

Find Beauty in the Storm

REX E. AND JANET G. LEE

Janet: We welcome you back to a new semester and a new year. For us, as for many of you, last semester was a first time BYU experience. And we really loved it. Over the years, Rex and I have shared many things, but since his training is in law and mine in education, we have never shared a job. Now, for the first time, we are even sharing that, and it has been one of many unanticipated joys that we have experienced over the last six months.

Rex: It reminds me of something I think Willie Mays said right after he started playing professional baseball: “I can’t believe they pay me for doing something that’s so much fun.” Maybe I shouldn’t describe a job that is so demanding as fun, and in some respects it isn’t, but on balance I agree with Janet; I’ve never done anything that I have enjoyed more.

Janet: Today we want to tell you a story. In a very real sense, it is a love story—our love story. We want to discuss with you some of the things that we learned, together, from the most trying and unpleasant experience that either of us has ever had, our experience with cancer. Rex made a brief allusion to it in his devotional talk last fall, and several news commentators have reported on some aspects of that experience. But we have never publicly given our

own account of what happened and what we learned during that time. Some aspects of it are not easy for us to talk about. But we have decided that we want to tell that story. We want to do it only once, and you are the right audience. We really do feel a close identification with you. To be sure, we do not know each of you personally, but we have felt the warmth of your spirit and your sustaining influence and interest as we have taken on our new responsibilities.

Rex: We recognize we are not the only ones who have suffered adversity. Many of you, though much younger, have already endured trials at least as great, and in some cases greater, than the one we went through two years ago. But there are lessons we can learn from adversity, and we can all learn by sharing these lessons with each other.

Janet: The spring of 1987 was probably the happiest and certainly the most prosperous time of our marriage. We had moved back to Provo from Washington, D.C. Rex loved his work, both teaching at the law school and

Rex E. Lee was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 23 January 1990.

arguing Supreme Court cases. My life was easier and more pleasant than it had been in years. All seven of our children were doing well and living in Provo. We had our daughter's wedding in April and were looking forward to our son's marriage in June.

Rex: On May 18 I wrote in my journal, "Life is interesting, enjoyable, and busy. I cannot imagine any combination of activities and circumstances that could make me as happy right now as I am with the combination I have. I love living in Provo, being a bishop, being on the BYU law faculty, being a Sidley & Austin partner who does mostly Supreme Court work, and married to Janet with whom I have seven wonderful children. This isn't just a Pollyanna statement. Life could not be better."

Janet: My journal entry at about the same time was: "Washington was wonderful, but it's great to be back in Provo. Our lives have never been busier, but also never happier. A day never goes by without realizing how very blessed we are. Life is as close to perfection as it can get in this life. It makes me uneasy. I feel there must be a challenge ahead. I know the cycle well. Each time our lives become too easy, it is time to grow again."

Rex: And then came the rapid-fire events of the morning of Monday, June 22. For several weeks I'd had a pain in my back, which over the weekend had become unbearable. My friend, jogging partner, and personal physician, Lyman Moody, wanted to run some tests at the hospital, which had to be done very early in the morning because by 10 a.m. we had to leave for our son's wedding reception in Boise. An X ray was followed by a CAT scan, and as I came out of that, I heard Lyman say to another doctor over the phone: "Then they are definitely destructive lesions."

Destructive lesions? I'd never heard that phrase before, but my friend confirmed my worst suspicions: I had cancer.

Janet: I was just hanging up the telephone when Rex opened the door, calling my name.

"Do you know?" he asked. Holding back tears, I whispered yes. Although his pain was severe, Rex spent the next several hours writing a legal brief and making financial calculations for the survival of his young family without him while I drove silently to Boise in my own world of pain. Both of us thought we were spending our last summer together.

In my journal, I described the rest of that week—after we returned from Boise—as follows: "The past several days have been a blur—tests and more tests, each confirming the diagnosis: Cancer! Lymphoma! T-cell immunoblastic lymphoma, in the final stage! All such ugly, terrible, ruthless words. I wish we could run away, but where can we run? There is no way to run away from truth—from the awful facts. In a few short days, my beautiful, wonderful life has been shattered, and I am terrified!"

It was also during that week that we made the very difficult decision about where to take the treatments. Thanks to some unsolicited efforts by one of Rex's law partners, we found that he was entitled to full, all-expense-paid treatment at one of the nation's premier cancer treatment centers' the National Cancer Institute, which is part of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. It was not an easy decision. We had the highest confidence in our local doctors, and it would have been easier to stay here in our own home with our own family. But Washington was also our home—we had moved from there only ten months earlier.

The irony was that though I had spent seven years in government service, it was not that service that entitled me to free treatment at NIH, but rather the fact that I had one of the kinds of cancer that NIH was studying at the time. So, it's not whom you know but what kind of cancer you have.

For exactly four months, July through October 1987, my twenty-four-hour-a-day home was the NIH hospital, where I

underwent the most intense dosages of chemotherapy and radiation that in the opinion of my doctors my body could absorb and still survive. My principal physician, Dr. Richard Rosenberg, told me that what they were doing was bringing my body just as close to death as they could without pushing me over the line. And then they hoped I would be able to make it back.

In short, those were not recreational drugs they were giving me, and I've never been so sick or so debilitated in my whole life. But even in those four months some things happened that were among the most memorable and most pleasing of our lives.

Janet: Among them was the realization of what dear friends we have, how much they mean to us, and how much they truly care for us. For example, special fasts were held in the wards of some of our college friends, many of whom resided thousands of miles away. The entire stake where Rex grew up in Arizona had a daylong fast, as did our home stake in Provo. Our ward had several. The mother of a long-time colleague at the Department of Justice persuaded her Protestant congregation to do the same. Rex's mother, brothers, aunts, uncles, countless cousins, and our own children submitted to blood tests in an effort to find a possible donor for a bone marrow transplant. Rex wanted very much to remain a bishop; this was made possible because of extra-mile efforts by his two counselors. Both our stake president and Rex's father gave him blessings, assuring him without qualification that his time had not come, that the Lord had other things for him to do in this life.

Our Utah and Virginia friends helped with our children, giving untold hours of loving service. Hundreds of cards and letters were sent, wishing us well and expressing love and cheer. The sisters in our Provo ward made a beautiful quilt bearing the names of all the families in our ward. It is displayed in our home and will

always be cherished for its excellence in workmanship and its symbol of love.

Several very helpful insights were contained in letters we received. My sister Lois encouraged me to find beauty in the storm. She reminded me of a time as children when we feared the dark clouds, explosive thunder, and rain slamming against our windows. As the storm passed, however, a contrasting cleansing calm settled and the sun shown again, now clearer and brighter than before. The next time the storm clouds gathered, we were not afraid. "Remember, dear sister," she said, "the storm exposes some surprise jewels of insight and compassion for others as well as individualized lessons borne of sacrifice rendered all the dearer. Find beauty in your storm." That metaphor seemed to summarize our whole experience and helped me find something beautiful within my darkest days.

Our good friend Larry Wimmer, who had recently gone through a similar experience with his wife Louise, sent us a piece he had written entitled "When Someone You Love Has Cancer." This thought from his essay seemed especially pertinent: "Commonly, it is believed that there are winners and losers in the battle against cancer. Louise eventually died of her disease, but she did not lose. In life and in death, Louise was a winner who taught us how to live, how to suffer if that be our lot, and eventually how to die."

But the most focused and the most heart-warming of all the efforts came from our immediate family. Remember that while we were in Bethesda, the children were in Provo, and four were still living at home. The three married couples helped with the younger ones. When school started, our youngest came back to live with me, and one of our newly married couples moved into our home, taking over everything from laundry to parent-teacher conferences while carrying full schedules at BYU. Each child did his or her part as they pulled together to make life work.

Rex: One day in August, our home teacher in Provo called and asked how long we would be in Bethesda. I told him it certainly would be several months and might be as long as Christmas. He said something to the effect that that was too long to be without our children. The next thing we knew he had arranged to fly all seven of them back to see us. His plane and pilot waited in Washington for several days while the children visited with us. For those of you who are trying to think of something nice to do for your home teaching families, you might keep that one in mind.

Janet: One of the most touching personal incidents involved one of the nurses, Juildene Ford. Probably the most serious continuous threat was infection because the chemotherapy almost destroyed Rex's immune system, which was already dangerously low long before he had cancer. I called the hospital once in the early morning hours when I knew he had been running a fever that the antibiotics had not been able to control. Ms. Ford responded: "He's going to be okay now. Let me tell you what happened. During the night when his fever continued to climb, I went into the nurse's station and prayed, 'Lord, this is a good man. Let him live.' After only about twenty minutes I went back in his room to take his vital signs. His fever had begun its decline, and now it is almost normal." I could barely pronounce a choked-up thank you. I hung up the phone and cried with relief.

Rex: I have often wondered if Ms. Ford—for whom I developed a great fondness—saved my life that night. Probably no more so than the hundreds of others in LDS or other congregations across the country who were praying for me. But my doctors—who may or may not have had any religious convictions—were as convinced as I am that those kinds of things really do make a difference. Their explanation was different from the one you or I would have given, but the result was the same.

Janet: There was one particularly pointed illustration of that fact. In November, after Rex had left the hospital but was still spending most of each day there as an outpatient, one of the greatest concerns was his extremely low platelet count, which endured for weeks. One Sunday Rex asked permission to go to church, a luxury he had not experienced for months. Dr. Rosenberg granted permission on the condition that he have a blood test first and then call from the chapel two hours later when the results were in to determine if he would have to return to the hospital for a platelet transfusion. Rex made the call and learned that his platelet count had more than tripled. The next Sunday when Rex was given permission to leave for a while and asked for instructions, Dr. Rosenberg said, "I have only one: Go to church."

Rex: We learned so many things during those months and also during the more than two years that have intervened. You probably won't want to consider cancer, chemotherapy, and radiation as a kind of academic steroid. But in my case, at least, they enhanced my capacity to gain knowledge. In the time remaining, we would like to tell you of just three of the many things we learned.

First, one of the enduring questions coming out of this experience has been, and continues to be, why me? Actually, included within that simple little two-word question are two sub-parts. The first is, Why was I the one who got cancer? That one, interestingly enough, was never one I asked myself. But many of my friends did ask it, some of them with a tinge of resentment, and some with more than just a tinge. The second subpart of the "why me" question is, Why did I survive, when others, every bit as worthy, every bit as needed by their families, and for whom just as many family and friends prayed just as fervently, are not alive today? That second question is the one that I asked.

Janet: With regard to the first question, Why did Rex get cancer, we found our friends' comments were based on two quite opposite premises. The first, and probably the more common, was that bad things—or at least really terrible things like cancer—just shouldn't happen to good people. That is a notion that has very ancient roots.

Rex: Consider Job. His friends had basically the same notion as our friends had, except they were more blunt and less charitable in the way they expressed it. In their view, his terrible illnesses were a manifestation of his wickedness. Some of our friends were more charitable toward me, but the premise was the same. Similarly, the Savior was asked, concerning a blind man, "Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).

I received a card from a longtime friend at the Justice Department with whom I have carried on a longstanding and good-natured banter about the net value of my Mormon lifestyle. His card contained a six-word variation on this basic theme that some have held from Job's day to ours. His card said, "Well, so much for clean living."

Janet: The other assumption, made by another group of friends, was quite the opposite from the first. In their view, Rex's cancer was due to his righteousness, rather than the lack thereof. He was being tested because he was so valiant.

Rex: It reminded me of Elder Dallin Oaks' story about the man who was being ridden out of town on a rail and commented that if it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon walk.

For me, the answer to the first aspect of this "why me" question seems fairly clear. I got cancer not because I was particularly wicked or because I was particularly righteous. The Savior himself made that clear in his answer to the question about the blind man. The Savior explained, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should

be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). We believe that what this and other scriptures teach is that the plan under which we are here necessarily assumes that we are on our own as to many matters, and one of those is susceptibility to serious illness or other disasters. If our Heavenly Father intervened to spare the really good ones from those kinds of experiences, much of the effect of this life's developmental and testing process would be blunted. If it were readily and objectively determinable that living a certain kind of life—either good or evil—in effect immunized a person from many of life's crises, it would be much easier to persuade people to live such a life. As it is, the case must be made exclusively on the merits of living a good life.

What about the second question, not the one my friends asked but the one that I asked myself: Why didn't I die two years ago? Here again, my friends—this time by the trainload—have been willing to supply the answer. My life was preserved, they say, because there were important things for me to do here, specifically, to fill the position that entitles me to be speaking before you on this occasion. I think in her heart that is what Janet believes.

I respect that view. I acknowledge that it may be correct. I am reluctant to announce unequivocally that it is, however, for three reasons. First, it seems inappropriate and immodest for me to take that view. Second, every argument—and I mean *every* argument, including the one that the Lord needed a BYU president to succeed Jeff Holland—that could be made as to why I ought to be left on this earth can also be made for my friend Terry Crapo, whose cancer took his life almost eight years ago. And finally, the only thing that is really certain is that we just don't know why some people recover from serious illness while others, with the same illness, the same worthiness, and the same faith and prayers, do not. Both the scriptures and my own personal experiences and observations make it very clear that

formal, extraordinary efforts (principally fasting and prayer) to invoke divine intervention on behalf of loved ones are proper, should be undertaken, and frequently bear fruit. But for the same reasons already explained in connection with why some of us acquire these afflictions in the first place, we cannot be assured this will always be the case. Otherwise, two of the fundamental premises of this existence—the need for independent earthly experiences and the need to be tested—would be frustrated.

What I do know is that I am alive, able to live outside a hospital, away from an I.V. pole, to work in a job that I love, to jog, and to live with a family that I love and particularly with a wife who during less happy times gave me a new insight into what love really means. Far more important than knowing why this recovery happened is taking full advantage of the fact that it has, in fulfillment of the most fervent prayers that I have ever offered.

Janet: Through all of this, I learned how to really pray. Now, like most of you I had been praying since I was two or three and through the years had learned the fundamentals of expressing gratitude for blessings received as well as asking for what was needed. There had been times when I not only prayed with real intent but had listened carefully for answers that gave new direction to my life or helped me know I was on the right path. Now, for some reason, faced with a frightening ordeal, I forgot much of what I had learned and became a child again. During those first few days, as I look back now, I must have sounded like a two-year-old, demanding and insisting that I have my way. “Please, Heavenly Father,” I would beg over and over, “make him well.” I *had* to pray. I knew nothing else to do. No one on this earth could help me. But such a prayer did not offer the healing balm that I needed for my wounded spirit. Prayer had always brought relief, but there was no peace for my soul.

Soon, without realizing it, my prayers took on another focus. I began to instruct, reason, even bargain with the Lord. “Surely,” I would plead, “there are things on this earth for him to do. He is still useful here. Send him anywhere, ask him to do anything, and I will be at his side helping him. Take away everything we own, but please leave him here. Canst thou see how much I need him, how much I love him? Please let him live.” Again peace did not come.

Then one day, after I had been fasting, I went into a wooded area across from the hospital. I knew many others had been fasting, too, and I felt strengthened as I found a quiet place to pray. I don’t know why, but for the first time since Rex’s diagnosis my prayer was significantly different. “If it be thy will,” I began, “let Rex recover from his cancer. Thou knowest the desires of my heart, but I recognize that I do not understand all things. Please strengthen me to meet the challenges ahead, and calm my troubled heart.” Finally, peace came.

This same type of prayer became my greatest source of strength during the ensuing months. Sometimes I would awaken in the night frightened and alone, in need of help. Although Rex had been told in blessings that his time had not come, reality seemed to indicate otherwise. It was at these times—when I could not shut out the doctors’ diagnosis—that I would fall on my knees in prayer, asking for the strength and peace that would always follow. I realized more fully than ever before that changing the circumstances is not always an option, but being given the strength to deal with what we are facing is the greatest blessing of all.

Scriptures I had known and loved for years took on new meaning. Certain passages seemed to be speaking directly to me and would be recalled when I needed them. “Be of good cheer,” I would remember from the Doctrine and Covenants, “for I am in your midst, and I have not forsaken you” (D&C 61:36).

I used to think that faith in God came in the form of feeling certain that life would be as I wanted it to be. I have grown to understand that to have ultimate faith in God is to know he is with us and will give us unfailing strength to help us through life's challenges. My greatest strength came not in knowing for a surety that Rex's cancer would be cured forever but in putting aside anxious thoughts as my faith in God matured.

Rex: The final thing we learned that we want to talk about today is something that each of us may describe in different words, but I will call it the real meaning of love. Like many of you, Janet and I first fell in love when we were students at BYU. Over the years, our love matured. But my most profound insight into the meaning of love developed two years ago in the 3-B-South wing of the NIH hospital.

I have concluded that we achieve the ultimate in love for someone else when that other person's welfare, happiness, and sometimes even survival are in every respect just as important to us as our own. The Savior told us that the greatest commandments are to love our Heavenly Father and to love other people as ourselves. He was the only person who ever attained that measure of love for all people, and that is why he was willing to do what he did for us. For most of us, we certainly care for other people, and the level of our concern and affection varies from person to person. But how many people do you know for whom you can literally say that you care just as much about them as you do about yourself—that their welfare and happiness are truly as important as your own? In the summer and fall of 1987 it became very apparent to me that I am the recipient of the fullest possible measure of love from at least one person.

Those of you who have spent any time in a hospital know how much fun it is. During those four months, July through October, I had no choice. I had to stay there. But day after day, Janet was there also, not just part of the time,

not just in the morning or the afternoon, but all day. I would tell her, "Look, I can't leave this place. But you can. I'll be fine without you for a morning, an afternoon, or even a day. Get out of here and preserve your own sanity. Go see your friends. Go sightseeing. Go to the park. Go anywhere. Certainly I would if I could." And friends would call, inviting her to go places. She usually found ways to turn them down. Occasionally she went, at their insistence and mine. When she got back, she would invariably tell me she had felt uncomfortable all the time she was away.

At first I thought that was positively weird. And then I began to realize: This was no put-on. She wasn't just trying to make me feel good. As astounding as it was to me, Janet really preferred to be there in that miserable hospital with me. My life, and every aspect of my welfare and happiness, were just as important to her as they were to me. And that, my friends, is love. It is also a part of our experience that I will never forget.

Janet: Watching someone suffer, and helping in the care of a possibly terminally ill loved one, had been one of my greatest fears. How could I ever give care and love under those circumstances and not fall apart emotionally? I had read books and articles about strong people who became stronger through a family crisis, but I didn't want to become strengthened in that way. To me, it seemed far less distasteful to fight severe illness myself than to suffer through it with someone I love.

When faced with the threat of losing my husband and the demands of his care, I was surprised to discover by-products of my trauma that gave me strength. Instead of being repelled by the effects of chemotherapy, my love for him intensified. As I applied cool towels to Rex's fevered brow or rubbed his legs and feet, a new dimension to our love appeared. He had helped me through seven pregnancies and births. Now I was getting a chance to care for him.

Rex: It wasn't the same. I performed for a few hours at a time. She was there for months. There was also a qualitative difference. She learned enough about my kind of cancer that she actually became something of a collaborator with the doctors.

Janet: My love for him increased each day as I administered to his needs. Now please don't think that what I did was entirely unselfish. While serving him I felt my greatest peace. I was in torment when I left his room. Nights were agony for me. My only joy during those months came in making him happy, comfortable, or in helping him with his work.

When his cancer was first diagnosed I had envisioned sitting by his bed, holding his hand, and gazing into his eyes while we told each other how in love we were (like in the movies). This lasted for about forty-eight hours. It then appeared there were other needs—especially for him. Even confined to a hospital bed, he needed to feel that he was an important part of ongoing life. He needed to work, to be productive.

Rex: She's wrong. The fact is, I was essential to the cause of right, truth, and justice in America's courtrooms.

Janet: I was horrified when he first suggested that we set up an office in his room. I thought working would be too difficult for him and the most romantic words he would speak to me would be, "Will you please read from pages two through five of this legal brief." But as I sat on the foot of his bed facing him, reading what he was too sick to read for himself, I felt a powerful outpouring of love and admiration for him. Sometimes he would close his eyes and I would think he was asleep, only to hear him interrupt to make a pertinent comment. This went on for months, with days when he could work only a few minutes, and days when he could barely hold up his head to take a bite or two of distasteful, often rejected, but much needed nourishment.

I was fearful that working would take a negative toll on Rex, yet this hospital office served him well. It was there he prepared for a Supreme Court case argued early in October. On the day of the argument, we literally unhooked his I.V.s, got him out of bed, dressed him, and took him to the Supreme Court. A nurse went with us carrying a bag full of medicine to meet any emergency. The Supreme Court clerk's office had a stool for him, in case he couldn't stand for the full half hour. He didn't use it. We were all frightened, but I sincerely believe that this was one of many experiences that helped to save his life. He was a vital, needed part of society.

There were painful tests, treatments, X rays, CAT scans, ever-present nausea, and those endless I.V.s and transfusions. Rarely did he ever lose his sense of humor or curiosity about his disease and treatment. He joked with the doctors and nurses even during the most grueling procedures. Before his illness when I had read about others in my circumstance, I often thought that given their situations I would want to leave or run away. My comfort came in being there, in comforting my husband, talking to the doctors and nurses, being informed, and helping make decisions about his care. To watch his strength, humor, and indomitable spirit in the face of all he was going through made me love and admire him in a way that was never before possible.

I realized that his failing body was only the temporal part of him as I grew to know his spirit more intimately. He was completely bald, his face was swollen from medication, and he had lost over twenty-five pounds. He looked like an old man in his feeble attempts to walk. His shoulders slumped, and he shuffled his feet as he slowly pushed his I.V. pole trying to get in a few minutes of daily exercise. Was this the same handsome husband who only weeks before had run with me and joked when I asked how it would feel if one of us would someday not be able to join the team? "Oh, I'll

describe the run to you when I get back," was his quick reply. We laughed like children in the warm spring sunshine, unaware of what was ahead. I loved him with all my heart. He was strong and healthy and still young after twenty-eight years of marriage. How could I ever love him more? That was the last time we ran together before he was hospitalized, and as I sat by the bedside of someone who barely resembled my husband, I knew that I loved him more completely than I had ever loved before.

I also gained a deeper understanding of our Heavenly Father and his love for us. How could I have ever missed this part of our lives together? I would not have chosen this way to learn the lessons I was learning, but I was there and I had to take a crash course in many

things. The alternative to learning was to fail the most important test I had ever been given.

Rex: She's right. It was a test. And it may not yet be finished. As students, you know about tests. You take a lot of them. Whether they occur in the classroom or some other place, tests will always be experiences from which we should learn. We learned some things from this test of ours. We learned about love, about prayer, about each other, and about ourselves. We don't seek life's storms, but they will come. And we can find beauty in them. That our Heavenly Father will help us to understand and appreciate not only tests but also life itself, of which tests are an important part, is our prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.