

Discovering our voices together after my wife's stroke

## **With her own voice changed by the stroke, she wanted to hear the Bible spoken aloud by her husband.**

by [Frank G. Honeycutt](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue



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I was two minutes away from boarding my bicycle for an April morning ride in the hills of upstate South Carolina when the cell phone buzzed. “You should come now,” said my sister-in-law. “It’s Cindy. I think she’s had a stroke. We’re on the way to the emergency room.”

My wife and her sister had been visiting their dad, an every Friday tradition, when my wife said the words “Ben Sasse”—the senator and former Lutheran college president from Nebraska—in a conversation about reasonable Republicans whom her conservative family members might want to consider as a sane option in future elections. They were the last words Cindy, a rabid Democrat, would speak for several days. (Cindy has not written to Senator Sasse about being struck speechless by saying his name, though she plans to.)

I don't remember much about the hour-long drive between Walhalla and Anderson except that I cried a lot, sped through yellow lights, and phoned my daughter and four friends to ask them to pray and please contact others. The rest is a blur. The receptionist at the ER was waiting for me, and someone led me back to a bright, curtained room.

A couple of years ago, Cindy and I were getting dressed for a rare formal date and standing in front of the bathroom mirror. Out of the blue, I asked, "Which one of us do you think will die first?"

"I hope it's you," Cindy responded.

"Why would you say that?" I asked, somewhat stunned.

"Because women generally handle the death of a spouse better than men."

As a pastor for over three decades, I'd heard the symphony of beeps, buzzes, and bells so many times in emergency rooms, the sound the swooshing curtain makes when it's pulled back to reveal the wounded occupant. But this, of course, was different. Cindy saw me from her bed as an IV with a clot-busting drug coursed toward the wound in her brain. Her eyes told me everything: a long road ahead for which she already seemed to be apologizing. Lord, how I love this woman.

With thrice-weekly therapy sessions, Cindy slowly regained some of her previous voice and full use of her right hand. Like so many others with medical challenges, we settled into a COVID-shaped daily routine that included relative isolation. This was compounded by the specific isolation of a neurological event and the many solitary thoughts rummaging around in Cindy's head that she was not able to fully articulate. We learned what is (and is not) helpful for people whose voice will not return to normal. Our pastor, Rachel, nailed Cindy's frustration one day during a visit: "I suspect you're rather weary of people completing your sentences for you." A sidelong mini-glare from Cindy told me all I needed to know about how I needed to improve as a listener.

Cindy's speech therapist told us that singing would stimulate her paralyzed right vocal cord. We began a new routine. Before breakfast, we sing a hymn that connects thematically to the readings from the daily lectionary. Then I read aloud the day's texts.

A retired high school teacher of English and public speaking, Cindy loves the cadence of words, the multiple meanings discovered in choice of inflection, the polyvalent possibilities lurking in tone and tenor. Cindy lamented that her voice now sounded like a kindergartner's, the *r*'s a special challenge. With her own voice changed by the stroke, she wanted to hear the Bible spoken aloud by her husband.

Over the last months, we've found new questions about the voices in the texts. We've imagined how young Samuel must have sounded in that classic evening encounter with Eli. How David's grief over the death of Absalom filled both heart and hallway. How the centurion at the foot of the cross offered his famous confession. How Esther found her brave tongue following Uncle Mordecai's encouragement. How the psalmist must have sounded while gazing at a night sky or imploring God's action in the face of injustice. How Paul crafted the right words to comfort ship passengers facing a wreck at sea. How Rhoda joyfully reported Peter's jailbreak to his disbelieving friends. And much more.

All of this struck me as radical in the context of our social media-fueled lives. I thought of how many of us start the day mired in the darkness of it all rather than in the light and music of these texts. In my work as a pastor and as a family member, I've refereed many social media fights. As Cindy and I read these scriptures together, I wondered what a "new voice," grounded in scripture, would sound like.

Reflecting on our lives before the stroke, it seems obvious that Cindy and I needed to slow down anyway, but reading the Bible aloud after the stroke has taught us a new way to listen for God's voice each new morning. And it has taught us, even after 40 years of marriage, how to speak to one another in new ways shaped by the surprising cadences of God's word.

Hymn tunes are now whistled throughout the morning, shaping conversation about God's presence with us and others on our prayer list. Daily lectionary texts, read aloud at dawn, bring new meaning and perspective to the news unfolding in the hours of the day.

In "Meditation 17" of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, John Donne writes these jarringly odd words: "No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction."

I'm pretty sure I've never shared those words with anyone in an emergency room. But here's a weird truth. Cindy and I have discovered a new voice in our married life

through partially losing the old one.

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