

Darling, Please Don't Shoot Me. I'm Hurting Too

by John and Susan Vawter

John: When we speakers were discussing what we should talk about at this conference, we were very careful to say that we would not preach but just share our experiences. Susan and I were assigned the topic about marital relationships and so we entitled our talk *“Darling, Please Don’t Shoot At Me. I’m Hurting, Too.”*

When Stephanie was an adolescent, something happened when she was in the sixth grade. One spring day our daughter went into her bedroom and an hour later a monster came out. Four years later, spring term her sophomore year the monster went into the bedroom and an hour later our daughter came out. Those four years were very tough years. For weeks at a time she didn’t speak to me. In my pain I would hurl at Susan or in her pain she would hurl at me. Somewhere we stumbled on the phrase when we hurled at each other; “I’m not the enemy, darling.” That response seemed to work better than swearing at each other. Using that phrase reminded us that we were together in this and it was a sign that said, “What you said was painful. Would you not do speak that way again?”

On my first Sunday as Senior Pastor at Bethany Community Church, July 6, 1997, about five in the afternoon we got a call from our son, Michael, who told us that Stephanie was using heroin. It was a shock to us, obviously. We learned that she was in Juarez, Mexico. We didn’t know if she was alive or dead. We didn’t know if she was a prostitute. We didn’t know if she was in prison. We didn’t know anything. I’m the kind of person who pretty well knows somebody who knows somebody to get anything done in the country that I would like to get done. But you go across the Mexican border and all bets are off. By my nature I was thinking I would fly to El Paso and then just drive into Juarez until I found her. But a former drug enforcement agent friend said that is ludicrous and not to do it.

“Don’t call immigration because when she comes back across the border they will flag her car. If she has drugs she will be imprisoned back in Mexico.”

Later, we found out she was on her way back to Denver where she lived. We found her Monday night. By 2:00 a.m. Tuesday morning she was in detox. We were scared to death. All of you know that pain.

On Thursday they told us she was ready for treatment. She chose to come to Phoenix for treatment and arrived on Friday. On Saturday at 11:00 a.m., Susan and I stumbled into a meeting a couple miles from our home called Naranon. It was our salvation.

About two months into those every Saturday morning meetings. On the way home I said to Susan, “Did you see that sign on the table this morning?”

She said, “What sign?”

I said, “The sign that said: I didn’t cause it, I can’t cure it, and I can’t control it.”

She said, “John, it’s been there since the very first day.”

I hadn't seen it. It was almost like God put some kind of blinders on me. When you are sitting at a table with sixteen people, it's not that much to hide, but I hadn't seen it. That became one of our code words. Also, one of the speakers we had was a woman. She was talking about finding out that her son was using drugs. She said, "Someone said to me, 'Let go and let God' and my response was, 'What in the hell does that mean?'" She then realized it means just exactly what it says. I can't control this. All I can do is pray. That was another message from God.

But often we would say to one another driving home, "We are so lucky. We had thirty hours of hell but now Stephanie is in treatment, Stephanie is in recovery, and Stephanie is going to AA meetings five days a week. We don't know how those people carry on with this fear of drugs dragging their children down hill." We considered ourselves very fortunate.

A year later almost to the day, July 1998, we were on vacation in Oregon, which is where I grew up. Our son Michael lives there. At the end of the vacation we went to Coos Bay on the coast. In the midst of that visit he told us he had used marijuana. We had been thankful to God we didn't have this incredible pain, which now became our pain. The hurt was so intense that I said, "If I feel this badly a year from now I'm just going to quit the pastorate. I can't continue on."

So we left to go back to Portland. I called a college friend in Eugene who happens to be an elder at the church that Kim Hodge pastors. He insisted we meet with Kim. I didn't know anything about Kim and Linda's story. Kim was just like an angel. He listened patiently and gave wonderful wisdom. He said, "You can get through this. It is very, very painful, but you can get through it."

So now, all of a sudden, we have a recovering heroin addict from whom you will hear tomorrow, but also our son, whom I think is brilliant, is doing nothing and just wasting a wonderful mind and a wonderful personality. The stress started hurling itself back at us. It wasn't the same as the stress in Stephanie's adolescence in that we were not hurling at each other. Rather, this time we were hurting one another, but we didn't know it.

The thing that we were able to define is that both of us have a low-grade sadness. Somebody said the hard part of drugs is letting your dreams die and accepting reality. So Susan and I began to have different responses to the sadness that we now felt. We looked differently at the solutions or the possible solutions that we took. She doesn't like me to say this, but the reality is that Susan's faith is much deeper than mine. It is much more abiding than mine; and it's much more genuine than mine. So now we were faced with what our daughter taught us: addict logic.

I would often say to Stephanie, "You are not making sense to me."

She would say, "That is because you are thinking normally. I use addict logic."

I began to realize I was trying to be rational with my pain.

The tension continued to rise because of our responses to the problem and our different ways as to how to solve the problem. Scott Peck said, and these are helpful words, "Your

children are not you. They come through you but they are not you.” As difficult as it was we had to accept the fact that at least at this point in his life Michael was smoking pot. (He has since told me that he has quit using it.) I would say it was for at least seven months from the time we had that interaction with him in Oregon, that there was rarely a Sunday that I didn’t weep through our musical worship time at church. My thinking that I was there trying to worship God and that my son was not worshiping God and maybe smoking pot at that very moment was a pain just too strong to endure. I sit in the front pew before I preach and often times I would just put my head down. I don’t even know what people thought. Maybe they thought I am a holy guy and I was praying. It didn’t really make any difference because the pain was just too deep.

One of the wonderful things about this church, however, is that recovering addicts have come out of the woodwork to reach out to Susan and me. One of the things they helped us understand our situation is that the decision to quit smoking marijuana had to be Michael’s decision. It could not be our decision. There is not a thing we could do to make him quit marijuana. As was mentioned in our group today from the movie “Rudy.” Rudy went to his priest because he was trying to get into Notre Dame to play football.

The old priest said, “After all my years of ministry there only two things I know for sure: one is that there is a God and two, I am not God. So you got to pray and ask God to work.”

That was very difficult for me because I realized that this was the first problem in my life that I couldn’t solve and that I am not God and God would have to do it.

We began to realize that after 30 years of a very good marriage it was almost as if we were starting over. We had to begin working all over at our relationship. One of the things that carried us through this time is that we have made it very clear to Stephanie that: “If you ever use heroin again, wherever you are in world, I will find you. I know how to do it now.” I said, “I will ask you if you want help and if you say no then I will begin to cry. I will then turn my back and walk away.”

One of the things we learned at Naranon was that you love the addict but you leave them in God’s hands. We made a decision during those good times when we were praising God that we only had 30 hours of pain. That decision was that we would not let Stephanie’s drug addiction, if she ever relapsed to the point of being utterly out of control, ruin our marriage. We made that commitment when we were thinking clearly. Then when our son hit us with his news and our emotions were so deep and so tumultuous, we could go back to that clear thinking decision with Steff. We will not let Michael’s decisions ruin our marriage. In fact, I told him that. “I don’t think you are making wise decisions here. Your mother is more important to me than you are. If you don’t quit using, I’m not going to let your decision to use marijuana ruin my relationship with your mother.” He said, “I understand that.”

Susan: John and I definitely have different personalities. Perhaps most of you have taken some sort of personality inventory. The inventory we have taken and the one we are

most familiar with says John's highest category is the dominant or driver style. My highest area is the amiable, phlegmatic or the steady person. There are very obvious differences. John is the leader and I am usually a follower. I look at life as a glass that is half full. John looks at life as a glass that is half-empty. John is an activist. When he sees something that is either going wrong or needs to be done, he wants to get in there to fix it and do something about it. I tend to be more passive. I just assume it is going to work out. It is going to be just fine. When we are faced with conflict I tend to back away, especially if there is a lot of anger. I want to retreat, whereas John is never afraid to confront a situation or confront an individual, if necessary.

These differences really started impacting us when the situation with Michael hit us. It tested us. It stretched our marriage and our communication because we felt we had been doing quite well in terms of accepting these differences in each other and in learning to adapt to each other's personality style and in giving each other leeway in those areas. I want to give you a couple of examples just to show these stresses. One night John came home and said, "Let's take a walk and talk after dinner." That particular day I had had a very peaceful day, a day where I had felt like I had been able to leave the sadness in God's hands and have a good time of prayer. An illustration that John often uses in his sermons when talking about giving our burdens to God and giving our fears over to the Lord is of giving God our burden with hands out, with hands down not up, so that we are letting go of that thing. It's easy to grab it back when our hands are up. Even in my mind that day I had been thinking of that image of giving our concerns about Michael to the Lord. I had been feeling such hopelessness because of Michael's situation. I had thought back to a very wise counselor friend of ours from Minnesota whom we had talked to on the phone. I was describing to Terry how hopeless I felt, that things were sad and looked so black.

He said, "Susan, that sense of hopelessness you feel means that you are looking at the circumstances. You are looking at maybe what you can do to fix it, what you should have done or what you can do in the future. If you are looking at God and what He can do and how He can work in the situation, then there is still hope."

All of those things I had been mulling over in my mind that day and had had a very peaceful day. Not that the sadness wasn't deep, but I still had a sense of peace with God. As we began taking the walk that night, John was obviously upset. As he started sharing, there was anger, there was frustration, there were lots of "what ifs" and taking those "what ifs" down the road to the point of Michael being dead in the street kind of thing. The intensity of what he was feeling was really high. I thought, "Oh no I've had such a great day. Anything I say is going to come out like I'm a big Pollyanna or that I'm just trying to give super spiritual answers to what he is saying and to what he is feeling." As a result I said nothing. I didn't know what to say. So after some time John expressed to me that he was really hurt that I hadn't responded at all to all this anger he was pouring out. I learned that he had interpreted my silence as not caring about his feelings or that I didn't care or wasn't also hurt by the circumstances with Michael. This was a point of alienation. As we worked this through I realized in my more amiable personality and wanting to back away from anger that I needed to respond to John when he was expressing things like this. I needed to say something, even if it was

just “Darling, I don’t know what to say” or “I haven’t been feeling the same way as you have, but I hear what you are saying.” It was just a point of tension that really could have been an alienation that built up between us. We tried to work on that.

John: Because of my personality style and being a little more logical, I kept urging Susan, “let’s think about solutions.” God has continued to bring people into our lives and into my life to help us. One man in our church who has an addiction in his family has helped me understand that our son had to decide whether or not he was going to use marijuana. That has really helped me to understand that I have to continue this process of letting go and letting God.

I was complaining one day to a friend about the fact that I am a total abstainer. I lived in a fraternity at University of Oregon and never drank. I put drunks to bed, but I never drank. Now, drugs have come into my family. She said, “Shame on you. You have so much to be thankful for.” Before I could say, “What in the world are you talking about?” she said, “Your daughter has been free of heroin almost two years. You have a lot to be thankful for. Stephanie could be dead.” She reminded me that just after Stephanie left Denver to come to Phoenix for treatment, there was a two-week period in Denver when seven people died of heroin overdose. One of those could have been our daughter.

Then I also had to realize that I couldn’t push everything. I was preparing for a sermon on giving thanks for all things. I said, “Stephanie, I am having a very difficult time giving thanks for your using heroin.” You will meet her tomorrow. You will understand the look she gave me. It was a look of disdain. She said, “Well, Dad, I already have done that. I don’t know why you can’t do it.” “You have given thanks for heroin?”

She said, “Yes, I realize I was abusing alcohol. I could have hidden out from you and Mom for years, but heroin took me to the bottom fast to get me the help I needed.”

I thought, *“If the addict can say, ‘I give thanks for heroin, then the addict’s father should be able to say, ‘I give thanks for heroin.’”*

A friend of mine said, “Stephanie, I am so proud of your hard work.” Stephanie said, “Yes, I had to dance with the devil to come back to God.” If that is what it takes, then that is what it takes.

Interestingly enough my father is deceased and Susan’s mother is deceased. I know that this is not Biblical or theological, but Stephanie said every time she would shoot up, she visualized her grandfather and her grandmother in heaven and would say, “I wonder if Grandpa Harry and Nanna are sad in heaven as they see me doing this?” I realize that God has a myriad of ways He keeps speaking to people. Even shooting up she was thinking of the legacy of these Christian grandparents. That helped me understand that God is smarter than I am. There are a myriad of ways that He can be speaking to Michael as well.

With this abiding commitment to each other, we just continued to say, “Marijuana will not rule our marriage.” So we have to keep telling each other our feelings. I do remember the walk that night. It was very frustrating for me. Pastoring a church this size

is stressful and complex and many aspects of the church were not healthy when I came two years ago. The day of the walk we took I had come home from a very intense day. Susan had the peaceful day. We learned something: I may be stressed but I have to respect her right to be peaceful. It is not that we have this peaceful co-existence but we have deepened our appreciation for who each other is. It has also deepened our respect of how God made us.

I have a friend whose daughter was involved in Scientology. I often said to him, “How do you live with that pain?”

He would reply, “The only way I can live with it is to put it out of mind during the day and when there is opportunity to think about my dear daughter then I think about her.” That has carried me because, while Susan can pray in the morning and give the pressure to God and let it go and not think about, it just pops up on me all the time. I realize that my good friend gave advice that was very good. When I am allowing my sadness to control me during the day, then I am not giving it to God. It is a well-worn phrase but it is one we are really trying to live right now: We have to take one day at a time. We do live with uncertainty for the future of our son.

It is true that all of us who have loved ones who are using drugs are innocent victims. I said to Stephanie one time, “What did we do to cause you to use heroin?”

She said, “You didn’t do anything. You and mom didn’t put the needle in my arm. It was a decision I made. You were wonderful parents. You taught me how to live right. I just made some decisions that were wrong.”

Susan and I both realized that even though we manifested it in different ways that we both have this low-grade sadness. It is now our responsibility not to hurl at each other but to care for one another.

Because so many people have been brought into our lives by God Almighty, we don’t hide this experience from the right people. The only people I hide addiction from in our family (I am speaking for myself here) are people who are going to be negative factors in my life. Frankly, I have some friends that have been so negative about Alcoholics Anonymous that I finally just had to memorize a little statement to protect myself against their criticisms. After one year Stephanie was going to five AA meetings a week, sometimes six. A couple of these friends, instead of rejoicing with me that my daughter who could have been dead from heroin has been clean for a year at that time, thought they had to warn me about the evils of Alcoholics Anonymous because they call God the higher power. But as Dr. Anderson Spickard, a professor at Vanderbilt University Medical School, says he’s seen lots of people come to faith in Jesus Christ through AA but not lose their faith. So what I’ve learned is this: I don’t have the energy for any negative people in my life. If people can’t be helpful to me, if they can’t be encouraging to me, I just put barriers up in order to protect myself.

Out of all of this, Susan and I are learning we are not going to allow drugs to ruin our relationship. We are not going to let drugs ruin our marriage. This means we need to keep

talking; we need to dig deeper into one another's life to see how we will continue to live together and grow together.

Susan: Because of the sadness that does not go away, we have been thinking through how to live in the present, and have joy and happiness in the present yet knowing there is still this uncertainty in the future. One of the things we do is remind ourselves of the things we have to be thankful for. For instance, we do have an open and loving relationship with our son. We have weekly telephone calls. Our son and his family want to see. We spend time together. There are signs of appreciation from them. For instance, for Mother's Day I got a little gift and a card. The gift was a tiny little necklace and on the necklace was a cameo of a praying angel. I thought, "Oh, that's really sweet." Then I read the card and the card said, "Mom, we sent this to you because it reminded us of you and we know that you pray for us even when we don't ask you to." So, of course, that just melted my heart. Also, it was a sign that God was working. They knew the value of prayer, even though they personally are not praying and asking God themselves. To a certain extent, they are open to our spiritual influence.

I was there recently when the baby was born. I was asked to come up and spend time with them to help take care of Mindy and the baby and the girls. I was very privileged to do this as a mother-in-law. It was a wonderful week. While I was there, the two older girls asked me a lot of questions about spiritual things. They wanted to pray at bedtime and mealtime. I was really surprised, so the next day I asked our son and his wife about this. I asked if they were praying with them. They said, "No, that is coming from their own initiative." I said, "Do I have your permission to pray with them and to take them to Bible camp when they come down to visit us and talk to them about these spiritual questions they are raising?" They said, "Oh yeah, we want them to be exposed to all religious ideas." I thought, "Good, I'll expose them to Christian religious ideas. These opportunities we have to be thankful for.

Our son is working now. They have a home. They are taking decent care of their kids. We try to remember those things to be thankful for. But then there are those times that the sadness just overwhelms us and that's just reality. In those times, other things help us get back on track, as John has mentioned. Other people have mentioned the AA motto of "One day at a time and God can give me peace one day at a time." He can get me through this day. I must trust Him. A reminder of that is a Bible verse that has been a favorite and an anchor for a long time. This is from Jeremiah 29:11 "I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope." Just the fact that God keeps reminding me that there is a future for our son keeps me remembering there is hope in Him.

As John mentioned before, not hiding the hurt is really important. Obviously you have to be selective about the people you share with. You don't share everything that is happening with everyone who says "Hi" in church, but there are a lot of safe people in our lives, a lot of positive people that I share with on a regular basis. I am in a support group and we pray together regularly. John and I have a number of friends whom we can call at any time to share these things with. That can pick us up. That's very important for me. As John mentioned, we have gotten very good counsel from a number of

psychologists. We don't have all the answers. As Jim Smoke said earlier, "Before we have experience we are experts." Sometimes we need to go to the experts to get through a specific phase.

John: A few weeks ago a pastor in Phoenix who has a radio program interviewed me. We were talking about families and he said, "My son was killed at age 16. I don't want you to misunderstand this because I desperately would like my son back, but God has done things in my life that He never could have done except that I lost my son." I realized once again how much I have to be thankful for.

One final story. At my low points this helps me understand that God is still at work. If you didn't grow up in Oregon you might not know that lumberjacks can be very rough and tough. At our son's wedding, one of his wife's aunts came up to me, threw her arms around me and said, "I am so glad to meet you." She said, "I am a born again Christian. I used to date lumberjacks, I got pregnant by two of them and didn't marry either one of them." I realized this lady has been around the track a few times. She said, "But I am a born again Christian."

Just then her husband walked up and I said, "Are you a Christian?"

He said, "I sure am. But you name it, I took it. I was at my ex-wife's house because I was thinking about committing suicide. She went to work and I went out in the woods. I heard a voice say 'Read my teachings.' But when you've taken as many drugs as I've taken, you hear lots of things." I said, "Say that again."

He said, "The voice said, 'Read my teachings.'" I didn't know what it meant. I went into the house and went to my daughter's bedroom. I didn't know she had a Bible. I just opened it up to the Sermon on the Mount. By the time I'd finished reading that, I confessed to God that I was a sinner and asked Him to save me."

This man's story helped me realize that God could do dramatic things. He can do dramatic things in my son's life. It is my responsibility to continue to ask Him to do something dramatic in Michael's life that will bring him to Christ or back to Christ. It's not my responsibility to play God's role.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the fact that none of us is alone. We don't need to be alone. We can share our pain together. I pray that you will continue to minister to all of us. Thank you for what you are doing in Susan's and my relationship. I pray you will keep working in our kids' lives. We pray this in the name of Christ. Amen.