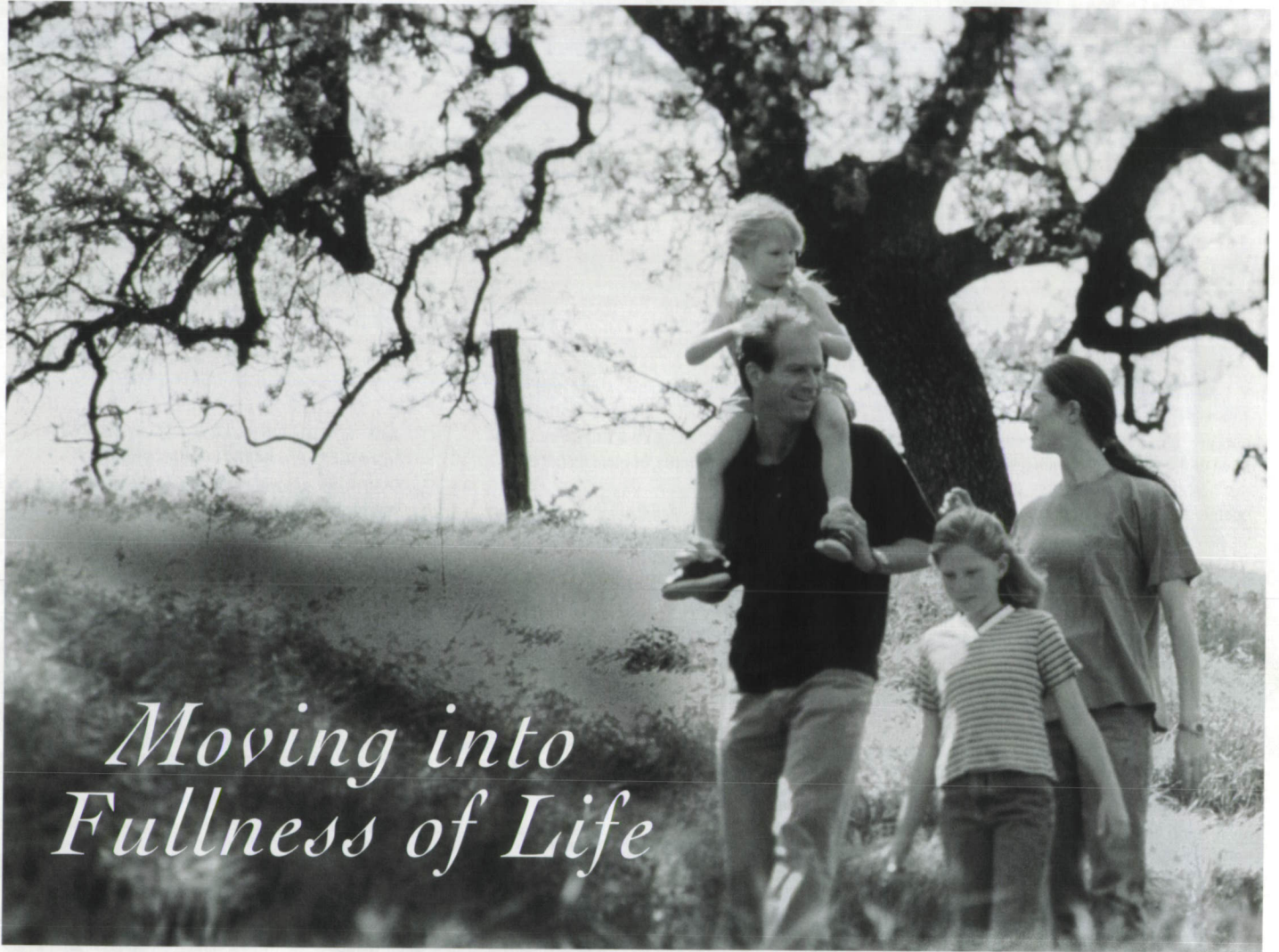


Embracing Shalom



*Moving into
Fullness of Life*

BY GRACE J. TAZELAAR

She had the life I always dreamed of—a loving husband, three children and a dog, a community volunteer opportunity, a beautiful home in the suburbs, a vibrant church home. She had a Christian heritage whose faith became her own

over the years as her relationship with God became more intimate and personal. She prepared healthy meals and snacks for her family, exercised regularly and made sure she got adequate rest. She regularly visited the dentist and doctor to maintain her health. She had done everything we in the health professions say people should do to stay healthy. Her life represented everything that I understood the concept of shalom to be—reconciled to God, to self, to others and to creation.

Shalom is a common greeting in the Middle East, often translated as *peace*. However, the Hebrew word *shalom* means more than the absence of strife. Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests that “we must add the ideas of justice, harmony and enjoyment to capture the full biblical meaning of the word. *Shalom* means just relationship (living justly and experiencing justice), harmonious relationships and enjoyable relationships. *Shalom* means belonging to an authentic and nurturing community, in which one can be one’s true self and give one’s self away without becoming poor. Justice, harmony and enjoyment of God, self, others and nature; this is the *shalom* that Jesus brings, the peace that passes all understanding.”¹

Throughout my nursing career, I have sought to promote health and justice. The concept of *shalom* embraces both. What does it mean to Christian nursing practice to promote *shalom*? It includes identifying spiritual needs and providing spiritual care.

Reconciliation with God

The first element of *shalom* is reconciliation with God. Three concepts affect our ability to have a personal relationship with God: our view of God, our view of ourselves and our understanding of Jesus Christ. Gaining an accurate assessment of what the person believes in these areas will help us to meet a person’s spiritual needs—ultimately for a personal relationship with God.

Our view of God includes an understanding that he is a loving God who desires to have a relationship with us. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” But we also must understand that God is perfectly holy, that is, without sin (Rev 15:3-4). God is also perfectly just. He cannot tolerate anything less than perfection (Mt 5:48).

Exploring how people view God may reveal why they have an inadequate personal relationship with him. For example, those who have come from abusive families may have difficulty understanding a loving God. They never may have experienced a loving relationship.

On the other hand, some people speak of God flippantly as “the man upstairs” and do not appreciate God’s holiness and justice. They do not understand that God is the creator of the universe, who created them. They think *I’m not all that bad* and tend to impose their standards on God. Their view of themselves and their spiritual condition is inaccurate. They do not understand that one act of disobedience (sin) has contaminated the whole being. Just as one drop of typhoid in a glass of drinking water contaminates the whole glass, so one sin contaminated all of creation.

An accurate understanding of our spiritual nature includes a dilemma. Although God created us in his own image (Gen 1:27)—to love us, to have a

relationship with us and to bring glory to himself—we disobeyed God and cannot have a relationship with him because of this disobedience (Rom 3:23). Because God is perfectly just, he must penalize this disobedience by imposing the sentence of death and eternal separation from God’s love (Is 59:2; Rom 6:23).

Without the intervention of Jesus Christ, the situation is hopeless. Therefore, an accurate understanding of Jesus and how he paid the penalty for us is also important. Today there are differing views of Jesus. Some do not believe that Jesus is the second person of the triune God, the son of God. They see him as a historical figure, a good man or one of the prophets. But the truth is that Jesus is God incarnate (1 Jn 4:14). He is holy, perfect and sinless.

God sent his son, Jesus, because he was the only sinless and acceptable person who could pay the price for the disobedience of humankind. Jesus did this by his death on the cross. God accepted Jesus’ death as payment for our sin. Jesus provided the way for us again to have a personal relationship with God. In raising Jesus from the dead, God demonstrated his power over death and imparts that power to us through the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11). His conquest of death also insures that our relationship with God is an eternal relationship (Rom 5:8; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 Jn 4:10).

Because Jesus’ death is the only acceptable payment for our sin, he is the only way that we can have a personal relationship with God. Jesus said, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (Jn 14:10). Many people teach that all roads lead to God. They say that a person can follow Mohammed or Buddha or any other god and still go to heaven. God’s Word, the Bible, teaches that the only way to heaven and to an eternal, personal relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.

The remarkable fact is that God provided Jesus to pay for our sin because he loves us and desires to have an eternal relationship with us. It is a free gift to us. Nothing we have done or can do deserves this gift (Eph 2:8-9). We just have to acknowledge that we have disobeyed God and sinned (Ezek 18:30). Then we must believe that Jesus is God's son and that his death paid the penalty for our sin (Rom 10:9).

Many believe that if they try to do good, don't harm anyone, attend church or have parents who are Christians, they have a relationship with God and will go to heaven when they die. However, none of these things can replace the confession of our sin and acceptance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the only way to have an eternal, personal relationship with God.

Reconciliation with Self

If she represented the epitome of shalom, why did she die of cancer? My beautiful younger sister, whom I looked after, with whom I had played, in whose wedding I had served as maid of honor, with whom I had shared the miraculous birth of her first daughter, my first niece, died at age forty-six of inoperable cancer. My mother asked, "Why is God taking her when she has so much to live for? Why doesn't he take me instead?"

The question *Why?* signals the spiritual need for meaning and purpose in life. There comes a time in each of our lives when we seek meaning and purpose. We each want to believe that our lives have made a difference, that we have contributed in some way to society. In times of disaster or calamity, we look for reasons why that event occurred. The particularly vulnerable times when people are apt to ask the questions *Why am I here?* or *Why did this happen to me?* include: (1) normal stages in development as a person progresses through life; (2) situations involving suffering or loss; or (3) when we face death.

Examples of developmental stages when a person might ask the question *Why am I here?* might be (1) adolescence, when teenagers are seeking to further define who they are and what they are supposed to do with their lives; (2) marriage, when two people are joined together and seek to find a new identity and set goals as a couple; (3) birth of a child, when another person is added to the family.

Natural disasters such as fires, floods, earthquakes and accidents are situations when we face a loss and often ask *Why?* Other examples of losses people experience may be an illness or a divorce. At these times people often ask *Why me?* or *Why now?* Naturally, when someone faces an uncertain future or death, *Why?*

Asking Why? is a normal human response.

becomes a nagging question.

Asking *Why?* is not a sign of spiritual weakness. It is a normal human response. However, our response to that question comes from our personal relationship with God. Some people get bitter and angry at God, blaming him for not stepping in and preventing the situation or intervening in some way. They may think, *If God is so good and all-powerful, why did he allow this to happen to me? Why didn't God do something?* Or they may ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" Their understanding of God and his relationship with them is distorted by the situation. Allowing this kind of thinking to pervade our reasoning interferes with our relationship with God and presents a definite spiritual need.

An entire book of the Bible, Job, is

dedicated to the problem of why God allows good people to suffer. Psalm 73 also contemplates why it seems that the righteous suffer while the wicked flourish. We continue to ask *Why?* because the Bible really doesn't give a definitive answer. When God finally spoke in the book of Job, he didn't tell Job, "I allowed this to happen so I could prove to Satan that you are a faithful servant," even though the book of Job opens with a dialogue between God and Satan that would seem to indicate this might be the reason. Instead God said to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding" (Job 38:4). In essence, God is saying, "Who do you think you are? Who made you, anyway?" We are referred back to what we believe about God and our relationship with him.

A positive response to the *Why?* question can lead us to a deeper understanding of God and our relationship with him. When we acknowledge that God is the creator of the universe, that God created people to have a personal relationship with him and to bring honor and glory to him, God redeems the pain and suffering that sin has brought into the world. God guides us into a greater appreciation and knowledge of who he is.

By focusing on God's character and attributes: his holiness, justice, love, the fact that he never changes and is all-powerful and all knowing, we recognize who he is. We also realize our own shortcomings and our need for the provision of his son, Jesus Christ, as the only way we can have a relationship with God at all. When Jesus arose and later ascended to heaven, God also provided us with the hope of eternal life with him in heaven. In the midst of Job's suffering, he claims the promise of eternal fellowship with God when he says, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25).

The search for meaning and purpose can lead us to a bigger, eternal perspective on life and help us to grow

spiritually. When we ask *Why?* we are imposing our finite, flawed sense of justice on an infinite, holy creator. We attempt to limit God to our level of comprehension and thereby limit our relationship with him. By God's grace, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes in the midst of our questioning *Why?* to reveal the holy, just, loving creator God. He redeems the effects of our sinful nature, extends his grace, mercy and peace to us, strengthens and deepens our relationship with him, and promises the hope of eternal life with him if we accept the gift of salvation through his son, Jesus Christ.

Reconciliation with Fellow Humans

Shalom not only focuses on the vertical relationship between God and us but also includes the horizontal relationship between human beings. God created us as social beings. God as the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is a social being, and we are created in his image. Two spiritual needs, the need for love and belonging and the need for forgiveness, fit into this aspect of the concept of *shalom*.

Spiritual Need for Love and Belonging

I returned home two weeks before she died to help care for her. An exhausted family had borne the burden of watching her slowly deteriorate physically and mentally over eighteen months and had lovingly cared for her. I met her home health nurse, Debbie, a dear Christian, who had provided holistic care for her and the family. As we talked about the inevitable end and converting to hospice care, Debbie said, "I have never cared for a family where there is so much love for one another."

Most people learn early in life that to be loved and accepted in society, they must behave in ways that will warrant being loved and accepted or they must own something desired by others. This is conditional love, love with strings

attached: "If you satisfy my needs, then I will love you. I love you because of who you are or what you have."

A second kind of love is unconditional love, unwarranted love, love that is extended in spite of faults or a lack of desirable traits or possessions. Parents who love their children in spite of their appearance or abilities exhibit this kind of love. You may have heard the expression, "Only a mother could love that child." That is unconditional love.

Children who do not experience caring and loving expressions from their parents, even if they are provided with the necessary physical needs of food, clothes and shelter, often fail to grow and develop normally. We say the child *fails to thrive*. Adults who do not experi-

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ence unconditional love in their lives often feel depressed, insecure and isolated, and express self-pity and fear.

God uses parental love to teach us about his perfect, unconditional love for us. While some parents routinely show unconditional love to their children, at times they fail. They may have a personal need that prohibits them from loving their child at that moment. Sometimes children are demanding or behave in ways that make them unlovable. But God loves perfectly and unconditionally.

Because God's perfect, unconditional love is not common to our life experience, it can be difficult to comprehend and appropriate into our lives. This is especially true for those who experienced abuse in their childhood. For

abuse survivors, to refer to God as father may conjure up emotions such as fear, isolation, insecurity and depression associated with mistreatment, rather than warm feelings of love and belonging. Also, because we commonly experience conditional love, we tend to transfer that conditional love back to our understanding of God. We think if we do something, perhaps give charitably or attend church, that we can earn God's love. Or we may think that because we have a talent, such as music, that God can use, he will love us. That is not the case. We can do absolutely nothing to get God to love us more. His love is perfect, unconditional and complete.

Fear is a symptom of the spiritual need for love and belonging. We fear what others may think of us or whether we will fit into the social setting. If God's love is appropriated into our lives, then we can be free to become the people God has created us to be. We need not try to earn God's favor. We need not fear anything because God's perfect love casts out fear. We can be secure in his love, and as a result, we can extend unconditional love to others.

Spiritual Need for Forgiveness

To my mother's question of "Why?" my sister replied "Why not?" She understood that she was merely a sinner saved by God's grace. She had been forgiven of her guilt, and she had forgiven the wrongs done against her. She was at peace. She experienced shalom.

Knowing right from wrong is part of our moral development. It begins in childhood as we learn that behavior has consequences. As we grow older, we expand our moral sense to include the expectations of society and ethical principles.

Guilt is the feeling associated with being wrong. True guilt is guilt that results from sin against God. God uses this guilty feeling to help us recognize our behavior as wrong and seek reconciliation with him. When Adam and Eve disobeyed

God, they experienced true guilt. They attempted to make excuses for what they did, to pass the blame to someone else and to deny that they erred. Their personal relationship with God was destroyed. As a consequence of their sin, we are born as sinful beings.

Because God is perfect and holy, he cannot tolerate or enter into a relationship with imperfect, sinful people. The good news is that God has provided a way for us to become a restored and holy people. By sending Jesus to take the punishment for our disobedience, God offers us forgiveness. But to receive that forgiveness, we must acknowledge that we have done wrong, confess our disobedience to the Lord and by faith transfer our trust from ourselves to Jesus. Then God promises that he will forgive us and restore our relationship with him.

Society sometimes broadens our moral sense of right and wrong to include societal norms, which may or may not be in line with the absolutes that God gave us in the Bible. Guilt associated with failure to live up to societal expectations, our own expectations or expectations dictated by someone other than God, is false guilt. We are not really guilty; we just feel that way.

For example, Jesus frequently had to address the tendency of the religious leaders to legalistically interpret God's law. When the disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, the religious leaders were outraged. They sought to impose a false guilt on the disciples by pointing out that they had not behaved in accordance with the rules set up by society. Society tends to redefine morality, often to suit its own purposes, and to make it into a set of rules. The Bible, God's Word, provides the principles of right and wrong that God has given for our lives. Jesus restored the God-intended principle of the Sabbath when he told the leaders that the Sabbath was made

for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27).

Another common guideline used in society today is moral relativism, the "do whatever is good for you as long as it doesn't harm anyone else" thinking. It denies that there is absolute truth. Therefore, society may imply that a behavior, such as premarital sex, is morally acceptable, although God has called it sin. Society tells us that we shouldn't feel guilty, but God has said we are guilty of wrong. Therefore, it is our responsibility to seek God's truth (those ethical principles outlined in the Bible) and to act accordingly. If we have violated God's standards, we need to seek God's forgiveness.

Sometimes we are able to receive God's forgiveness, but we struggle with forgiving ourselves. We may have set our expectations for ourselves too high. We like to hang on to the guilty feelings, preferring to think of ourselves as unworthy and sinful people. In doing so, we deny that God has forgiven us and imply that Jesus' sacrifice was inadequate. In a sense, we are insulting God by denying his love for us and the gift of his son that makes it possible for us to have a relationship with him. Both true and false guilt interfere with our personal relationship with God.

Receiving God's forgiveness does not mean that we will not fail again. However, as often as we sin, God is always there to offer forgiveness (1 Jn 1:9). God also tells us that because he has forgiven us, we must then forgive others (Mt 6:14-15). Maintaining a grudge actually is more harmful to the person who fails to forgive. As we forgive, we are able to rid ourselves of the resentment, anger, bitterness and hatred associated with being wronged. It is a powerful healing tool that restores *shalom*, health. In the process, God teaches us about and uses us to extend his love and forgiveness to others.

Reconciliation with Creation/Environment

An often-overlooked part of *shalom* is being reconciled with creation and the environment. As nurses, we are aware of the role that the environment plays in the healing process. Caring for fluid and electrolyte balance; monitoring pO₂ levels; insuring that offensive odors are eliminated; and reducing noise levels—aren't these components of good nursing care?

As a former missionary nurse, however, I have to admit that the waste in the current health care delivery system overwhelms me. As a person currently working in public health, the pollution of the air, water and soil with the chemicals we use in transportation, agriculture and generation of power leaves me questioning how well we are reconciled to our creation.

It had been three years since she died. I found her sister-in-law and family visiting the grave when I went there that day. One of her little nieces asked, "What is Auntie Terry's body like? Is she wearing that pretty purple dress?" It was an opportunity to explain that the earthly bodies we now have return to the earth when we die. God has given us the responsibility to care for our bodies and this earth now. Some day when Jesus comes back, we will be given new bodies, and he will make a new heaven and a new earth, and we will live eternally reconciled in perfect shalom. ■JCN

¹Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 69-72.



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