



Learning about God: A Personal Story

by Bob Terry

A 6-part series from
The Alabama Baptist

A NOTE FROM BOB TERRY:

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the death of my wife, Eleanor, who died from injuries suffered in an automobile accident in South Africa. For all of those 20 years I have tried to support people walking the grief journey as I was supported in that crisis time.

It is only in the last few months that I have been able to write something I can share with others about the many crises of that experience and what I learned about God in the midst of grief. This article is part of that series. I pray it will be helpful to others walking the grief journey.

Chaos and Despair

“Did I die?” I asked to no one in particular.

The last thing I remembered was riding in a taxi through dark downtown streets well before the Saturday morning sun broke. We were on our way to the airport after leading training sessions for Baptist communicators as part of a Baptist World Alliance meeting in Durban, South Africa.

Now all around me was light, bright white light. I could make out two fussy dark objects that seemed to be moving toward me and muffled sounds like voices that I could not make out. I was confused. I felt no pain and my senses were not working properly.

“You have been in an accident,” said a voice above the two dark objects approaching me. “We are waiting for an ambulance.”

The voice belonged to a Durban policeman. So did the two dark objects. They were his legs. The bright light came from the morning sun, now well above the waters of the Indian Ocean. In short South African English sentences the policeman explained the taxi had been broadsided by a speeding car and that Eleanor, my wife, and I had both been thrown from the car. I had been propped up against a light pole but Eleanor still lay among the debris on the street.

I looked toward where he pointed and only glimpsed the caved-in Toyota SUV in which we had been riding. Then everything was dark again.

How long before I came to I do not know. This time I was lying on a hospital gurney. People were buzzing around. Years before I had worked as an emergency room chaplain for a metropolitan hospital and instinctively knew I was in an emergency room.

When I spoke nurses immediately responded. This time my first question was about Eleanor. She was lying on a gurney next to me. I reached toward her and she reached toward me. Our hands touched. Our first words came out almost simultaneously. “I love you.” We assured each other we were OK and that all would be well. Then darkness.

The next time I regained consciousness Eleanor and I had been moved to a treatment area of the emergency room. Leaders of Baptist World Alliance came in but only for moments. I remember Jimmy Draper, former Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) president and then president of LifeWay Christian Resources, asking how to contact family members back in the United States. I was in and out of consciousness a number of times, never conscious for very long.

What I did not know until much later was the hospital refused to admit Eleanor and me until a \$5,000 down payment on our treatment had been made. Draper refused to allow the hospital to ask me for payment given my injured condition and put the total amount on his own credit card. The last thing I remember from the day of the accident is hearing that Eleanor was in surgery and I would have surgery after her.

The next morning, a Sunday, I awoke in a six-bed ward. This time I did have pain and my other senses were working — at least a little. I quickly recognized I had no clothes and was covered only by a bed sheet. It would be Tuesday before the hospital would find the bottom half of a pajama set I could wear. No one seemed to know what had happened to our luggage.

Late Monday evening a Christian shopkeeper of Indian heritage from whom we had purchased souvenirs came to see me on the ward. I was surprised at his thoughtfulness. He left to visit Eleanor who was on another ward. A few minutes later he was back. He told me that Eleanor had asked him to tell me that she loved me and always would.

That was the last message I got from her. She went into a coma that evening from which she never awoke. We had not seen each other since holding hands in the emergency room and saying, “I love you.” We had both been restricted to our beds. Later I learned Eleanor had a premonition of her death and told a nurse she “was not going to make it.” I always wondered if Eleanor knew the shopkeeper was bearing her final message.

On Tuesday I was moved to a private room and twice during the day allowed to go to the intensive care area for a few minutes at a time. I was told to tell Eleanor goodbye because she could die at any moment. Those were precious minutes. I tried to extend my stays but was always taken back to my room in a wheelchair.

Tuesday evening after visiting hours, a nurse came in and asked to pray with me. Later I learned she was a Zulu, which is the largest ethnic group in South Africa. I tried to be polite but was not overly enthusiastic. My physical, emotional, mental and spiritual trauma was extreme. The nurse shared several psalms with me and then began to pray. Honestly, I have never experienced anything like that before or since. With a passion I have seldom experienced, she interceded for Eleanor, for me, for our family and for the medical team. Her prayer was filled with praise and anguish, with hope and confidence, with intimacy and otherness.

I don't remember much of what she prayed that night or on Wednesday when she returned to read Scripture and pray, but I remember the sense of God's presence in the midst of her prayer. Like the biblical story of the lame man lowered through the roof by four friends (Mark 2), she laid me before the feet of Jesus.

When I could not help myself, others carried me. Southern Baptist missionaries whom I had never met came to see me. When my children arrived in Durban later that week, the missionaries cared for them and guided them through the red tape of claiming our luggage from the police and other details. I even had a visit from a local Rotarian who had been contacted by a member of my Birmingham Rotary Club and came to offer help while I was in the hospital and afterwards, if needed.

And there were others. Many, many others who helped in unexpected ways. But perhaps the point is clear. God ministered to Eleanor and me in unexpected ways. He used a SBC executive who knew of me but did not know me. He used an Indian Christian shopkeeper and a Zulu nurse. He used missionaries and others to remind me a child of God is never alone — not even on the other side of the world.

Most importantly, God never left me, not even in the midst of chaos and despair. He will never leave you either. He promised, “I am with you always,” and you can trust the promises of God.

‘She is a 6’

She is a 6,” my daughter Jean announced as she burst into my hospital room. The announcement brought the first smile to my face since the early Saturday morning accident. Now it was Thursday afternoon.

Jean and Brent, my son, arrived in Durban, South Africa, late Wednesday evening after flying in from Atlanta. Neither had realized the severity of the situation until one of the tending physicians began talking about the death of his mother a few weeks earlier.

The original reports received back at home were that Eleanor and I were seriously injured but should recover. Reports started downhill Tuesday and got worse even while Jean and Brent were on the airplane headed for Durban.

Part of the problem is that medicine is not an exact science. That is what the doctors at St. Augustine’s Hospital kept telling us. Diagnosis is a process of trial and error, they said. The initial report was that Eleanor suffered a heart attack but after doing tests that was ruled out. Then the diagnosis was a stroke but that was later ruled out. Then doctors said it was a pulmonary aneurism but that too proved false.

We were confused. All the doctors could say with certainty was that Eleanor was a 5 on the Glasgow Coma Scale. I had never heard of this scale and did not know what a 5 meant.

When the children visited Eleanor in the intensive care unit earlier that morning there had been a slight rise in her respiration. This time Jean sat beside her bed, held her hand and sang to her. And Eleanor responded. “She knows you are here,” the nurse said. “Keep singing.” All the vital signs being monitored by the hospital went up.

Jean’s announcement that Eleanor had improved to a 6 provided a ray of hope. It was like “a cloud about the size of a man’s hand” for us. Remember the story? First Kings 18 tells the story of Israel suffering from a severe drought and Elijah’s combat with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. After the battle was over Elijah sent his servant to look toward the sea for signs of rain.

Seven times Elijah sent the servant back before the servant reported seeing “a cloud about the size of a man’s hand” (v. 44). That was all Elijah needed to see God’s answer to prayer.

The improvement from 5 to 6 was all our family needed. The doctors had given us no medical reason Eleanor could not get better. We had prayed believing she would get better. Thursday night as we went to sleep we were confident Eleanor would recover.

Friday morning was like a slap in the face. Brent was the first to visit her that morning. He came back a half hour later with sorrow in his face and tears in his eyes. Eleanor’s pupils had dilated. She was dying. We were told hearing is one of the last faculties to go in the dying process and that Eleanor’s hearing was going.

That afternoon a medical team from Birmingham arrived — a service provided by Medjet — to treat us and bring us home. After the neurologist from the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine examined Eleanor he looked disappointed. He explained he had hoped to give us good news but that her situation was not likely to improve.

He did not try to diagnose what had happened, only evaluate where she was. Eleanor still had brain waves but was in a deep unconscious state with no meaningful responses and no voluntary activity.

The best the team could do was try and get us home before Eleanor died. Otherwise her body would have to be left in South Africa and other arrangements made to ship it home. That could take a long time.

Our decision was to leave at 6 the next morning which gave the pilots only the minimal required rest. Eleanor and I would leave on Medjet. Brent and Jean would return on a commercial flight and bring our luggage.

Friday night was a long night. We still did not know what was wrong with Eleanor. We had prayed. By this time thousands of people in scores of countries were praying for her. We had believed as we prayed, confident that God had given us a sign of healing — but it was not to be.

What had we missed? Why wasn't God healing her?

Answers to those questions I still don't have. But now I don't need to have them either. We had not asked for a sign of her healing. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus condemns those who want a sign before they obey. We had tried to read the momentary improvement as a sign but it was not. We were just grasping at straws like desperate people are prone to do.

Later we learned that the only thing that produces the kind of reactions Eleanor had is a blood clot in the basilar artery. A large blood clot can produce instantaneous death. A smaller one, evidently like Eleanor had, can take longer as it shuts down the bodily functions one by one. Neither large nor small can be treated. It was a miracle that Eleanor made it back to Birmingham, doctors said.

Learning that Eleanor died of a blood clot in the brain didn't make the pain any easier or the loneliness any more bearable. God does not ask us to live by knowledge or understanding. He calls us to live by faith, even when our hearts are breaking.



DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

Jeremiah 29:13 assures that when we seek the Lord, He will be found. In Matthew 5:8, Jesus promised that if we seek God with a pure heart, then we will see Him. Looking back I see God in His providential care through a confusing and chaotic time. That wasn't always clear at the time.

Seeing signs "like a cloud about the size of a man's hand" is not what the Christian walk is about, not even in the midst of our pain. The Christian walk is about seeking God who already is seeking us.

No matter the circumstances, no matter our pain, may we always seek God.

Don't give up on God

How can you give someone you love permission to die?

That was the struggle I faced as I entered the intensive care unit (ICU) of the hospital for the first time Tuesday afternoon. That morning a doctor visited me on the ward and told me Eleanor had taken a turn for the worse during the night. He told me she was in critical condition but he could not tell me what was wrong with her.

Later I realized he was trying to tell me Eleanor was dying but I refused to hear it, and because his own grief was still fresh from losing his mother, he could not say the words plainly.

The doctor who waited for me outside the door to the ICU had no such problems. He looked at me and told me in no uncertain terms that Eleanor was dying and that I needed to say goodbye to her now. His bedside manner was a little rough, to put it mildly.

My wheelchair was pushed to Eleanor's bed and I took her free hand. I talked of our love, of my thankfulness of being a part of her life and the privilege of having her in mine. I talked of our faith in God and our hope for eternity.

During the time I talked about the medical conditions she faced, I said one of the most foolish things ever to



Photo by Rex Harrell

The Medjet plane carrying Bob and Eleanor Terry arrives in Birmingham on July 19, 1998.

come from my mouth. I assured her I would be all right.

Similar words were said every time I visited her the next few days. I believed them at the time but nothing could have been further from the truth. When you lose someone you love, you lose a part of yourself.

I thought I was strong emotionally. Much of my life I have lived in my head, not allowing my heart to respond to things people said. It was safer that way as editor of a state Baptist paper. But if I were ever emotionally strong, I cracked and almost fatally so.

On Saturday morning, Eleanor and I were placed on cots along one side of the Medjet plane which had more equipment on it than the hospital's operating room. The first stop was more than three hours away, the international airport near Windhoek, capitol of Namibia on the opposite side of the African continent.

The plane was directed to the far end of a tarmac. A car was sent to take me and the emergency room nurse who watched over me to the bathroom in the terminal. When people glanced at me they quickly turned away. My face was disfigured from the accident and the surgery.

As we drove back to the plane — about 300 yards — I saw something that offered escape from the trauma, chaos and grief surrounding me. I saw a spinning airplane propeller blade.

I had read about people being killed by walking into a spinning propeller. Death was immediate. I could take a few steps and be free of all the problems facing me, I thought.

I was asked to try and walk between the wing and nose of the Medjet plane to get some exercise before the next leg of the journey home. My nurse boarded the plane to help care for Eleanor. Yards away propellers from a commuter prop-jet whirled. Even at my slow pace I could make the journey from wing tip to propeller tip in about 20 seconds, I calculated.

Eleanor was dying and I could be with her for eternity. I would not have to live with grief or face the loneliness and heartache the death of a loved one brings. It seemed like a perfect solution and it was only seconds away.

I walked outside my prescribed area to see if anyone was watching. They were not. They were all treating Eleanor. I walked to the edge of the wing and back. The more I walked the stronger grew the song of the spinning propeller. It was as if the sound was calling my name. It promised escape, relief. I wanted to take the first step.

But I could not. Life is God's first gift. Our responsibility is to accept it. We are not free to treat it carelessly or to throw it away because of some unfortunate circumstance.

For me to take that step would be to give up on God, to act as if God were not able to uphold, to guide, to heal, to restore. Philippians 4:13 came rushing to my mind, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" — even walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

I could not give up on God, not on what He would do in the immediate situation and what He would do in the time that followed.

Perhaps my mind cleared a little after choosing life over death. I began to think of my children and my grandchild. Already they would be deprived of their mother and grandmother. My responsibility — my opportunity — was to be more involved in their lives than ever, not to throw away that privilege.

About the same time that I took a step back from the wing of the Medjet plane a flight attendant stepped out of the commuter plane and soon a line of passengers was boarding. I never again thought about suicide. I had never

thought about it before. That was something beyond the pale for me.

Now I am not so sure. I still do not understand suicide but am more sympathetic than before remembering those moments in Namibia when all I wanted to do was die and wonder what if

If you ever feel that way let me urge you not to give up on God. On this side of that experience I know He will see you through the chaos and through all the days that follow. He did it for me and God will do it for you.

‘Go with the Angels’

With the greatest of reservations, Eleanor’s tending physician at St. Augustine’s Hospital in Durban, South Africa, signed the papers releasing her for the trip back to Birmingham. He warned us — the Medjet medical team, our children Brent and Jean, and me — that Eleanor would not survive the trip.

He was almost right.

Shortly after we landed in Namibia, Eleanor had a massive brain seizure. I knew nothing about this because I had been taken to the terminal for a bathroom stop. When I returned I was left on the tarmac, ostensibly to get some exercise.

I had no idea that inside the plane the three members of the medical team were fighting to keep Eleanor alive. For a time it seemed they lost the battle. At some point the pilot messaged the Birmingham office that Eleanor had died. That message was communicated back to Durban and someone told Brent and Jean their mother had died en route.

Neither Brent nor Jean were surprised by the message.

There is a lot about death we do not know. Death used to be defined as the irreversible stopping of the heart and respiration. Then the definition became the irreversible cessation of brain waves. But stories of near-death experiences have complicated human understanding of death. Can the spirit leave the body before actual death or are they bound inseparably until physical death? And is the current definition of death accurate? How does one explain or understand out-of-body experiences? These questions continue to be discussed and debated.

While Brent and Jean waited for their flights at the Durban airport, they received a second message. Eleanor was still alive. The aggressive treatment of the neurologist and other team members had brought her through the crisis. She was still in a deep coma but alive.

When the physicians at University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Hospital examined Eleanor after we arrived home, they told us it was only a matter of time before she had another seizure and this time they would not treat her as aggressively as she was treated on the plane.

I knew none of this at the time. I was caught up in my own crisis of determining my response to the alluring song of the spinning propellers that promised relief from all my pain.

In part 3 of this series, I shared that I stepped back from that edge. I chose life over death, hope over despair, trust in God over helplessness.

When I did, something miraculous happened. I saw the angels.

I stepped back from the tip of the plane’s wing assured that “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” — even face Eleanor’s death. I looked toward the plane and was astounded to see two angels hovering above the fuselage. They faced each other as if in conversation but I heard no sound.

Yes. They were dressed in white robes and, yes, they had wings like depicted in countless pictures. And they hovered suspended in air over the airplane without a single movement I could detect.

I saw arms but not feet, only white robes draping downward. I saw faces but don’t remember seeing halos.

When I shared this story with a spiritual adviser a few years ago he asked for details of the angels that I don't remember noticing or could no longer remember. I am not sure he believed my story.

Seeing angels hovering above the plane startled me. I actually looked away and rubbed my eyes. Seeing angels is not normal, at least not for me. When I looked back they were still there. It was more than a momentary glimpse. I stared at them from less than 50 feet away.

It was not an illusion for illusions are based on an acknowledged desire such as one seeking water in a desert. I had never thought of angels.

I stood frozen and watched them fade from my sight. But before they did they both seemed to glance my way. At that moment I knew that not only could I do all things through Christ but so could Eleanor. She could even face life's final enemy in the confidence of God's ultimate victory — even over death. After all, God had sent His angels for her.

As fast as I could I walked to the door of the plane and looked toward the cot where Eleanor lay. The medical team members were bent over her. I could feel the intensity but had no idea what was going on.

With a voice as loud as I could muster I yelled back into the plane, "Eleanor. It is OK. Go with the angels. Go with the angels."

The doctor looked at me like I was crazy and barked for me to get away. He was not going to let Eleanor die, he said. Not now. And he did not.



Photo by Bob Terry

Eleanor Terry is pictured here during the last night of a photo safari experience she and Bob participated in during their trip to South Africa prior to the BWA meeting.

Weeks later Brent, Jean and I pieced together the timeline of events — when the plane landed in Namibia, when they heard she had died, when I saw the angels. I learned that about the same time both the children had their own experiences of a deep sense of peace spreading over them. It was the first sense of peace either had had since a nighttime call telling them of our accident.

Often I have wondered why there were two angels. Was one there for me in case I had succumbed to the siren song of death or were both for Eleanor? Do we each have a guardian angel and God let me see both mine and hers as reassurance of His never-failing presence for either of us? I don't have an answer.

Neither do I have answers about the relationship of the body and soul. I know God made us one — body and soul. The resurrection promises the restoration of that oneness. But until that great day the believer's identity is with the Lord. How God created all of that I cannot explain.

I do know one thing. I saw the angels, whatever their significance.

Walking into the storm

Two ambulances awaited when we arrived in Birmingham but I insisted on riding with Eleanor. It would be the last ride we would ever share. The next day, Monday, July 20, family members joined me around her bed as we sang, prayed and said goodbye. Then the ventilator was removed and within minutes Eleanor quietly and officially died.

During Eleanor's funeral a strong thunderstorm struck the Birmingham area. Trees and limbs were down across many roads causing the police escort to change the route to the cemetery. That storm became a metaphor of what awaited me.

Grief is an arduous journey under the best of circumstances (if there is such a thing as "best of circumstances" related to death). But an out-of-season death, a sudden and traumatic death compounds the difficulty.

No two grief experiences are alike just as no two persons or no two relationships are alike. But there are signposts along the way.

One has to form a new sense of identity. For 34 years we had been a couple. I knew myself as Eleanor's husband. That was no longer true and I had to determine who I was without her. It was like losing a part of my body. I had to learn to live and function without that vital part.

In seminary I received special training in pastoral care and death and dying. As a pastor and minister I had comforted bereaved families. I thought I knew what lay ahead. I was wrong.

I had little appreciation of the impact grief makes mentally, physically and emotionally, or its power and trauma.

The directors of *The Alabama Baptist* were considerate of me as I recovered from additional surgery and as my physical wounds healed. Yet, when I came back to work I had trouble thinking clearly. I could not remember things. At times I would sit and stare at a blank computer screen unable to write or edit.

Physically I renewed my exercise routines but I was weaker. I moved slower. Not even simple routines processed as quickly as before. Even my speech pattern had changed.

And inside emotional storms kept me from sleeping. I did not eat properly. Both contributed to unhealthy patterns which developed.

Later, information provided by Community Grief Support helped me realize I was not losing my mind. A common characteristic of grief is increased forgetfulness, inability to process information and slower reactions.

That is part of the reason people in grief have a higher rate of illness and a higher rate of accidents than the population at large.

In some ways society acknowledges these facts by the old adage telling the grieving not to make any life-changing decisions for the first year. But business expects the grieving to be back at work and at full speed a week after burying a loved one. That is not only unrealistic, it is impossible.

Someone said the best thing one can do to prepare for grief is to make friends 20 years earlier. I found that to be true. Expressions of sympathy from acquaintances were appreciated but comments by those who had known Eleanor and me, shared life with us, provided much more comfort. Perhaps it was because they lost something in Eleanor's death too. They lost a friend and we shared grief, although at different levels.

Friends patiently listened as I told my story over and over again (at least parts of it). Grieving people need to tell their stories. They need to hear others say the name of their loved one and hear how that person was important in the lives of friends. Silence makes people think the loved one was not important or already forgotten.

My church reached out with food and visits. My church also was the first place I experienced the reality of my new status. The first Sunday I was able to go back to church was the day dual Sunday Schools began and my former class had been dissolved.

The printed material announced couples' classes and singles' classes for my age group. Men's classes were for older men but I decided to try one anyway. That Sunday I skipped worship in order to try two Sunday School classes. The first was a singles' class. I felt like a fish out of water. I was not emotionally ready for that yet.

On my way to the second class a college friend stopped me in the hall and invited me to the class he attended. My response was that I did not qualify. The class was advertised as a couples' class. He assured me that did not matter and I went in. It is still my Sunday School home today.

These several years later, churches generally have abandoned advertising classes as "couples" unless they are special purpose classes. To me that is a good thing.

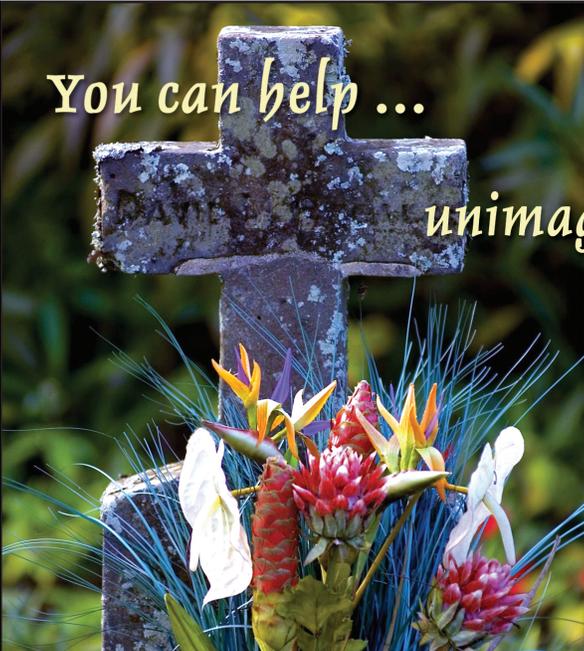
Most of the time churches and friends rally around the grieving for about six weeks. Caring does not stop at that point but other deaths have occurred by then and life goes on. Unfortunately, purposeful church care ends just about the time numbness and shock created by death begins to wear off for the survivors. That is when the grief work begins.

For me a grief support group sponsored by Community Grief Support Service in Birmingham was a godsend. I did not think so at first. My first reaction was that I did not need it. I had my family, my friends, my church and I was a minister with special training and experience. I could handle this.

I went to the first meeting only because my pastor said he thought it could be helpful in my grief journey. Out of respect for him I went. I am thankful I did. With others who were on similar journeys, I learned about grief intellectually. I learned from the experiences of others. Sometimes others learned from my experiences.

Community Grief became important enough to me that for more than 15 years I served on its board of directors assuring its services were available to those grieving because of death. And I am grateful my church continues to support that ministry.

Despite all the support, storms still awaited me on the grief journey, storms that had to be faced. Unless one sets his face and walks into the storm it is easy to become mired in neurotic grief. That is not where God calls us to live.



You can help ...

... when the unimaginable happens

through Community Grief Support Service

"Community Grief Support enabled me to navigate one of the most tragic and incomprehensible events in my life."

Order out of chaos

While a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps, Viktor Frankl learned to look into fellow inmates' eyes and accurately predict which prisoner would live and which would die. Later in his book "Man's Search for Meaning," Frankl wrote that if one has a purpose for living, one can endure the cruelest of circumstances. Without a purpose, life cannot be sustained.

I had a reason for living — my children, my 4-month old grandson, my calling to be editor of *The Alabama Baptist*. And I had God's promise that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." But that did not mean the grief journey would be smooth or always upward.

The first three years after Eleanor died I sat under an umbrella at the foot of her grave every July 20 between 6 and 6:30 p.m. That was the time Eleanor died. Every year it stormed at that time and more than once I sat there praying God would strike me with a lightning bolt. That would be an honorable way to die.

The loneliness was almost unbearable. Ours had been a good marriage and I longed for those days to return. One grandchild became two and then three and eventually four. I could not provide the support and help that Eleanor had when our first grandchild was born. My inability only compounded feelings of unworthiness.

Too soon I began dating and sometimes I pushed relationships too hard. Now I know that "find and replace" is



Photo courtesy of Bob Terry

Pat and Bob Terry (back row, left and center) participate in a missions experience with International Mission Board missionaries Jonja Jacks (back row, right) and her husband, Ken, along with other missions team members and hospital personnel at Imanuel Hospital in Lampung, Indonesia, in 2017.

a failed strategy for heartache. It prevents grief issues from being faced, but those issues eventually will demand attention, usually in unhealthy and destructive ways.

One can only work on one relationship at a time. Until issues related to one's former relationship and one's present identity have been worked through, the survivor has little to offer a new partner.

It took me about three years to begin to find a new sense of balance, to learn to live with an open wound. Often it was three steps forward and two back. But the falls were not as deep as before and it didn't take as long to regain the lost ground.

I quit pushing toward goals as if it all depended on me and began taking (dare I say enjoying) life as it came.

The leaders of Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church, Hueytown, asked me to be their interim pastor in 1999. I told them I was not sure I was able to help because I was still pretty broken from Eleanor's death. Ironically, Pleasant Ridge was the last church in which I preached the Sunday before Eleanor and I left for South Africa.

The leaders said their congregation was broken too — they had just had a split — and maybe we could help each other heal. In some ways, I think we did.

At the 125th anniversary of the church the following May, I was introduced to the daughter of one of the deacons — Patricia Hart, a professor at Samford University in Birmingham and former Southern Baptist missionary to Venezuela. The church still had a Woman's Missionary Union group named for her. We talked briefly and that was that.

More than a year later Pat and I made contact through circuitous circumstances and agreed to meet for dinner. I remembered our earlier meeting but not what she looked like. I found a Samford directory to look up her picture so I would recognize her when she arrived.

I arrived early and was watching the door in order to greet her appropriately. While I didn't expect it, it happened — when Pat stepped through the restaurant doors my heart jumped. Something inside of me said, "This is going to work."

Sometime before, in a conversation with friends who also had lost their spouses, I shared how I had read that second marriages were more about companionship than the "bells and whistles" of early romances. One in the group dismissed that immediately saying she was looking for "bells and whistles and fireworks" in any future relationship.

That Sunday night it was all "bells and whistles and fireworks" for me. We talked until the restaurant closed. We saw each other on Thursday and went to Samford Homecoming on Saturday. The next Saturday, I asked Pat to marry me and she said, "Yes."

That was October. We were married in March. We were both like teenagers caught up in a whirlwind romance. Our preoccupation with each other caused us not to be as considerate of other family members as we should have been. We had to work through that mistake with love, understanding and forgiveness.

There was one more challenge. I knew how to be Eleanor's husband. I had to learn how to be Pat's husband. Pat and Eleanor were different people. The relationships were different and that meant different ways of relating, acting and communicating.

And now more than 16 years later we both remain confident in who we are as individuals and as a couple because of love for one another and God's promise that we "can do all things through Christ who strengthens" us.

For neither of us did life work out as originally envisioned. But God is faithful and works amid all the circumstances of life to bring good for His children and honor to His name. Out of the chaos created by sin God brings order and wholeness.

That is why a visitor to our home will see God's promise recorded in Jeremiah 29:11 prominently displayed. The verse declares, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Our story is not over because the journey is not over. Life is never finished this side of heaven. We are always learning, always changing. But amid all the change and uncertainty one thing is sure — as believers we "can do all things through Christ who strengthens" us.



3310 Independence Drive
Birmingham, AL 35209

Phone: 205-870-4720
Toll-free (in Alabama): 800-803-5201
www.thealabamabaptist.org