the theologian who died in Nazi Germany writes about the gap that separates grieving people from others. God keeps the gap open despite the pain, Lischer wrote, because God is not supposed to be the guarantor of happiness and security.

Lischer's God, manifest in Jesus, is found in the homeless shelters, prison cells, and cancer wards. God lives not "in the restored flesh we hoped for," he wrote, referring to prayers for his son's healing, "but in the flesh of those who suffer."

L. Gregory Jones, professor of theology at Duke and dean of the school when Lischer's son was dying, said the memoir's strength is that it is able to deliver haunting prose alongside deep wisdom.

"I learned as much about the grief of God as I did the poignancy of the suffering," said Jones. "It's narrated in a beautiful way."

Nearly eight years hence, Lischer still rejects pat truisms.

The fact that Adam will never be able to brush his daughter's hair or read her "Goodnight Moon" will always feel wrong.

But, he adds, "When you get perspective, your faith tells you there is a basic goodness in the gifts God has given. It's a terrible thing what happened. But that he was here in the world—that was good."

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