

Magic in the Pediatric Ward

Cathleen K. Chopra-McGowan

And above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it. -Roald Dahl

*Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:
I wish her a lucky passage. -Richard Wilbur*

The young mother sitting beside a crib in the pediatric ward where I was a volunteer was beyond grief. Just out of the Intensive Care Unit herself, she had lost one of her newborn twin daughters. The other was hovering between life and death. It nearly broke my heart when she smiled at me sadly and said, "These things happen. It is not our place to question God's plan." She told me that she knew she had to be strong because she had to live for her other daughter. I marveled at her faith: frail, but not broken, despite her agonizing loss. At nineteen, how could she possess such wisdom to bear this pain?

Here in India, women like this young mother are not uncommon. Most girls are married very young, and often have two or even three children by the time they are twenty-one. On that day, however, this mother's plight hit home-perhaps because her little baby, barely visible through all the tubes, reminded me of someone I love: my sister, Moy Moy.

My little sister was born three months premature on a roadside in India, as her mother was coming down from the mountains to my town for a routine checkup. When she went into labor unexpectedly, the bus pulled over and she delivered her baby on the side of the road. Her mother had already planned to give the baby up for adoption, having been talked out of having an abortion. My family adopted May two weeks later. We were aware that because she was so premature, she might have developmental problems. It was still a shock, though, when she was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of three, and at five with a rare neurological degenerative disorder.

On the surface, the young mother in the hospital and I have little in common beyond age and

gender. At that moment, however, having a sister with a disability erased the boundaries separating us. I knew a little of what she was feeling because I had felt it myself: a deep, aching sadness and overwhelming grief at the loss, but a strong need to find the dark cloud's silver lining.

Whether the loss of a loved one is sudden, like the death of the young mother's baby girl, or gradual like my sister's, it is heartbreaking to live through. As Moy's disorder has progressed, she has lost her ability to talk, walk, and even eat. Each phase has been devastating-how can I describe the grief of watching my little sister go backwards? For me, the worst has been the fear of the unknown, having no idea what she'll lose next. However, with each change in Moy's development, I've also found something to celebrate, something to appreciate. It was only when Moy began to lose her speech that I realized the emotional depth that can be communicated through silence. When I accept Moy as she is, everything else falls into place. Maybe this is the wisdom that the young mother possessed. As tragic as her baby's death was, it was her reality and her only choice was to accept it.

Acceptance did not come easily or quickly to me. I loved my sister, but I always thought there must be *something* that could be done to make her life easier and longer. It took me a long time to realize that the way I felt was actually rejecting the person my sister was. As she moved backwards developmentally, I slowly moved forward in my understanding of what was really the only option: acceptance. Moy brought me to re-examine the way I look at life. I tend to make quick judgments and form immediate opinions, and I love the idea of perfect order. I like fitting people and things into categories. Moy taught me that the world doesn't always work that way; people fit into multiple categories. Even though I understand this concept intellectually, I am still struggling with it in reality. I am still learning to take life one day at a time, and am continually surprised by the joy of simply living in the moment. The most valuable thing I have learned is that *now* is the only time there is.

The most challenging time in my acceptance of the gravity of Moy's condition was last year, when she lost the ability to eat. After a lot of deliberation, we decided to go through with a surgical procedure to put a tube in her stomach. It seemed so cruel to me that she was robbed of the simple

pleasure of tasting food. Yet, as we worried and obsessed over the details of her nourishment - How would we know when she was full? When she was hungry? - Moy just smiled angelically and seemed completely unperturbed. It was as though she was on an entirely different plane of understanding. It reminded me of how Jesus said: "Do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink' or 'What will we wear?' For your heavenly Father knows you have need of these things" (Mt. 6: 31-32). Worrying about how we were going to manage, and how Moy would adjust to the tube was actually doubting God's presence in our lives. It was as though we were suggesting that God would not be there when we called upon him.¹ With her soft smile, Moy once again reminded us of this and gently helped us remember to place our faith in God and accept that whatever happened was a part of His bigger plan.

As I think about the young mother, I realize her cargo could not have been greater and that her passage will probably not be swift or grand, but her graceful acceptance of reality is what can make the passage a lucky one. I know this is true because I've seen it work in my own family. The only way to come to terms with tragedy is to accept that it is a part of God's larger plan, and that there is a purpose to all that He does. This is a truth people spend years searching for, but families like mine and the young mother's are lucky to have been blessed with experiences that, heartbreaking as they may be, have taught us so much about life, acceptance, faith and love. The young mother and I bear a heavy cargo, but it is a lucky one, too.

Works Cited

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¹A similar idea has been reflected in an article by my mother, Io McGowan, titled, "Feeding My Daughter" in *Commonweal Magazine*. 13 Jan. 2006. Commonweal Foundation: New York.