

Ann's Story

By Tim Wood

Nature was in conflict.

A lightning bolt split the sky as rain poured down on the gentle Ozark countryside. Along the old highway a procession of cars fought through the weather and turned onto an old dirt road. Rivers of water, stained red by the clay of the earth, flowed down one side of the road.

It was as if the Earth was crying. She had good reason. I was driving one of the cars in that procession - the funeral procession of my sister, Ann. At the time it seemed that my sister, who had suffered more than her share of misfortune in her all-too-short lifetime, couldn't even get good weather for her funeral.

As I reflected on it that night, it seemed all too appropriate that nature should be in an uproar. There was no rhyme or reason that a 38-year-old woman should be dead - leaving a husband, two children, two step-children, her mother, three brothers and many others to mourn her.

The rain let up enough so that no one was drenched during the graveside service, which was held inside a small tent. The minister was mercifully brief, but nonetheless said what needed to be said. My mother seemed to take comfort in presence of the two granddaughters who jumped on her lap when she sat down.

I had left my wife and children to stay in the safety of our car, but later I learned that Cheryl and four-year-old Michael left the car and watched

the service.

Michael had cried the night before as we were in the middle of a frantic 12-hour drive from Texas to Missouri. We asked him why he was crying and he said it was because Ann was dead. Seven-year-old Daniel already had cried many a time over Ann. I wanted to cry.

My brother Joe had called eight weeks previously to tell me that doctors had decided Ann was too weak to continue treatment of the cancer that had ravaged her. She was to go into hospice care, Joe told me. I knew what that meant. I cried.

Six years had passed since a doctor removed a mole from Ann and found it to be cancerous. I was alarmed, but there seemed to be no indication that it was serious. Three years later, doctors removed several cancerous lymph nodes. Joe did some checking and told me that the odds were not good for Ann's survival. I believed him. Perhaps it was then that I started to grieve. Ann's name went on the prayer list of at least four churches. It was on the list of my church so long that at one point, I asked the church to remove it. But they insisted that it stay on the list- even during that time when I thought Ann was in remission.

I felt guilty because I didn't pray daily for Ann. Was it because I resented Ann for some things she had done? Was I lazy? Unconcerned? Or had I given up hope? I believe in divine healing and knew God could heal Ann. I also knew that God healed some people and did not heal others. Only God knew the reasons for his choices. My pastor had a divine healing of cancer. Interestingly, he's a Methodist preacher. Generally, one thinks of fundamental, charismatic churches in the context of divine healing. But here was the minister of the First

Methodist Church of a county-seat town in Texas saying he had been divinely healed of cancer. He didn't make a habit of talking about this, but he mentioned it when he felt it was relevant, either in conversation or in the pulpit. If only such a thing could have happened to Ann. But it was not to be.

Joe and I talked about Ann over the phone a couple of weeks before she died. Joe took responsibility for the family at a young age. Whether the situation was watching the rest of us while Mom and Dad worked, or helping Mom after Dad died, Joe grew up fast. In that sense, he feels somewhat like a father figure to us - particularly to Ann.

He shared with me a dream in which one of his children wanders away, has an accident and dies. As he called to the child, he didn't call the name of either of his daughters - he called the name of Ann.

Not long after Ann went into hospice care, Joe called and said that if I was going to see Ann, I should not delay. Cheryl and I already had planned a trip for June, but we moved it up to the first week of the month.

I didn't know what to expect. As I walked into her house, I saw her sitting at the end of the long, wrap-around couch. She had lost one of her front teeth. That bothered me more than the fact that she had difficulty moving, had lost hair and was weak.

Ann always had a beautiful smile - at least after the orthodontist had finished with it. Two pictures on her walls reminded me of that smile - a

line drawing of her high school graduation picture and a more recent photograph.

How many times had I seen that smile? She had used it to con me into doing things I should not have done. She smiled when she was up to something. She smiled to brighten up the world.

I dared not ask what happened to the tooth. I wondered if it could be replaced - then I thought, perhaps no one will get the tooth fixed because she's terminally ill. I shuddered at the thought. Later I was told that she did have a partial plate available to her, but apparently chose not to wear it.

People left the room and left us alone. I told her to talk about any subject - including her condition. She did. She said it seemed as if the disease were happening to someone else - not her. She was not emotional - she spoke calmly and in a straightforward manner.

She expressed uncertainty about her spiritual condition. I told her I believed that her experiences as a teenager - accepting Christ and her subsequent baptism - were genuine experiences. Many people doubted their experiences as they grew older, but I shared my conviction that in most cases, those doubts are unfounded.

She was preparing to embark on a great journey and it was not unreasonable to worry. It was like packing the car for a long trip, I told her. One often wonders if everything has been packed, even though many, many checks have been made.

I made a point to ensure that we were at peace. Over the years, I had built up some grudges against Ann. I had disagreed with some of the things she had done. Details are not relevant now. Before I went to

Missouri, I prayed to God to forgive Ann of anything she had done against me. I asked God to forgive me for holding any grudges against Ann. It helped. Ann told me she had nothing against me. I told her I was at peace with her.

Among the other things I shared were the words of Cheryl's 93-year-old aunt, Violet Schramm, who had died earlier that year of cancer. A short time before her death, she had told a friend in the nursing home that she "needed rest." The friend asked if she needed to go to bed and sleep. Violet said that wasn't the kind of rest she needed. I told Ann that perhaps she too needed that kind of rest.

I wasn't sure if this was the correct thing to say. I was in effect telling Ann to give up the fight and go ahead and die. In retrospect, Ann already knew the fight was futile. After we talked, I took her on a car ride. We went by the farm in Richland, Mo., where our family had lived for a few years, and also drove over the nearby Gasconade River, where our family had taken many a fishing trip.

That was to be the extent of the trip, but Ann said she was strong enough to go to Marshfield, Mo., where our family had lived for three years before moving to Lebanon. I stopped to get her a cup of ice and tried to call her house to let them know of our plans. I couldn't get through, but we went anyway.

We didn't talk much. Ann seemed delighted to be out of the house and doing something special. Perhaps she thought we were being a little "sneaky" - Ann loved being sneaky. The old Marshfield house was still there, although the land around it had changed. The pond was gone, as was the block building behind the house.

We went around the town square and Ann seemed particularly

interested in the old dime store. It appeared to still be in business, but construction work blocked us from it. We drove by the building that once housed First Baptist Church.

It was through the work of a deacon of this church that the four Wood children had some spiritual education. The deacon picked us up every Sunday morning and took us to church. Initially, Joe and Jon went with him. Ann and I went with a neighbor who took us to a Lutheran church. One Sunday I went to the Baptist church and decided to continue going. Eventually, we got Ann to go to the Baptist church also.

I've nothing against Lutherans - but at that time, we wanted to go to the Baptist church. All of us eventually professed faith in Christ - at least three of us did it in that church building. I told Ann it was my "spiritual birthplace."

It was the beginning of Ann's involvement in Baptist churches. She eventually became a soloist in the youth choir of First Baptist Church in Lebanon. Her main solo was "I Quietly Turned To You" from the musical Celebrate Life. She took home a tape of the accompaniment and practiced, practiced and practiced it.

I could hear her practicing it in her room all of the time. I came to be quite familiar with the song also. It was about a sick woman turning to Jesus for help. A few years ago, the musical was revived and a new accompaniment was recorded. Cheryl and I gave Ann a copy of the tape. Now it was Ann's turn to turn to Jesus. I don't know if she ever listened to the tape.

I drove Ann home and we talked some more, but not very much. Later I learned that Ann was delighted with the trip. We said goodbye the next day. The Wood family is not a hugging family. I hugged her. She didn't

want to let go. When I left her, I figured it was the last time I would see her alive. It was.

I viewed her body before the funeral. I would later read that this is an important step in the grieving process. One must face the reality of the death of a loved one. Viewing the body is one way to do that. I've been to funerals where the bodies seem to have an "artificial" appearance to them. Ann looked all too natural - as if she really was just sleeping. It was as if she would wake up any moment, flash that smile and say it was all a bad dream.

Cheryl and the boys were with me. I picked up Michael so he could see Ann. I wondered how much of this the boys will remember. They too needed to see the reality of Ann's death. During the funeral I felt like Ann did about her illness - it was happening to someone else. It was the same funeral home - in fact, the very same room - where my father's service was held almost 25 years previously.

My boys were acting up, so Cheryl kept them in a conference room during the funeral. We sat on the second row of the family section. Joe, Jon, Jon's wife Junko, Mom and I sat on the second row. Ann's daughter, Emily, read a poem. I've heard funeral sermons that sounded canned - just pull out sermon no. 24, insert the correct names and get it over with.

The theme was Psalm 23, but the minister, the Rev. Gary Longenecker, seemed to preach it with genuine sincerity. Kaye Edwards, a familiar voice from my youth at First Baptist Church, sang two solos. At the end everyone filed by the casket. I saw a few familiar faces. One of the daughters of Rubben Hudson, Ann's husband, cried.

Mom muttered something about her "putting on a show." Mom believes that's not appropriate behavior for a funeral. I think it's all right to cry when your father loses his wife.

The graveside ceremony was short and to the point. Jon seemed to be expressionless the entire time. The closest I came to crying was when I thought of Ann's son Tommy - losing a parent at about the same age I did. The immediate family received carnations, each with a lettered silk cloth indicating the relationship. Mine read "sister." Mom's said "daughter." Mom's silk cloth ended up with Joe.***

We held the wake that night. It wasn't intended to be a wake. Joe, Jon and I were to discuss the future of Mom. But we digressed to a variety of subjects, including our father and Ann. We talked for about four hours, ending at 2 a.m. It was like old times. It was chilling to realize that we three were the survivors of the Wood family. There were just three of us now - not four. It was as if we no longer were whole.

Jon earlier had treated all of us to dinner at Ann's favorite restaurant - a steakhouse. On Friday, we had a picnic lunch at what is officially known as Boswell Park, but which Jon and I call Maplecrest Park - its old name. I had the foresight to bring a tripod so I could take a group picture with the camera's self-timer, allowing me to get in the shot. Jon used the tripod with his camera to do the same thing. I took a nice shot of the children on a piece of playground equipment and thought that Ann would like it. Then I remembered. It wouldn't be the last time I had to remind myself that she was gone.

Joe and I went to the basketball court to shoot baskets. For me, it was a sentimental journey. I had spent hours and hours on this court as a boy, trying to become a basketball player. I never developed much skill, but I still play pick-up games. Jon joined us later and we played HORSE.

I won.

Friday afternoon, we worked on writing thank you notes so Rubben would not have to do it. It was a tough job. Joe's wife, Mary, took charge. Others helped and the job got done.

My main contribution was taking five children to the library and getting them out of the way. We had supper at Shoney's that night. Later I went to the trailer park, where Jon and I did slam dunks and alley oops on a very low basketball goal.

I talked to Emily briefly and she insisted on a hug. Bless that girl. I wish I could have talked with her more, but perhaps it was best that I didn't. Jon gave me a "Silverwood" hat - the name of the mobile home park which he owns and which Rubben manages.

*** Jon brought his wife, Junko, and baby daughter Jenny. This precious bundle of life was the best therapy we could have hoped for during this time. In the midst of all this sadness, we could look at Jenny, with her wide eyes, happy smile and joyous innocence. Junko was gracious and allowed us to take turns holding her. Jenny's middle name is Ann - no coincidence. I'm reminded of the old song lyrics: "And when I die, and when I'm gone, There'll be one child born in this world to carry on - to carry on."

Joe left for home Friday night. Jon and I met at Mom's apartment Saturday morning. I asked Mom for a back rub, but Jon offered and gave me some kind of Japanese treatment which felt good.

On the way out of town, we stopped by the cemetery. The Lonesome

Hill Cemetery is located not far from the farm Jon owned and where Ann lived for a few years before they moved to the trailer park. One takes the same highway exit for both the farm and the cemetery.

Flowers covered Ann's grave. I took several pictures. The flowers seemed to purify the grave and her memory. As we walked from the grave to the cemetery entrance, where the car was parked, I stopped many times to turn back and look at the grave. It grew smaller and smaller. As I drove away, I managed to see the grave one more time. This was the final goodbye.

I've experienced various types of grief - mostly over insignificant things, such as academic, career, financial and other types of disappointments. But this is real grief. I will never be the same. Does this mean I'll spend the rest of my life moping around and thinking about my sister? No. I will continue to function. I will continue to enjoy life. By the grace of God, I will "handle" this.

I can't explain exactly how or why, but I have been irrevocably changed. On July 13, 1994, I became a different person. On the afternoon following that stormy graveside service, the sky became calm, peaceful and beautiful. And through all of this, those who remain in this world have become somehow, in some way, stronger.

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