

Crossroad and resurrection: The father of the prodigal son

by [Richard Wile](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

During a Lenten retreat, we were asked to reflect on the feelings and role of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Though I had frequently thought about the parable over the years, I had not given the father much attention other than to consider him a symbol for God. Our retreat leader, however, asked us to think of the father as a real parent. We discussed parental roles, parents who cannot let their children go, parents who are overly critical, parents who are not available when their children need them. Our leader pointed out that the father in the parable had given his son the freedom to take chances, risk failure and push limits, not because he was indifferent to his child, but because he had a deep and abiding love for him. The father was able to see his returning son when "he was still a long way off" because the father had been continually watching for him.

As I listened to the discussion, I felt as if I had been kicked in the heart. My only child died when she was 18, just ten months after she was diagnosed with a rare and virulent cancer. Laurie was a smart, beautiful, lively and loving young woman. I envied the father in the parable. Even while his son was gone, there was always the possibility that he would return. I would have given anything to have been in his position.

During the month following the retreat, I again felt the anger, despair and guilt I thought I had overcome during the eight years since Laurie's death. I had gone through grief counseling. I had read books by and about parents who had lost children. I had written about Laurie in journals, memoirs and short stories. I had begun to meditate, first using Thomas Keating's form of centering prayer and then Zen practices. I had read the mystics and come to believe that my child's death had helped me to understand such concepts as Buddhist emptiness and T. S. Eliot's "waiting without hope." I had become an active lay reader and chalice bearer in my church and was considering doing pastoral care. I thought I had done everything possible to cope with Laurie's death. Yet during that Lenten season, I felt as if I were looking into a void, a blackness, a nothingness completely different from the comforting silence I usually found in my meditations. I would rise from my prayer

bench filled with a cold despair.

Then on Easter Sunday I heard a sermon on the women at the empty tomb in Mark's Gospel: "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The preacher spoke of the fear that keeps many of us from entering into the joy and festivity of Easter-the fear of what the resurrection means for our understanding of the way the world works. It challenges our security, even if the only security we have is the constancy of our suffering.

As he spoke, I realized that the void I had been confronting was my own fear. My spiritual journey-my reading, meditation and growing involvement with the church-had been moving me to a crossroad. It was time to face this thing called "resurrection," not as something that occurred 2,000 years ago, but as something that had happened to my daughter and me. I needed to decide what I believed: either Laurie was resurrected in God or she wasn't. It was time to say either "Yes, I believe" or "No, I don't." I was afraid to make that commitment.

The parable of the Prodigal Son had been the sign at the crossroad. I thought of the father standing on the hill near his house, looking for his child. He didn't know whether his son was still alive. I imagined his sense of abandonment, loss and despair. His friends and his older son probably were telling him he would never see his younger child again. The boy might have been robbed, killed or sold into slavery. "Face it," they might have said, "you've lost your child." His son must have been about Laurie's age. I remembered the times I'd questioned Laurie's friends or criticized her hairstyle, the times I'd told her she was "recklessly impatient"-which is one of the definitions the dictionary gives for the word "prodigal."

When his son left, the father kept nothing back from him; when his son returned, he threw a great party, again giving his child all his love, holding none of it in reserve. He had loved his son just as fully while he was gone as he did while he was at home. I imagined the father standing on that hill sending out his love to his child, wherever he was. I realized that if I believe in eternal life, I should do the same thing. I should send out my love to Laurie in the faith that she would receive it. I saw that being in the father's position wasn't a question of what I would give, but of what I would give up. Would I be able to give up my guilt, anger and fear, and let go of my frozen memories? If Laurie is in God, then she is not pasted onto the pages of the past; she is part of an eternal, evolving present.

During my meditations, I began to focus my thoughts and love on Laurie. I became the father watching out for his child. I imagined the view from the hillside, the smell of the grass, the sheep bleating in the distance. Instead of dwelling on old memories, I thought of Laurie as present in my life now. Then one day I had the clear sense that my daughter was standing beside me and had her arm around my shoulder. And I wept-both from sadness that I couldn't hold her, and from joy because I knew she is alive in God.

The more I meditate on the story of the Prodigal Son, the more it offers me as a grieving parent. Sometimes it is I who am the prodigal, wandering in the long valleys and circular trenches of grief. Then I think of Laurie, already with God, watching out for me and waiting to welcome me home.

Sometimes I think about the elder son. He reminds me of my rational, doubting self-the self that says my sense of Laurie's presence was a projection of my imagination, of my own needs and sorrows. He calls me sentimental and gullible. And I know I have a choice. I can stand with this observer as he wrings his hands and passes judgment on his father and brother. Or I can wait with the father, my hands stretched out in the faith that my arms will once again enfold my daughter as we come together in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Making my choice is easy, but living it is hard. With another father in Mark's Gospel, I say to God, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Fortunately, the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son is there to help me, an icon of hope for this grieving parent.