

Keeping Hope During the Tough Days

by John and Susan Vawter

John: Alcoholism has been a part of my family for as long as I can remember. On my mother's side I lost two uncles to alcohol. I remember as a little boy hearing one alcoholic uncle saying of another alcoholic uncle, "If we had given him beer we probably could have kept him alive." As a little boy I did not understand the "d.t.'s" and the body's unquenchable craving once addiction sets in, but I knew my uncle had them. On my father's side I had an uncle who died as a "hopeless alcoholic" at a Salvation Army camp for alcoholics.

Because of these experiences and my parents' example of total abstinence from alcohol, alcohol never held any allure for me. I simply was not interested, even in college where I lived in a fraternity where alcohol was a huge part of that subculture.

As parents Susan and I modeled total abstinence. We discussed the risks of using alcohol/drugs with both our children from the time they were little kids. We also prayed diligently that they would stay away from alcohol/drugs. I thought recounting the deaths of my uncles, the example Susan and I set as total abstainers, the anti drug/alcohol training they received at school plus our diligent prayers would be sufficient. Unfortunately, they were not.

To remain on the same subject—but to change it for a minute—will underline how God uses many experiences to help prepare us for what lies ahead. In 1988 the son of a very good friend in the church I pastored in Minneapolis committed suicide. Later, his father, Reuel Nygaard, wrote the book *From Triumph to Tragedy*. Since then Reuel has become a much sought after speaker on the subject of suicide. When Reuel asked me to read an early manuscript of the book, I noticed that Mary his wife was not mentioned one time. When I asked Reuel about this he answered, "Each of us grieves in our own way. Mary is not a public person and only speaks at Survivor of Suicide support group meetings. She affirms my being public about suicide, as long as I do not mention her."

Thus, when the devastating news of drugs hit our family I was crushed, as I am sure all of you were. But, Susan and I learned from our friends Reuel and Mary that two parents who love each other have the right to grieve and deal with that grief in entirely different ways. Susan and I have tried (notice the words "have tried") to practice that principle.

This also means that we have the right to find answers to our pain and grief in different ways. In some cases those "ways" might be through people outside the family, as you will see in Susan's comments later in this presentation.

By nature and temperament I am much more impatient and impetuous than Susan. The sermon title "Why Pray When You Can Worry?" seems to be my theme song. Susan is much more apt to pray and think positive thoughts than I am. So, we have been learning the lessons of encouraging each other to keep hope during "The Tough Days." For me, this means not judging Susan or assuming she does not care when her equilibrium on the future of our kids seems to be one of balance and mine is not. For Susan, this means accepting the fact that I will have more mood swings, and more ups and downs than she. I will need to talk things through more than she and I will be slower in applying faith in God than she.

As with all of you who are married, Susan and I are best of friends. We have worked hard at our marriage. We do not take each other for granted. However, we have found that drugs and addiction have tested our love, our ability to minister to and encourage each other and care for each other. I am not happy about drugs in my family but I am thankful for the results in my relationship with God and Susan. I have come to understand her more clearly, to be more sensitive to her pain and her fears and to hold onto her more tightly as we ask God to work in the lives of our daughter, son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

Growth in our relationship also means that I have to give Susan the freedom to get advice, wisdom and encouragement from others. This means that I cannot be threatened when she gets those things from others.

Additionally, I have watched with clearer focus how Susan has manifested her faith in God, expressed her love for me and been patient to help me through my times of discouragement and despair over the issues of drugs in our family.

Susan: In Stephanie's early adolescence she went through a time of rebellion and hostility, which really tested us. Her pain and anger then were probably the seeds that led her to drug use later. This difficult time also helped prepare us for going through the dark valley of addiction as parents.

One thing we learned during the pain of her adolescence was that we could not handle or solve this issue alone. John and I needed each other. We needed trusted friends and counselors to talk to and on whom we could lean. And, we needed the Lord.

One Christmas, in those early days of adolescent conflict, we had just learned that Stephanie had been experimenting with marijuana with a friend in the church. We were devastated. I was going about preparing for Christmas without much joy. After delivering some packages to Toys for Tots, the attendant wished me a Merry Christmas with sincerity and thanks. This simple kindness broke me up. I could hardly drive for tears streaming down my face. I knew that I needed to talk to someone. I headed to the home of my trusted friend Sherry. Sherry was a friend from church and Stephanie's piano teacher. As we sat on her white love seat in her den, I poured out my fears and pain for our daughter. There were so many tears shed that we lovingly refer to that sofa as the "soggy white couch." Having a few trusted friends like Sherry got me through many sad times during Stephanie's adolescent days.

My neighborhood Bible study was also a source of comfort and prayer support when we found out about Stephanie's heroin addiction. Also, we have gotten very good counsel from a number of counselors and psychologists. There were times when we needed their expertise to get through a certain phase.

John and I are very fortunate to have each other to lean on and to share with. Fortunately, when one of us is really low, the other seems to be able to lift the needy one's spirits.

It is important for me as a more reserved person to keep on sharing my feelings with John whether the feelings are good or bad. If I do not honestly talk about what is going on inside, I can become isolated from John. John often picks me up with his wise perspective and good counsel. There is an illustration from one of his sermons that I often use as a reminder to give my child to God. I am a very visual person so this image is very helpful. The illustration is of giving God our burdens with our hands outstretched and our palms turned down not up. With our palms down we cannot grab back what we have given to God.

Another source of support during the early days of Stephanie's recovery was going to Nar-Anon meetings. That first Saturday at 11:00 a.m. we walked into this room full of strangers thinking, "What are we doing here?" But, every week I learned something from what other parents of addicts said or shared. I was not going crazy; my pain and fear were common to other parents. I found there were ways to get through this time of trial and pain. One example of a lesson I learned at Nar-Anon was that it is easy to build up expectations for your child, only to have those expectations and hopes dashed. I might dream and pray that a Christian friend might come into my child's life to influence her or, I might hope she would get involved in a good church that would straighten her out. These are not bad things for which to pray but I saw that these were my plans to fix the situation.

At one Nar-Anon meeting I heard that "false hope is self centered" or what I want for my child, while "real hope is God centered" or my seeking God's will for my child. The Nar-Anon *Blue Book* is a book of wisdom and principles for parents of addicts. On pages 10-11 it says, "Take no thought for the future actions of others. Neither expect them to get better or worse as time goes on, for in such expectations you are really trying to create. This is God's job, not yours; when man tries to create another life, he makes only monsters. Love alone can create. Love and let be. If I am willing to stand aside and let God's will be done, I free myself from personal anxiety and a mistaken sense of responsibility."

A daily time of looking to God for comfort and hope has been my spiritual lifeline. There were some days when all I could do was read a Psalm and let the cries of the Psalmist be my prayer to the Lord. Or, in the darkness of the circumstances I might only be able to claim that the Holy Spirit would intercede for me, not knowing how to pray. There were a few passages of Scripture that became anchors for my faith. Jeremiah 29:11 is one of those verses that continues to give me hope for the future. It says, “For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare not calamity, to give you a future and a hope.”

I am reminded of a time when I was particularly discouraged and felt there was no light at the end of the tunnel. John and I happened to be talking to a counselor friend of ours on the phone. As I told our friend about how hopeless I felt, he said, “Susan, that sense of hopelessness you feel means that you are looking at the circumstances. You are looking at what you might do to fix it and at what you should have done or what you can do in the future. If you start looking at God and what He can do and how He can work in the situation, then there is hope.” Thus, Jeremiah 29:11 helps me keep my focus on the Lord.

Another verse that has been a frequent comfort this year is Isaiah 40:11. The verse says, “He is like a shepherd feeding His flock, gathering the lambs in His arms, holding them against His breast, and leading to their rest the mother ewes.” I found this promise at a time I was feeling discouraged for our children, but I was also going through some personal soul searching. I began by praying that God, the Shepherd, would gather my “lambs” into His arms of protection and give me, as the mother ewe, His rest. Soon I was seeing my need to be held in His arms and to hear His heartbeat of compassion and tenderness. This whole process of “recovery” is not only for our children but also for me as their parent, too. I have been stretched and tested through this painful time. I am thankful for having gone through it because it has brought me to a new place of trust and love for the Lord.

John: I think the Scriptures serve not only as God’s love letter for us and to us, but also as our standard by which to judge ourselves. For example, Jesus said in the upper room before He went out to be arrested, “My peace I leave with you—peace not as the world gives.” He also said, “Let not your heart be troubled.” That is the Biblical standard: peace and an untroubled heart. I know the standard; I can understand it; I can visualize it. The reality is: I simply do not experience it all the time. Indeed, if the truth be known, I probably do not experience it much of the time. However, I know the standard. It is there before me. I ask God to build it into my life. It allows me to be honest with myself, with Susan and with God when I am not experiencing the “peace that passes all understanding.”

Let me comment on those three:

- **With myself**—to admit that I am not as close to Christ or as reliant on Christ as I should be and I need to press on toward that goal.
- **With God**—to admit this need to God helps me realize that I need Christ as desperately today as I did when I invited Him into my life as a sophomore in college.

As Paul says in Colossians 2:6, “As you received Christ, so walk in Him....” I need the same impetus for Christ today and what He can do in my life as I did when I met Him in 1964. I was desperate for Him then, and I need to be desperate for Him now. I need Him period.

- **With Susan**—The Bible is truth; God is truth. It is only when we deny the truth that we remain stagnant. “It is what we keep in the dark that keeps us sick,” Zach Whaley said at another one of our conferences. Thus, when I can be brave enough to be honest with Susan that I am not experiencing God’s peace, that I am fearful for our kids’ futures, and that I am angry, then she is able to minister to me. She is able to turn my attention back to Christ. God uses her to recreate hope in me, and step-by-step we get a little stronger in “Keeping Hope During The Tough Days.”