



This is the eighth in a series of stories for The Buffalo News by the oldest daughter of Bills great Jim Kelly.

I'm not afraid to die. The first time I heard those words I was sitting next to my mom in a New York City hotel room. It was during an interview my father had with NBC. His response to the correspondent's poignant question was filled with resolve and conviction, yet tempered with deep humility. My mother and I both looked at each other and started to cry.

Since then, my father has been interviewed numerous times and I guess due to his ongoing battle with cancer, the topic of death naturally comes up. And every time it does, he confronts it with those same words, "I'm not afraid to die."

I'm not going to talk about football or what it means to be a Buffalo Bills fan this week. Instead I'm going to tell you why my dad isn't afraid to die and why I'm not afraid, either. But before I dive into what might be uncharted waters for some of you, I'd like to make a few things clear: I'm not trying to tell you what to believe. I'm not even remotely suggesting that I've got this all figured out.

What I am going to do is share the source of my hope – a hope that is greater than me, greater than my fear, and greater than death itself. A hope that transcends time and reality, bringing light into the darkest valley. It's a hope I've found in the midst of my father's battle to stay alive so he can walk me down the aisle one day, even if he has to "crawl to do it."

I've lived long enough to know that the next heartbeat is not promised to anyone, and each breath is a gift – never to be taken for granted. I am well aware that as sure as the sun rises to bring forth a new day, filled with promise, among those promises is the assurance that life on earth will end someday.

Whether we like it or not, death comes to all of us.

I first experienced this when my brother Hunter died at just 8 years old. I remember that day as if it were yesterday – every feeling, every tear as joy intertwined with tremendous pain. Joy because I knew my brother was in Heaven and he wasn't suffering anymore. Pain because I miss him with every breath I breathe.

I didn't want my brother to die, and I don't want my father to die, either. But, I know that death is real and lays claim to each of us – whether we age out of this life and into the next, or something intrudes to violate the natural order of things to take us earlier. However, I believe there is something more real than death. Something greater. Something stronger. Something more powerful. Life.

In the Bible, in John 14:6 Jesus said unequivocally, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

The Bible is not a book about religion; it’s a book about relationship. It’s the greatest non-fiction story ever told about man’s deepest need and God’s perfect fulfillment of that need. It’s about life and death and the Creator who is beyond both holding all things together in time and eternity for His glory and our good. 1 John 5:12 clarifies what true life is, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”

My dad isn’t afraid to die because he knows and trusts the Author of Life, God. It’s that simple, and yet, it’s the most important thing for us to contemplate and conclude. He has “life” now, and when he takes his last breath, eternal life in heaven – not because of anything my father did or has done, but solely because he trusts in what Jesus already did for him. Trusting in a God, who is greater than our circumstances, greater than our very lives – isn’t merely a religious experience, or a reason to go to church – it is an ever-present active reality that is meant to be lived out one day at a time, and, as my mom would say, “one prayer at a time.”

My dad and I, we’ve been changed. As a result of the reality and fear of death we had both experienced, we have been ushered into an even greater reality. One that has taken the sting out of death because of the One who conquered it to give us life here and in eternity in all its abundance.

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