

From The Heart About The Heart Of The Matter

BETWEEN FATHER AND SONS: A Spiritual Odyssey by Arthur Van Seters

Faced with the diagnosis of prostate cancer in the fall of 2003, I began writing missives (as I called them) to our five sons — David, Stephen, Tim, Philip and Tom — scattered across the continent. Since that September, I have produced just shy of a hundred. But in the beginning I didn't send them; I left them in my computer in a "Father and Sons" folder.

Cancer has a way of breaking open the largely hidden. A heightened sense of mortality causes one to ponder life and relationships. In my case it also made me ask whether I had adequately shared with our sons those deeper reflections about them and about my own journey as a human being. Life is a gift; their lives have also been gifts to my wife Rowena, and me. Do they really know this? Have I told them? Also, what spiritual dimensions of my own have been adequately articulated, and how could these be shared? So a distinctly spiritual odyssey was starting to take shape.

In the first letter, September 19, 2003, I wrote that seldom a day goes by that I do not think of them and, naturally, my wife is in the circle as well. Then I added,

Sometimes I wish that one or another of us had talked further about something. At other times I have yearned to share some idea, conviction, memory, or even a regret, and it never quite happened. You will not be surprised that I remember you daily (with very few exceptions) in my prayers. Others (your spouses, girlfriends, children, etc.) are often added. You are all God's gifts to Mom and me and so sharing your stories with God just seems so natural.

On October 31, after getting the results confirming cancer I wrote,

I see myself between two worlds: the world of now, of family, of life around me in which you are all more directly in the arena of my journey, and the world of my mother and father and sister, who are "on the other side of the river", to use the language of the old black spirituals. To express my feelings this way should not be interpreted as some fatalistic response to yesterday's grim news. As these days unfold, I will keep in touch. I will try to be honest with myself and with you. You may also discover how much more I need you to be with me today than you may have expected.

Naturally, Mom and I talk. There is a closeness here that transcends every other relationship that I have. At an even deeper level, I ask myself what God has in store for me. Because if God is still calling me to something further, cancer won't stop it! Or I ask, "What can come out of this ordeal that has a larger, more profound meaning?" I don't know. I do believe I am loved by grace, and that gives me a sense of both peace and hope.

My initial questions and musings focus a lot on the distinct possibility that death for me will come sooner than previously anticipated. I imagine my wife carrying on with the family and sharing the lives of the boys and their families. I feel a certain regret as a result. But I also wonder about *what crossing over into the life to come will be like. What kind of memory will I have? What self-consciousness is given to us? Will I have some awareness of what is happening in my absence? I know that these are purely speculative questions. But this does not stop them from coming into my mind and imagination.*

In January of 2004, just a week or so before scheduled prostate surgery, I believed that the prognosis was positive, but this did not stop my "what if" questions, so I asked myself, *What is it that I now most want to say to those I love most dearly, to you, our sons and your families, to the church, the academy and the wider world? Much of what I want to say to you I have shared in endless conversations with Mom. I most want to share with you*

my love for each one of you and my faith in God's boundless grace — and these two are inseparably connected. Have I conveyed either of these adequately, or their interconnectedness? The honest answer is, no. Can I do so in some small measure now? I doubt that what I write will be adequate because these are matters that require dialogue and I have engaged you in this kind of dialogue so sporadically and inadequately. But better to try than not. It may even be that in the coming days, however few or many they may be, such dialogue may unfold.

At the beginning of February, 2004, two weeks after my operation I wrote,

I am aware of just how vulnerable I have felt — which is not to say that I did not feel hopeful. So many people were praying in our church, among my friends and within the family so naturally I had a sense of hope and strength beyond myself. But vulnerability was (and continues to be) part of my experience. I have usually been in control of much of my life. Now I have become acutely dependent on doctors, nurses, technicians, family and friends. I have been more dependent on you than you may have realized. I don't regret this for one minute because we are all made to be interdependent. I only wish I could have conveyed this to you more clearly and concretely over the years.

This operation and its aftermath is, above all, a singularly spiritual experience. I am face to face with my fragile life, with all of its challenges to faith that seeks to transcend the limits of reason and experience. I feel that I have been drawn nearer to Jesus whom I seek to follow because he too is described in the Gospels as extremely vulnerable. In that vulnerability of his, I find the ultimate strength to face myself and the road ahead. The Apostle Paul once wrote, "When I am weak, I am strong." I share that conviction and want to live it more clearly.

When we received the post-op pathology results on March 5, I noted that we were on a journey in the providence of God. In the mercy of God, the timing, the choice of treatment and doctor, and so many other factors simply unfolded. So many people had been praying for me and guiding us, and there was a power at work that is beyond all of this.

I continued to write and file my missives until the late fall of 2004. I had just received the publication of my book, *Preaching and Ethics*, by Chalice Press, in the fall of 2004, dedicated to our five sons because of my deep indebtedness to them and their ethical commitments. In sending them copies, I included a disc of all the letters that I had written with the following explanation.

I started this back in September, 2003 when I was facing the prospect of serious medical challenges. I was sensing that my life is a fragile journey, but also in a way (as are yours) a gift. So why not reflect on it? At the time, I was going to keep these matters on my computer so that after my passing (which I did not yet see as immanent!) you might know some of my deepest thoughts about you.

*I had written most of these pieces over the following months — each reflecting the moment of writing — when I thought, **no**, I must send them to you now! As I re-read them, I realized how much they are but momentary ruminations. As a result, you will find a fair bit of repetition in them. They are words between us and may elicit conversations down the road. They are a part of me that I pass on to you. This, too, now becomes part of your heritage.*

I believe that in doing this I will surprise you. I only hope that the surprise will bring us closer together — a bond that I have felt for so long and the unveiling of which should have happened long before now.

References to the providence of God are pervasive in this correspondence. This understanding of God is theistic rather than

deistic (though naturally I have not used these technical philosophical terms). I share with the boys my sense that God is always close to our lives, theirs as well as my own. This is rooted in my understanding of the incarnation, through which I note that Jesus is described as Emmanuel, "God with us". It is immeasurably deepened at the cross where God is present in the mystery of ultimate suffering. Suffering and death do not have the last word; life does, and the resurrection reveals that even in the midst of Jesus' own sense of abandonment, God was present, God was suffering.

In mid-August of 2006, it became clear that a new cancer had invaded my body. So I wrote to the boys about the recognition of symptoms and the confirmation that I had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I went on to state that ultimate questions of life and its brevity have emerged again and with a new poignancy. But I add,

Of course, this is not a journey I take alone. Mom is a central part, and you, when I share some of this with you, will be in it as well. Neighbours and church, as well as friends and colleagues, share such journeys. Most of all, I know that the love of God sustains, particularly in the times of greatest challenge. So once again, the ultimate issues of life are put to the test. In sharing this with you, I have confidence that all of you will offer both your love and your prayers. For this I am already grateful.

Later as I was getting ready to begin intensive chemotherapy, I wrote,

All of you have been very quick to get back to us as soon as a message is sent out. I know this means a great deal to Mom, and it certainly gives me a lift. But I would not be honest if I didn't admit to wondering just how all this will turn out. I have many questions and sometimes my dreams go in those endless circles that just leave me in the dark. Mixed with this, however, I still have a strong conviction about my future. When David called the other day

wondering about my prognosis, I told him that ultimately I'm not going until I am called! No matter what the doctors say or do, my time is in Other Hands. David, being David, had a good response: "I hope that calling is not for at least ten more years!"

A couple of weeks later I reminded the boys that *I have no doubt that many are seeking to give me support. Many have pledged to pray for me. When I feel my own weakness (not just physical but also psychological and spiritual) will I feel empowered by the prayers of others? I believe that even if I am not aware of such empowerment, it can still be operative.*

I suppose this is what Christians mean by faith. You believe it even when you don't fully understand it or even feel it. This is why I think that faith is, ultimately, not our doing but God's gift. This is why, when we try to grasp this gift it seems hard to hold on to, because gifts are to be graciously received rather than grasped. But it is also true that when a person is going through the deep valley where darkness seems to be overpowering, the faith of others can be sustaining.

In November my immune system was at a very low ebb, and I landed up in hospital for a week. Gradually I came to see this period as a kind of window to invite reflection. I thought about the picture of the human body in Psalm 139, and of God as a knitter.

So here I am with this condition in which some of the knitting has been tied up in knots called cancerous nodes. The chemotherapy goes to work to untie those knots. But the effects of the intervention stresses part of the rest of the system right down to the bone marrow which is trying to manufacture the neutrophils to keep on fighting disease. Their collapse led to my infection (probably from my own bacteria) signalled by my high temperature and resulting in the need for a further intervention to counter the new threat. But the process also had to wait for the chemo cycle to begin the journey

of renewal that emerges after the 14th day following the start of each chemo series.

In late February of 2007, I completed my final round of chemotherapy. Naturally, I expressed gratitude for the support our sons had given to me. I then posed the question, “So how am I to face the future and how will all of you face the future with me?”

Clearly, the future is circumscribed by the possibility, perhaps even the likelihood, that I will need further treatment down the road. Such treatment could be less effective than this past four months of chemotherapy. On the other hand, given the impressive progress of lymphatic cancer treatment in the past decade, the response of the medical profession may be considerably more positive. We just don't know right now.

What we do know is that life is limited, finite and, yes, mortal. Each year is a gift; each week, in fact, is a gift. This is the wonder and mystery of living. My times are not, finally, in the hands of the medical profession, but my Creator. So I say again, as I have said before, each day is a day of grace. My conviction about the goodness of God who is revealed most fully for me in Jesus of Nazareth, gives me inner strength, and also a profound sense of hopefulness. This hopefulness is not so much about living for a long time, but about living with a sense of meaning that is bound up with God's purpose for my life.

In the early fall of 2008, I began to suspect that my lymphoma was coming out of remission. I pondered again what had been happening inside me since the appearance of my first cancer back in 2003, when I first began writing this Father and Sons series of e-mails. After my recovery from prostate surgery, life returned to a fairly normal pattern, but I had to add that, *...it was not really the same. My sense of finitude had a permanent effect on how I viewed my life — and also life in general. The*

theoretical conviction that somehow life is a sojourn of limited duration, and that it's meaning is bound up with what is beyond that duration, became a practical way of living. In a way, I had always thought that this was so and tried to live accordingly, but faced with a more intimate awareness of my mortality, this came into sharper consciousness.

Now there seems to me to be a connection between my experience of cancer and my openness to looking at the major issues facing our world today. I am disposed to engage difficult questions and issues more readily because I have less and less to protect in myself. Of course, I can still be resistant to lots of things, but most of them are relatively small, even petty. I am sorry that I am not a more generous person and that I overreact at times. I have lots of things to confess regularly. But I still live by grace, a grace that is so often given to me by my beloved, your amazing mother!

But there is another aspect to all of these ruminations: the loss of transcendence in our culture. This has not been so much by deliberate choice as by a slow process of osmosis, as the world's ways of thinking control more and more and our spiritual heritage dissipates — not like a blast of steam but an imperceptibly slow evaporation. I have wondered if this has not made you, as sons who have respected the spiritual heritage of your parents, wonder about its connectedness to your lives. Have you lost a sense of the transcendent dimension of life? I ask this not by way of accusation, but in the hope of trying to understand how you view your lives and your world in light of the heritage which you received from Mom and me. I am not asking for a response from you as much as simply sharing thoughts that go through my head these days.

One reason that this is so important to me arises from my profound respect for the way in which all of you have sought to work out the ethical implications of your deepest convictions. I have learned so much about being a Christian from the way in which you five have

grappled with life. Of course, the main reason for raising this is that my love for you compels me to share with you my deepest questions.

So here I am on my continuing journey. I am trying to sort out intractable questions with my deepest convictions about why God chose to reveal love through the death of Jesus on a cross. In that central event the profound suffering of the Creator allows me to see that the suffering of the world is God's central concern. So this distinctive conviction nurtures an engagement with a world that I cannot change, but for which I encourage the church to offer genuine hope by being an alternative community of self-giving love.

A I continue to write with the return of my lymphoma during this current year, I share with our sons that I have a deepened awareness that I see myself as incomplete. I add that

I do not think of this as failure. I have, of course, failed in many ways, but incompleteness is what we all share because we are connected to something larger. We are incomplete in ourselves because our lives are bound up with others. My life is profoundly interwoven with Mom's and hers with mine, and both of us with yours, and with friends, associates, neighbours, and so on. Also I am shaped by my moment in time, the circumstances that have influenced me and what has transpired in the world around me in the limited spheres that have touched my life.

Where this correspondence now moves will be a continuing discovery. But I do hope that the boys will have a sense of the benediction that I have been experiencing, especially in these past six years. By this I mean the sense that I am blessed by God who loves me, by Jesus who revealed the depth of that love on the cross, and by the Spirit who continues to empower even in weakness.