

Family Letter
August 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is now mid-August and in the blink of an eye, the end of summer is drawing near. It has been a hot summer with very little rain but plenty of sunshine. Such weather is good for the church expansion project now under active construction. This good weather is also ideal for family vacations. Have you and your family been traveling? Our family took a trip to the highland of western North Carolina at the end of June to celebrate the completion of my daughter's residency program. By God's grace, she successfully wrapped up a three-year residency in pediatrics. My son-in-law graciously invited my wife and me to go on this trip with them in appreciation of our indispensable help in taking care of their children during the last seven years. During the weeklong vacation, we first went on a hike at Blowing Rock and then traveled to Biltmore, Highland and Smokey Mountain. With all six of us squeezed into one car, the two grandchildren showed unusual politeness toward each other and chattered all the way, despite their constant quarreling at home!

Blowing Rock was once the territory of American Indians. It stood majestically with precipitous rock faces and sheer cliffs, dense forestation, strong winds and, narrow and challenging hiking trails. It used to be the dwelling ground of Cherokee and Catawba Indians. These two tribes were hostile toward each other and engaged in constant skirmishes. However, their animosity was turned into peace through a sad but moving love story according to legends. A young man from one tribe fell in love with a girl from the other tribe but his tribesmen vehemently opposed their love and summoned him back to his village via smoke signals. The girl tearfully hugged her lover and begged him to stay. The young man, struggling between tribal loyalty and his love for the girl, jumped off the cliff. As the girl cried tearfully to heaven, a gust of wind suddenly blew in the mountains and amazingly lifted the young man up into the arms of his lover. The two tribes lived in peace thereafter and that mountain has been called "blowing rock" ever since. It has become a popular tourist spot with hotel rooms, expensive as they are, hard to come by.

After settling down into the hotel and a hearty meal, we had a sound sleep that night. Early next morning, we climbed the Tanawha Trails. Tanawha means eagle in Cherokee language. The peak has an elevation of 3,000 feet and has a steep slope, presenting a great challenge to my aging wife and myself. In fact, this was the second time we climbed on this trail with the last one six years ago. As we revisited this place six years later, we realized the cruel fact that our physical ability had deteriorated. Fortunately, I bought a sturdy wooden mountain-climbing rod for thirty dollars at a gift shop at the foot of the mountain. I was initially reluctant to buy it considering the price, but it really paid off when we climbed on that difficult trail, made slippery by the rain the night before. It was doubtful that I could complete the hiking without the rod.

The trail began with a stretch laid down with thick wooden tiles as steps that were relatively easy to climb. As we ascended, the trail became more treacherous with no wooden steps anymore. Instead, it was crisscrossed with thick tree roots and littered with rocks of different sizes. It meandered upward in the midst of trees and rocks with no end in sight. As it rained the night before, walking across muddy potholes and slippery rocks was difficult. After two hours of walking, we were still not at the peak but my wife and I were totally exhausted with no strength left in our legs.

Our 5-year old granddaughter, on the other hand, was full of energy. She marveled at the tree branches and bugs along the way. Her 8-year old brother lovingly walked alongside and helped her. I asked the grandchildren to walk with their grandma ahead and I followed them. The scene brought back an unforgettable story in my life.

Before I embarked on teaching at a seminary after quitting the pastor position at a Chinese church in New York, my wife suggested that I accompany her on a trip. We first went to London and Paris and then arrived in Australia via Hong Kong. Shortly after our arrival in Australia, my wife fell seriously ill with the condition of bacterial spinal infection. The pus was accumulated in her spinal canal from the fourth cervical vertebra all the way down to the middle of the spine. As it compressed on spinal nerves, she felt terrible pains. With great difficulty, she was returned to Hong Kong for treatment. By that time, she had lost her sensation from the neck down and was paralyzed. She was rushed to the hospital for emergency surgery. The doctor solemnly pronounced to me after the surgery that although the solidified pus had been removed, the nerves had been compressed for a period of time and only God knew how much recovery in her functions would ensue. When she was wheeled back to her room in the hospital, I, sitting beside her and seeing her with eyes shut and face pale, realized what a nightmare we had experienced. How could she, being usually healthy and strong, succumb to such illness all of a sudden and become totally incapacitated? It is difficult enough to become seriously ill let alone being on a trip in a foreign land. That thought made me feel totally helpless. I touched her lips with wet tissue but she showed no response. I recalled our marriage of more than thirty years and during those years, we walked together through many changing situations. Despite how hard the situation was, she stood by me to help me through with perseverance. She often reminded me, “don’t panic when difficulties come. Even in the midst of severe storms, God will not give up on us; together we shall endure through them.” I returned home that night from the hospital. Facing the empty bed, I was greatly saddened but my eye had no more tears to shed. Two suitcases were sitting in the room with a shopping bag on the top, containing three pairs of new shoes. My wife seldom shopped. During that trip to Australia, a friend took us to a shopping mall. An aggressive Hong Kong saleslady managed to convince my wife to buy three pairs of comfortable shoes to wear in America. I was especially sorrowful when I saw those shoes, thinking, “could she still wear them?” How would our life be if she continued to stay in bed and relied on others to take care of her? Then, a miracle happened during her three-week stay in the hospital. Sensation gradually returned to her hands and legs. She once told me decisively in the midst of her sickness, “I shall take my grandson Aidan to climb a mountain one day!”

Eight-year old Aidan took his grandma’s hand to help her climb that trail at Blowing Rock. Witnessing the scene as I followed them, I remembered my wife’s wish as she was lying on that hospital bed and felt deeply God’s mercy and grace. Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” In this uncertain world, we do not know what will happen tomorrow. We should treasure every moment when we are still able to walk together with thanks and gratification. Don’t you think so?

Serving with you in the Lord,
Pastor Calvin Tran