

Grief Paper

A Beautiful Transformation

Esther Oliveira

Alliance University

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Dr. Tesia D. Wells; LMFT

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Introduction:

When my husband and I came to the United States as missionaries to help the Brazilian community, when we left Brazil, I promised my sister Ada that I would bring her to live with us as soon as possible because being a single mother of two children in Brazil was a challenging job for her. God allowed me to fulfill that promise two years after we were here, in September 1989. Unfortunately, in 2013 she was diagnosed with ovarian carcinoma cancer, and we lost my sister in 2021. The history of losses in my family is large and painful. Each one of them meant a lot to us. Words cannot describe the pain and the sorrow; many tears have translated the emotions, tears that had brought sadness and joy simultaneously. I want to tell you about a beautiful and joyful person who left many memories. I want to share with you the remarkable life of my sister Ada. She is the most recent loss my family and I have suffered.

1 - I Not only lost a sister, but I also lost a friend:

She came to the USA determined to bring her kids; she worked very hard for that; two years later, Alex and Ariane were here with her. Ada married Mauro, and they had Maureen and Mike. Unfortunately, her dream of having a husband and, together, raising their family did not happen. She did try, but Mauro was an alcoholic, and the kids suffered significantly from the turbulent relationship. They divorced, he returned to Brazil, and she stayed with her four children.

The demands of her three jobs, and the household, were enormous. Still, Ada always had time to be involved in the Church, bring the kids to the park, and always visit us, particularly for

Thanksgiving and Christmas in Hyannis, Hartford, and Bridgeport. Even though my husband and I moved to many different places to attend churches, my sister and I had a very close relationship. We talked on the phone almost daily, but our relationship grew more assertive after my sons were born. David and Timothy are very close to their cousins, and we went to their house in Boston frequently to visit them. Ada and I got very close during tough times. I understand the Bible: *“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” Proverb 17:17*

In July 2013, Ada went to Brazil to help my sister to take care of our mother, that was dealing with cancer. During the trip, she started to have abdominal pain, and soon after, the doctor examined her and sent her for an ultrasound; four days later, her life changed completely. Ada was diagnosed with fourth-degree carcinoma cancer. After the surgery, the doctor called my family and said she had only three months to live. I always say that doctors do their best and do not lie to us; they have worked very hard to accomplish their careers, but the last word always belongs to God, the One that has our days written in His Hand.

2 - I not only lost a sister but a confidant:

During her treatment, we got closer to each other. Her journey of surgeries, which was nine, and her chemotherapy, which was 130, was long and arduous. I always told my sister how much I admire her courage, perseverance, happy spirit, and a strong desire to live, which encouraged and touched many lives on the road. She reacted terribly to the medicine when they did her first chemotherapy after her surgery; she almost died. The nurse had to give her an

EpiPen injection immediately, saving her life. She went to Brazil to help my sister care for our mom, but God brought her back to save her life and give her more than nine years with us.

Her life was divided into two countries she loved until the last day: Brazil and the United States. Because they discovered her cancer in Brazil and did her first surgery there, when her cancer returned in 2014, her doctor in Boston told her the best way was for her to do chemotherapy in Brazil and the USA. Still, he recommended that she do her surgeries only in Brazil, and she followed her doctor's advice. Every six months, my sister came to Boston to stay with her kids and grandchildren, but she returned to Brazil if they discovered a relapse from her cancer.

Unfortunately, her cancer relapsed in 2015, and during the surgery, she had to remove part of her intestine. After her surgeries, she always had long chemo periods, making her fragile. However, as soon as she could stand it, she was moving around, cooking, cleaning, and helping around the house, which she had enjoyed doing, and believed or not eating feijoada. This typical Brazilian food is baked with black beans and different pig meats. We laughed years later when she mentioned to her doctor the food she enjoyed eating after doing chemo, and he was petrified, saying that all his patients hardly handled soup. Until her last days of life, Ada ate what she liked and desired, and we could see the hand of God in each detail, preserving her and working in her personality, transforming her into a new person. She used to say that God was doing with her the same metamorphosis as a butterfly, *“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3:18*

3 - I not only lost a sister but the plains we had for future trips and places we want to visit:

Nevertheless, between her chemotherapies and surgeries, she continued enjoying the fullness of life. We went to Hyannis for vacation during the summer. She traveled to London to visit her son, went to Dubai with our sister Debbie and continued to come to the USA every year. We are seven sisters, and we always wanted to go on a cruise together, and they did, but unfortunately, I could not make it. Something that I regret until today, but nothing can be done anymore, life passed away so fast, and we learn every day that the most treasure we have is time, and we must learn to use it wisely because it never comes back. On the other hand, I enjoyed the time I had with Ada. Her memories will be treasured forever.

Even though Ada continued to live her life the best way she could and was faithful to God, honored Him, and recognized that every day and every breath was a miracle, her cancer returned. In 2018 she faced another relapse, where she almost lost her gladder, but we could see another gift in her life. The doctor and nurses always say that her life is a miracle.

One nurse in particular, who took care of her and followed her all these years, says she was convinced that Ada could not make the first six months of her treatments. Still, God was indeed in control of everything, and He was proving to everybody, even my sister, that He had other plans for her. *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” Jeremih 29:1.*

4 - I not only lost a sister, but my sons lost their mentor:

Ada always tells my sons: *“Learn from my mistakes, be wise, and do not repeat my errors.”* Many times in life, she chose the wrong path and made wrong choices that cost her a lot. However, she continually told my sons her experiences and tried to advise them that they were not worthy and walked away from God's principles. She told my sons and her kids that they must understand that we live in a fallen world. Sin brought pain, sickness, hardship, and tribulations to our lives, and we, as children of the living God, are not preserved from all that. Still, God is with us in the middle of our distress. My sister's beautiful transformation was a lesson that my sons treasure in their lives. We never saw her murmuring against God and not even questioning her conditions, but she always said that God is sovereign, and he knows what He was doing.

5 - I not only lost a sister but a person that was transformed:

The transformation and the work God hands in my sister's life were tremendous. Her testimony was not only because God extended the days of her lifetime, but the work He did on herself. God can still do miracles, and I believe that the most precious one is the transformation of our character, and we can be called sons and daughters of the Living God. *“I have been crucified with Christ. No longer I live, but Christ who lives in me.” Galatians 2:20*

For many years Ada had a hard time serving the Lord. She regretted her mistakes and blamed herself for her choices and their consequences on her and our family. Especially our parents and her kids had paid a very high price for that, and she blamed herself and was angry and bitter. Ada was guilty and remorseful and had difficulty forgiving herself and receiving God's forgiveness. She could not believe that God could forgive her and love her. Therefore, she

could not have a closer relationship with God for many years and had a demanding schedule, working three and sometimes fourth jobs to support her family. My sister always punished herself and tried to fix her past and situation, but that was impossible. For many years, she carried a heavy burden and struggled to learn to depend on God and His mercy and receive His Love for her. Maybe that brought the most terrific deal of stress to herself, complicating her situation and compromising her health even more.

6 - I not only lost a sister but our “*Mixuruca*”:

My dad never liked to give us nicknames, but Ada was the only one of us that daddy called “*Mixuruca*” which means mixing because she resembles my grandmother and my mother. My dad loves Ada very much, but she has difficulty believing and accepting his forgiveness. She and I had an endless conversation about that. Toward the end of my daddy's life, they talked and forgave each other. She knows she had to be at peace with our daddy to be at peace with God. I constantly affirmed to her that the love of God for us transcends all we can imagine or understand; we can comprehend His love for us, and we need and must accept because we could not survive without His love “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*” *John 3:16*. Our minds cannot understand the love of God for us, but we must recognize that we cannot live without it. We do not need to do anything for God to love us, but it will cost us everything to be with Him in Heaven; we must surrender ourselves to His will every day and follow Jesus very close. Ada had to learn to trust God and accept His love for her. Her journey to receive and understand the love of God for her was a journey of pain and loss.

7 - I lost not only a sister but a person whom I saw growing in faith:

God calls us to walk with Him on a road of faith and trust. The Bible prepares us that our journey will be very bumpy, *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world, you will have tribulation.” John 16:33.* Every day, I saw my sister getting closer to God and her faith getting confident and robust. Sadly, her cancer came back in 2019, and it was a challenging year of surgeries and trying different types of chemo, but in 2020 her cancer progressed very aggressively. Her situation has aggravated even more with covid. She got covid two times, and her immune system was significantly compromised. She called me at the beginning of June 2021, saying she was coming to the USA, and I was thrilled to see my sister again.

Looking back, I can see how God orchestrated everything for her trip. I was in Boston when she arrived; on June 26, 2021, I picked her up at Logan International Airport, the same airport I had picked her up thirty-two years ago. However, I did not know that her doctor said that was nothing else to do for her, that she was in the terminal stage of her cancer, and that she came to say goodbye. After each surgery and chemo, I saw so many miracles in her life that it was unbearable to comprehend that they could do nothing for her anymore. After two weeks with her son in Boston, she went to her daughter in Louisiana. She started to get very sick and weak, and my niece called asking me to come to help her. I arrived in Louisiana in July and found her fragile. The same week she was admitted by Hospices. Besides her battles against cancer, she had covid for the third time.

Furthermore, a terrible tornado and hurricane hit Louisiana, leaving us without energy, water, or communication for days. The hospice told us that we must move my sister to another city. My niece, her husband, and three children drove us to Houston, Texas. That was Ada's last trip with us. The nine-hour trip was a great challenge for her, but we tried to enjoy ourselves as much as possible. Two days later, my niece returned to Louisiana, and Ada and I flew to South Carolina because she wanted to see our older brother and his family. After that, we planned to come to my house in Connecticut. Unfortunately, she got very sick, and the hospice doctor no longer allowed her to travel.

Finding Meaning: What does this loss mean to me?

My sister had to walk a long way through many life hardships and tribulations to learn to understand and receive the love of God. She lost her health to discover that Jesus was the healer of her soul. My sister lost her ability to do everything she was used to, like simple things, using the bathroom alone, or even showering alone. She lost the ability to walk alone and even go to places she used to or even be with her friends. She lost the privilege of going to Church services. She lost the ability to drive. She lost the privilege of walking on the beach or in the park to ride her bike, which she enjoyed doing. My sister lost her hair many times after chemotherapy, only to discover in a profound and personal way the love of Jesus for her. My sister developed a closer relationship with Jesus because she understood that Jesus knew how much hair she had on her head. *“And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Matthew 10:30-31.* My sister had to lose many things to discover the absolute love of God for her and that she had eternal value.

However, her transformation into a different person was noticeable and beautiful, and that helped me during those three last months of her life that God was so close to us; He never left or forsook us. Losing my sister, friend, and confidant helped me discover the bravery of life and how important it is to be ready. She often made me promise that I would not pray for healing because she was prepared to go home and encounter Jesus. God was so benevolently that He abbreviated her suffering. The doctor said she would only live for more than six months, but she lived only three. I found meaning in my sister's death through God's love for her. I found meaning in my sister's death because I saw that God was caring for her fragile body, but at the same time, her resilience through pain and suffering helped me to find meaning in my loss. Ada left us with many memories that we are going to treasure forever.

Adjust Mastery: Identify coping strategies employed to manage the pain of the loss:

Caring for Ada for the last three months of her life was a great challenge for my family and me. I do not doubt that I did it only by the grace of God and the love and help of my sister, nephew, and family members, who were with us all the way. The road would be unbearable without them, but the Lord brings the right people to walk through the valley with us in His loving and caring. *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” Psalms 23:4* Looking back, I see that even the strategies we used during the last month helped us with our grieving process.

- My nephew made a calendar for us to follow to help us manage Ada's medicine, which should be given at the right time and dose.

- We took turns during the day and night to rest and even take care of ourselves and our health. I usually like to walk at the lake and in the park for fresh air.
- I always took pictures to show to my sister because she enjoys walking around nature.
- My sister-in-law was the one who cooked for us; we tried to eat as healthily as possible to help our immune system because our emotions were friable.
- Another strategy that helped us during this challenging time was the hospice nurses; they always answered our questions, explained our sister's process, and helped us navigate this complex and painful road of loss.
- During the last week of Ada's life, they came daily and talked to and supported us. The nurse tries their best to ensure my sister stays as comfortable as possible, without pain.
- Above all, what helped us adjust to the loss of our sister, was the love of God among us, His presence, and the love and care for each other. Ada loves to sing, so we did a devotional every night, allowing God to minister into our lives and hearts every night. We cry together, and we sing together every night. We talked about our family and God's plans for each of us. Ada always helped us understand and told us that she was at the center of God's plan for her. Indeed, all that had allowed us to manage and cope with the pain of our loss.

Reconstruct Identity:

Ada was four years older than I was, and she was not only a sister but my son's closest aunt and my confident friend. We had many family histories together and dreamed of much more

in the future. Losing her was very painful, but caring for her was a way God had given me to show her how much she had meant to us. For the first time, I was separated from my husband and my sons for so long. I devoted myself to taking care of her for those three months, and for the first time, in 37 years, I was away during my birthday and my anniversary.

On the other hand, I asked God to allow my sister to be with me to celebrate my birthday together, and my niece prepared a great party for me, and I keep my pictures with my family and my sister as a treasure. That was her last party together as a family. After her death, my husband and I took a few weeks off from the Church. I was exhausted, and emotionally was essential for us to be together. When we came back home, I was ready to reconstruct my identity as a wife, mother, and pastor and be involved with many demands waiting for me.

Analyze strengths and deficits in their morning process.

Analyzing my sister's death now brought clarity to see the straight of God in my life during the whole process. Our friendship and closeness brought specific resistance for me to let her go, but the time I cared for her prepared me to say goodbye. God, in His sovereignty and love for us, knows that this time was tough but brought healing and peace to my soul. Cancer had spread to her body, and we constantly prayed for God's mercy and peace. I know we will miss her and have to learn to leave our lives without her, but we did not want to see her suffering. We were close and bound together for good and worse, but the love among us was more potent and brought the certainty that we would see each other again. *"Jesus told her, "I am the One Who raises the dead and gives them life. Anyone who puts his trust in Me will live again, even if he dies." John 11:25.* My sister is in Heaven without pain or suffering. Her death was only a

transition to a better place, and we will be reunited again. Our faith helped us walk through the valley of death, and it will allow me to continue to live with the certainty that nothing on Earth can be compared with Heaven. She will always be present in our hearts and minds. We continue to celebrate her memories and remember how happy she was and enjoyed living, and we are trying to do the same.

Identify family origin and ethnicity factors that influence grief:

As a Christian family, we faced death as a transition into Heaven to live with God for eternity. The Bible teaches us that we should mourn and respect the memory of our loved ones that had gone. Our traditions as Brazilians are staying with the deceased body the whole night and doing a memorial service before going to the cemetery. As a family, we talked about how we would do all that, mainly because we were in the middle of a pandemic, and nobody could go to a funeral home.

My sister wanted to be cremated, and we wanted to honor her desire, but in all the details, we prayed and asked God to guide us on what we should do when the time came. Once more, we could see the sovereignty of God. Ada passed away at 11:45, and the funeral home came at only four o'clock because it was a terrible storm, and they could not come early. We called the family, and they came, and we had our service together. We prayed, sang her favorite songs, we cry together, and consoled each other with the Word of God.

We remember many stories about her, and we laugh and cry simultaneously. When the funeral home arrived, we had changed her, and she was ready. A year later, her children had a

ceremony in the park they usually visited with her during summertime. We had a beautiful memorial celebrating her life and buried her ashes atop the hill. We plant many flowers around her to symbolize our love for her.

The Most significant of learning about grief therapy:

First, I learned that **death is inevitable**, realizing that truth brings healing. We will never forget her and what she represents to us. No need to forget. No need for closure. Honor what we had and move forward. We must tell the next generations the history of our loved ones; my grandkids one day will hear about my sister Ada and how strong, courageous, determined, and resilient she was. I will tell them that she made many mistakes, sorrows, and despair, but she did not allow them to stop her from receiving her Citizenship or even owning her house, and a new car, raising her four kids, and traveling to many places.

Second, the death of a sibling causes pain and sorrow at any age and stage. Losing my sister was a break in our bond, dreams, and plans for our future. **Accepting** her death helped me deal with unresolved feelings and solve emotional problems. Accepting my sister's death helped me with grief in a healthy way. We always planned to visit Jerusalem together, but I know she is in celestial Jerusalem now, and we will meet again one day. Our lives had to be reorganized without her, my brothers, sisters, and her family. God gives us His grace daily and will continue caring for us.

Third, I learned that caring for **unfinished business** is essential for the dying person. My sister had to encounter her four children before she passed away. She needed to talk to them,

set boundaries about her desires, and affirm how much she loved and cared for them. Because we were in the middle of a pandemic, getting her four kids together was a challenge, especially for my nephew Alex, who lives in London. We had to send letters to the embassy explaining the situation, and finally, they met. My sister prayed every night for that to happen, and I could see how important it was for her. I was her legal guardian, and the day I had finished all her requests regarding the money and belongings she wanted her children and grandkids to have, I told her I had done everything she had asked me. That night she passed away. It is crucial to live a life in which you will live good memories; nobody is perfect, and indeed, my sister was not, but she left a legacy of great memories, and we will treasure that forever.

Fourth, discover new hope. The Bible prepares us for death because this life passes as a vapor, *“they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.” Psalms 90:5-6.* God gives us the strength to say goodbye, and He gives us new hope for tomorrow. During the last months together, my sister always told me how God had called me to help people and be with them during challenging and tough times. She always told me I should return to school and finish MFT.

A year passed after her death, and I started talking to my husband about returning to school. After praying and asking God for directions and open doors, that was exactly what happened. Coming back to school is a blessing for me and my ministry. The skills and understanding I am learning prepare me to serve God and others more proficiently and capable. As a counselor, I will show my clients that the most important thing about death is that we must be ready. My sister was ready. As Dr. Wells told us the other day: *“Nothing we can do to change*

the date of our time. God knows the day of our death, the day He will call us home; we must be ready.” My sister was ready.

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