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"Fear God," said the engraving on the pulpit of the chapel in Ireland I was compelled to attend as a boy. My young and truant mind used this hour every Sunday to wander far and wide, but it would always return at some point to those two syllables and their ominous message.

It seemed reasonable. There was already a long list of people and things that — in my own small way — I feared quite a lot, and it seemed only fair that the maker of the universe should be right at the top.

However, he didn't stay top for very long. Soon there was a new and very urgent supreme fear, one that was already making me grow up fast. Shortly after my 13th birthday, my mother took me with her as company when she visited a neurologist. Later, on the train home, she explained that she had been diagnosed with a rare form of progressive paralysis. She couldn't even remember its medical name but, perhaps to reassure us both, she added in her usual let's-not-make-a-fuss voice, "It's not a death sentence."

Even as she spoke, I don't think she believed it.

The day after the diagnosis and for almost every day until her death, I got out of bed 15 minutes early and, in the quietest place I could find, prayed for God to cure my mother.

It was hard work, especially once it became apparent that he was answering my prayers in a way that tested my fledgling faith. For the next two years, I watched Lou Gehrig's disease consume my mother week by week, inch by inch. The verse from First John reminds us that fear has met its match in God's perfect love but the verse goes on to warn "fear brings torment." I could relate to that.

As her ALS illness progressed, like many who watch loved ones suffer, I learned that my prayers were still being answered, even if not in the way I had hoped. For example, while she was still quite mobile, she once again took me with her on a visit to a doctor. This one offered the hope of a cure — and that hope was enough to get us on a plane to America.

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In those days, visitors from Ireland required a visa to gain entry to the U.S., but we didn't know that. Hence, we arrived visa-less and unsuspecting at the immigration desk at Kennedy Airport where our little pilgrimage of hope was stopped dead in its tracks. Or so it seemed.

The expressionless gray-haired immigration officer was coldly matter-of-fact. "No visa. No come in." His message ranked with the inscription on the chapel pulpit for its admirable brevity — and seemed just as ominous.

For a moment my mother and I stood in silence, stunned by this thunderbolt. This couldn't be happening! Horror ignited inside me: We had come all this way to save my mother's life and now this faceless official had casually blocked our path to a cure. I tried to look tall and fierce, without any obvious effect. The officer failed to quail.

My mother had a better idea. Drawing me aside she whispered, "Darling, I am going to cry. And you are *not* to worry."

And with that she stepped back up to the immigration desk and tearfully related the purpose of our mission. So effective was her performance — and, to be fair, so much well-hidden kindness must have lived in that official — that in minutes our passports were stamped with temporary permits and we were safely on our way to baggage claim and the promised land beyond.

My mother continued sobbing until we were well clear of the immigration hall. Then, to my great relief, she got out her hankie, powder compact and lipstick and made all necessary repairs before we ventured out into the chilly New York night.

Both then and later, I reflected on that little scene. Not only did it teach me a rare lesson about women and tears, it made me recognize in my tough little mother some of the qualities that we now ascribe to "the Greatest Generation." I knew that she had been an anti-aircraft gunner during the Blitz of 1940 and I supposed that, after Luftwaffe bombs, even a deadly illness — or a soft-hearted immigration official — need not seem so daunting.

In later years, when I spent a lot of time working with armed men — even temporarily becoming one myself — I remembered her example in reaching my own accommodation with fear. An accommodation, need I add, that required constant

prayerful reinforcement.

"He that fears is not made perfect in love," John continues. And it is Christ's perfect love that in turn makes us perfect too, and so liberated from fears of death and all lesser afflictions. Through the torment of my mother's suffering a simple understanding was being planted in my soul.

The fear of God that the chapel inscription encouraged in little boys was the fear of judgement and eternal damnation. Praying every morning for my dying mother, the concept of eternity grew very real for me. Yet, by the tiniest increments, so did the message of Christ's love and sacrifice by which she would begin her new and everlasting life in his loving care.

In my morning prayers now, I always try to remember to include a recognition that today could be The Day. And I remember my mother's words: "You are *not* to worry." I still fear God — it feels good for my pampered 21st-century soul. But that fear is now but the doorway to the real glory and grace of life in Christ. In John's words again — "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Perfect love. Perfect peace.

[Patrick Jephson, equerry to Princess Diana for seven years, is a journalist, broadcaster and a New York Times bestselling author, based in Washington, D.C. He is the brother-in-law of Soul Seeing editor Mike Leach and a regular contributor to the column.]

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