

Open to the Mystery

In the face of death, one man gives witness to the bread of life. DIANA TRAUTWEIN

He was a strapping man—larger than life—with a laugh as big as whatever room he was in, and an intellect to match. His wife was in some ways his opposite—small-boned, delicate, but ferocious in her love of life, her two children, and her husband. They moved themselves 300 miles from home in pursuit of a new job for him, a job suited to his strengths and skills.

They approached the newness of it all the same way they came at life—full steam ahead. Schools were researched, churches were visited, a home on the hill was found, one with a view of the ocean, where life would be punctuated by the rhythm of the old mission bells. Tim dug into his new job with relish. Life was good.

Except he had this stomachache. He'd had it for many months and nobody seemed to know exactly why. He wanted answers and he wanted relief, so he pushed back against all the “We-see-no-reason-for-your-discomforts” and the simple fixes of tablets to chew and liquids to swallow, and he said, “Help me, please. Something is wrong.”

After yet another round of testing, more picture-taking, scanning, and then a biopsy—something *was* wrong. Something was very, very wrong: pancreatic cancer, stage three, prognosis grim. Within the week, Tim was scheduled for chemotherapy and began treatment. And within the same week, he began making plans for his own funeral. He gathered together his wife and the pastors from their new church, and this is what he said:

“Sing *this*, please. Say *this*, please. Read *this*, please. I want to talk about all of this now, while I'm coherent and strong. And then I don't want to talk about it again, because until that day comes, I want to spend whatever time I have left helping my wife and my kids get ready for me to be gone.”

We quickly learned that Tim also wanted

prayer—*in person, come-by-my-house or stop-in-my-hospital-room, lay-hands-on-me, offer-the-words-on-my-behalf* prayer. More than that, he wanted to say the words himself—with his pastor or his wife or a good friend standing beside him. He found comfort and sustenance in prayer and he hungered for it, literally hungered for it.

I had been a pastor for less than ten years when I walked into that living-room planning session, and I learned more about prayer during the next few months than I'd learned in any book I'd read, class I'd taken, or practice experienced. I learned that sometimes prayer is filled with sighs, that sometimes prayer is an offering of silence, of “wordless groans” when the words simply cannot be found. I learned that prayer becomes bread—nourishment that satisfies like no other.

And so it began: the rounds of treatment, the weight loss, the hair loss, the ebbing of strength and vitality. Perhaps because Tim was such a larger-than-life character, the process took longer than predicted. He was able to travel with his family, to laugh and to explore, to work, and to accomplish some major goals professionally and personally.

Soon after his diagnosis, Tim and his family were enfolded into a small group. Meals were offered, errands run, house repairs made, walks taken, confidences shared, safety, shelter, and companionship found. At about the same time, there was a brief but frightening stay in the hospital. I brought a prayer shawl to his room, handmade by someone in the congregation, each stitch a prayer for the recipient. I remember reaching across the bed, my fingers slippery with anointing oil, making the sign of the cross on his forehead. I remember wrapping the shawl across his broad shoulders, and saying the words of blessing: “Oh, my friend, the God who loves you, the God whom you love, *that very God* is nearer to you today than this oil on your skin, this soft yarn on your body. The Lord bless you



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and keep you...” He rallied that day, gratefully receiving the oil, the words, the gift of woven love.

For another fourteen months he and his family walked the road of suffering. The last time I saw Tim at home, he was on the sun porch, weak and wobbly, with a look of desperation on his face. He leaned in and whispered, “I am overwhelmed by the inevitability of it all today. It is relentless. Will you pray with me?”

I loved this man. He had been my teacher in ways that astounded and moved me, living his faith even as he died, shimmering with a beautiful holiness. So of course we prayed that day—together, through tears. When I left, the desperate look had faded, transformed into one of peace and acceptance.

Less than a week later, he was moved to the local hospice house, surrounded by beautiful things that he loved, his family always near as he was tended with skill and compassion by the staff. It was ten hard days, and he was struggling so much just to breathe that I found myself pleading with God for relief and release. One day I left his room in tears, and quickly phoned a friend to join me in those prayers, sobbing by the side of the road.

I fell into sleep earlier than usual

that night, physically and emotionally spent. At about 2 a.m., I sat bolt upright in bed, gasping.

“What’s wrong?” my husband asked.

“I just saw Tim,” I said. “He was here—in my dream—smiling.”

My heart pounding, I lay back down, wondering what it meant. Ten minutes later, my cell phone rang and the nurse at Serenity House said, “I just wanted you to know that Tim died about ten minutes ago.” I shared with her my strong sense of his presence, and she said to me, “Ah, yes. He came by to see you; he came to say goodbye.”

I dressed and drove out into the night, joining his wife, waiting for the mortuary to come. I told her about my strange and wondrous visit from Tim. And as I finished, she lifted her head toward me, eyes glistening: “I left him thirty minutes before he died, literally collapsing into our bed, and *the same thing happened to me*. Tim was with me, in the bedroom, at about two o’clock.”

There are no words of explanation that satisfy, there is only the experience itself. Who can say what the connections are between this world and the next, how thin the veil may

be? I only know that at that moment, the very moment when my friend was released from the prison his body had become, he appeared—to me and to his wife. And he smiled.

I believe there is a kind of bread that most of us do not know, a kind of bread that defies logic, reason, rationality, yet is very, very real. My friend Tim knew this bread, and as his life began to wind down, as physical food became increasingly difficult to digest, he was transformed by the nourishment of the real.

From his initial diagnosis until his last breath, Tim chose to die well. And this is how he did it: even as he moved closer to death, he consistently chose life. He opened himself to the mystery, day after day, one foot in front of the other, looking out for those he loved, welcoming the presence of a caring community, using this last leg of his own journey to pour wisdom into the lives of others. Even as he drank so deeply from the cup of suffering, Tim gratefully ate his fill of this good bread, this good, good Life. ■

 For an expanded conversation with Diana Trautwein, go to CovChurch.tv/companion-december-2012-feature.

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