

When Life Crashes

Walking alongside Students in Times of Pain

by Scott Craddock

In 15 years of student ministry, I've had the opportunity of living in "nice" communities. I have served at "nice" churches with "nice" families. "Nice" families, for the most part, have produced in "nice" children—who, in turn, became part of my "nice" youth groups. I have countless "nice" memories of communities, churches, families, and most of all, students.

But along with the "nice" memories are: A parent of a student dying of a heart attack while standing in line at a fast-food restaurant; a beautiful family reduced to a grieving father because of a drunk driver; a student torn by anger, guilt, and pain because of a parent's infidelity; a room of crying students just learning of a trusted adult's immorality; a student caught counterfeiting checks the very same week his nine-year-old sister—a cancer victim—was buried. And many other stories that don't fit into... "nice."

Bad things aren't supposed to happen in "nice" places and especially not in "nice" churches consisting of "nice" families with "nice" students, right?

What do we do when things don't make sense and life has crashed for our students? What happens when the lesson we taught at the last youth meeting has no relevancy to what students are facing? What if our far-from-"nice"-ministry is much more about deep hurts, failure, chaos, and loss? What happens when our kids learn firsthand the sobering truth that God "sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45)?

Hurt

There was a time I felt well-equipped to walk with students in times of crisis, pain, and confusion—it was the first time it happened to me. The call came just after midnight that a

student's aunt and cousin had been killed in a car accident. It was one of those tight-knit families where "aunt" meant "second mother." When I hung up the phone, I felt a great sense of calm and peace that God had placed me in a unique position to comfort the student and her family. I drove to the family's home, not with a sinful pride, but with a sense of adequacy.

But I wasn't prepared for the pain I saw on the faces of that family. I couldn't say anything. I was choking on the lump in my throat. I sat there feeling the weight of the terrible tragedy and the helplessness of having nothing to offer them. In a room full of hurting people, I sat and hurt with them. The silence was ringing in my ears. They thanked me.

Nothing eloquent, comforting, or thoughtful had escaped my lips, but my presence meant something. Ironically I received far more comfort that day than I gave to this student and her family. Maybe I just lived Romans 12:15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." Perhaps I had something to give after all.

Our human tendency is to distance ourselves from pain; we may even couch it in terms of having a "professional detachment." We want to comfort from a distance. If we get too close we might be reminded that our own lives are subject to pain, loss, rejection, and unanswerable questions. We may feel again the pain of our own losses or tragedies. But the Body of Christ is called to be different; we're called to identify and feel what our brothers and sisters are feeling.

Hush

One of the greatest privileges that we receive when God calls us to work with students is the call to act as God's mouthpieces before an audience of teenagers. We're called to act and to speak on God's behalf in both good times and tragic times.

Ironically, it seems the best work in times of sorrow is done when we turn off our mouthpieces.

It's precisely during moments of intense loss, tragedy, and pain that St. Francis' words ring most true: "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." There are simply too few answers in those moments when life cuts our hearts in half, and sometimes silence is the best and most God-honoring response.

I've been guilty of speaking "on God's behalf" when God intended on keeping silent. How many times have I spoken up in an effort to either represent or explain God when God wanted my words to be few—or none? We often desire to rush to an answer, a purpose, a rhyme a reason, even a defense on behalf of God. But God isn't offering one. I move to the "maybe" or the "could be," but God says nothing.

Job's three friends often get criticized (and rightly so) for their pitiful attempts to speak on behalf of God with respect to Job's plight. But at least they waited a week (Job 2:13). All too often I've been guilty of trying to answer for God way too early in the process. I either push the hurting to find an answer or push God to give one—and neither happens.

We want to get to the answers as quickly as possible so the healing process can begin as quickly as possible. Answers, we assume, will make it all better. But perhaps the answers can't be found that quickly; perhaps they can't be found at all. Maybe God doesn't want healing to move according to my schedule. So part of what I'm learning is to avoid providing something that God, at least for the moment, isn't providing, either.

To that end, there are three little words I've learned to use in the presence of hurting students who look at me with tear-filled eyes, wondering why God would allow their circumstances: "I don't know." While on their own they don't provide

a lot of comfort, a second phrase I've also learned to use often begins the healing process: "I will be here with you."

Haven

Another innate desire of ours is to "set the agenda" for the hurting. We make assumptions about what they need from us; we set a timetable and process to optimize the healing and lessen the pain. On far too many occasions I've decided beforehand what my role will be when a student is hurting.

A student of mine lost his father the Saturday morning before Thanksgiving—and his extended family had planned a celebration that afternoon. What did I do? I sat with him as family member after family member arrived at the door with their hot dishes, only to hear the horrible news. I also sat with him playing video games. That Monday night, he sat at my house watching a football game with no talk of his father's death. I never saw him cry. He never came to me for counseling about his loss. The nagging questions ran through my head, "Am I really helping?"

Turns out I was. I was his haven. In God's plan I was the place that this student ran to when he didn't want to think, when he didn't want to hurt, when he didn't want to grieve for a few brief moments. It was a privilege.

There isn't a textbook that tells us how different students react to different tragedies and losses. Some heal quickly, and some take a long time. Some heal in ways that we expect, and others take a course that we never would have imagined.

It isn't our timetable, and it isn't our plan. It isn't about us! My role in difficult situations has never been the same twice. I need to learn to be flexible in whatever position God puts me as I walk with suffering students, letting God use me in whatever way God sees fit.

Hope

Hope is in short supply today. Studies and daily life show us

that people in general have less hope. We don't have to have tragedy to lose hope, either—it was barely present in the first place. Most students in "normal, happy" situations have little or no hope. If we don't see it in our everyday lives, how much less will it be present when life crumbles in on us?

Yet hope is precisely what we need, especially in the midst of senseless pain and tragedy. My role is often to cling to hope when people filled with pain have run out of it.

I've always been impressed with Job's hope (16:19-21). He hurt with inexpressible pain, but did so with hope (19:25-27). At the end of the day, maybe the best I can do is offer hope when life makes no sense. Maybe rather than spouting off a pat theological answer that really doesn't apply or vainly attempting to explain the purpose of the pain on God's behalf, I'm called to become an agent of hope when it all looks and feels hopeless. Maybe there are times that we hope "by proxy" for others? Hope is a powerful tool; it allows us to take one *more* step, to ask one *more* question, to continue forward, to cry one more tear.

Make no mistake, though: Hope isn't a panacea that lets us forget a loss or eradicate the pain. Rather hope allows the grieving to hold on to a God who brings purpose to a confused world, who offers love in the midst of unlovely situations, and who stands tall when every other knee wobbles.

Healing

"He's just hurting because of the divorce," the mother attempted to explain to the policeman standing at her door at 2 a.m.

"She's just angry over her father," lamented the parent as her daughter was sentenced.

Maybe the most difficult thing to remember about walking with hurting students is the fact that while there may not be a single, time-honored, "right way" to deal with grief and healing, there are countless bad ways.

Only one thing has been more painful in my ministry than seeing students face tragedies—it's seeing students make bad choices in the aftermath of those tragedies. There have been countless situations where the road to healing was beyond my sight, but avenues of continued hurt were abundantly clear. Sin is, at best, a short-term placebo for pain.

So while we lack a simple, five-step course for bringing about healing in the midst of tragedy and loss, we can at least walk with students and challenge them to heal rather than harm.

It may seem didactic or uncaring to push hurting students toward righteousness, but we fail them in the healing process when we fail to confront sin as a "means" of healing.



Your phone will soon ring, if it hasn't already. It may be today or tomorrow. It may not ring for a week or even a couple of months. But it will ring. A hurting student with pain filling him from head to toe will call with a deep wound or profound loss. There will be no immediate rhyme or reason why his life is suddenly filled with loss and sorrow.

It's my prayer that we all learn to respond, not with quick speeches, but with quiet (and indeed, silent) presence. That we become places where the hurting can go for haven; to let God use us as God chooses to use us. To offer hope when it can't be found anywhere. To walk with students on the path toward healing. 🙏

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