

# Finding Grace **AMID** **GRIEF**

**A caregiver's story: Alzheimer's diagnosis opens doors to a spiritual journey.**

BY CHRISTINE MCMAHON SUTTON

People who doubt God's existence say that, despite the well-known adage, there have been plenty of atheists in foxholes. All I know is that until I found myself in a foxhole, it had been pretty easy to ignore the Lord.

My time in a foxhole came in October 2007, a few months after my husband and I moved back to our hometown of Boone, Iowa. Gery—a 56-year-old family physician—was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's.

We had been married just five years, and for the first time I faced a challenge I couldn't handle alone. In sheer desperation, I reached out for the Lord. I had pretty much ignored God for years, but God was still there.

We had not yet chosen a church when we learned Gery had Alzheimer's. I knew it was important for Gery to feel comfortable with our choice, so we began attending First Presbyterian of Boone—his childhood church. When a second neurologist confirmed Gery's diagnosis, we asked our minister to announce it to the congregation.

Our openness greatly expanded our support network, and our church family became a true blessing to us. We tried to "give back"—we served as deacons and I joined the choir—but we got far more than we gave.

Every Thursday, one of our church friends took Gery for a long walk, giving me a much-needed break from caregiving. Another friend sat with him every Sunday,



Christine McMahon Sutton with her husband, Gery, a physician who was diagnosed at age 56 with early onset Alzheimer's

keeping him calm and in his seat so that I could sit with the choir. Late in Gery's illness, I was gone for a week, visiting my grandson, and returned to find that our front steps—which had been falling apart—had been mysteriously repaired. I know that my benefactor was someone from church, though no one would take the credit.

### **Comfort in the familiar**

As his illness progressed, Gery was increasingly comforted by long-familiar people and places, including his church. He was always happy when Sunday rolled around. I suspect that the atmosphere of warm and loving acceptance was a refuge for him in a world that didn't always show compassion and understanding

to people with dementia. Attending church each Sunday renewed my spirit and brought a brief but welcome sense of normalcy to our relentlessly abnormal world.

During Sunday services, I tried to pray, but I was so terrified of what lay ahead that all pretense at eloquence deserted me.

I shut my eyes, folded my hands and begged for help. *“Please, God, help me to be a better caregiver. Please give me the strength to deal with this.”*

During the first year Gery was ill, I had difficulty sleeping and frequently found myself wide awake at 3:00 a.m. While the rest of the world slept, I lay wondering where I would find the strength to meet the terrible challenges of Alzheimer’s caregiving. I’ve never felt so alone and frightened—or so humbled. Over and over, I repeated my simple plea.

At first I wondered if I deserved for God to hear me. Eventually, I believed that God was listening. It was an indescribable relief to put myself in God’s hands.



Gery running the Marine Corps Marathon

Every Sunday at the conclusion of the church service, we recite a charge: “Wherever we go, God has sent us. Wherever we are, God has put us there. He has a purpose in our being there. He has something He wants to do through us, wherever we are.”

I taped these words to our refrigerator and, during Gery’s illness, thought often about their relevance to my life.

My wonderful friend Jane, who prayed faithfully for us throughout Gery’s illness, was the first to suggest that, even in this, a divine purpose was being worked out. With God’s help, I was eventually able to put aside my bitter anger and stop asking why such a good man had met such a terrible fate. Instead, I began to consider the possibility that the Lord brought us together later in life for a reason other than our love for each other.

In me, Gery had a companion for this last and hard stretch of his journey. In Gery, I had someone who made me believe again. And in the church, we both had God’s grace and love.

### Reassurance in faith

After Gery’s brother died in 2003, we discussed our faith for the first time. The knowledge that Gery believed in heaven helped me face the terrible last stage of his illness. I could barely look at him without crying, but I knew we would see each other again—except that Gery wouldn’t be ill and we wouldn’t be sad.

Sometimes I prayed as I sat with him during the terrible final weeks of his life. My prayer was still a plea, but this time I asked God to enfold Gery and carry him away. I was able to do so because I believed to the depths of my soul that Gery was on his way to a better place. Without faith, I don’t know how I would have thrown off the utter despair that threatened to sink me so many times during Gery’s illness.

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Gery was a family physician when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

Through God’s grace, I’ve survived the illness and premature death of my husband, the most traumatic event of my life. Many people suffer similar or worse tragedies, but how do any of them persevere without belief in God? I have no idea, and I’m glad I didn’t have to find out. As one of Gery’s childhood friends said, “We were raised with faith, and sometimes it’s all we have.”

Sometimes, it’s all we really need.

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## RESOURCES FOR CAREGIVERS

Each year, congregations around the country celebrate Caregiver Sunday. To help them, the Presbyterian Health Network develops annual resource packets, including worship ideas, personal reflections, and ministry ideas for caring for our caregivers. To find these and other resources or to get help: [phewacommunity.org](http://phewacommunity.org) (scroll over “PHN: Health Network” and select “Congregational Resources”)