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Wrestling with loss: Finding the kingdom of heaven after hell on Earth

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In February 1976, Tom Janicik brought jubilation to metro-east prep wrestling fans by winning the 119-pound state title for Belleville Township High School West.

Now, 30 years later, Janicik says he has his eyes on a far more important goal -- trying to help others stay focused on the kingdom of heaven even while they may be going through hell on Earth.

On that, 49-year-old Janicik can speak with painful experience. Ten years ago, he started going through some of his darkest days when he realized his 10-year marriage was crumbling. At the very same time, he says he inexplicably uncovered two buried treasures -- a gift for poetry and a deep faith in God.

He shares both in his book, "Your Gift of Grace." Released in June, it's far more than just a collection of inspirational verses for those dealing with divorce, death, illness or other serious loss. Published in workbook form, it also offers a complementary Bible verse after each poem along with a blank, facing page for readers to record their own reflections.

The idea, he says, is to help the sick and the grieving keep their eyes on the bigger picture while they work through their pain as he did. He hopes that they -- along with old friends -- will at least take a look when he holds book signings from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday at the Vineyard in Belleville and from 1 to 3 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 20, at Borders in Fairview Heights.

"For me, it was just the process of relating with God and getting this sense and just putting it out there," Janicik said. "My hope is that when people read this, they can sense a real relationship. That's the key. This is my three years of spending time sitting down, reading the Bible, and interacting with God.

Whoever said that God works in mysterious ways certainly knew what they were talking about in Janicik's case. For years, his blessings had continued to mount. After a stellar career at Belleville West, Janicik went on to wrestle at Northwestern University, where he went to nationals three times and was ranked fifth in the country at 158 pounds as a senior.

His moves in the classroom were just as good. Eventually choosing environmental engineering as his major, he would win a scholarship from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and go on to earn master's degrees at Texas A&M and Stanford. He took jobs at, among others, NASA and Lockheed.

For a time, he settled in Houston, where he married and began raising two children, before moving to St. Louis, where he lives today. In 1998, on a flight back from visiting old friends in Texas, came the moment that would turn his life upside down.

At whatever elevation I was at, I suddenly got this sense that I had some really significant issues in my marriage, and the sense was I could see it potentially just going down," Janicik said.

"But at the same time, I had this overpowering, overwhelming feeling that God existed. It just intervened, so it was a bittersweet moment of great and terrible at the same time -- all on this flight on Southwest."

The spiritual reawakening was completely unexpected. Raised Catholic, Janicik said he gradually had drifted away from the church and had no relationship with God as he neared his 40th birthday. Suddenly, he said, he could empathize with Paul in the Bible, whose vision was restored after he was blinded en route to Damascus.

Even as he was going through his divorce, Janicik returned to church and began reading the Bible with renewed fervor. Then came something crazy: He read an announcement for a poetry contest and went to work. The result was "The Healer," in which he tries to capture the heavenly intervention he felt on that airline flight.

"I am an engineer," said Janicik, laughing when asked about his poetry-writing background. "I'm a technical writer. I wrote a chapter for a book with other engineering experts around the country. I probably wrote a few poems as a kid for my mom in grade school like any kid would do. But I didn't take any course in poetic expression or anything like that."

He didn't let that stop him.

"What I would do is I'd start reading the Bible and these ideas would start coming up of titles and topics and I'd just start writing," said Janicik, who later bought computer Bible software to help him pair each poem with an applicable verse. "It was inspired writing."

For several years, he simply showed them occasionally to family and friends while the work piled up on his desk. Finally, he decided to take the plunge and publish a book as his Christian witness for those going through divorce or other painful life experience.

"You're never quite sure if it's good enough," Janicik said. "I thought it was decent but I really didn't know for sure. But I had been talking about this for several years, so it was time to just ante up and do it, you know?"

The more he looked into it, the more confident he became. One of the first people he showed his poems to was Richard Johnson, a spiritual coach from whom he had taken several courses at a local church.

"Tom's poetry brings you deep into your soul in ways that make sense to the Christian sojourner," Johnson says of the book. "Read one poem every day, and your world will be brighter."

But perhaps his biggest boost came from Patricia Campbell, his daughter's honors English teacher who agreed to edit the book.

"She loved it," Janicik said. "She's saying, 'Oh, what great alliteration' and using all these different terms. I have no clue what she's talking about but apparently I do it. So, it was just something that came naturally."

Janicik wound up dividing his poems into four chapters: Brighter Days, Re-created, Treasures in Heaven and, finally, My Lighthouse. Drawings for each chapter were done by his children, Elena, 16, and his soon-to-be 15-year-old son, Tommy Jr. (who may finally be discovering the joy of wrestling as a freshman at Parkway West). The cover is also based on a sketch by his daughter, featuring the trinity of God's hands with a cross and dove.

Six months after its release, Janicik continues to see new uses for his work. Not only might it serve as a bridge between divorce-recovery groups for children and adults, but Johnson also suggested it could provide comfort to the chronically ill. That's how Janicik decided to give 10 percent of his net profits to the Susan G. Komen Foundation, which helps those with breast cancer.

"Now the other audience which I really didn't expect was the Fellowship of Christian Athletes," said Janicik, who earned an enthusiastic reception when he shared his book and testimony, with former prep wrestling teammate Bryan Mitchell's FCA chapter at Belleville West. "So the idea of teens interacting with it was huge because that's where my kids are at."

Janicik has begun to turn his poetry into songs after receiving encouragement from several well-known Christian songwriters and songwriting groups.

His first -- ironically called "Never Letting Go," inspired by Jacob wrestling with God and a throwback to Janicik's own sports career -- earned him a second-place prize at the annual meeting of Write About Jesus. Another tries to offer comfort and hope to people like his dad, Al, who currently is watching his wife, Eileen, lose her memory to Alzheimer's disease.

Janicik doesn't expect to leave his day job at Covidien for a songwriting career, but like his poem "Always Faithful to the Cast," he will continue to throw out a line to those in trouble just as he says God did for him.

"I think most people tend to be self-sufficient," Janicik said. "But you can rely on self so much that you can go too far that way and be out of balance, which is what I was. So, being quiet and listening and relying on him, my strength now blows away anything I could have ever done on my own."