

## Deep Cheer

*Dana Haight Cattani*

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Nine years ago, my husband Kyle was offered an attractive job at Tulane University in New Orleans. At the same time, he was offered—and ultimately accepted—a position at Indiana University. Six months later, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, and Tulane shut down for an extended period. If Kyle had accepted that job, we likely would have been displaced indefinitely from home and work and schools. We felt empathy for those who suffered, and we thanked our lucky stars that we had dodged this bullet.

Three years ago, I was in a head-on car collision. I had just picked up my kids from school when a car traveling toward us drifted across the center line and hit us. Our car was totaled, but none of us had serious injuries. We felt empathy for the other driver, who did need to go to the hospital briefly. We hadn't quite dodged this bullet, but it had only grazed us, and we gave profound thanks for this good fortune.

Two years ago, I was diagnosed with advanced uterine cancer. No dodging this bullet. It was a direct hit. There was no heartfelt prayer of thanks and then resuming our familiar lives. I had ten months of surgeries, radiation, and chemotherapy. It was a lost year. It was also a kind of holy year of solitude and wrestling with God.

“I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say” (D&C 82:10).

*Really? Is there a customer service desk where I could file a complaint?*

“The destroying angel shall pass by them” (D&C 89:21).

*Could you not read the numbers on my mailbox?*

“O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt”  
(Matthew 15:28).

*Okay, make it go away.*

But alas, there seemed to be a common-knowledge escape clause for every promised blessing. *In God's own time. God has a higher plan for us. God works in mysterious ways.*

Indeed.

Case in point: I could be a Word of Wisdom poster child. All my life, I have eaten fresh produce in the season thereof and meat sparingly. I eat kale, for heaven's sake. I have avoided tobacco, alcohol, drugs—not to mention trans fats, MSG, Twinkies, Big Macs, and—to my sons' chagrin—any cheese that can be served through a pump. I even played Relief Society basketball every week for seven years. I got cancer anyway.

I know how to be a cynic: scornful, jaded, suspicious. It's easy. And it's satisfying—briefly. After that, cynicism buys me nothing. That bank account is empty. But I have learned that cynicism costs me a lot. It costs me an orientation of hope and trust in the goodness of this world and of my sense of friendship with life. Cynicism may be warranted, but it is not the stance of the people I admire most.

People like Amy, my cancer rehab swim instructor. My class met at a modern day Pool of Bethesda, where the halt and the maim gathered to try to heal themselves. Bill had a giant scar over his heart. Helen had one breast. I was still bald and had a chemotherapy port visible above my swimsuit. We were not exactly the varsity. But in life belts, even the halt and the maim can float. With Amy's generous encouragement, we kicked our way toward some kind of elusive health. Amy knew all about it. She had cancer, too, although I did not know it until the time she told us that it was her 53rd birthday, a day that she had never expected to see. Week after week, Amy cheerfully helped me raise my heart rate and my spirits.

Cheer. That's what it was. It is the stance, in some of the people I admire most, toward life, even a life compromised by suffering and heartache. I'm not saying that these people are cheerful all the time. I'm saying that they rally around cheer as often as they can.

This is not a shallow cheer. Shallow cheer is plastering a smile on your face in public so that no one will know you are hurting. Shallow cheer is manic levels of activity in hopes of being too busy to feel what you feel. There is nothing lonelier or more depressing. In fact, when suffering people seem too cheerful for the circumstances, I sometimes wonder whether they are delusional, in denial, or medicated. I've been all three, and I know that sometimes whatever it takes to get through a traumatic experience is *what it takes*, and I make no apologies. But shallow cheer can be hard work and requires vast energy to maintain.

Deep cheer can be hard work, too, but in a less stressful way. Its root is authenticity, a full awareness of life's limitations and of our own. Deep cheer is a turning away from desperate, one-sided bargaining with God for our heart's desires. Deep cheer is not contingent on getting the outcomes we long for. This kind of cheer is the hard-won stance of those people who move forward after life's losses with all the grace they can muster. They accept that God does not always provide for us what we want, and they still find him relevant.

Job asks, "What is man, that thou shouldest . . . set thine heart upon him?" (Job 7:17). Enoch asks, "How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?" (Moses 7:29). We teach that a holy and eternal God has set his heart upon us, that he created us and chooses to love us and that he weeps—not over our sins or our disobedience—but over our suffering.<sup>1</sup> This god is not a genie in a bottle or a fairy godmother who magically appears, wand poised.

But why bother worshiping a god who does not deliver us from evil or grant us our heart's most worthy desires?<sup>2</sup> It's a fair question. In my experience, sometimes we dodge the bullet, sometimes it grazes us, and sometimes it's a direct hit. However, nobody worships a genie or a fairy godmother. They are not invested in us

beyond our three wishes or after the clock strikes midnight. They have not made themselves vulnerable to our inevitable suffering. They have not set their hearts upon us. To me, a weeping god is the only god worthy of worship, the only God who can credibly say, “Let not your heart be troubled” (John 14:27), or “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Faith in this loving, caring God who has set his heart upon us is a powerful source of deep cheer. However, sometimes even that is not enough. One of my favorite hymns, “Where Can I Turn for Peace?” examines this abyss of human suffering. Emma Lou Thayne, the author of the text, describes its inspiration:

[I was] trying to deal with the frightening illness of our oldest daughter, then a freshman in college.

In 1970, treatments of manic depression/bipolar disease and eating disorders were, by today’s standards, rudimentary. More than bewildered by our usually happy nineteen-year-old daughter’s self-destructive behavior, we stumbled into the bleakest time we had known in our family. . . . [T]he three years of her battle for healing were a blur of upheaval in our home.<sup>2</sup>

In this miserable context, Emma Lou Thayne wrote:

Where can I turn for peace? Where is my solace  
When other sources cease to make me whole?  
When with a wounded heart, anger, or malice,  
I draw myself apart, searching my soul?<sup>3</sup>

These are the direct hits, the private Gethsemanes, situations which might cause any of us to beg, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matthew 26:39). They occur in every life. They can leave us scarred or bitter or wiser or more compassionate. I believe we have some choice in the matter.

I believe, also, that it can be difficult for us to know whether the direct hits in our lives are the end of the world or the beginning of a new one.

[According to an old Sufi tale, there was once] a wealthy farmer, Amad, whose prized Arabian stallion ran away. His neighbor

came to him and said, “Amad, how terrible! You have lost your best horse.”

Amad replied, “Maybe.”

The following day, the horse returned, bringing two mares along. Now his neighbor said, “Amad, how wonderful! Now you have three horses instead of one. Perhaps you will have colts, soon, too.”

Amad replied, “Maybe.”

The following day, Amad’s son jumped on the back of one of the mares and rode it around the farm. Before long a big wind came along and frightened the steed. It reared back and threw the boy to the ground, and he broke his arm. Now the neighbor said, “Amad, how terrible. Your only son has broken his arm. How will he help you to gather the crops? This is truly a catastrophe.”

Amad replied, “Maybe.”

The next day, the army rode through the countryside, looking for conscripts for their next battle. They came to Amad’s farm, having heard that he had a young son whom they could spirit away. But when they saw the son’s broken arm, they left him behind to seek someone else who was more fit. Now Amad’s neighbor was beside himself with excitement at his friend’s good fortune. Amad’s measured reply was still, “Maybe.”<sup>4</sup>

Although I am less cautious than Amad about celebrating apparently good news, I admire his modesty and patience in suspending judgment. The trick is to recognize that good times come and go, but so do bad times. I take heart in the old adage that “everything will be all right in the end. If it’s not all right, then it’s not yet the end.”

For each of us, sometimes things are most definitely not all right. However, we believe that any true end is yet a long way off, far beyond this world. In the meantime, I want to be open to the possibility of deep cheer. I find inspiration in the kindness and

generosity of those around me. In 2002, Fred Rogers of the PBS children's program *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* spoke at Dartmouth College and said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"<sup>5</sup>

Who are the helpers? One is my grocery store pharmacist who, on a Sunday afternoon, called me when I was in the hospital just to check on me and offer encouragement. Another helper was a flight attendant with a short blond ponytail who noticed me wearing a ski cap in July and said quietly, "I lost my hair two years ago." Then there was my neighbor, who offered to bring dinner to my family when I had treatment on December 26th. When I protested that it was a busy season, she said, "Look, Christmas is really low-stress for Jews. Let me do this for you." Any of these people might be considered presumptuous, but for me, their timely outpouring of support was a different and welcome kind of direct hit.

This I know. It rains on the just and on the unjust. I do not attribute my cancer to either a punishment or a test from God. I would be hard pressed to worship such a God. Fear? Oh, yes. Resent? Certainly. But worship? Only under duress. But the God I worship is known by different works: creating, loving, and sometimes weeping. This is not a God I need fear or resent—just one I am drawn to seek. Even in hard times. Especially in hard times. Because this is a God of deep cheer, and deep cheer is the only life stance I know that offers comfort and hope, that can suture our broken hearts and confer wholeness on our shattered spirits. And I don't say this lightly, but that is better, even, than hair.

### Notes

1. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The d dGod Who Weeps* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak Publishing, 2012).

2. Emma Lou Warner Thayne, *The Place of Knowing* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2011) 149–50.

3. *Hymns* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 129.

4. Susan Golant and Mitch Golant, *Kindergarten: It Isn't What It Used to Be* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: Lowell House, 1990), 73.

5. Kirstin K. H. Campbell, "Kirsten's Adventures in Wonderland: Forward and Back through the Looking-Glass," [http://www.exponentii.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Exponent-II-Magazine\\_Q4-2013\\_compression.CV01\\_2.pdf](http://www.exponentii.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Exponent-II-Magazine_Q4-2013_compression.CV01_2.pdf) (accessed February 22, 2014).

