



Stories of Unusual Encounters with the Lord

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Grandma Lehman, seeing Jesus March 7, 1997 (as told to Karl Lehman, M.D. 10/31/97, also from notes from Paul Lehman Ph.D. who spoke with Grandma shortly after her experience 3/7/97): “I was staying with Paul’s family (in Gainesville, FL) for the winter. It was last spring, probably March, when this happened. I had been discouraged, and was worrying that maybe I had not followed the Lord as closely as I should have through out my life. It was afternoon, and I was sitting next to the big window in my room. I was longing for a closer walk with the Lord, and was asking for assurance that He was with me. ‘Lord, please send me something to tell me that I am walking with you.’

“I looked out the window and was startled to see Jesus in the clouds, coming towards me in the sky. It was very real. He went away, but then came back again, this time much closer. He came closer and closer until He was standing right in front of me. I remember his face most clearly, he was smiling. His face was so wonderful I don’t even know how to describe it. He was close enough that I could hear him speak to me. He assured me that he was with me. He told me ‘When it’s your time to come to Heaven, you will see me like this. I will meet you in the sky.’

“I was overwhelmed and exceedingly comforted. I was so glad that Jesus had appeared to me and given me this reassurance. Now, whenever I am anxious or discouraged, I can see this picture so clearly and it reassures me.”

Russ Harris (member of our church), near death experience: As remembered by Russ Harris, Pat Harris, Susanne Bergeron, John Lehman, Joanna Lehman, Susanne Donaghue, Dale Cooper, and also from a written report by Kelly McKinney.

Russ Harris was too busy to enjoy the warmer weather and longer days as March of 1987 moved steadily into spring. In addition to his job as a pastoral counselor at Reba church, he was also trying to complete graduate school classes and working as an intern at a mental health clinic. He was usually quite healthy, and when he caught a cold this spring he figured it was due to being run down from so much work.

However, instead of getting better after a few days, the cold lingered. Russ’s fatigue seemed to be getting slowly but steadily worse. Finally he went to the University health clinic to see if his illness might be something more serious. Physical exam and routine blood tests could find nothing more than evidence of viral flu. He was sent home and went back to bed. “One day while my wife, Pat, was at work, I fainted. When she came home I told her about it” he said. “That’s it”, she replied, ‘You’re going to the hospital. No one faints on the way to the bathroom just because of a cold.’”

Russ was quite sick by the time he was admitted to St. Francis Hospital, but the cause of his illness was not clear at the time of admission. The initial cold seemed to be unusually intense, but Russ’ doctors knew that a cold should not send a healthy 48 year old man to the hospital. The medical staff searched urgently for the source of such severe symptoms. Finally Dr. Humad, a rheumatologist, diagnosed Systemic Lupus Erythematosus.

Lupus is an auto-immune disease in which the immune system attacks its own body. As Russ was informed, the initial onset of Lupus can be triggered by respiratory viral infections such as the common cold. It usually affects connective tissue, commonly causing rashes and arthritis, but

can also affect vital organs such as the kidneys, heart, and brain. Almost 90% of patients with Lupus are women, but when this disease does occur in men it tends to be particularly severe. This was certainly the case for Russ.

Ironically, while Lupus causes the immune system to become hyperactive in one way (attacking the body's own healthy tissue), it can also impair the ability of the immune system to fight real enemies. The doctors realized that this was the case for Russ, who was suffering from a raging viral infection ("cold" was no longer an adequate term), as well as from a severe autoimmune attack. This situation presented them with a very difficult treatment decision: treating the Lupus by using steroids to further suppress Russ' immune system would make him even more vulnerable to the invading virus, but leaving the Lupus untreated until his body fought off the infection could result in fatal auto-immune injury to vital organs. His overall condition continued to deteriorate as they tried to decide what to do.

By this time Russ was having episodes of confusion, indicating that his central nervous system was being affected. He didn't recognize my mother (Joanna Lehman), even though they had been neighbors and friends for almost 20 years. However, a strange phenomena with Lupus is that central nervous system involvement can change dramatically with little relation to disease activity elsewhere. Furthermore, many patients with significant observable central nervous system symptoms show very little actual nerve tissue damage. The medical team therefore wanted information about other vital organ systems to help make the crucial treatment decision. Kidney function tests indicated Russ' kidneys were affected, and Dr. Humad wanted a needle biopsy to provide additional information regarding the extent of kidney involvement. Russ' fever was spiking to 104, and the medical team waited anxiously for this to resolve so they could complete the biopsy.

When Russ slipped into a coma, his doctor decided it was time to go ahead and treat the Lupus even though they had not yet been able to complete the kidney biopsy. Dr. Humad ordered a powerful dose of steroid and observed Russ carefully for results. The viral infection might worsen over the next couple days, but the Lupus component usually responds quickly and dramatically to this treatment. Russ showed no response. Dr. Humad realized what this meant and called Pat to let her know how serious the situation was. He summarized the most recent developments, finishing with "Russ is critically ill. He might not make it through the night. Your daughter in Montana should fly home as soon as possible."

"I had a clear sense that the Lord was in charge" Pat states, "and that I was supposed to turn the whole thing over to Virgil. I got on the phone immediately: 'Virgil, the Dr. said Russ might not make it through the night. Get over there and pray.' I left the prayer to Virgil while I called close family and worked on getting Suzanne home. Virgil called the elders and they were over there praying within 15 minutes."

"He just had the flu a couple weeks earlier" Susanne recalls. "Then Mom calls and tells me Dad's in the hospital but he's O.K.. A couple days later she calls and tells me 'Dad's in a coma, they have given him a maximum dose of steroids but he hasn't responded. They think he might not make it and that you should come home immediately.' I got on the next flight to O'Hare, which was about an hour and a half after I got the phone call from Mom. During the flight I couldn't talk to anybody – I didn't know if my dad would be alive when I got to Chicago. I can remember thinking about how much I would miss him if he died. 'What am I going to do if he dies? I'm not even married yet, he has to be there to walk down the aisle with me!'"

My father (John Lehman, one of the elders of our church at that time) remembers the call from Virgil telling him that Russ was critically ill and failing quickly. "Virgil, Julius, myself, and several others went immediately to the ICU to pray for him. He was awake when we got there, but still very confused." When his 26 year old son, Doug, came to stand beside his bed, Russ mistook him for Julius Belser, an (how old?) elder.

While the rest of us perceived Russ to be slipping in and out of coma, he was having a very

different experience. “I appeared to be unconscious, but I can remember clearly what was going on in my own mind. Because of my condition, I was unable to follow through with my responsibilities. I was unable to complete my internship responsibilities, unable to see my private practice patients, and unable meet with the people for whom I was supposed to provide pastoral counseling. I had the sense that I might never return – that I needed to get ready to go and be with the Lord, and that I needed to let go of all these responsibilities in preparation for this journey. This triggered a lengthy and anguishing process of releasing everything in my life to the Lord.

“I thought of everyone important in my life. Starting with the outer circle, I thought of the people at Lakeview Mental Health Center whom I counseled. There were a couple of marriages on the verge. If I left, how would they be provided for? ‘Lord, I don’t know how you’re going to do it, but I trust you to find some way.’ In this way I released my responsibility for each of them. Then I thought of all the people at church who I worked with as a pastoral counselor. One by one I went around and released them all to the Lord. Next I thought of the people in my small group and then all the friends and acquaintances from church. After being there fifteen years, there were so many to think about. One by one I gave them over to the Lord.

“After that I thought of my family. That was really hard for me. Our daughter, Susanne, was nineteen and in college at the University of Montana. Susanne said she wanted me to be around to give her away when she got married. ‘How am I going to do that if I’m leaving?’ I cried. It was hard, but finally I gave my relationship with her to the Lord. I then did the same with my two sons and granddaughter.

“At last I came to my wife, Pat. We had been married twenty-seven years. We had a deep covenant together under God that had weathered years of ministry, raising three children of our own and one foster son. Leaving Pat was the hardest of all. When I finally gave her over to the Lord, I felt ‘There is nothing holding me back. I’m ready to go.’

“In the middle of this process, I regained consciousness temporarily. Pastor Virgil and the elders were standing around my bed. They had come to pray for me, but I didn’t have the energy to explain what I was doing. I remember telling them ‘Sorry fellahs. I can’t talk with you right now. I’m too busy.’ They must have thought I was really out of my mind, but I just couldn’t explain what I was doing.

“Shortly after this I finished releasing all my loved ones to the Lord. I felt that there was nothing holding me back, I was free to go. My heart stopped beating and I began my journey. I can remember a growing sense of anticipation as I realized I was going to heaven, I was going to see the Lord. ‘Wow, I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.’ I was surprised when Jesus met me half way there. I expected to meet Him in heaven, not half way there. He stopped me in my tracks, but very graciously. ‘It’s not time for you to die,’ He said gently but firmly, ‘I’ve got more for you to do.’

“This last expectation of heaven remained, and I remember being able to release this as well. I can remember thinking ‘Well, He’s the Lord. He knows more than I do. I’m His servant and I’ll do whatever He says’, so I said ‘Okay, you’re the boss.’ Then I turned around and went back. My heart started beating again, even though there had been no medical intervention.”

Dad (John Lehman) described these moments to me: “I was standing at the side of the bed where I could see the heart monitor. We started to pray, but I kept my eyes open so I could observe what was happening as we prayed. Suddenly Russ’ heart monitor went flat. I glanced quickly to the nursing station but there was no one there at that moment. I was trying to figure out what to do – should I call the nurse? Was this a real crisis? At first I thought maybe a lead had just come off, but then I looked at Russ – he seemed to be unconscious and looked terrible. ‘Maybe his heart has really stopped!’ I thought with growing alarm. I was about to disrupt the prayer to call for help when I glanced back at the monitor and noticed that his heart was beating again. I continued with fervent prayer. By the time we finished our prayer time, Russ was awake again and looking much better.”

A long standing tradition in our church is for the members to gather in small groups each Tuesday evening for sharing and prayer. Dale Cooper still remembers this particular Tuesday: “We were very much aware that Russ was declining rapidly and might not live through the night. I felt a strong conviction that we should meet as a whole body to pray for him. I felt we should cancel small groups to meet as a whole church to pray. I called Virgil and he agreed. Someone called all the small groups, and the whole congregation gathered at the church for prayer. I remember feeling a strong sense of the Lord’s presence, and felt that we should pray for healing even in the face of death.

“I had a word from the Lord: Isaiah 43 ‘I have called you by name, you are mine.’” Susanne Donaghue recalls from the prayer service that night, “We felt lead to speak in prayer to the cells in Russ’s body to tell them that they were his and the Lord’s, that his immune system didn’t need to attack them.”

“People from the church were in and out of the ICU, praying constantly for the rest of the evening” Pat reports. When Dr. Humad came to see Russ later that night, he realized Russ had improved dramatically. “I think he has turned the corner” he told Pat and Doug. “He’s going to make it. You can go home.”

“I thought I had released everything to the Lord, but when I woke the next morning I discovered that I still had more to do.” Dr. Humad reminded Russ that Lupus tends to be especially severe in men, and informed Russ that even though this crisis seemed to be past, there was still significant risk that he could die from the Lupus at some point in the future. He also warned Russ that Lupus can damage blood vessels, leading to gangrene which sometimes requires amputation of the arms or legs. Furthermore, Russ was instructed to avoid exposure to the sun since ultra-violet light can cause Lupus to flare. “I was physically quite limited during the recovery period, so I released any expectation of running again – something I had previously enjoyed 4-5 times each week. I even let go of sailing, which I loved, in order to avoid exposure to the sun. I also decided to improve my diet in order to help my body heal. I gave up sugar, even ice cream (one of my favorite foods). I stopped eating refined wheat and started taking lots of vitamins.”

“My church continued to pray for me and I slowly regained my strength. Now, ten years later, I am quite healthy. I still have the disease but I have a very active life. Just recently I ran a 5 mile race and set my own best time. It might not be great, but it is not something Lupus patients usually do. I finished graduate school and now counsel people full time. I am seeing the Lord heal many people in my counseling practice as I show them how to give their problems to the Lord.

“My whole attitude has changed (my wife says for the better). I used to be a somewhat over-responsible, uptight workaholic. Now I feel I am more balanced. I do what I know I can do and leave the rest up to the Lord and other people. I see my whole life and death story as an experience in surrendering to Jesus. I like to tell people, ‘There is a Lord, he is someone you can trust.’ It’s great to see the Lord healing people. It’s great to see the Lord use me.”