

Dreams Diverted

By Laurie Spellmeyer

When tragedy struck our newlywedded life, we wondered how we'd make it through.

Though most of us spend a lot of time and energy planning our wedding day, we can never totally plan or be prepared for our marriages. We just do not really know what our future will hold for us. Even the wording of our vows is full of ambiguity. We promise to love "in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer," and "for better or for worse," but we don't really know what we are saying. Will the "for poorer" mean that we won't be able to afford the Lamborghini we dream about, or will it mean that our spouse will lose a job and we will face bankruptcy?

As Catholics, we believe in the Paschal Mystery. While we know that God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this is a mystery incomprehensible to humans. Yet, even without full understanding, our faith helps us to believe that it is true. As a couple, we enter into the same sort of mystery. When we receive the sacrament of matrimony, it has not yet been revealed to us how we, as husband and wife, are to serve God. We trust that when we are tested, we will have the grace to survive.

When Bob and I married in March of 2004, our future looked bright. At 35 and 43 years of age, we planned to start a family right away. Other plans included fixing up our house after a beautiful honeymoon in Germany. Committed to our marriage, devoted to each other, and confident in our love, we knew we could get through whatever hard times were bound to happen. Neither of us was prepared for how quickly we would be tested when God revealed one of the "mysteries" of our married life!

[New roles so soon?](#)

On the eighty-third day of our marriage, we learned that Bob had oral cancer. Despite not having any of the risk factors normally associated with oral cancer, such as being a smoker or heavy drinker, with that one sentence from the doctor our lives were changed forever. The number of future years together was in question. Family and friends were as shocked as we were. Sickness happened to older people after

many years of marriage. We hadn't even ordered our wedding pictures yet!

Even though we were scared, we leaped into action. Appointments were made with oncologists and surgeons. Surgery was scheduled and we started researching treatments for oral cancer and trying to make sense of all the information that was coming too quickly at us from the doctors. Bob healed quickly from the surgery, starting radiation treatments six weeks later. Our roles as newlyweds



changed to those of patient and caregiver.

In other ways our lives were different. Many tasks and responsibilities that Bob had handled now fell on my shoulders. I had to quickly learn about pain management, narcotics, and the side effects of radiation in addition to deciphering piles of insurance forms and medical bills, while trying to keep his spirits up.

Survivors or victims

When we look back now, we both agree that those days seem like a bad movie we watched a long time ago! At first we felt we were walking in a daze, numb and confused. We still are not exactly sure how we made it through that terrible time. We received support from people who loved us. We joined a weekly cancer support group where we talked to others struggling with the same issues that we were. And there were times we just held each other, crying as we reminded ourselves that we would be *survivors*, not *victims*.

Someone suggested that our life dreams had been shattered, but neither of us care much for that word. “Shattered,” to us emits feelings of hopelessness or broken-ness. It seems so final. What we try to convey is the power of love, mutual support, faith in difficult times. While we have worked very hard to make sure that cancer alone does not define our marriage, in reality cancer is a large aspect of our life together. I go with Bob to his doctor visits so he doesn’t have to wait by himself, and to ensure that he is never alone in case of bad news. Each summer we participate in a fundraiser for the American Cancer Society. In October we gather with friends for a Celebrate Life party to commemorate Bob’s finishing radiation three years ago.

Surprising rewards

Our marriage has also seen other mysteries; some good and some that have required adjustments. Together Bob and I have discovered we share a love

traveling and have enjoyed several trips over the past three years, including a two-week road trip last summer. We are enjoying being a “great” aunt and uncle for the first time. I went from full-time to part-time employment (remember the “for richer or for poorer” in our vows?) that required some budgeting changes. Most exciting of all, we finished an application to become foster parents and are researching our options for adoption.

While cancer was certainly not the ideal way to begin married life, it enabled us to grow together. Our relationship has been strengthened by this shared, albeit difficult, experience. Cancer made our commitment to one another stronger and in some way hard to explain, it increased our love for one another. But most importantly, cancer allowed us to grow together deeper in our trust and love of God.

Laurie Spellmeyer and her husband Bob live in St. Louis, Missouri, where they enjoy gardening, traveling, reading, music, and spending time with their family and friends.

