BRENDA

Dave Brown

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Dear Friends...

I wrote "Brenda" many years ago. Occasionally, I up-date it so that the time that’s passed is more up-to-date. I'm publishing this “final” version in honor of the seventeenth anniversary of Brenda's death (Monday, June 3, 2019).

This is an extremely personal piece; and it can be very difficult to read.  It was difficult to write and excruciating to live through.  I share it as, in some ways, it may benefit you and give you a window into a world that nearly swallowed me whole.  Over the years, many who’ve read it have said things like, “Now I see, Dave.  I think I understand now why you are the way you are.”

God's peace to you...

Dave Brown

Durham, NC

June 1, 2019

BRENDA

"Life," as M. Scott Peck writes in the opening line of *The Road Less Traveled*, "is difficult." No kidding. As you and I probably both know, life can be not just difficult but exceedingly so at times. Especially, when we're being flattened, bent, or reshaped over the anvil of grief and loss.

In some instances, and I emphasize some instances, the things we love and trust in most are the things we most need to let go of. Almighty God, in His providence, uses the losses we sustain (of family members, friends, marriages, careers, dreams, the esteem of others, even the "felt sense" of His Presence) to "burn-up" the detritus layers of dead and dying things, those ancient securities and primitive ways of thinking and being, that line the forest floors of our lives. To protect the forest from burning to the ground, this material must be consumed in some way. Often, it's broken-down through the long and natural processes of decay; sometimes, it's lapped-up quickly by fire.

Using small, contained fires to prevent larger fires, while theoretically effective, is risky, especially where human beings are concerned. But God seems to do it all the time, and, while I can't speak for you, I think He's really good at it. Even though my perspective is limited, I think God uses these controlled burnings not just to protect us from exterminating events but also to infuse back into the soils of our souls those absolutely critical things needed for life to truly flourish. Nature has no garbage; everything is used: every event, every material, every element, even time. The same is true in God's economy.

While I don't want to appear overly dramatic here, I imagine that you, dear friend and reader, as well as your family, have suffered in the flames, perhaps greatly. Ultimately, I don't think any of us escape this. If you've endured such things and clamored desperately to touch the garment hem of Jesus (see Mt 9:21), then I know you can understand completely what I mean when I tell people, "I need the Gospel. No, I don't think you understand...I really need the Gospel."

Despite my positive nature, I’m not a Pollyanna. Never have been. In this life, not everything works out as well as we might like it to or as well as it appears to work out on ole-timey TV programs like *The Andy Griffith Show* (which, by the way, is one of my all-time favorites). And God knows it, too. For He sees it all: every injury sustained, every dream shattered, everything. "Jesus wept," the Scriptures read (see Jn 11:35); and He still does. Because He's able to feel and understand everything we're feeling, and because He's neither frightened nor threatened by it, He's able to come along side us compassionately and weep right there with us. While there may be many fires in our lives, God is (most gratefully), right there with us; and, because of this, we're promised such fires won’t consume us so long as we stay right there with Him and let Him finish what He's begun.

Over the last many years, I've had the deep privilege of being able to visit Bohoc, Haiti, more than a dozen times. Bohoc is a remote village in the mountains of northeastern Haiti. On the map, it's located about two-thirds of the way between Port au Prince and Cap Haitian. A common greeting amongst my Haitian friends is the Creole phrase, "S'ak Pase?" It's kind of like saying "What's up?" in English. The typical response is "N'ap Boule!", which is a lot like saying "No worries." A few years ago, I learned that the most literal translation of N'ap Boule is "Not burning." I love that, as I'm always fascinated by how so much about a culture is reflected in its linguistic expressions. The Haitians have suffered much throughout their history...from several centuries of grinding poverty, corrupt leadership, European colonialism, environmental catastrophe, and demonic oppression. And then there's been the almost mindless, and often unaccountable, foreign government aide that has, at times, done little but line the pockets of a privileged few while robbing the Haitian people of their dignity and initiative as human beings. To be "in the fire" is very Haitian; to be "not burning" is nothing but God's grace. As I think on these things, I'm reminded of the three Hebrew children, Hananiah (who was also called "Shadrach"), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego), who, for their faith and devotion, were thrown into a fiery furnace by order of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. This event, which is recorded in Daniel 3, occurred during the Babylonian Exile, when the Jews had been taken into exile by the Babylonians. It’s quite interesting to note that while some outside the furnace were burned, none of the Hebrew children were harmed. The reason? Because Jesus (the Son of Man [see Da 3:25]) was right there with them. Much hope can be derived from reading and meditating on such things.

*Home Fires Burning*

In my life, perhaps one of my greatest season of fire came with the suicide of my late wife, Brenda, on Monday, June 3, 2002. At the time of her passing, Brenda and I had been married for 10 years, 7 months, and 8 days. Her death, while I knew it to be almost inevitable, was devastating just the same.

Brenda suffered from the effects of an extremely difficult childhood. In fact, along with suffering great abuse at the hands of her adoptive family, she was trafficked sexually by her three older brothers, who used her to obtain drugs and alcohol, and she was raped a couple of times in her teens. While it’s probably needless for me to write such things, I will anyway: the violence, sexual assaults, and ritual abuse Brenda endured attacked her at the core of who she was; in many ways, those events murdered her little soul just as her life was beginning.

Brenda and I first met in March 1990. After dating for several months, we got engaged, and then on October 26, 1991, we married. During the initial weeks of our friendship, Brenda told me about many of the troubles she'd endured during those early years of her life. But it wasn't until after we'd been married for a few months that a more complete picture of what had happened (and of what was happening in the present) began to emerge. In summary, Brenda suffered from poly-fragmentation, an extremely rare form of a not-so-common illness called dissociative identity disorder (or, as it was once called, multiple personality disorder). Brenda struggled, too, with post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, anorexia, bulimia, cutting, and substance abuse. In 1985, Brenda committed her life to Jesus Christ, and, even though she found recovery from alcoholism through AA in 1986, she struggled off and on with nearly everything else until her death in 2002. As I wrote before, in many ways, things were over for her before they began. The losses she sustained throughout her life are unimaginable.

In December 1992, Brenda first told me of her battles with suicidal thoughts. I'll never forget her words that Christmas: "Dave...if ever I do end my life, I want you to know that it won't be because you weren't enough." Those words are still difficult for me to hear, even after so many years.

During our life together, Brenda taught school off and on, was a nanny for a time, and babysat countless kids. She was kind of like a pied-piper with kids. She loved them, and they just seemed to be drawn irresistibly to her. For years on most Saturday nights (usually about 40 or more per year), Brenda and I were in someone's home taking care of their kids. And there were a lot of kids. Through all of it, Brenda suffered greatly. And so did I. Even though Brenda appeared to have things together to many of those around her (due mostly to her "princess-like" persona, which she guarded fiercely), it was only an image. In fact, for Brenda, her day-to-day life played out a lot more like a movie that kept changing scripts mid-scene. How she was able to juggle such things, and deal with the fear and disjointedness such things created, I'll never know. In time, our marriage dissolved into a care-taker kind of relationship, where it seemed that a good part of my energies were spent just trying to help her make it from one day to the next. Through all this, I experienced great sadness, distress, and isolation. Things did, in a way, resurrect themselves for a brief time before she died. Perhaps, "resurrect” isn't the right word, because, through it all, Brenda and I loved each other very much (even during those times when, sadly, Brenda felt compelled to pursue relational and physical intimacies outside our life together). Though we didn't articulate it at the time, I think we both saw those last couple of years as a season of saying goodbye. As sweet as it was at times, I remember living with the nagging feeling that a great calamity still awaited us. Have you ever felt that way? As if you knew (somehow) the other shoe was about to drop but had no idea what it might be or when it might happen? I lived with such feelings for a good part of my time with Brenda, especially there at the end. Perhaps that's why now the practice of learning to stay with and find peace and enjoyment in the present moment, no matter how excruciating things might feel, has become so very precious to me.

All this reminds me a little of an ancient myth I once read about a man clinging to a vine on the side of a cliff. In the story, we're not told how long he'd been up there, only that, in the valley far below, a tiger waited to rip him apart while hundreds of feet above, a field mouse gnawed away steadily at the vine he was clinging to. In a way, all of us are like that dangling man: perched precariously above that which represents our sudden and immediate death all the while holding on for dear life to that which seems to be deteriorating before our eyes. Toward the end of the story, the man makes the decision to do his utmost to make the most of the time he has left. Accepting and, in a way, dismissing the gravity of his current predicaments, he begins to pay much closer attention to that which is around him. Looking over his shoulder, he notices, perhaps for the first time, just how beautiful the mountainous landscapes are that seem to stretch out endlessly in all directions. He also allows himself to enjoy the warmth of the sun as it, along with a drifting breeze, caresses his face. Taking a genuine interest, too, in his immediate surroundings, he notices what appears to be a small clump of strawberries growing out of a clef in the rock just a few yards from him. Pushing himself out and away from the cliff, he's able to swing in close enough to grab a strawberry and pop it right in his mouth. As he tastes the delicious fruit, his face envelopes a smile, and, just as he's about to reach out and grab another strawberry, the vine he's been clinging to gives way, causing him to plummet to his death.

What can we draw from such a story as this? That life is short and precarious? I suppose, but I don't think that's really the point at all. Why? Because most of us already know that part of the story (even though we might not like to admit it). I think the more perceptive message is this: life is, as Jesus might have said, a wind, and it blows where it chooses. "You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8, NRSV). Life can be neither controlled nor contained, only lived. Life, if it is to be experienced genuinely, can be lived only when one has reconciled with (and is no longer running from) one's current (or past) experience and where one wishes for nothing else but to cherish the wonder and extraordinary ordinariness of the present moment. Yes, the material parts of life are short and precarious, but, as some have said, life is a Dancing Breath, and it brings a rich bounty if you'll let it move you as it desires. The psalmist, in Ps 30:11-12, captures these feelings beautifully when he writes, "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever."

Life, my friends, can be experienced only in bite-sized slices. For lack of a better phrase, we call each slice "the present moment." In our material existence, all we have is right here and right now. Yes, there's "yesterday," but it exists only as a memory, as seen in the roots of who we are today. And, yes, there's "tomorrow," too, but tomorrow's even more ethereal than yesterday, for it exists only as a projected hope (or fear) of what might be. For me (actually, for all of us), all we have is right now. And it’s in this very moment that I want to enjoy my current experience completely, even if it's cold and rainy out. One day (and, most likely, not too long from now), my vine will give way, and my soul will be asked of me. When that time comes, I want to enjoy the moment and enjoy, too, the sensation of my final breath as I yield it back to God.

Okay, back to my story...

*The Other Shoe*

The other shoe fell in January 2001, when Brenda suffered a minor stroke. Over the next year or so, she suffered two more, and in March 2002, she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. I will never forget the day she called me on the phone, just moments after leaving her doctor's office, to tell me news of the diagnosis. (It was Brenda's primary care physician [who was also a dear friend of the family] who told her the diagnosis. He broke the news at Brenda's unrelenting insistence, which was a hallmark of her personality. This happened the day before Brenda and I were to meet together with Brenda's neurologist. Because of this, I was not with her when she first heard the news.) When Brenda called me, she was crying uncontrollably. It wrenches my heart today just thinking about it: her expressions of deep anguish and loss (once again). I left work that day without even telling anyone. Less than three months later, and Brenda was gone from this life.

Brenda was in therapy for most of the time we were married. She used to tell me, "Dave, I'm going to work really hard now so someday we can have a bright future together." To Brenda, I think the MS diagnosis seemed to rob her beforehand of the very future she was hoping for. And I could certainly understand why she might have felt the way she did.

In May 2002, Brenda attempted suicide (as she had several times before). But, as had also happened before, she didn't follow it all the way through. Three weeks later, after a session with her therapist, Brenda and I sat in her jeep and had what I would consider to be the most honest conversation we'd ever had with each other. It was one of those rare conversations where there were no secrets and nothing hidden to shield the other from anything. Brenda told me how much she loved me as well as how much pain she was in. Over the next three hours, she poured forth from the depths of her heart her feelings concerning her sufferings and how she really felt like she'd come to the end of her ability to cope with all she'd endured and lost. I told her I understood and that I would support whatever she decided. In doing this, I gave her the best gift I could: *permission*. Permission to end things on her own terms (should she decide to go that route); knowing that she was and had been loved; that she would be going home; and that at least one person had heard her pain, knew a little of what she'd endured, and watched her fight so valiantly for so long. Did I make the right decision? That's hard to say. Perhaps God will tell me someday. Or perhaps not. All I can say is I feel both comforted and guilty about it at the same time. Such are the ambiguities and paradoxes of life. A week to the day of our three-hour conversation, Brenda ended her life in the back seat of her jeep.

On that particular Monday night, I'd been at my pastor's house for a Dominican Republic Missions Trip dinner. When I got home, I found the following note on our kitchen counter: *D—Had to go do stuff. See you in a while. Love you—B*. Five minutes later, Brenda's therapist called me to tell me that a police officer was headed my way to talk with me about Brenda. My heart sank as Barb B told me how Brenda was somewhere in her jeep, that she'd taken all her meds, and that she was no longer answering her cell phone.

A minute or so after hanging up, I heard the doorbell ring. Rushing up the stairs, I opened the door to a Fairfax County Police Officer. After ushering him down the stairs, Officer K sat at my dining room table and talked with me for a few minutes about Brenda. In between his questions, he made two or three phone calls to get a search going for Brenda's jeep.

After Officer K left, I called my pastor, Father Jim P, the Rector of St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Reston, Virginia. After our phone call, Father Jim came to my home, and we talked for about an hour or so. His presence was a great comfort to me. During our conversation, I remember telling him Brenda was probably somewhere peaceful where no child would be able to see her. After Jim left (at around midnight), I went to bed, only to wake up at around 2am and begin searching for Brenda myself.

I looked for her for ten days. Repeatedly calling her work and cell phones (just to hear her voice), I did whatever I could to connect with her in some manner.

Fairfax County Homicide took the case on June 5th, a little less than two days following Brenda's “disappearance.” It felt strange giving them our family computer and letting them go through all the details of my life with Brenda. I suppose, with any missing persons case, family members are automatically scrutinized. They were, of course, just doing their jobs. Even though I harbor no bitterness, I never want to go through anything like that again. The local newspapers were not particularly helpful either as they got the story wrong, and, even after Brenda's body was found, reported that Brenda had shot herself in the head. Reston, Virginia, is a fairly small community. Many people, including a lot of kids, new and loved Brenda; now, on top of all I was feeling, I was having to stomach the fact that those who read the story were now carrying an image in their minds that the woman who used to teach and take care of their kids had shot herself in the head. Consequently (and, probably, for obvious reasons), it’s been seventeen years since I read a newspaper.

After searching for Brenda for a couple days, and especially after Homicide took the case, I began to feel I was no longer searching for Brenda, but was, instead, looking for a body. Needless to write, those ten days of searching were by far the most difficult and heart-wrenching of my life. Brenda was out there somewhere, and I wanted to find her, if only just to preserve her dignity and bring some degree of resolution to all I was feeling and experiencing.

In my search, I focused on residential areas during the day and business and commercial areas late at night. I figured residential areas would tend to clear out during the day and that, late at night, the same would be true of business and commercial areas. I enlisted the help of an army of friends to help me in my search. As I wrote above, Fairfax County Homicide conducted their own independent search, and I was in regular contact with them. Detective Tom F, the homicide detective I worked with, was fabulous. Until that point, I'd never known a homicide detective before, let alone, nearly become friends with one.

On Thursday night, June 13, 2002, a friend of mine found Brenda's jeep and, through the tinted windows, saw what appeared to be a body across the back seat. The next day, dental records confirmed the identity of the body: it had been Brenda's.

As things would have it, and unbeknownst to me, I actually drove right by Brenda's location at least twice in my search for her. She died within a quarter mile of the front door of our condo. The location she was in was surrounded by tall pines and overlooked a garden trellis. Her jeep sat up high and faced a western sky. I like to think she watched the sunset one last time before climbing into the back seat of her jeep. In God's providence, I never saw Brenda's body and, fortunately, don't carry those images with me. And even though I never really got the chance to say that final good-bye, I did see her jeep once before my insurance company "totaled" it (for reasons I probably don't need to explain).

A part of me died the night of Brenda's memorial service. Quite honestly, I don't think I've been the same since. How could something like all this not affect or change me? Perhaps even fundamentally?

I’m different today because of what I went through. In fact, the intensity of my many monastic-like approaches to life are a direct result of my responses to all that happened, before and after Brenda's death.

*The Oil of My Gladness*

Through everything, Jesus was My Constant. When things hurt so much I could hardly breathe, I found in Him the Sustaining Presence of He who Sees and Knows all intimately. For some, enduring such an extended period of burning can breed deep resentment and an iciness of soul (and I can certainly understand that); for others (and, by God's grace, I find myself within this group), it can create a broken-hearted-wholeness and a peculiar intimacy with God and with oneself that can be difficult to articulate. To know and experience God as a suffering God, who suffers with us in our pain, is not common. To write about it, and the great blessedness of it, is probably even less common. But I will write of it because I am blessed, and blessed in ways I never thought possible. In bottoming out (and that happened many times), I discovered something quite intriguing and comforting about the bottom: it's *Rock* solid. I know this is so because Jesus met me there. In hitting bottom, I discovered that Jesus, the Master of the Universe is not just the Rock of Ages but the Rock Bottom of All that Is and that none of us can descend below Him. I consider this one of my greatest discoveries. In my early years, I'd heard people speak of hitting "rock bottom." At the time, I had little idea of what they were talking about. I know now. Again, next to discovering Jesus Personally, discovering He’s present at the very bottom of life is probably my single greatest, first-hand discovery. As the psalmist wrote in Ps 139:8-10, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; *if I make my bed in the depths, you are there*. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” *(ialics* mine*)*.

Today, seventeen years later, I can write that I am by far the happiest, most grateful person I know of. I lay this, too, at the Feet of Jesus, a man of deep sorrows Himself (see Is 53:3): The God-man who anoints those who mourn with the oil of everlasting gladness (see Is 61:3, NASB). And that, my friends, is who Jesus has become for me: He is the Oil of My Gladness. May all honor and praise be His forever and ever. Amen.