

The Community of Faith and Developing Resiliency

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“Dad, I have just been diagnosed with fourth stage bowel cancer that has compromised my lungs and liver.” While these words left me stunned and in a personal crisis of my own, my 31-year-old daughter Belinda J. (‘BJ’) Alder, who had just returned home from a mission assignment in Thailand, was unexpectedly confronted with a very uncertain future. The next two and a half years was a journey of great intensity, pain, suffering ... grace and hope. It is now over two years since I stood by her bedside as she took her last breath in this life. It has been a journey of immense pain and grief for me, my wife and two sons but I can at last write about this without tears blurring the screen as I type. However, it is not my journey that moves me to write these words but rather my daughter’s.

Her journey was one of great dignity. The comment made by my daughter-in-law, immediately on BJ’s passing, captures the essence of that journey:

BJ, you fought a brave fight. You’re a hero and an inspiration to everyone you’ve met. And you will continue to be. You went out with a smile on your face. Guess the view that was awaiting you is everything you imagined it to be. We miss you. We love you.

This sounds a little odd, but it was a privilege to witness that journey. Being privy to many of her private, as well as public moments, gave me opportunity to see BJ respond out of an established identity as a follower of Jesus. Being an active member in a community of faith positively influenced her ability to face intense medical challenges with hope and buoyancy born of grace. Several questions come to mind as I observed BJ’s responses and the obvious resource she found in that community of faith. What resources do communities of faith bring to these crises? How do we, as disciple makers and fellow sojourners, intentionally make a positive difference in the midst of these crises? What are the features of these resources that communities of faith are strategically placed to offer? This article explores these questions through the lens provided by McBride in “*Spiritual Crisis: surviving trauma of the soul*”¹ (Figure 1).

McBride’s Spiritual Crisis Pathway

McBride describes a spiritual crisis pathway that identifies “preventative and protective filters” in that pathway. Of the ten filters listed, support, connectedness, faith community, and positive principles and beliefs are features that appear to have immediate relevance to faith communities such as local congregations.

¹ J. LeBron McBride, *Spiritual Crisis: surviving trauma to the soul* (New York: Routledge Press, 2013).

The terms “preventative” and “protective” may be misleading if we suppose that these filters can assist in avoiding crises altogether. Perhaps they can be compared to a robust immune system, where the disease is not prevented as much as it is dealt with in a positive fashion. Similarly the preventative and protective function of McBride’s “filters” is to prepare people for crises and give resources for handling the crises as they arise.

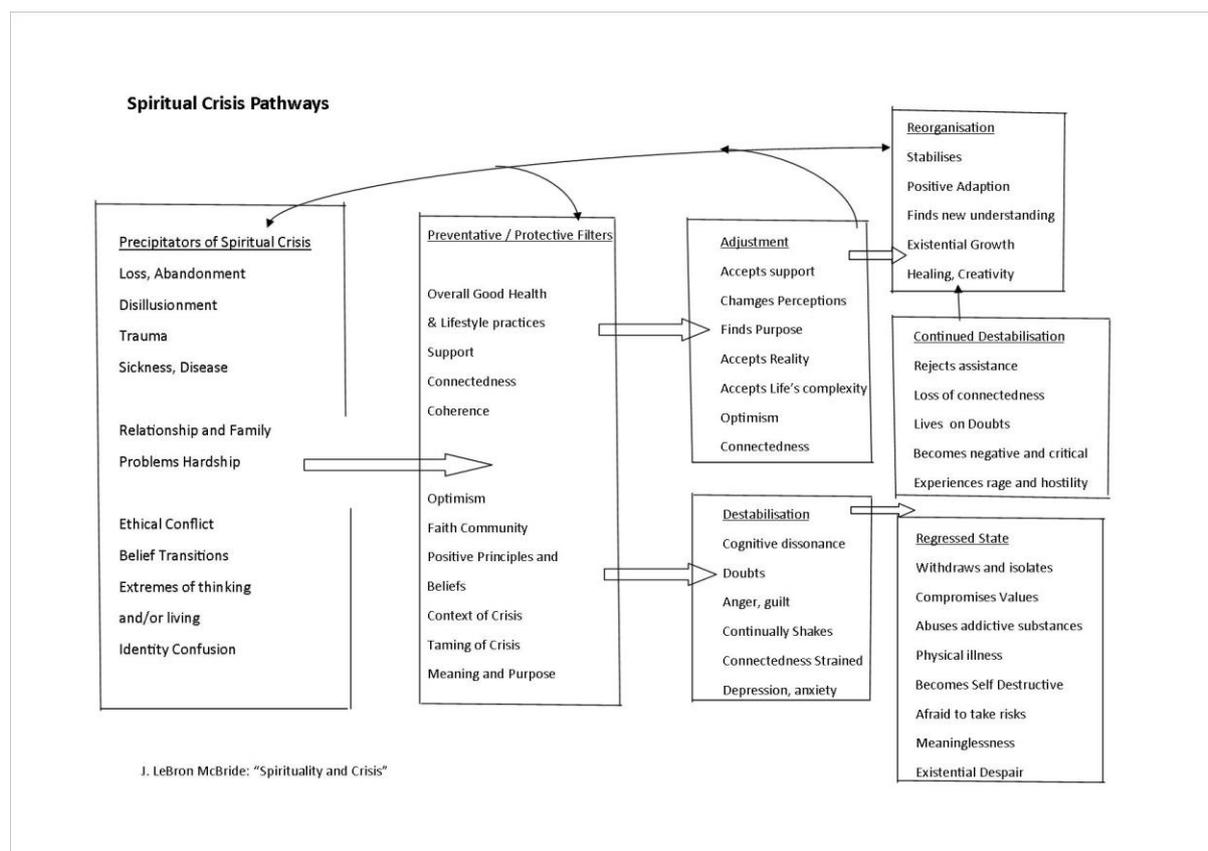


Figure 1: Adapted from McBride’s “Spiritual Crisis Pathways.”²

BJ’s Story

BJ dug deeply into these “protective filters” in her two and half year journey through cancer. The faith community was not only a preventative measure through crises, but also the context in which preventative measures were developed. I share BJ’s journey to illustrate a few of these measures and how these “protective filters” appeared to develop in her life.

BJ grew up in a pastor’s home and witnessed the highs and lows of ministry in a small church. This experience shaped her profoundly. As I reflect back on my wonderful days as pastor, I am humbled

² Ibid. Figure 1.2 Chapter 1.

to see the way God led our congregation, despite my bumbling efforts. It was not easy, and there were days when it would have been easier to walk away from what, I felt at the time, were a fractious and self-centred people. However, God was gracious and taught me to work with His agenda, not mine. I grew to love the people who served God with a passion that was inspiring.

Under the leadership of a gifted youth pastor, the youth of the church began to see that their activities were not about entertaining themselves, but rather in serving. Each month the youth made care calls on seniors in the community and served well - cleaning windows, cleaning house, taking away trash, etc. I spoke to the seniors about sharing their lives with young people and allowing the young people to serve in some small way. A service mentality was established within the DNA of the church youth. Sunday was a time of thanking God for each other and for acts of service or random acts of kindness. God was at work.

Once a quarter the youth had a "Friends Night". Youth, who regularly attended, were expected to bring along a friend that had not been to youth group before, and they did. This created a wonderful sense of excitement and pushed young people to invite their schoolmates to the youth night, which was designed as a fun social time. In this way, service and outreach were established as key components of the DNA in this group. Church was a fun place to be for a young person.

The church grew with a wide variety of ages (primarily senior citizens and high schoolers / young adults). It was an unlikely mix of people. Different cultures and languages were present in the congregation, and lunch after worship service each month created an atmosphere of community celebration. This was the context in which BJ was shaped as a Christian young person. In her journal, she wrote:

I am so grateful for a mentor who walked with me! He disciplined me...in the harvest...as we worked together...I was being prepared...I was being equipped. From my early youth days my mentor used me in the leadership of our youth group, actually developing a youth group. He taught me how to lead and how to run activities...until I could then do it myself. He took time out for me...took interest in what was going on in my life. We met regularly to catch up, something that continues to this day whenever we are in the same town! or through skype etc. He let me make mistakes and guided me through picking up pieces. He stood by me, he supported me. He saw the areas of leadership to develop in me and in time had me running my own discipleship groups; something which I have been able to develop everywhere I go. I would not be where I am today if it were not for my mentor, my discipler, my friend.³

These comments illustrate the preventative filters that were being built into BJ's life:

1. Intentionally disciplined by regular contact with a mentor

³ BJ's Thank You Journal 2011 (unpublished).

2. The discipleship was being done “in the harvest”, meaning, done while doing ministry. Discipleship was no theoretical discussion with some after thought about how it might be applied – there was “being” and “doing” with no separation of the two.
3. Development of trust – allowing BJ to make mistakes in a supportive environment.
4. The discipleship was holistic involving not just conversation about “spiritual” things but life in general.
5. Based on relationship – in other words, it was not a programme but about living life together.

As BJ developed her ministry skills and deepened her personal walk with the Lord, she let her light shine at High School. A Christian teacher noticed BJ and asked her to assist in starting an “Interschool Christian Fellowship” (ISCF). BJ was instrumental in making the small group a “cool” place for the students to be seen. These Christian young people courageously became a positive influence in a very secular, multi-cultural school. At a time when racial tension occasionally flared into violence between racial groups in the school ground, a positive, inclusive group of students praying for their school was both needed and refreshing. However, BJ did not just make friends with fellow Christians. She had a wide circle of non-Christian friends in the school with which she kept contact over the years after her high school experience, through email, Facebook, etc. Several travelled long distances to see her while she battled cancer, and she was an amazing witness of Christ’s grace to these friends.

Further features in the development of BJ’s “protective filters” included:

1. Started at an early age – her youth pastor began the discipleship process when BJ was an early teen
2. Regular and rich personal devotional life through reading of Scripture and music. While BJ was never rigid in her discipline of spending a few moments each day in Bible reading and prayer, she did so at some point each day. When friends visited her and stayed overnight (which was a frequent occurrence) she would encompass the visitor in her daily devotional exercises as naturally as preparing breakfast for them.
3. Loved people and “doing life” with people. She was very inclusive but did not expect everyone to respond the same way she did. During her two years of cancer treatment, she continued to disciple peers. The reflection of one of these young ladies reveals much of BJ’s approach learned as a teenager under the tutelage of her youth pastor:

Our little group was great to be a part of and the memories I hold from our time together, especially the time with BJ, I will hold very close. What I liked about our group was that it was relaxed and informative without making me feel like the “bible kindergartener” that I was. BJ had a way of explaining sections of the bible in my terms, relating it to everyday life. I always felt like an important part of the group and felt I could add to the conversations which I had never experienced in a bible study group before.

Our group focused a lot on the amazing women in the bible. Being a group of mothers, daughters, sisters and friends it was quite easy to discuss issues arising in our own lives and how to deal with them in God's way.

The meetings with the girls were a great way to regularly reflect on one's life, goals and values. It was a regular reality check and kept me grounded and really thinking about what is important to me and those in my life that are of value and importance. BJ always wrote down what we wanted to pray for, and what we gave thanks for, that week. Towards the end of BJ's battle we went over all of our prayers and how far we had all come! This was quite amazing.

Another defining moment in our group was during our last time as a group together. Most meetings everyone was very reluctant to speak up and pray for the group, everyone except BJ of course! But on our trip to "the Penthouse", BJ put it to us that we all pray for another person in the room (out loud) and tell a little of our journey towards becoming a Christian. These prayers were very deep and many tears were shed. It was very heartfelt to hear another person feel and care so much for another family/person and we could all really see how important each of us really were to each other. It was also comforting to know that everyone's journey was not as easy or straight forward as originally thought! It was a very REAL moment.⁴

4. Involved in several teen mission trips while she was in high school and university. These excursions pushed BJ out of her comfort zone and it appeared that she would discern God's call even more clearly in such times. It was never a self –focussed journey, but in the context of serving, sometimes in difficult and confronting situations, there developed a spiritual acuity that built strength and resilience.

The role of a community of faith and the connections found within it appear to be foundational to BJ's development of "preventative filters". The development of grace-filled communities that embrace the stranger and the disenfranchised, accommodate difference, enjoy living, and serve beyond their own boundaries appear to be a major role for local congregations. For example, the groups with which BJ was instrumental in developing, focussed on "doing life" rather than on some narrowly constructed focus on formalised teaching. Learning appeared to take place through the serendipitous moments of sharing together. The involvement of the immediate families of the young ladies also provided for a broader curriculum from what would ordinarily have been expected of a discipleship group. There was an air of wholesomeness and celebration as families got together. The children played together and the adults socialised in relaxed and very informal ways. Through it all, there was never any sense of "this is something that I have to do". Rather it was more "this is one of the fun things we do". BJ had a wonderful ability to live out her faith in the "ordinary" activities of life.

⁴ Melissa, one of 4 women in a discipleship group with BJ during BJ's battle with cancer, reflecting on her experiences with BJ, 2013 (unpublished).

Lessons Learned

So to return to one of my original questions: How do we, as disciple makers and fellow sojourners, intentionally make a positive difference in the midst of crises?

One cannot legislate relationship formation, nor is there a curriculum guaranteeing connectivity. However, a place, such as a local community of faith, where people gather and do their best to live authentically, both with each other and with God, opens up possibilities for resilience building relationships to emerge. I suggest that these relationships are the fabric of McBride's "preventative and protective filters". There is no distinction between the secular and the sacred. Rather, there is a holistic view that encompasses all of life, whatever it may throw at us.

Ammerman says:

Maintaining a spiritual sensibility requires a communitySeeing the world through a spiritual lens is something that is created in conversation – in places where people tell each other stories.

If seeing spirituality in those everyday places is a product of the place, the person, and the relationships, nurturing faith means paying attention to how people find friends and life partners and workmates with whom they share spiritual commonalities, how they are able to talk spiritually about what happens in their shared lives.⁵

For a local community of faith to be involved in what God is doing, the cultivation of spiritual conversations within inclusive life groups appears as a top priority. Creating communities with the opportunity to talk about life and spiritual issues; creating meaning out of unexpected events; to find opportunities to love and be loved in non-manipulative ways; embracing difference and an ever expanding circle of friends with which to do life; moving our spirituality out of a privatised, individualistically driven experience into a genuine community of fellow journeyers; these are features of a missionally engaged congregation that is building resiliency for the long haul.

But discipleship is more than conversation and connectivity. It is preparing people more adequately for living life in tune with Kingdom principles; learning to be Jesus in the flesh; becoming more Christ-like. This is best done in a context of a serving, inclusive community. Just as corporate worship is never meant to be about us and our needs, discipleship is about engaging in the mission of God and learning as we serve. It is not about developing a holy huddle for our own enjoyment. Genuine empowerment that allows the individual to learn by serving appears to be a needed feature of effective discipleship. Openness to learning through the positive and negative experiences saves the community of faith from mere tolerance of dysfunction, to challenging toward growth and change.

⁵ Nancy Ammerman, "Everyday life, people of faith, and lessons for those who seek to lead them," *Colloquium* 46, no. 1 (2014).

Conclusion

Our faith is nurtured as strong “preventive filters” are developed through the ministry of the community of faith. Or perhaps it is the other way around; strong “preventative filters” ensue from a nurtured faith. Whichever it is, an important vehicle for this is the personal relationships built through the discipleship process. This is a community endeavour. Stopping long enough to really “hear” from those around us requires a discipline to live somewhat counter-culturally. Walking slowly with people as we learn the art of participating in spiritual conversation, being part of a transformative community as we do life together, this is one of the most amazing privileges we have as followers of Jesus.