

# A Window to Heaven—When Children See Life in Death

## Colleagues:

Dean Lueking, pastor emeritus at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois is on the same graduation picture as I am—Concordia Seminary, Class of 1954. He married well, became Jaroslav Pelikan's brother-in-law. Nowadays he and wife Beverly are working on a book. Something to do with what Lutherans around the world think Lutheranism amounts to in that particular piece of the world they live in. The two of them are just back from several weeks in Southeast Asia, interviewing folks in Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, China, Indonesia, and maybe more. He sent today's posting to me and told me this: "I met Dr. Liang almost by accident in Shanghai. Bev and I had scheduled an interview with a Chinese nurse (the school nurse at Concordia Intl School Shanghai) for Sunday evening, Oct 29, at 6 p.m. She called before, asking if she could bring a friend – a doctor. Sure, we said. The friend was Dr. Stephen Liang, who hustled to our hotel room a half hour late...but it sure was worth waiting for him. He blew us away with his zeal, medical competence, warmth of personality and dedication to the kids he serves.

"Dr. Liang has taken the baptismal name of Stephen – being baptized perhaps several years ago. He is a pediatric oncologist working in a Peoples Republic of China hospital in Shanghai. He refers in the piece to his medical school and a leukemia specialty center there (Quongdong?). He has established important connections with USA specialists in leukemia – and did a brief study program at Duke Univ Medical School some time back. I continue in contact with him; he has connected with the worshipping community at Concordia International Secondary School in Shanghai."

Here's the message from this young Christian for our edification.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

*P.S. Registrations for the Crossings January conference, "Honest-to-God Gospel," are pushing 100. Yesterday the third ELCA bishop signed up. Is that a good sign, or not? We think it is. FYI, contrary to Bethlehem, there still IS room in the Inn.*

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## ***A Window to Heaven—When Children See Life in Death***

*I am a pediatrician from China. My name is Stephen. And I have chosen to specialize in pediatric oncology, which means that, however well I do my job, a high proportion of my patients are going to be little children who will die of cancer. My experience belies conventional wisdom which says that it is easy to believe in a loving God so long as all goes well. People who experience pain, sickness, and death at close quarters often find themselves moving closer to God rather than away from him. But there are a lot of people whose faith really is dependent on things going well. As a doctor who has been constantly exposed to suffering and death in little children, I would like to introduce those above to real life. In the meantime, many people feel the single most powerful argument against the reality of the love of God is that innocent little children suffer and die. I used to think of myself as somewhere between agnostic and atheist. But through the experience at the bedside of many dying children, I returned to a belief in God and recognized the reality of God's love.*

Another point is professional. As a pediatrician myself, I love my profession so much but I am also distressed by the widening gap between doctors and patients. The current generation of doctors is encouraged to keep a distance between themselves and their patients; they are advised to avoid becoming involved with their patients' feelings because of so-called professional dignity. "Patients" have changed to be our "clients" somehow. When I was faced with my first patient who would die, I asked my clinical mentor how we as young doctors were supposed to deal with our feelings about "innocent suffering." He responded that the answer was not to attempt to deal with feelings, simply to do my work and concentrate on that. Hard work, he said, is a good tonic for untamed and uneasy feelings. Her advice seemed good because it appeared to help me through the ordeal. I learned from her to keep my feelings about patients as numb as possible.

One of the side effects of this approach was that my faith began to slip away with each passing child. But I found there was no way in which we could treat chronic illness in children without getting to know them. And to know them is often to love them. To love a child who will die soon is to expose oneself to the pain of dying. I really want the reinforcement to my own faith that comes from seeing these little ones return to their Lord in the natural way of a child to its parent. Little children do not quickly lose the sense of where they are from, nor do they fear where they are going. It is a special privilege from the Heavenly Father for me to be a means that facilitates peace and preserves hearts untroubled. I have never felt that the story belongs to me. Rather, they are given to me as gifts, and I have tried to be a good steward of these treasures. I just want to share with you a quotation from one brother who died from cancer as a short preface: "For the Christian, the Big C is not cancer, the Big C is Christ."

One of the bitter-sweet privileges of caring for children with cancer is that you grow to love them and bask in that love returned. This love returned is a form of love that is rarely seen on the earth. It is unconditional. Part of that love entails, on occasion, sharing the road toward death. The Bible told us that Jesus rarely used adults as role models for spiritual maturity but often pointed to children when he required an apt metaphor for the kingdom of heaven because children are important in God's redemptive plan for us. I am so thankful that I always ask myself what my life would be like today if I were not privileged to know these dying children. The children's experience did not correspond with anything I learned in medical school, but they did remind me of the words of Jesus that I learned that are recorded in the gospel of John. These words were meant to dispel the fear and sadness Jesus saw on his disciples' faces in the garden of Gethsemane:

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also"(John 14:1-3,KJV)

Jesus spoke of an alternative to the unsure, uncertain heart—the heart untroubled. The untroubled heart that he described is not achieved by having access to more information about the feared subject. Neither is it the result of an intellectual desensitization to painful words and concepts. This peace is simply a gift. The greatest gift in my life has been in linking the children's experience to my own. In accepting the linkage, God has ministered to my unsure heart with the gift of hearts untroubled. As I sit by the beds of these children, I have seen God's love made manifest in this descending way. Peace also has been given to children. "Peace I

leave with you," said Jesus. "My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither I let them be afraid (John 14:27,RSV)."

Perhaps only a pediatrician would smile in relief that a patient could earn the privilege to be seen as a child. I hope that when it is my turn to be a patient, I am equally privileged and I hope that I will have the courage to report all the mysteries that excite me.

For some of my patients, intellectually and physically they were diminished, but spiritually they were stronger. One of the Greek words in the New Testament for healing implies salvation. Spiritual healing does not restore a person to the place they were before the illness. It provides a more comprehensive health care package. The peace and healing of God that defies human understanding can bring us salvation and keep our hearts and minds untroubled—even when they do not satisfy our analytical inclinations! As I look back now, I am so thankful that Jesus dealt with me the way a loving parent deals with a hurt child. He made me reach out to others rather than get lost in myself. Helping others helped me.

But I am also reminded by a parent that belief can be a more painful proposition than unbelief. The unbeliever assumes that no one is responsible or holds an answer. Belief to these parents suggests that there is some One who holds all the answers. For every young heart untroubled, there maybe one and more older hearts left thirsty and unsure. It is my observation that parents tend to see their child's illness most often in terms of their own failure. In fact, when I am asked, "Do you know why children get cancer?" I always assume the real question is, "What did I do wrong that my child got cancer?" In the Old Testament, father Abraham had the outrageous faith to believe that God would honor his promise to make Abraham the

father of many nations. In another era, there is also a true Christian who had the outrageous faith to give up his visa to certain freedom and remain in the Nazi-occupied land with his vulnerable parents during World War II. He was able to protect them for several more years and went with them to the camps where both his mother and father met their deaths. He survived to tell his people and the world about self-sacrificing love. God's law and its promises were written on his heart. I believe all the suffering, this dying around us has a meaning. For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance as whether one escapes or not ultimately would not be worth living at all. The book of Job gives clues to the meaning of suffering. But we do not really understand this message—in fact, we hardly take it seriously—until we suffer. Our initial knowledge may come from the Bible, but deeper understanding comes only as we put teaching into practice. I am reminded that without the agony of the Cross, the resurrection would have been just as irrelevant as some contemporary theologians believe it to be.

At the end of 2003, I met one of my patients named John. I tried to be involved in helping his family. I knew he had AML, which is an uncommon kind of leukemia in children and has a possible curing rate of 60% without relapse. But he was in relapse at that time. Also, I heard about another bad news that his mom was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. This family had no insurance. The hospital was going to release John since his daddy could not pay for the treatment. At the moment, the first person I thought of was Jesus. I felt there was a strong desire in my heart that told me to do something. After a short prayer, I started the journey to be with this family. I visited my friends Amber Young and David Tormey first and asked them whether it was okay for me to seek help from QICF for John and his mom. After a conversation with the representative Dr Ron

Halbrooks from QICF, he asked whether QICF could visit the leukemia ward since Christmas was coming. I agreed with their little request.

During the following outreach in the leukemia ward, every visitor was touched that there were so many children with cancer who needed help. John represented all the kids to say welcome and to say thanks to their parents for taking care of them so patiently. I told those who had yet to hear the good news why we were so willing to do that—Christmas Eve is a holy night because Jesus is born to share hope and love with us. When we meet those children who may lose their hope, what should we do? After the outreach, John and his Mom received the best medication. All the brothers and sisters were so excited that John was in remission in a month but soon after that, John was in relapse the second time. I must admit that I was very frustrated when I knew that we really wanted him to stay with us. To be honest, I wanted to quit then. But when I talked to Dr Ron, he told me a true story happened several years ago in Qingdao.

There was a brother named Robert who started to help a boy with leukemia for 3 years. Robert is not a rich man but he and his wife did try their best. When brother Robert heard that Xiao Bo Yang needed a transplant to finish his treatment, he talked to his wife and made the decision to sell his house in Chicago to help. But Robert passed away just when they made the decision. When local media and churches heard about all that, they were deeply touched by such an awesome American brother's deeds. At last, a local hospital gave Xiao Bo Yang a free transplant also as a gift to Brother Robert who is with his Father right now. Xiao Bo Yang was saved. It is the Father's perfect plan for him to stay. After I heard about this story, I felt I got the answer which keeps on giving me strength. During John's last moment, he mustered the final energy to sit up in his hospital

bed and say: "Daddy, thank you so much for taking caring of Mom and me. I do not want to be without you. I want to go home." Then he lay back on his pillow and died. I felt such an utter failure as I heard the news. When I followed the news on line, I cried, almost as though it had been my own child. I strongly believed God had a perfect plan for John through which I had the idea to establish a children's leukemia foundation to help more kids with cancer when I moved to Shanghai.

In Qingdao, China where I used to live, there is a Children's Leukemia Foundation. I did do some work in the foundation and to establish the connection between QICF (Qingdao International Christian Fellowship) and QCLF (Qingdao Children's Leukemia Foundation). During the past three years, because of Him, more and more children with cancer are on the road to recovery. One of the favorite verses from the Bible I would like to share with my patients and their families is Mark 5:36: "Do not be afraid, only believe."

Let me return to my prayer for my young friend John. It was not an exercise of the head but a demand of the heart. My prayer, "Do you not care at all?" was answered in my heart as quickly as my thoughts blasted the heavens: "Yes, I do care and it's because I care that you are there. And I am there also."

Those in the fiery furnace find One who walks with them. Those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death do not walk alone. God, the Parent who so loved the world, became a co-sufferer with all parents who share Mount Moriah's supreme test of faith, through the gift and death of his beloved son.

Before my career is complete, there will be many more Johns. I doubt that many of their parents will report that all of their hard theological questions found answers. Neither will I, and we continue to pose some awfully tough arguments. At least when



*we challenge God, we keep a conversation going. That type of conversation is called prayer. And occasionally in the conversation, God interrupts, so to speak, and gets a word or two in edgewise. To troubled hearts and hearts unsure, there is a window to heaven in the abiding promise that Jesus will come. May our lives be a feast: the spirit of Jesus in our midst, the work of Jesus in our hands, the spirit of Jesus in our work.*

*I would like to end my testimony with this simple witness that God is alive, interested, and loving. I would like to say amen with the children safe in the arms of Jesus. Amen!*

*Dr. Stephen Liang  
Shanghai, PRC*