

Dee and Steve with their youngest granddaughter, born in 2000.

# Don't Send a Sympathy Card

by Dee Brestin

An invisible knife pierces my heart. Ever since my 59-year-old husband, Steve, lost his valiant battle with colon cancer, I've waited for him to call, to hear his hearty laugh—but silence looms. I long to talk to him about our five children—but he is gone. My body aches to be held by him in the night, to have his deep voice pray over me or to hear him recite “Wynken, Blynken, and Nod,” the nursery rhyme he often used to lull me to sleep—but I am alone under the covers.

My counselor tells me to accept the reality of my husband's death, to stop tormenting myself. I must accept that I will go to him in my mind, but he will never come to me.

I don't particularly enjoy being around Christians who haven't suffered deeply. They can be like Job's friends, offering pat answers, misapplying God's truths, bumping up against the knife they do not see. They smile and quote Scriptures to me. I cringe.

They send a card with a platitude pointing out the silver lining to my pain. I close it quickly. I *know* they mean well. “Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart,” Proverbs 25:20 warns.

But, oh, the comfort of being with those who have suffered. They see the invisible knife. They stay by my side when I am not pleasant and listen to me drone on. They've been there, so they know better than to tell me God is sovereign and all things will work together for our good. I *know* that's true, but I can't hear it now.

High-tide grief is not the time to speak solutions. (Women who have had miscarriages tell me the last thing they want to hear is “You can have another baby.”) When one is grieving, it is the time for friends to be silent, to hug and to weep.

I don't know why it

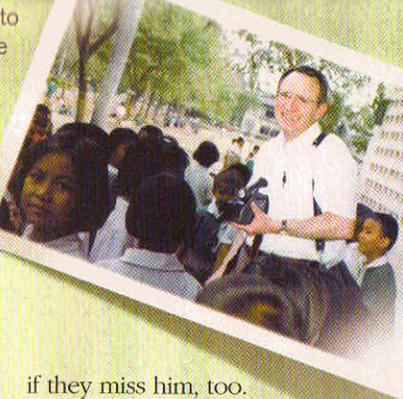
diminishes grief to have someone weep with you, but it does. Friends who cry with me are like Ruth, who, having lost her own husband, could stand beside Naomi without trying to fix the unfixable. Ruth steadfastly stayed at Naomi's side, knowing that if she did not grow weary in loving her mother-in-law, the woman who was saying, “Call me Bitter!” would become sweet again in God's time.

The friends who comfort me the most:

- show up. (They came to the hospital, came to the funeral, came to my home.)

- write notes telling me what they loved about Steve, notes that don't try to “fix” my pain. I am always pleased to open a letter instead of a ready-made card. Though there are exceptional cards, and I appreciate being remembered, a *personal* note is more likely to soothe my soul.

- talk about Steve. Some fear mentioning him, thinking it will remind me. Believe me, I haven't forgotten—nor do I ever want to. I cherish friends who will still bring up his name and a memory. I love it



Steve Brestin on a trip to Thailand in 1993. He and Dee adopted a daughter there.

if they miss him, too.

- don't expect me to recover in a year. Instead, they are steadfast in asking me about how I'm handling my grief. They probe until I speak the truth, even if that truth releases tears. They aren't frightened. They know tears bring healing.

- intercede by finding Scriptures and reciting them as prayers, knowing the Enemy attacks those who are down but will flee when the Word is prayed.

When friends say the wrong thing, I have come to see their heart behind the awkward words or sentiments. I must be gracious, for I have done exactly the same thing—trying to fix the unfixable. Even now, on this side of suffering, I can stammer on and say too much. Better to hug, to cry and to say simply, “I am so sorry.” ■

*Dee Brestin is the author of The Friendships of Women and Falling in Love with Jesus. Her husband passed away in 2004.*



**Related Resource:** Two-part “Focus on the Family” broadcast with Dee Brestin, “Living Through the Loss of a Spouse.” (Item code B01144D. Suggested donation \$9.)

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