

This book is a brilliant, personal and ultimately hopeful journey through grief and beyond. While dealing with death, it is also about the loss, disappointment and suffering we all experience. Alain wrestles with the mystery of woundedness and the painful journey of being transformed by the love of God through suffering. If you don't want grief to define you forever, read this book.

PETER LYNAS

Northern Ireland Director, Evangelical Alliance

Luminous Dark is, quite simply, one of the most powerful books I have ever read. I couldn't put it down. This is a book to be read by all who have experienced suffering and grief – and all who will do so in the future. It brings together the experience of a young man who faces the sudden death of his 23-year-old wife; it is illustrated by his poetic and honest journaling; and it is deeply rooted in theology and modern culture.

If you are anything like me, you will probably weep your way through it. Whatever else, don't miss it! A beautifully written Christian book which should become a classic.

THE RT REVD HAROLD C MILLER

Church of Ireland Bishop of the Diocese of Down & Dromore

I had the painful privilege of walking with Alain through the valley of the shadow of death. It was hard watching him stare down his grief and vulnerably wrestle with God. As I read *Luminous Dark* I am thankful that he has told us what he saw down that tough dark road. This is a theologically thoughtful and pastorally powerful resource for us all – a sweet song of catharsis from a shattered soul.

STEVE STOCKMAN

*Minister of Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, Belfast;
Author of Walk on: The Spiritual Journey of U2*

Through opening up his story, Alain opens up how we see God himself. There is no gloss painted over pain but there is a beautiful melody building throughout. A painfully raw read at times, yet full of honest hope. Having now read it once I want to go back and read it again slowly, because this is a story that shines so much light on God; I need to listen again.

HELEN WARNOCK

Director of Belfast Bible College

Death, especially the death of a loved one, raises hard questions that touch on the very meaning of life. Alain faces these questions with honesty and realism. He not only describes the pain that lies in death's shadow but also how he encountered the Lord as his shepherd in helping him navigate the consequences of the loss of his beloved wife, Lindsay. Alain's book will help restore faith and confidence in God and bring light into dark places. I thoroughly recommend it.

JOHN LENNOX

*Christian Apologist, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics
at the University of Oxford, and Lindsay's uncle*

This raw and unflinching book urges those who love God, but who feel only confused betrayal in the face of loss, to press on into the Father's heart of love.

As we share with Alain the transformative experience of bereavement, he takes us on a journey through a valley of silent darkness to reach a place of unexpected revelation and paradoxical joy.

This book can also help our churches to discover a new and much-needed insight into grief and loss. It offers an interpretation and a vocabulary to reach those who are hurting, and promises the potential of God's rich and generous blessing on those who have been bereaved.

JANE OUNDJIAN

Founder of 'The Bereavement Journey' course, Holy Trinity, Brompton

Luminous Dark is an exceptional, inspiring, deeply courageous, and moving book. It is a meditation and spiritual response to the question 'What will you do with your pain?' In his book, Alain encourages us to embrace the pain of loss and offers one of the most sensitive and comprehensive books on the theology of grief in our time.

ANDREA WIGGLESWORTH, MSc

Counsellor, Psychotherapist and Life Coach

**LUMI
NOUS**

DARK

LUMI NOUS

ALAIN
EMERSON

DARK



Muddy
Pearl

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*Girl on the edge of the photograph
Who always seemed so distracted
The gift of your mischievousness
Was what left you so unaffected.*

*Girl on the edge of the photograph
Who could have been centre screen
The beauty about her beauty
Was she knew what beauty means.*

*Girl on the edge of the photograph
A heart with peripheral vision
The strength of your contrariness
Touched the corners of this world's derision.*

*Girl on the edge of the photograph
Who you could so easily miss
But not by those who watched you bow
To give their soul a kiss.*

For Arthur and Liz, Zoe, Sancha and Nik

'Having loved his own ... he loved them to the end.'

John 13:1

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FOREWORD

‘There are precious holy moments in the travail of a soul burning
with pain.’

I’m sitting beside Alain Emerson in his car on a wet, winter night outside Belfast’s famous Crown Liquor Saloon on Great Victoria Street. Rain is clattering on the roof. Bruce Springsteen is playing on the stereo. And Alain is showing me photographs of the beautiful Irish girl he married two years ago and buried just a few days before our meeting.

I know it was Springsteen because his classic rendition of ‘When the Saints’ takes me back there every time I hear it.

At first the photographs reveal a beautiful young woman, newly married, luminously alive. A flick of the wrist, another line of the song, and we are in Africa. Lindsay is surrounded by laughing kids and she is laughing too.

We are all travelling in the footsteps of those who’ve gone before,
and we’ll all be reunited, on a new and sunlit shore.

Here she is again, the same beautiful girl, but now she is sitting incongruously in a wheel chair.

And when the sun refuses to shine,
Lord, how I want to be in that number, when the saints
go marching in.

One way or another, I suppose the song was meant to be.
She’s losing her hair. She’s lying on clinical sheets.

And some say that this world of trouble, is the only world we’ll
ever see ...

Here come the pictures I've been dreading. She is gaunt and pale, hooked up to a cat's cradle of wires and intravenous drips. Alain falls silent. The windscreen wipers sigh.

But I'm waiting for that morning, when the new world is revealed.

'And this,' he says eventually, holding up the last, most frail photograph, nearly thrusting it in my face, 'this is the most beautiful of them all.' I almost believe him. There is a rage about him. A rage and a holiness.

I heard 'The Saints Go Marching In' on almost every page of this book, often pausing at particular paragraphs to dry my eyes; the tears that failed me back in Belfast, all those years ago.

It matters a great deal that it was more than a decade ago. No one should share such pain in public when their wounds are still raw. Alain has wisely waited to tell his tale, healing slowly with the help of friends and family, Bruce Springsteen and the odd, inevitable pint of Guinness too. The wisdom of this memoir flows in part, I think, from the wholeness of its author. *'The reason I write this book,'* he says, *'is not to simply tell you my story but to humbly encourage those of you facing what seems like insurmountable grief and irreversible anguish to lean into the pain. You may feel like you have lost your life, but you don't have to lose your soul.'*

Alain has learned to 'lean into the pain' of his own tragedy for sure. There are no magic pills on offer, no neat algorithm awaiting the final page. Instead you will find brutal honesty disguised in the most beautiful prose. And yet somehow, having suffered more than most young men of his age, Alain Emerson has turned his own 'irreversible anguish' into a message of defiant, resilient hope. He has retained his soul. In fact, he has probably catalyzed more concerted, united intercession in Ireland than any other member of his generation, in spite of – or perhaps, because of – his own tragic experiences of unanswered prayer.

It's another night at another bar, a year or so after Lindsay's death. 'You know that wee bit where Jesus promises us life to the full?' he asks and I nod, noticing the wry smile on Alain's face, wondering what's coming next.

'Well, has it ever occurred to you,' he says, with his head on one side, 'that when Jesus said "life to the full" he must surely have meant a life like his own?'

This doesn't seem particularly controversial or profound. I nod again and sip my drink.

'Life to the full means a life full of joy and miracles, like Jesus, right?' I try to smile encouragingly. Where is he going with this?

Alain looks me directly in the eyes. 'But wasn't the life of Christ marked by suffering as well as joy? Wouldn't a life like his also be full of struggles, disappointment and pain?'

Caught off guard, I put down my drink. How had I missed such an obvious and important insight all my life? How often had I preached on this particular promise, emphasizing only the fullness of joy that Jesus comes to bring, but never the pain.

I looked at Alain and realized, not for the first time, that his suffering had granted him wisdom and empathy well beyond his years. You'll find that his story effervesces with similar, simple, hard-won insights like these. I have absolutely no doubt, therefore, that it is destined to bring comfort to many who suffer their own great loss, and to help countless others find healing in the hurt and in the very darkest of nights the gentle light eternal.

Oh Lord how I want to be in that number,
When the saints go marching in.

PETE GREIG

24-7 Prayer International, Emmaus Rd, Guildford

INTRODUCTION: RUNNING IN THE DARK

These days I love running in the dark. On winter nights when the air is cold, I set off for a gentle gallop through the streets of my hometown village. Chasing the long shadows of the street lamps as the fog from my own breath dissolves on my perspiring face, I run over the motorway bridge, stealing away from the noise of the late-night commuting traffic, through the spookily serene railway crossing and eventually into the darkness of the countryside. The only thing lighting my path is the low glow of my phone, helping me navigate ankle-damaging potholes and providing a precautionary warning light for the occasional car venturing down these winding country roads. It is dark and still, dangerous and eerie, yet I am not scared.

I no longer fear the darkness.

Even though the night appears vacant, the darkness is filled with, dare I say it, 'presence'. This is the place where I do my best thinking these days. The night is flooded with mysterious luminosity. It is here my mind and soul are laid bare, the imposter is exposed and my true self revealed. And I rediscover how deeply known and loved I am.

It hasn't always been that way though.

Like most people I have lived my life scared of the dark, fear gripping hold of my senses on many occasions. From night-time walks as a child, up the creaking long corridor while the whole house was asleep, to wandering the ghostly back streets of townships in Soweto, searching for runaway street-kids as a gap-year volunteer. Darkness for me has been synonymous with fear, confusion and disorientation. It has both frightened and disconcerted me, sending shivers through my spine and causing my knees to buckle. As Barbara Brown Taylor describes:

“Darkness” is shorthand for anything that scares me – that I want no part of – either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out.¹

Yet something changed when I learned, or rather was forced, to stare darkness in the eye, when I was summoned to front it up square in the face. I discovered something liberating happens when we *acknowledge* the genuine fear we are experiencing from the darkness that surrounds us and yet *refuse* to let that fear have the last say. Further, the fear is disarmed when we discover there is a light concealed within that very darkness. When we apprehend a certain quality to darkness which draws us further in, beyond what normal feeling or thoughts can comprehend. This is a discovery that cannot simply be learned in abstraction, only *encountered* as we choose to *enter* in.

What do I mean? Let me try to explain.

In 2007, when I experienced the great loss of my life, I found myself for long days walking down dark trails of grief ending only in cul-de-sacs. This was due in equal measure to my inability to process my pain, and the incapacity and ignorance of the culture around me to accept the reality of loss and grief.

As a means of catharsis I began to write, journal and then, more publically, blog some of my thoughts online. Initially this was motivated simply by the fact that many of my friends were compassionately seeking to walk with me through dark and lonely days and as it was too painful to leave the house, the blog allowed me to thank them and inform their kind prayers for me. But I found the heart ponderings I was posting on my blog were gaining a much wider readership than my immediate friends and family. Hundreds of people seemed to be following my story. I wasn't particularly happy or sad about this. I just found it interesting and slightly embarrassing that a story so broken and thoroughly depressing was capturing people's attention. I was worried it came across as nihilistic and self-indulgent; there were far worse things happening in the world around us at the time, as there are now, but I was just trying to be true to what I was

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Canterbury Press (2014).

experiencing. People commented kindly, telling me they were praying for me and thinking about me. But then, as I continued to unravel the nature of my dark days in this blog form of processing, the comments people were leaving started to become more personal and vulnerable, then private emails appeared in my inbox and eventually a trickle of new acquaintances began to visit. They came to share with me their own broken stories: parents who had watched children die, family members of suicide victims, spouses who had lost lovers, singles who had never found soul-mates, friends who were watching companions deal with cancer diagnosis, invalids dealing with long term physical disabilities. Some of these stories people shared with me were recent and the pain was acute, others were dealing with a deeper pain and vacancy in their lives that had lingered for many years. The common denominator: all of them familiar with darkness.

I became aware that, like me, people did not know how to grieve, no one had taught them how to wrestle with pain, how to stare darkness in the eye, how to discover the permission to laugh again. Bewilderingly they were talking to me about it, a disillusioned twenty-seven-year-old widower, who most nights, wasn't sure if he was going to make it to the morning. All I was doing was being honest – describing how I *really* felt and figuring out as I journeyed through how to articulate a language for my soul. Not settling for trivialized answers or religious hyperbole, I simply said what I felt. More, I was trying to *pray* what I was experiencing. I didn't know if that was ok or not but like trying to submerge a beach-ball under water, it became almost impossible for me to hold my emotions down. The longer and more forcefully I tried to hold them down the more violently they burst up through me again. And because so much of my life was shaped in church and my relationship with God, he seemed like the most obvious person to express it all to. It was simply too painful, both physically and emotionally to let the darkness and agony settle inside me.

Ten years on, those days still haunt me. For some of you this is your current reality. For others, even in this introduction your heart has already been painfully jabbed as you recall those days of dense darkness that have never fully worked their way through you. My deepest hope and humble prayer is that this book will become a type

of soul companion. A resource wherein you will find language and liturgy that initially connects with the darkness in your heart, helping soothe the bleak loneliness which engulfs you in these days that often persist for many years. Then in time I hope you can trust me to help you believe there may be a certain luminosity laden in the darkness currently flooding your senses.

More generally, however, I hope this book can connect with all who read it, for, truthfully, the valley of the shadow of death, and the way of suffering, grief and loss, is a terrain we all must travel at some point in this life. Loss is woven into the fabric of life and the choice we all have to make is *how* we will travel through this valley when it is our turn to walk it: we *will* lose the one we loved most in life; we *will* do something we never thought we would do; the ideal we carried for years *will* get smashed up right in front of our face; we *will* enter the cloud of unknowing for a season where the heavens seem like brass. Love and loss, presence and absence, suffering and resurrection; these are not sets of opposites, rather they ebb and flow together in this current of life on earth. Darkness in this world is as real for most people as light, pain more common than wholeness, loneliness more felt than belonging. Unfortunately, our church environments have developed what Barbara Brown Taylor describes as a ‘full solar spirituality’² which only absorbs and reflects ‘the sunny side of faith’. As a result, we are forced to try and navigate the traumatic emotions of isolation, fear and anxiety. The days are dark, the nights are darker and we are left, often alone, to choose how we will respond.

My experience has taught me that most of us don’t know what to do. Of course, there is no formula. Bravely we may try to fight and grapple our way through the bleakness shrouding our new normal. But this is a lonely road, and for understandable reasons we often escape down any road that promises even a glimmer of light for respite, rather than pursuing the ‘true light’ which can only be discovered as we choose to completely *move through* that darkness. A ‘sunny spirituality’ is inadequate for such a journey. It does not possess the skills to operate in the dark.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*.

Surprisingly though, we are much better equipped to deal with the darkness than what we think. John O'Donohue, that beautiful modern day mystic, argues 'darkness is one of our closest companions'.³ We are, believe it or not, innately familiar with darkness. Creation itself was formed out of darkness, each one of us was formed in the darkness of the womb and, more trivially, we all love the idea of keeping a secret! For the Christian, this train of thought deepens when we reflect on how God incarnate was acquainted with grief and sorrow, hanging for three hours in total darkness. He 'made his bed in Sheol', shrouded in darkness in a guarded Roman tomb. Imagine, the Light of the World embodied the darkness of the world and of every human heart. His light and presence concealed in a dead body in a dark tomb. Yet even when it seemed the lights had completely gone out the story hadn't finished. The Light would have the last word. The resurrection reminds us that ultimately this light shines *in* the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it or comprehend it.

Not only are we image-bearers of the One who suffers loss with us, a non-forsaking companion for the dark days; we also have a forerunner who has moved through a mysterious and monumental intensity of darkness we cannot comprehend. In a sense God in Christ has lit up every dark place in our hearts with his Light because he has taken that darkness *into* himself and showered it with his glorious and victorious light. When we embrace the darkness wholeheartedly and pray it before his face, eventually an inextinguishable light will rise up within us as resurrection life.

The church fathers of the Christian tradition discovered this subversive truth hundreds of years ago, long before I did. Their writings and works helped me through my own journey and now serve as an inspiration for the title of this book – *Luminous Dark*. They had perceived through experience that true enlightenment for life and faith came through an embrace of the darkness and would go as far as to argue 'darkness is the cradle of growth'.

³ John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Hunger to Belong*, Bantam, new edition (2 November 2000).

Gregory of Nyssa, one such example, described in his work *The Life of Moses* the way pilgrims could fearlessly approach the darkness for they had come to realize that it was through these seasons they could apprehend a deeper truth, attain a richer wisdom and encounter a place where mere understanding does not reach.

Since Moses was alone, by having been stripped as it were of the people's fear, he boldly approached the very darkness itself and entered the invisible things where he was no longer seen by those watching. After he entered the inner sanctuary of the divine mystical doctrine, there, while not being seen, he was in company with the Invisible. He teaches, I think, by the things he did that the one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and – lifting up his own mind, as to a mountaintop, to the invisible and incomprehensible – believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach.⁴

Gregory of Nyssa and the wise sages of church history gave us a whole new level of understanding of the relationship between light and darkness in the Judeo-Christian faith. They released the wisdom and beauty contained in the first chapter of John's Gospel. 'The light shines *in* the darkness ...' The light shines *in*, not outside or into the darkness, but *in* the darkness. This light more than simply the natural light we see and experience, *inheres* the darkness and when it is illuminated we witness an infinitely more beautiful, translucent and transformational light that shatters the opaque circumstances of our lives.

Arguably no one said, or sang, this better than the Psalmist:

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,'
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

Psalm 139:11-12

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, HarperCollins (1 July 2008).

Some advice and caveats for the reader

The first few chapters of the book describe the great loss of my life and the subsequent days of survival. They are intense. This may be too much for some – I understand. This book may not be for you or may be for another time. But I wanted to really engage with people who *are* experiencing such stark hopelessness and what seems like unrelenting waves of traumatic grief. I felt strongly exercised to validate the extreme loneliness that is an all-consuming reality in such tragic days. We dare not trivialize or ignore. Firstly, because there is a holy power, a kind of sacred pathos released in the vulnerability of powerlessness that acknowledges the pain our fellow humanity has endured. Secondly in fully validating this pain there is something to discover, a treasure to mine if we can get to the bottom of the darkness.

Chapter three is a watershed moment. After describing my own tragic brokenness of belonging, I invite the reader to come on the journey through the luminous darkness, leaning into the pain, in the hope of transformation. The ensuing chapters (chapter four onwards) are therefore my attempt to do such describing the key stages of my luminous darkness.

The danger with highlighting one particular story in a book is that it can invalidate other people's stories. Please don't allow this to be the case but rather come with me on this journey carrying the personal disappointments and questions of your story with you for there is a sacredness to each one of our lives beyond which we can fully grasp. My hope for this book is that whatever chapter you find yourself in, in your own story of life, you will find threads of truth in my journey that will connect yours.

I've tried to be as true to myself as I can be. As you will have guessed already, I am a Christian and have been nurtured in that faith tradition all my life. My thoughts and worldviews are therefore shaped from an understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The reconstruction of my life in light of my loss provokes a challenge to the predisposed way many evangelical Christians understand some of our fundamental thinking. I hope you can hear my heart in this, as I reconstructed a completely shattered Biblical worldview. Equally if you

are not a Christian, or from a different tradition of faith, I hope you will not find this disengaging. Rather I would encourage you to stay curious with me as I try to genuinely wrestle myself into a reoriented faith space.

While this book focuses more internally on the wrestlings and wranglings of a fragile soul coming to terms with acute pain and loss I want to acknowledge the other practical implications associated with such difficult days. Many people, in addition to the agony of soul they have experienced, have complex day-to-day concerns to cope with such as finances, disabilities, marriage tensions and intense parenting stresses. It is beyond the purposes of this book to deal with these specifically but it would be insincere not to acknowledge how intrinsic these issues can be in the journey towards wholeness.

With all this said, let me begin by telling you my story.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LOSS

We all lose things in life. Every day. The car keys, the TV remote, or, worst of all, the mobile phone. Typically, this happens at the most inconvenient times – when we are already late for work, when the match is about to start, when we urgently need to make a phone call. Tensions escalate, tempers fray, we summon everyone within range to join the emergency search party. Eventually, the calmest person in the room finds the lost item, hands it back to us and there is a sense of relief. Life is ok again.

Sometimes we lose things that we never get back in this life. This is the worst kind of loss – the loss of a dream, the loss of innocence, the loss of someone we love. Things we had hoped to keep forever just slip away, and are gone. It may be sudden – a shocking blow that leaves us bewildered and broken. Or it may be that loss comes gradually, gnawing away at our souls, until one day we have to accept the brutal reality that our hope, our treasure, is gone. We are left to work out how to grieve our way through a future we had never planned. Our dreams are shattered, our ideals smashed, our hopes crushed. Our souls bleed pain and sorrow; our minds are tormented in confusion and doubt. This is where I found myself at the tender age of twenty-seven.

LINDSAY ANDERSON

The 8th June 2005 was the best day of my life. Lindsay Jane Anderson had just become Mrs Emerson. I felt like a king!

I had met Lindsay about four years before. It was pre-church worship practice when she arrived early with her dad, Arthur, and focusing

on the worship became suddenly very difficult. She was strikingly attractive, her movements carried mystery, and she had a natural confidence that made my insides do somersaults. I had never laid eyes on her before, never spoken to her, and yet it felt like I already knew her. As it turned out, my dad knew Arthur from way back, which I chose to believe was the providence of the Almighty, and the perfect opportunity to introduce ourselves. I played it as cool as I could, trying to match her much more natural poise. After a five-minute chat on the steps of the church that Sunday morning, I would think about Lindsay Jane Anderson every single day for the next six years.

At that time there was a bit of a buzz around the youth church that I was helping to lead – there was a sense of excitement, a lot of energy, people were encountering God and we looked forward to meeting together on Friday nights, and on Sundays. Lindsay was very much at the centre, with her natural confidence, but the thing I admired most was she was also always picking people up from around the edges.

After a year of occasional conversations and brief flirtations we finally had ‘the chat’. I plucked up the courage to ask her: ‘Would you kinda like, sorta like, maybe like, no worries if you don’t wanna like, go out with me?’ She said: ‘Sure, let’s see how it goes’. I was head over heels. Two years later, I proposed to her in front of all our closest friends. She said yes. I had found my soulmate and it was better than I ever imagined it could be.

Life with Lindsay was an adventure. She never seemed particularly conscious of her looks, but was often asked by hairstylists to be a model – which meant she got her hair cut for free, but also that she would turn up with all sorts of weird and wonderful hairstyles. I remember one Sunday, I had been asked to speak at a fairly traditional church in County Down. I came to pick her up, she got in the car with a nonchalant ‘hiya’ as if everything was normal. I did a double take, ‘Holy smoke that’s bright!’ Her hair was shocking crimson. I stopped worrying about my talk and began to worry what the congregation would make of us. I needn’t have – she had soon completely won them over. She had a way of connecting with people of all ages, a maturity way beyond her years.

Eighteen months later we were married. We were full of youthful idealism about the future and how we would serve God together. Inspired by Jesus' description of his Spirit being like the wind we vowed to live obediently and adventurously – blown by the Spirit of God wherever he would have us go.

We bought an apartment with one room downstairs and a bedroom upstairs. It was simple and small, yet the setting for a magical time, the start of our married life together. What we lacked in money and space we made up for in fun and creativity. Content in our mutual determination never to be defined by what we might own or acquire, we treated our home as a base from which to plan and anticipate the adventures that lay ahead.

AUNTIE JILL

One Wednesday night, about nine months into our marriage, Lindsay and I had just returned home from a night out when I received the most terrible phone call of my life. My auntie Jill had suddenly died. She had come home from a women's meeting in church, climbed into bed beside her husband and, as he asked her how the meeting had gone, literally died in his arms. Jill Emerson was my fun-loving, dream-catcher of an auntie who, alongside my uncle Phil, had pioneered and planted our church, Emmanuel, Lurgan. At the age of 48 and with no previous health problems, she was suddenly gone.

Phil and Jill were the closest of family and dearest of friends. Their four children matched up easily with my three sisters and me at similar ages, and we spent a good part of our lives together. Meals out, sleepovers, cinema trips and joint holidays had given us a legacy of beautiful memories.

Phil and Jill. The lilting rhyme of their names mirrored the deep affection they had for one another and the inseparable nature of their married life. They were the most reluctant, down-to-earth leaders you could find, who made themselves available to God to serve the most

broken of our local community. Their attitude of simple obedience has affected thousands of lives. The first ten years of our church family's life was a wild and exhilarating faith adventure. From a handful of people meeting in their home and spending most of their time around their table, eating and sharing life together, the church had grown to over 200, from all sorts of backgrounds. Yet they held to the same strong family values the church had been established on. When she died so unexpectedly, the impact on her immediate family, and the wider church family, was colossal.

When I received the call, I raced to the house. I will never forget Phil coming down the stairs from the bedroom where his wife's body lay lifeless, his face hidden in his hands, utterly broken. I couldn't believe what was happening. I had chatted with her, laughed with her, worked alongside her that very day.

Now she was dead.

My uncle Phil was one of my closest friends – we spent most days together dreaming and shaping the church we had given our lives to. Over the next couple of days, I watched him, the man who had been an inspiration to me for years, fall into a black hole of unimaginable pain. I was heartbroken at losing my wonderful auntie, who had left a lasting impression on my life. Yet it was the picture of Phil, my strong-spirited uncle and inspirational leader, reduced to a grieving and despairing child, that I will never forget. As the weeks unfolded I felt compassion well up inside me and a desire to be with him whenever I could. We walked together almost every day. 'Walking helps', Phil would say resting his hand delicately on his chest. 'If you sit down it hurts too much.' After a walk in the park we would go back to his house, I would make a cup of tea and sit at the table, while Phil just kept walking – round and round, lap after lap of the carpet in his kitchen. Sometimes he would say nothing, other times he would talk about his loss, his fears for the future, his concern for his four grown-up children who were coming to terms with losing their mother. This was the closest I had been to death and it was haunting to watch.

For me it was a stretching time. Helping to lead the church through this crisis wasn't a challenge I was expecting during my first year of marriage, but I was determined to respond well. Lindsay and

I sought to emulate the marriage of Phil and Jill. In these terrible circumstances we resolved to live out the vows we had committed to each other a year earlier – to be blown by the wind of God, wherever he wanted to take us. We stepped in to help in leadership, going to Albania to support a sister church six weeks after auntie Jill died, spending time training up their leaders; and then that summer we were off again to Uganda to lead a mission trip and pioneer new work there. The timing was not ideal, as I was reluctant to leave Phil, but with his blessing Lindsay and I set off, knowing that as we went we were fulfilling a shared dream.

AFRICA

Africa was our favourite continent: the history, people and culture had already gotten firmly under our skin even before we were engaged. During her gap year, Lindsay had spent two months in South Africa with Christian Aid and, later, another five weeks in Burkina Faso with Tearfund. She was deeply impacted by her experiences in Africa and her time there matured her passion for social justice in ways, it seemed, that would start to determine the direction of her life.

I, too, had fallen for Africa. At the age of nineteen I had spent a year in South Africa, working with street kids in a shelter on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Africa was where I found myself, and, more importantly, found God. I fell in love with this enchanting part of the world. Subsequent trips led me back to South Africa, Ghana and Uganda, all granting the most life-giving experiences and unforgettable memories. When we knew we would spend the rest of our lives together, it seemed only a matter of time before we would board a plane to Africa together.

On this trip we spent a month in Uganda, leading a team of forty people from our church to help with building projects for a local primary school in a remote village called Jandira. There we met Pastor Richard, and connected deeply and profoundly with him and the work

he had committed his life to. We came back changed, and dreaming of committing to this work longer term, perhaps one day helping to build a much-needed secondary school for the community.

THE LOSS

After we returned from Uganda, Lindsay was troubled by headaches. She was completing her International Studies degree but was struggling with pain and tiredness. After many appointments and prescriptions, Lindsay underwent a precautionary CT scan. As we were waiting for the results a consultant approached us and kindly asked us to come into his office. It was here that we heard the news. Lindsay had a 'growth' in her brain. Growth? I later learned that the term 'growth' is oncologists' code for brain tumour in the initial stage of breaking the news. I could feel my insides going numb. A routine hospital check-up on a lousy Monday afternoon had been interrupted by the soul-destroying news that would change our world. A sense of despair pervaded my being, and fear was crawling all over my skin. As we walked back through the hospital, a parallel world opened before me, making everything and everyone feel further away, and a surreal emptiness invaded my insides. I helped Lindsay into the car and for a moment I couldn't get in beside her. I called my dad in the car park and as he answered I began to weep. I had never been so scared.

We were asked to return to the hospital that night, the locus of our lives for the coming months. Four days later Lindsay was wheeled into theatre to have brain surgery. As I watched her disappear through the swinging hospital doors, my stomach began to churn with apprehension. I walked to the canteen to begin the long wait and in a kind of a role reversal, just six months after auntie Jill had died, Phil was there, waiting to sit through the long and tortuous hours with me.

Initially the prognosis was positive. Lindsay came through the operation well, and we were told it was a success – they had managed

to remove 95% of the tumour. Critically, however, it was too deep to remove all of it without damaging her other cognitive faculties. This was a grade 3 tumour, meaning there was a strong likelihood it could return. However, the surgeon told us he was pleased with the operation and that we should 'get on with living our lives and fulfilling our dreams'. He encouraged us to travel and have kids, and Lindsay and I, along with our incredibly supportive friends and families, dared to hope and believe that the tumour would shrink and Lindsay would be completely healed.

Within a month Lindsay looked as good as she always did and within two months her surgeon asked her to take part in an open lecture with other brain surgeons as a case study of a successful operation.

As we approached Christmas 2006, our initial hopes were dashed when Lindsay experienced two seizures in the space of a week. This prompted a second round of brain surgery, followed by six weeks of chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Slowly but surely Lindsay grew weaker. Clumps of hair started to fall out, her legs started to weaken and by March 2007 her speech started to go. At 27 years of age I found myself taking my wife for walks in a wheelchair, spoon-feeding her meals and taking her to the bathroom. I was aided by Lindsay's wonderful family and my own. Together we journeyed through Lindsay's sickness in love, carrying with us a tangible sense of peace. We tended to her needs and loved her with everything we had within us. Eventually Lindsay lost the ability to do anything for herself, but in spite of this she maintained the most profound sense of courage and dignity I have ever witnessed.

Carried by the prayers and faith of our church community and many others we continued to hope for Lindsay's recovery. Our family, friends and local church, who were still in a place of grief after the loss of Jill, rallied and prayed for Lindsay's life every night for many weeks. They gave everything they could. Their prayers and mine didn't seem to have an effect on Lindsay physically, but they did something profound in my soul. I am convinced these prayers galvanized a resolve and strength of covenantal love. In the midst of my brokenness I could feel my heart enlarging with an intensity of love and compassion for Lindsay that I never imagined was possible to feel for someone.

The extremes of emotion I was experiencing were beyond anything I had ever known, yet they were genuine. It seemed that the less beautiful she became outwardly the more her *real beauty* captivated my heart. I remember thinking I was too superficial to experience this depth and purity of love. Even though Lindsay couldn't physically offer me any of her love in those days I was deeply aware of all the ways she perfected and completed me. I couldn't escape the anguish of seeing my stunning wife reduced almost to a vegetative state, yet there was a beautiful, profound peace as I looked into her eyes. I had discovered a boundless reservoir of love deep within me for her.

Lindsay's speech deteriorated to the point where she could not string any words together, but she was able to gently sing. Often as I sat at her bedside stroking her hand or face she would slowly sing one line to me repeatedly – the chorus to Blur's hit single 'Tender'. It was the sweetest lullaby:

Oh my baby, oh my baby, all right, all right.¹

During her sickness she would sing often to me and when she lost the ability to sing, I followed her lead and sang it back to her.

The room Lindsay lay in as we cared for her was charged with a gentle but powerful peace. She loved to meditate on a line of scripture: 'he makes me to lie down in green pastures'. She would often gesture to me to read this to her. On one occasion one of the community nurses left her bedroom in tears. Visibly moved, she asked me earnestly: 'What's in there?' The nurse had been touched by the presence of God tenderly gracing Lindsay's room. The sick room had become a 'thin place', a sanctuary, a kind of prayer room – as one by one her brother and sisters, mum and dad, and close friends would keep watch, reading scripture, praying gentle prayers, singing lullabies.

But she wasn't getting better.

On our final check-up in hospital, after the chemotherapy and radiotherapy had been completed, the oncologist and head nurse asked me to meet them for a few moments alone. They had just assessed

¹ Blur, 'Tender'.

Lindsay's failing speech and continued debilitation. Mrs Harney, the oncologist, said to me: 'Alain, we need you to know Lindsay is really sick'. Looking back now it was the nicest possible way they could say: 'We don't think she is going to make it'. I thanked them for their loving concern and reminded them that we knew God was with us and we were still praying for a miracle. But it was in that moment and on that journey home from the hospital that the calm I had been carrying for the previous weeks began to crack. I didn't know what to do other than fast and pray. For thirteen days I touched no food and cried out to God with everything, every part of my being.

One morning during this fast I sat at Lindsay's bedside and became embroiled in the fiercest, most intense and heart-wrenching tug-of-war with God. There was nothing more I could do. If there is such a thing as a spiritual checklist for times like this (I don't believe there is) then I had ticked every box. I had done everything I could before God, yet she was slowly slipping away from me. I told God that I wasn't finished fighting, that I wasn't giving up, and pleaded with him not to take her. Yet somehow, someway, I knew I needed to recognize his overarching plan and sovereign will. My only comfort in this titanic tussle was the conviction that, as her Heavenly Father, he loved her more than I did. Deep down I knew this was true but I had to muster up every ounce of faith left in me to *choose* to believe it. I quickly squared with God that even though he might love her more than I did, and I had to trust him with this, it was no reason to take her from me. I told God that if I had to compete with him for the depth of love he had for Lindsay I was running him pretty close.

I had always found that writing a journal was helpful, and in this intense season of my life opportunities to pour out my heart and head on paper kept me sane. That terrible holy morning, I wrote my own Gethsemane prayer in my journal:

Father, this is ripping my heart apart. This is almost unbearable. I know your grace is and will be sufficient but I am pleading with you to speak the word, Lord ... Just looking at her surely is enough for you to speak

the word, to breathe that breath, God? I know you love her more than I do. I know and will believe you do ... I feel I have entered into something of the torment of that moment when Jesus uttered 'not my will but thine be done'. But unlike Jesus I am unsure of what happens next and so I will fight on for her life.

DEATH

A week later, on Sunday 22nd April 2007, 6.30am, I awoke in the bed beside Lins and watched her gasp for breath. I panicked as the period in between breaths became longer and longer. How could I help her? How could I help her breathe more normally? There was nothing I could do. When the nurse arrived, she examined Lindsay's body and turned to us with a sympathetic slow shake of the head. I will never forget the look on her face.

It was over and she was gone. She was only 23.

Lindsay was dead.

I clung to Lindsay's body, still warm, and wailed from my innermost depths.

She was gone and I still had so much love left to give her.

I had not imagined Lindsay would die. I just never thought it would happen. I wasn't prepared for it at all. I was engulfed with anguish and pain. Utter disbelief gave way to a daunting, haunting realization that she wasn't coming back. Ever. The harsh cruelty and absolute finality of her death clashed violently with every fibre of my being.

Well-wishers came to pay their respects and to mourn with me. I am indebted to so many of them, for I am not sure I could have got through without them.

The odd person lovingly whispered to me in their embrace: 'At least you know where she is now'. Firstly, when coming alongside

someone who is grieving, never start a sentence with ‘at least’; secondly, it is hard to find consolation in this well-intentioned statement. In pent up frustration I wanted to howl back: ‘No, I only know where she is NOT. She is NOT beside me in bed, she is NOT on the other end of the phone, she is NOT sitting beside me, she is NOT holding my hand’.

The assurance of Lindsay’s security in heaven didn’t soothe my mind the way I thought it should, such was the all-encompassing presence of her absence. I knew it was the great hope that I needed to cling to, but it just felt distant and abstract in those early days.

Our church family were warriors of love in these days as they rallied to pray for us, visit us, cook for us and weep with us. They had lost another leader, another friend and they still found a way to give Phil and me space to grieve yet also to grieve themselves. We tried our best to lead them through it, but they carried us and each other – they came together with one another in church, in their homes and in coffee shops – bearing one another’s burdens, drying one another’s tears, pulling each other through.

On the Friday night after Lindsay died – when they would have been meeting together and worshipping God together, the young people of Emmanuel came. There were around fifty or sixty of them – they parked a little way up the road from the house, gathered outside the front window for a moment, and lit candles. For a while they stood and prayed, and then in single file they walked around the house, with their candles, praying. Then they quietly went off to their cars and left. It was the perfect gesture of prayer, sympathy and respect, giving me space I needed but letting me know they were with me, praying.

Tuesday brought the funeral. I had stood at the front of our church less than two years before acknowledging and declaring my love to Lindsay in front of 200 people. Now I was standing at the same place in the same church in front of 1,000 people staring with disbelief at her

coffin. How did I get here? I had cried so many tears that by the time of the funeral it felt like I had nothing left. Instead I felt empty and numb, stumbling around drunk in my own grief.

Phil, who had endured the funeral of his own wife so recently, was now conducting the funeral for mine. My close friend and gifted writer, Steve Stockman, mentor to both Lindsay and me during our days at university, helped articulate the collective sense of injustice, confusion and grief amongst those gathered to mourn Lindsay's death.

Caught between the mystery

We come with faith

But the theology don't rhyme

We come with hope

But we are all out of time

We come with reason to believe

But reason isn't what it was

We come with words that fail us

But Jesus never does

Faces stained with the love we cherished

Our hearts broken into a million pieces

It's the hardest thing you can ever do

Give your love into the arms of Jesus

And I know today Lindsay is singing

But it don't make this anymore right

To be caught between the mystery of darkness

And the mystery of God's good light.

After the graveside service, hundreds of people came back to the church to offer their love, comfort and support. Each one represented a different aspect of Lindsay's life and our lives together. My tears flowed in one wave of emotion after another. She was not just my wife, but a daughter, a sister, a niece, a cousin, an influencer, an encourager, a team member, a friend.

After the funeral we all went back to Lindsay's parents' house. Lindsay's dad poured me a glass of red wine to help me settle. While I

sipped it I observed how Lindsay's family and mine were as united in our grief as we had been in our love for her during her sickness. It was very special, but then the realisation hit me – the one who had tied our families together was gone. The reason I had come to love her mother and father, her brother and sisters as my own, was gone. Would our relationship change? In the back of my mind a fear was developing: *everything* would change. Everything.

ALONE

Exhausted and emotionally spent, I fell into bed, a single bed. Though we hadn't shared a bed for weeks during Lindsay's sickness she was still beside me; her bodily presence within touching distance. Getting into bed on my own was a cruel reality and it carried with it a profound loneliness. I took her journal to bed with me that night, carefully reading the personal things she had written about me, her sickness and her conversations with God. I read the text messages she had sent me over the previous months that I had made sure were saved in my phone. These words were all I had left of her. As I poured over them, I longed for an apparition of her, something to help me 'feel' her close. If I could I would have gathered up all her words in her journal and swallowed them just to know that she was still part of me, still inside me. Her words brought a semblance of her to me and led me to instinctively reach out for her hand, but it wasn't there.

I was on my own.

Except I wasn't on my own.

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

Psalm 139:8

I couldn't feel God and there was nothing I wanted to say to him at this moment, but instinctively, even in my own living hell, I knew he was there. God was there. I believed enough in what I had preached for years to know he was there, silent and watching. I didn't know what to

say to him but it felt like I needed to say something. And so I prayed, or at least I wrote my thoughts to God, as an attempt to pray. I was desperately confused that my Father had let this happen. I had known him as my Father for most of my life and so, more out of habit than desire, I still addressed him as Father and poured out these words on a page.

Father, today I buried my beautiful Lins ... I am now a broken man. I do not want to go on without her. I miss her too much. I miss her hand touching mine, and my feet rubbing hers. She was 'my' Lins ... It hurts like hell. I cannot understand why you took her. I cannot and will not forget ... What will I do? Where will I go? Jesus help me. Help me to let you into my pain. Father, I love you but I can't see you or feel like I can hold you. Help me to trust you are holding me.
