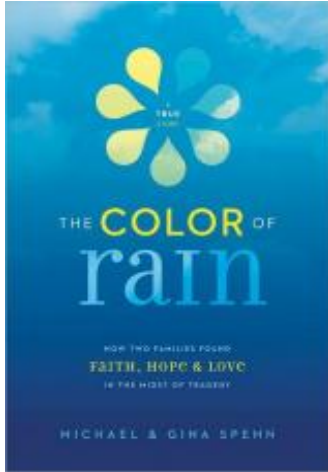


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# The Color of Rain: How Two Families Found Faith, Hope, and Love in the Midst of Tragedy

by Michael Spehn and Gina Spehn

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## About the Book

This real-life Brady Bunch story is about what it means to endure the unthinkable --- and still open one's heart to what's next. When two childhood friends die of cancer six weeks apart, the shared experience of loss brings their grieving spouses together. After months of late-night phone calls, family dinners, and countless dreams and tears, this unlikely pair builds a trust, a love, and a shared life. Told from alternating points of view, **The Color of Rain** illuminates the stepping-stones of healing that lead to a joyful new beginning for Michael and Gina Spehn and their five children. Like many who grieve, Michael and Gina had to choose to hope again. Along the way, they discovered that God can restore the darkest circumstances --- and even from death, He can bring new life. Michael and Gina's gripping story of 'growing new hearts' will inspire readers not only to survive loss but also to receive the new courage, faith, and identity that God gives in the midst of tragedy.

## Discussion Guide

### Chapter 1: The Fall

1. Gina and her father share a birthday on September 11. Where were you when the news broke about the terrorist attacks on the United States on 9/11/01? Tragedy has a way of actually bringing people together in ways they never imagined. Other than 9/11, what events have impacted your relationships?
2. Sometimes the simplest notes and letters are the most meaningful --- like the one Matt presents to Gina in the aftermath of 9/11. Have you ever received or given a letter like the one Matt wrote to Gina? What made it special?
3. What are the ways you show gratitude to the people most important to you (spouse, children, parents, siblings, friends)? How does it impact your relationships when you do?

## **Chapter 2: Mullett Lake**

1. There is a vivid description of morning on Mullett Lake. Where is your favorite place in creation and how would you ?paint the mental picture? of it?
2. Michael resisted going to Mullett Lake for the first time, but he is pleasantly surprised by how much he likes it and how wrong his images of the experience turned out to be. When have you been delighted by how wrong you were about something or someone?

## **Chapter 3: Skyline**

1. Matt saw two highly regarded specialists that had opposing viewpoints about his cancer treatment. Have you ever been in a situation where doctors have different opinions about your health issue? How did it resolve and what was your role in the decision making process? What are your views on holistic treatments?
2. Lying in a hospital bed following surgery that confirmed Matt?s cancer had metastasized, he offers a prayer not for himself, but for the nun (and her ministry) who came in to visit him. Describe a time when you thought of others in the midst of your own crisis.

## **Chapter 4: Mushroom Cloud**

1. Michael describes growing up Catholic in an area of Chicago he dubs ?Skeptic Valley.? Many young adults step away from the church when they leave home. Why do you think this is?
2. ?I always question them, I?ve never once questioned Him.? What does this mean to you? Who is ?them?? Why do so many question ?them??
3. Richard Spehn began to question his role in his children?s lives as they grew up. He was the ?old lion? who could still roar but the other lions didn?t respond the way they used to. Is this inevitable? As we age, are we destined to become less relevant?
4. As his parents are slowly allowing their relationship to dissolve, Michael is forced to watch it happen almost in slow motion. Can couples reverse the course of their relationship once it starts to atrophy? As Michael says, ?Acrimony and scorn had come to live with us ?? Once that happens can the relationship be saved?

## **Chapter 5: Win-Win**

1. Matt describes having cancer as a ?win-win.? Why do you think Matt said this to Gina? Have you ever considered that cancer or any difficult circumstance in your life could be a win-win? Do you believe, as Matt did, that having cancer is a win-win situation? Why or why not?
2. What did Matt mean when he asked Gina to walk him to the water?s edge?
3. When you read Matt?s journal entry at the end of the chapter, did your perspective shift at all?

## **Chapter 6: Just Get It Done**

1. Cathy tells Michael, ?We?re moving to California!? Have you ever made a declaration as bold as this and then followed through on it? What was the result? Knowing what you do now, would you do it again?
2. The ?rhythm of the kids? was sacred to Cathy. Are you in tune with the rhythm of your kids? (Or nieces, nephews, etc.) Truthfully, are smiling kids more important than shiny counters?
3. To Richard Spehn, ?Just get it done? was a personal mantra. He was someone who ?just got it done? throughout his life. If you were to assign a slogan or motto to yourself, what would it be?

## **CHAPTER 7: Lost Valley**

1. Matt's experience with Drew at the Major League Baseball All Star Game prompts him to generously encourage Gina to take her own "dream trip" to Lost Valley Ranch with their sons. Matt wanted her to experience the same joy he did, but he didn't want to take the trip with them. Do you feel Matt should have taken the trip with Gina and the boys? Why or why not?
2. Gina is in acute pain during her time at Lost Valley, but draws closer to God and finds true peace in the midst of it. What draws you closer to God in the midst of your circumstances? What pulls you away? What are the long-term effects of drawing closer to God?

## **CHAPTER 8: I'm Home**

1. The joy Michael feels inviting his dad to the World Series quickly deteriorates into another disagreement between the two men. Do you remember a time when pettiness and inappropriate expectations caused a problem in one of your relationships? How did it resolve?
2. Cathy is due to fly home without finding a house in Michigan. On the day they are to fly, four-year-old Danny develops a fever so they postpone for a day—just long enough for another house to come on the market. Coincidence? Fate? A God thing? When Michael once again follows Cathy's "tone" and makes it happen, is he just going along or is he slowly beginning to see God at work in his life?

## **CHAPTER 9: Freight Trains**

1. Matt and Gina wanted to protect their children from the freight train called cancer that was barreling through their young lives. They couldn't stop cancer, but they guided and protected their sons in other ways. When your children are faced with trials, how will you prepare them to cope with the circumstances? How important is faith in God to seeing our children through tragedy?
2. "Sitting down in front of the camera would mean saying good-bye. Saying good-bye would mean giving up. Giving up meant dying. Dying means not being there for the boys. Unacceptable." Matt struggled to begin making a video diary, but it is one of the greatest gifts he left for his children. What are the pros and cons of making a video diary? Would you make a video diary for your children if you were facing a terminal disease, or even if you weren't?

## **CHAPTER 10: Life Is Good**

1. "Cathy could see the righteousness in imperfect things." Is there a difference between what is "perfect" and what is "right"? What are some examples? Can something be righteous, yet imperfect to us? How?
2. The title of this chapter is, "Life is Good." Is it for Michael and Cathy? Is it perfect? Is it righteous? Is anything missing? The title of the entire section of the book in these opening chapters is "Life is Good." Do you think it is intended to be literal? What is meant by this title? Compare the lives of all four (Michael, Cathy, Matt, and Gina) when considering whether "life is good."

## **CHAPTER 11: Connections**

1. Mr. Schaffer is a teacher who likes and understands kids. He sets a great example for how to love and respect children. His actions say a lot about how he feels about kids. What do your actions say about what you think about kids?
2. Would your family and friends describe you as a Nike, Thingtime, Snailer, or Mirror? How would you describe yourself?

**a.**

?Nikes? don?t offer to give help, they just do it.

b. ?Thingtimes? offer to help with anything, anytime.

c. ?Snailers? send cards and notes of encouragement.

d. ?Mirror People? look at you and see themselves.

## **CHAPTER 12: Bibles and Basketballs**

1. Michael finds a new house of worship out on the rocks of Newport Beach, CA. To him, it is a spiritual place where he can talk to God. Is this the same as worship? Can this take the place of Sunday church? If not, why not? What?s the difference?

2. Nearly 77% of Americans call themselves Christian, yet only (at most) 40% attend church on a regular basis. This means that more than 110 million people are essentially ?out on the rocks? with Michael. What would you tell someone who says, ?You have church, I have the rocks? (or any other substitution for church)??

3. When Michael says to Cathy, ?We?ve been so lucky. We?ve been so blessed.? He is talking about the fact that so many other families have had tragedies and illnesses. Do you ever feel as though you are ?lucky? to have avoided these tragedies? Do you feel dread as though your luck may run out someday? How does that affect your faith?

## **CHAPTER 13: ?Tis the Season**

1. Michigan State University basketball coach, Tom Izzo, and NBA Star, Chauncey Billups, each came to visit Matt and his family within two weeks of Matt?s passing. You are likely not an NCAA coach or professional athlete, but your presence at the bedside of a dying friend can be a tremendous gift. Are you at ease visiting the sick or dying, or are you uncomfortable tending to stay away? Do the unpleasant, even scary sights and sounds of visiting a dying person prevent you from being present in the midst of their suffering?

2. Gina balances caring for a dying husband and making Christmas special for her young sons. For Gina, the space between tragedy, joy and every day life is the place where her faith provides clarity. What role does faith play in the midst of your circumstances? What source do you rely on to help balance the demands of an ordinary day in the midst of extraordinary trials?

3. After 13 years of marriage Matt and Gina share an intimate first when Gina gives Matt a shave. What simple, intimate moments can you find in your life to share with the ones you love?

4. Matt tells Gina, ?When I?m gone, I want you to find a good Christian man and marry him.? Would you say this to your spouse? If your spouse said this to you, how would you respond to hearing this?

## **CHAPTER 14: Coach**

1. Coaching high school basketball has become Michael?s passion. Cathy doesn?t just tolerate it she supports it fully. She actually involves herself in it to an extent as well. How do you respond to your spouse?s (or best friend?s or siblings, etc.) passions? Do you simply tolerate them or do you really support them? How do you actively show your support?

## **CHAPTER 15: So This Is Christmas**

1. Gina explained, when everything else is stripped away the only thing left to give, is love. ?If only we had the ability to live life as though it were so new or so close to the end that all we could do is give and show and become love. It seems that beginnings and endings teach us about this kind of love. It is in between that we tend to forget.? Our perspective can easily shift into a much healthier focus when the unimportant things we place above our relationships are forcibly stripped away by cancer or some other tragic circumstance. Why do you think it is so difficult to rid ourselves of

unimportant distractions until we are forced to do so? What do you need to be stripped of in order to have a better relationship with God? Spouse? Kids? Others?

2. Do you agree with Gina's decision to bring Drew into the room to say goodbye to his father?

3. Describing Matt's final moments of earthly life Gina writes, "There was an indescribable beauty in this moment." Have you witnessed the passing of a loved one into eternal life? How would you describe that moment?

### **CHAPTER 16: Applause of Heaven**

1. As you read Pastor Galik's description of taking the journey to heaven what is your reaction to knowing you too will take that journey some day?

### **CHAPTER 17: Not a Pinched Nerve**

1. Cathy is deeply moved by what she experiences at Matt Kell's funeral. Michael remains cynical and this keeps him at arm's length from St. John, the community and God's Word. Have there been moments when your cynicism has kept you separated? Did that lead to regret?

2. Cathy tried to connect with Gina Kell in the weeks after Matt Kell died. Is this your reaction when people you know are met with challenge? Do you tend to go toward people in crisis or away from them?

### **CHAPTER 18: Gratitude**

1. Knowing the positive impact Matt's video diary had on Gina and her sons, does that affect your desire to create a video diary of your own?

2. If you were to create a video diary, what would be the first thing you would want to talk about?

### **CHAPTER 19: Sixteen Days**

1. Michael hears the words, "We're praying for you?" as the sound of doom. "No one says that to someone who just won the lotto." Why not? Should they? What is your reaction when you hear those words?

2. "The long meantime?" is the time between now and the moment you do what you've been putting off. Do you have a long meantime happening in your life right now? What will it take to end it? Will it take cancer? Death? What is keeping you in your long meantime?

3. What three words would you use to describe the rift between Michael and his father? List three more that describe their reconciliation. Which group of words best describes your relationships?

### **CHAPTER 20: Five Balloons**

1. Even after receiving a new balloon to replace the one that popped, Sam was inconsolable, wanting only the original balloon. It was easy to identify the connection to his father who died only two months earlier. Being aware of the primary source of our emotional breakdowns can make human relationships much easier.

a. Were you able to recognize Sam's misdirected grief over the popped balloon?

b. Can you recall a time when you realized that a "popped balloon" in your life was not the primary source of your emotional breakdown?

c. Can you think back to a time when someone else in your life was directing emotions at you, when in fact you were not the source of their grief, anger, frustration?

## **CHAPTER 21: February 27**

1. Reflect on an experience that created such cataclysmic shift in your life that almost nothing was ever the same afterwards. Did that experience move you closer to God or further from Him? Where are you today compared to when you first experienced that shift? Is it possible to make that shift without the tragedy? What are you waiting for?

## **CHAPTER 22: The Dream**

1. Drew and Sam asked questions and expressed fears which made it possible for Gina to provide answers, comfort, and guidance in trusting God when there are no answers. How comfortable are you expressing your fears and how willing are you to trust God when there are no answers?

2. Gina's dream of Matt was like a gift. Have you ever had a vivid dream about someone you love and miss? How did it make you feel?

## **CHAPTER 23: Telling The Kids**

1. "There was nothing left for this husband to do. In fact, I no longer was a husband." Can you relate to this feeling of emptiness? Your identity has been stripped away and there really is nothing left to do. This doesn't just happen when someone dies. It also happens to those who lose their jobs or get divorced, etc. When have you felt this?

2. Michael gives his children permission to "feel the way you feel". Whether they want to laugh or cry they should feel okay to simply be themselves. Then, to prove his point he chased them around the house and gave them a big laugh. How did this initial talk and permission impact his kids in their grief? Society frowns on those who laugh "too soon". Michael gave his children permission to do it immediately. Do you agree with him? Could you do that?

## **CHAPTER 24: Not Again**

1. Who is your best friend? Why is he/she your best friend? Describe three things about your best friend that are different from all other friends.

2. When Gina first hears the news that Cathy Spehn died, she snaps. Why do you think Cathy's death was the catalyst for her meltdown?

3. Pastor Galik did not attempt trite explanations in the midst of Gina's fit. What do you think of his response to Gina? Should he have done or said more in that moment? What is your expectation of clergy in moments like this?

## **CHAPTER 25: She Wasn't There**

1. Pastor Galik comes to Michael's house, sits on the floor and ministers to 4-year old Danny, reaffirming his feelings. "I don't want her to be in heaven either Danny," Pastor Galik says. Is this the right answer for a pastor to give a 4-year old?

2. As Michael stands next to Cathy's casket he is filled with the Spirit. He says, "It had nothing to do with religion and everything to do with faith." What does he mean by this? What is the difference between religion and faith? Are they mutually exclusive? Can either exist without the other? Is it possible to have faith without religion?

## **CHAPTER 26: The Only One I Know**

1. Michael and Gina meet for the first time at the funeral visitation for Cathy. Do you understand what Michael means when he says, "You and I just met, but you're the only one I know here tonight"? Have you ever had an experience where you feel more understood by a total stranger than you do by people you have known your entire life?
2. Michael tells Gina about his conversation with Cathy the day she died. "Cathy talked about you. She told me I should call you." Why do you think Cathy told Michael to call Gina?

## **CHAPTER 27: Five Pews**

1. Why do you think Michael felt he had to speak at his wife's funeral? He calls this an "amazing time of thanksgiving"? How does faith help us reconcile being thankful to be alive here on Earth and still rejoicing that our loved one is in heaven?
2. There is a moment of quiet reflection after the funeral for Michael. He leans "against the brick wall of the church." Why is this line included in the text? Is he still as cynical as always? What does the fact that he leans on the church and never loses contact with the "rough surface" indicate to you?
3. As he stands alone in the cold he says, "I knew that whatever this was, the really hard part was likely still to come." What does he mean?

## **CHAPTER 28: Calling Gina Kell**

1. Pastor Galik asks Michael to tell him about Cathy. This simple gesture made a significant impact on Michael. Why is it important to speak the names of those who have died? Do people seem uncomfortable doing that? Why?
2. Michael is told that he is grieving the loss of two people: Cathy and the man he was when she was alive. What transitions have you gone through where you grieved for the loss your "old self"? Did you realize it at the time?
3. Michael's neighbor Ed organizes a gift for Michael's family: a deep freezer stocked with food. This was a classic "Nike" thing to do. Have you ever extended yourself to a friend or neighbor in such a way? How did you feel afterwards? How was it received?

## **CHAPTER 29: Dinner With Strangers**

1. Why do you think Michael and Gina brought their families together for dinner for the first time? Why do you think it was so comfortable and "normal"?
2. If Gina insisted on doing the dishes in your home after having dinner with you for the first time, how would you react? Did you relate more to Michael or Gina in that moment?
3. When Michael asks Gina, "How is it that you are here, sitting on my couch tonight"? what does Gina mean when she answers, "By the grace of God."?

### **CHAPTER 30: You Can't Do This Alone**

1. When family and friends try to help Michael he only sees people telling him he's doing it all wrong. How can we better serve the ones we love without trampling boundaries?
2. Perhaps even without knowing it, Michael seems to be articulating his faith in God more and more. When he says that he doesn't necessarily know what he is going to do, but he is certain what he is not going to do, how is this like Scripture?
3. Michael's children present him with a contract to sign, promising that he will never marry another woman. Why does he sign it so willingly? Why not sit the kids down and explain that there actually may be a time when he does meet someone and wants to marry them?

### **CHAPTER 31: Working Mom**

1. Gina talks with Cathy's father, Larry, and they agree, "People just don't understand" their losses. Later, Gina visits the cemetery with her boys and realizes many people really do understand. Loss is a shared, universal human experience. Do you agree? Do you feel understood in your losses?
2. Sam was comforted by his time at the cemetery, whereas Drew was not comfortable being there. Do you find comfort in visiting the gravesite of a loved one?

### **CHAPTER 32: Turquoise Lake**

1. Did you understand Gina's need to take the hike to Turquoise Lake? Did you agree with her decision to ask forgiveness later, rather than ask permission first?
2. How would you have responded to her after she returned to the condo?
3. Is it ever right to be selfish at the expense of others? Does being selfish always mean somehow shortchanging others? Is it necessary, even Biblical, to be selfish? Consider the second commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself" when you ponder your answer.

### **CHAPTER 33: Because She Knows**

1. Michael and Gina have late night phone calls where they talk about everything, including faith. This is one of the topics (along with politics) that most people want to stay away from. Why can't we talk about our faith more? Why is religion such a taboo subject? With almost 80% of the country calling themselves Christian, why isn't there more agreement on the subject? Do you think that more conversation is the answer? Or less?
2. Intercessory prayer is something that many are confused about. What is your view on intercessory prayer? How do you explain it to those "out on the rocks"? How is prayer a part of your life?

### **CHAPTER 34: Take The Walk**

1. The twenty-dollar bill hits Michael the wrong way. When in your life were you the recipient of help but it felt like pity?
2. When Gina says, "Take the walk" she is once again sneaking a little Scripture in to Michael without even him knowing it. Psalm 46 says, "Be still and know that I am God"? Why is this so difficult to do? Does it ever feel irresponsible to "let go and let God"?

### **CHAPTER 35: Date Night**

1. Michael and Gina discuss and even laugh about the awkward things people say to the bereaved. What do you think is the best thing to say to a grieving person? Have you ever been in a situation where you or another person said something



awkward or inappropriate? Can you laugh about it now or was it hurtful?

2. Gina addresses feeling of regret and destructive thinking. Do you understand what she meant when she wrote, "I had been trying to live in the moment by sitting in one place, waiting for something to happen. Before despair could take root something needed to move, and it had to be me"? Have you ever been stuck? How did you start moving again?

3. What do you think is an appropriate amount of time to wait before a widow/widower starts dating? Does that time frame have anything to do with the calendar?

### **CHAPTER 36: Happy Patio**

1. Michael tells Gina about the power of the backyard and that mom's need to "let the kids do their thing" without interfering at the first sign of conflict. Do you agree with Michael? What kind of parent are you in these situations?

2. Although the families were spending a lot of time together, do you agree with Michael and Gina's decision to avoid all signs of affection in front of the children? How did you feel about the timing of their first kiss?

### **CHAPTER 37: Foundations**

1. Who are the people that form the foundation of your life? Do they know it? Have you lost any of them?

2. Gina shows strong leadership by presenting her ideas, asking for support and proceeding in the face of opposition. What situations have you been in, where you proceeded in the face of opposition? Were you successful? How do you discern when to listen to those in opposition and when to follow your heart?

### **CHAPTER 38: The Double Rainbow**

1. In the opening paragraph of this chapter Gina writes, "My deepest personal regret it that it took a terminal illness to bring about this simple change." When you read this, are you aware of any areas of your life that you could change now, before you have a regret like this?

2. What does it mean to see the color of rain in your life? Describe a time when you have seen the color of rain in the midst of your circumstances.

3. Do you see Biblical themes in Michael and Gina's love story? How do they apply these to your own life story?

### **CHAPTER 39: On Both Knees**

1. "Love is not a zero sum game." True or False? Do you see love as an ever-expanding force in your life? Where in your life have seen evidence that we grow new hearts?

2. "Grief can actually be an extremely healthy experience"? However for some, grief becomes a lifestyle. What drives some into this despair? What are the ways you can help friends and family stay connected and out of the "grief lifestyle"?

3. Michael and Gina decide to "take the walk" together and get married. Does this mean that their grief is over? Does moving forward mean the same as "getting over it"?

### **CHAPTER 40: Replacement Parts**

1. Gina recaps the unexpected blessings that have poured forth in the midst of losing her beloved husband. Can you see how the experiences you have regretted or resented most in your life are those things God intends to use for some good in your life? He also intends for us to use what we learn to help others. Describe a time your trials or tragedies were used to serve others.

2. Has someone you know remarried following the loss of a spouse? In your opinion was it replacement or redemption? Why?

## **CHAPTER 41: Holy Water**

1. Michael and Cathy rarely spoke about their desires for funerals and final resting places. Does your family know your wishes?

## **CHAPTER 42: Here Comes the Sun**

1. Are you in a blended family? If so, what are your biggest challenges and joys? If not, what do you perceive to be the biggest challenges and joys?

2. Do you think grief is more difficult on memorial dates such as anniversaries, birthdays and other holidays compared to other days of the year?

3. Gina's friend Katherine kept a hand-written prayer journal for Gina and her boys, for 12 months. Have you ever given or received a gift like this?

## **CHAPTER 43: The New Day**

1. Pastor Galik's message at the wedding was "He turned their mourning into dancing"? What does turning "mourning into dancing" mean to you? Does redemption mean "happy endings"? What does redemption mean in your life today?

## **Author Bio**

Michael and Gina Spehn, joined together by the loss of their spouses, co-founded The New Day Foundation for Families, which provides financial, emotional and spiritual resources for families with children who have lost a parent to cancer. They are privileged to share their story and faith as speakers and as hosts of a weekly talk radio show, "Your Family Matters," in Detroit, MI. Michael and Gina, along with their five children, make their home in southeastern Michigan.

## **Critical Praise**

"It's so refreshing to hear people giving glory to God, even through trials and adversity. I'm sure it's not the story either of them would have written for themselves, but it's a beautiful story --- and one I'd definitely recommend for anyone to read!"

--- Heidi Strawser ("Heidi's Ramblings, Reflections & Reviews")

"Their story is so powerful you will change how you think about life and how you go about your daily living."

--- Jeff Carter ("Points and Figures")

"This is an inspiring story for any who have gone through a season of personal loss."

--- Elaine Raxon, CBA Retailers & Resources

"THE COLOR OF RAIN is not only an instant bestseller, but also an instant classic, certain to be pressed into the hands of hundreds of thousands of grieving men and women by their closest friends. It is simply a profoundly moving guidebook to the Valley of the Shadow."

--- Hugh Hewitt, Host of "The Hugh Hewitt Radio Show"

"Michael and Gina personify the beauty that God can bring out of the ashes of sorrow."

--- Kathie Lee Gifford, Actress, Singer, Songwriter and co-host of the "Today Show's Fourth Hour"

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