

TRAGEDIES OF LIFE REQUIRE STRATEGIC RESPONSE

Sometimes life can be a bully. It seemingly stalks victims, pouncing unexpectedly, delivering abuse that is both unfair and undeserved. Yesterday was crammed with examples.

Friends received a horrific phone call from a neighbour. He'd noticed suspicious smoke drifting from their farm house and, after venturing near, discovered it to be on fire. Despite a rapid respond by emergency personnel, little could be done to save their home and our friends watched helplessly as flames quickly transformed it into a smoldering, blackened mess. All was lost except for the clothes pulled on that morning.

Meanwhile, a young couple from our church family plodded through the barren wilderness of grief. Three months ago they were overjoyed to discover she was pregnant, but an unexpected miscarriage brought the joy to an abrupt end. They wept their way through the day, thankful for each other, but desperately missing their little one who had been growing within. Shattered dreams produced shrapnel that proved to be astoundingly sharp, piercing to the core of their parental souls.

A third drama was unfolding in a hospital room as our youth pastor grappled with the harsh reality of bile duct cancer. A recent operation revealed the unexpected invasion of cancer cells and doctors recommended a liver transplant. He, along with his wife and three daughters waited for further test results, hoping for the best, fearing the worst.

When unexpected tragedy invades the lives of those we love, our initial response is generally a sense of utter helplessness. Clichés like, "It will all work out in the end" or "When God closes a door, he opens a window", seem trite and flippant. Reality is, we can rarely bring order out of their chaos or satisfy questions with answers drawn from the wells of personal wisdom. No, the elimination of turmoil is not ours to offer. We can however, help friends and family members navigate the whitewater of crisis by carrying out three essential actions.

We can always love. Discerning souls discover unlimited opportunities for expressions of such via hugs, a hand on the shoulder or offering a tissue to catch tears. Chocolate chip cookies, lasagna or roses can be delivered. Cards with handwritten messages scrawled within are cherished. Tragedy and financial duress usually go hand in hand; cash is welcomed. Be

aware that love is best shared face to face, so venture to them, even when uncertain about what to say.

We can always listen. Ask questions that elicit a response like: "Can you tell me what happened?" "How did that make you feel?" "What went through your mind when you heard the news?" Deep issues of the heart are conveyed one sentence at a time, usually with long pauses in between. A wise doctor once told me that the most valuable medical instrument he possessed was his two ears; we would do well to emulate his example.

We can always pray. Indeed, prayer on behalf of another is the highest level of care we can extend. Words whispered heavenward wind their way into the heart of the Almighty. Sincerity is more vital than complex vocabulary -- brevity can be beautiful. Try: "God, please help _____. They really need you right now. And allow me to love well, listen sincerely and pray with persistence."

Each life comes seasoned with a sprinkling of tragedy. It's an unavoidable part of living in a fallen, sinful world. When beloved are bombarded by circumstances we hate, rise up and draw near them; love, listen, pray.

Remember, bullies of all types tend to step back when a friend dares to step forward.