



Strength to love, honor, and care

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One family walks through the dark valley of PTSD to hope and love.

Debbie Sprague

I was blessed to grow up in a loving, Christ-based, Lutheran home. My dream was to provide the same for my children. By 1990, my life was complete with a husband and two children. But my dreams began to crumble. My marriage ended, and I struggled to keep my children at our Lutheran school. With my parents' help and our commitment to providing a Christian education, they stayed.

In 1993, my ten-year-old son Aaron was diagnosed with cancer. Five months later, he was gone. He was without fear; his faith held strong to his final breath. My seven-year-old daughter Andrea served as a pillar of faith, explaining God's will to the children at school who had prayed so faithfully for Aaron's healing and then were crushed by his death.

In 2000, I met Randy, a fellow employee. It was love at first sight. He and Andrea also had an immediate connection. He accepted my invitation to join us at church and soon began to attend classes and was baptized and confirmed. Eight months later, we were married and looking forward to a wonderful Christ-centered life together.

But things began to crumble again. In 2004, Randy began screaming out in anger in Vietnamese. I would wake up to his punching and kicking me, spitting out profanity—words that I had never heard him use in his waking hours. He was always on edge, having angry

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outbursts for no apparent reason. That left Andrea and me trying to avoid doing anything that would trigger him, even though we had no idea what those “triggers” might be. With an increase in physical pain, Randy began to self-medicate with alcohol and prescription drugs. He became hyper-vigilant, roaming the house at all hours of the night with his gun nearby. I became more fearful of what he might do than of any intruder. Sleep deprivation took its toll on both of us.

More of the burden of everyday life was falling on me. I didn’t ask him to do more because I was afraid of what his reaction might be. My resentment and anger began to grow to a level that I had never experienced. He became numb and withdrawn and would go days without speaking to me. He lost interest in every aspect of our relationship. He avoided social activities and places with crowds and noise, so I had to go alone or not go at all. Loneliness and depression set in. I was also feeling guilty because all of this had to be my fault. And I should be able to fix it—if I could just be better or try harder.

We were blessed by a divine intervention, in the form of Randy’s chance parking lot meeting with a fellow Vietnam vet. They began to talk about their war experiences—experiences that Randy could share only with another vet. The vet told Randy, “Bro, you need help.” The next morning he walked Randy into the Veterans’ Service Office and introduced him by saying, “This vet needs some help.”

And he was right. Repercussions from Randy’s two tours in Vietnam 30 years ago had risen out of nowhere and now threatened to ruin our lives. Not only had he been diagnosed with complications from exposure to Agent Orange but also the invisible wounds of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

Many types of traumatic events can cause PTSD, including being in a war zone, even without being in direct combat; sexual or physical assault; serious accidents; natural disasters; and working as first responders like firefighters and police officers. Most people who go through a trauma have some symptoms at the beginning. It isn’t clear why some develop PTSD and others don’t. There are conflicting views on the existence of PTSD. Some cite evidence that it was present as far back as biblical times. Some deny that it exists at all.

Randy began treatment for his PTSD with medication and individual and group therapy. But things got worse. Just imagine 30 years of suppressed memories rising up like an angry volcano. We struggled. I struggled in silence because no one around me understood PTSD. When I shared that my husband had PTSD, I received blank stares and comments such as, “It’s just an excuse for bad behavior.”

One day when I was at my lowest of low, I confided in Randy that I didn’t really care about my life anymore, I just felt numb. He simply walked away. But the next day Randy said to me, “You need to find someone to help you, because I can’t.”

I saw two different therapists, who both diagnosed me with PTSD. They also both gave me the same *easy* answer: Get a divorce . . . just walk away.

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But that wasn't the answer I was seeking. I knew that stranger in my house was the man I fell in love with. Sometimes a glimpse of him would return. Besides, this was not his fault. This happened while he was serving our country, a mere boy at 19, experiencing the horrors of war.

So I walked away . . . from the therapists. I had experienced the destruction that divorce has on a family. I wasn't going to let that happen again. I had vowed to love and care for my husband in sickness and in health. With the Lord's help, I was going to honor my promise. God's gift of grace was the sacrifice and resurrection of my Savior, Jesus Christ. He had upheld me during past adversity. I trusted that the Lord would carry me through the darkness of PTSD.

I began praying for strength to be more understanding, patient, and compassionate to my husband. I also needed to honor the life that God has given me by caring for my own physical and emotional health, understanding that only by caring for myself would I have the strength to care for others. I prayed that I could accept that my life was never going to be the same as it was when Randy's and my love story began.

Randy has worked hard to get better and could not have done it without the Lord. Asking for forgiveness from those he hurt, prayer, worship, spiritual guidance, medication, group and individual therapy are all critical to his continued healing.

The Lord gave us both the strength to save our marriage from the perils of PTSD. In order to begin the work of healing it was necessary to bring the Lord into our marriage at a deeper level than we thought possible. As a result, we have created a peaceful daily existence and renewed hope for our future together. We have a stronger love and commitment toward each other and our faith.

I believe that God has designed my life with the pain and challenges that I have encountered for a purpose. He has given me the opportunity to tell our story so others can understand that PTSD suffered by our veterans affects their spouses and families. Equally important is helping spouses to cherish their needs for their own health and happiness so they can have the strength to love, honor, and care for their veteran in sickness . . . and so they can honor their marriage vows.

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