

When I was a child, my father, a secular Jew, paid me a dollar for each volume of the encyclopedia I read. My mother was a lapsed Lutheran who taught me how to find bargains at the mall. Our house was loving, loud, and fun, but an undercurrent of anxiety coursed through it all. The message of my childhood was clear and insistent: Work, play, and love hard, and at all times stay in control, because something scary is waiting to take you down. I heeded that message into adulthood. I went to a great college, found the perfect job, and chose a wonderful husband. Weaker souls might need a god, but I needed no such crutch. My anxiety would keep me on my toes so that I could orchestrate the perfect life.

That belief was obliterated when my husband of five years, Scott, died from complications during a routine surgery. Ten days later, I delivered our first child, Sarah, stillborn.

During the next year, I became a Christian, a member of a tradition whose character and intellect I had long disdained. Nothing miraculous happened — no defining moments, blinding visions, or irrefutable arguments. But slowly, imperceptibly at first, I was drawn into the life of faith.

It wasn't clear from the beginning which faith that would be. I visited psychics, read New Age thinkers, and attended meditation classes. I even tried praying to a god I didn't believe existed. My forays into faith were attempts to make sense of what had happened to me and, in some ways, to control a world in which I had far less control than I thought I had.

Then I started reading the Book of John with a friend. Tony was the only Christian I knew who didn't try to explain away the loss of my husband and baby. After many debates in which he tried to convince me of the divinity of Jesus, he said that if I would just read the Bible, God would do the convincing. So we read the Bible together over the phone on Saturday mornings. I was drawn to the text, even as nothing about it provided firm evidence of its truth.

I especially loved the story of Lazarus. Unlike the Eastern philosophies that maintain that suffering is the result of our attachments, this story was about a man who was unashamedly attached. A man who behaved as though death was not natural. As though everything was broken, and that the sane response was to snort and weep. I loved that man.

I had been reading the Bible with Tony for months when he began pestering me to find a church. I searched "churches in New Jersey" online and went to the closest one. They practiced "open table fellowship." I had no idea what that meant, but when everyone got up to stand around the fancy table, I didn't want to be left sitting alone in my seat.

By the time I figured out that everyone was up to take Communion, I had a choice: Did I still want to go it alone, trying desperately to keep all the balls in the air? Or did I want to admit that Jesus had offered himself up so that I didn't have to be alone? To admit that I had little control but was infinitely loved?

Having the choice of Communion made it clear to me that I wanted it. After months of reading the Bible, of trying to find what I was looking for anywhere other than in the church, I had to admit what I had fought so long to resist: I was hungry for Jesus. For the Jesus who hung out with outcasts, who wept when his friend died, and who claimed to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In the end, all of my searching for something in which to place my faith didn't lead to a well-reasoned decision to choose Jesus over other gods. Instead, God offered me himself in the form of Jesus. I didn't have to find him or explain him or even make sense out of him; I just had to say yes.

After that first Communion, I returned to school to study childhood bereavement. I met and married a wonderful man, and we bore two beautiful sons. Three years ago, I became a mother through adoption to a teenager whose own mother had died, a teenager who is the same age my daughter would have been.

After getting married, I worked for two years with middle-school students whose parents had died. I facilitated a support group for surviving parents whose spouse had died, and taught a class at Harvard on bereavement. I often find myself the repository for stories of loss, told in lowered voices at cocktail parties and grocery stores. I try to listen deeply as people share those stories, nodding in agreement with how awful it is. I bear their story and, in so doing, remind them that they are not alone. In addition to solidarity, I offer my prayers. As I try to take in the magnitude of what they are telling me, I pray. Sometimes I pray for healing words. Often, I pray for the grace to be quiet.

When I am with someone whose losses ring of Job, I pray my faith would withstand another occasion of what appears senseless and unbearable. I try to remember that, despite my inability to discern otherwise, God's ways are never senseless. And I tell myself the story of what God was doing while I was in New Jersey, watching my life fall apart.

After Scott and Sarah died, a woman from Massachusetts named Liz stood up at her church for several weeks on end and asked people to pray for me. Liz lived with my friend Ora. A man named Jeff went to Liz's church. He prayed with the congregation that God would take care of my body and heart. Several years later, Liz asked Ora how I was doing. Ora told her that I had met a nice guy, a chaplain at Harvard. She mentioned Jeff's name. Liz said incredulously, "Jeff Barneson?" Liz told Ora about the times she had solicited prayer on my behalf, realizing that Jeff would have been praying as well. Jeff, my husband, had been praying for me before we met.

Piecing it all together, I wept and wept, unable to imagine the grace of it all. In 1997, when I was an agnostic widow living in New Jersey, a group of Christians in Massachusetts had been praying for me. And while my own attempts to find a faith never adequately explained my conversion, this did. I had been prayed into the kingdom.

These days I am in awe of how little we control, of how ugly life can be, and of the beauty that seeks us out in the midst of all the horror. Now, when I sit with the broken and mourning, I pray for God's love to do what I cannot: to bind up the wounded places, leaving their scars to bear witness of the power of both loss and love.