

Birth of an Angel



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Death

Monday, June 04, 2007. My beloved son Carlo passed away. He was fourteen years old. His battle against Hodgkin's disease was finally over. The sufferings, pains and agonies he endured for thirty three months had ended. Bravely he faced his death in grace at 12:40 in the afternoon in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit of St. Luke's Medical Center in Quezon City, where he was confined and treated.

An hour before my son breathed his last, the doctors in the ICU called to tell me and his mother Nancy about their prognosis. They wanted us to come immediately in case anything happened.

Earlier we were in the ICU when the priest arrived to perform the holy rite for the sick. I told Nancy to go ahead, and when she came back she told me that I needed to sign some papers.

The walk on the aisle from our private room to the ICU seemed to last a lifetime. I held Nancy's hand. Her eyes were swollen from lack of sleep and tears. As we walked towards the ICU, I could not help but weep deep inside me for this woman, the mother of my dying son. She had spent most of her time with our son. Ever since he was stricken with the disease, she never left him alone. I had witnessed her devotion to our son, how she cared for him and comforted him to ease his pain and suffering.

Unwittingly, she had neglected herself. Now pale and bent, she had turned into some kind of slave who was always on her knees, pleading not for her own freedom, but for deliverance of her son from the grip of pain and agony. She had often prayed for a miracle in exchange for his

life. A simple daughter of a poor but righteous farmer, she had no desire for fame, wealth and money. Her only joys and treasures were her children.

I had often shared her sadness over things she loved and lost. I had often told her that those things could be replaced. But this time, how could I comfort her when I too was in so much pain and grief? I could not do anything for her anymore. I could not buy another life to replace the loss of our little boy. It will be a long and endless agony for her and for me.

When the door of the ICU closed behind us, doctors, nurses and the unit staff approached us with solemn faces. They were speaking to us one after another in medical terms. My mind refused to hear and comprehend what they were saying. I seemed to have developed a firewall in my brain to protect myself from overwhelming information about my son's condition.

From where I stood six meters away, I looked at my son. For the first time in many days I could see him lying on his back in deep, calm sleep. The absence of struggling for air, the serenity on his face, and the normal movements of his chest sent me ripples of joy and comfort. It was so refreshing to see him at peace, asleep.

"...Cardiac Arrest," I heard one doctor say as he blurted out long and scholarly statements of hazy "ifs" and "whens".

They were asking me to decide on an aggressive mode of treatment. Breathlessness could lead to respiratory failure which would cause cardiac arrest, etc. Indeed, the hospital boasted of this most advanced treatment to keep someone alive.

But why should I be the one to decide?

It was the most difficult question I ever had to answer in my lifetime. In all his treatments and confinements, it was always a question of whether or not we will proceed with routine treatment protocols, laboratory tests, and medical procedures. Now it was very different.

Why did they have to ask me this?

God had surely abandoned me. He did not hear my prayers and devotions. Was he punishing me for the grave sins I committed against him?

In a long moment of terrifying and painful loneliness, I was confronted by my personal sinfulness. One by one the laws of heaven flashed before me in a long checklist that categorized my inequities.

"Oh my God, I beg You. Please spare me from this! My greatest fear aside from the scorching fire of hell is the awareness that You are not with me when I most needed You to be with me."

It had never crossed my mind that one day I would be asked to decide on whether someone was going to live or die. God must be very angry, for if it were not so, He could have healed my son after those long and painful treatments. Or He could have taken him in his sleep or through some compassionate way. He could have spared me from this misery.

I scanned the room and stared at the big and small contraptions attached to life-giving machines. Plastic tubes were attached to my son's nostrils and one was coming out of his mouth. A tube was piercing his left arm and the other was running toward his left foot. Bottles of dextrose hung on the left side of the bed. A plastic bag under the bed sagged with a small quantity of hazy urine.

Although asleep his eyelids were half-open just like when he tried to wake himself up in the early hours of the morning to go to school. He hated to be induced to sleep; in fact he despised sleep. Even with his ailment my son remained ambulant. He loved to move about and kept himself busy all the time.

His breathing began to be erratic again. The machine beside the bed was doing the breathing for him, supplying fresh oxygen on one tube and taking out carbon dioxide via the other one. He was going through another episode of *dyspnea* or breathlessness.

From what I perceived as I looked around him, I came to a decision. I was seeing two different scenarios. The first was my son, peaceful and tranquil in his sleep. He lay there free of the disease and its pains and agonies. The second one was him with all the tubes and artificial life-lines. Even if he woke up from one aggressive treatment, those tubes were what he would again feel and see. My heart bled just to think of letting him go. But I would die each day seeing him suffer.

"Will I revive him only to let him suffer in unabated pain, or will I let him go now in the serenity of his sleep? Oh my God, please look down on me and show me the way."

I looked away from my son. With a calm voice, loud enough to be heard by everyone in the room, I said "Doctor, if you can tell me that after doing your best to revive my son in the event of a cardiac arrest, that someday he would then walk out of this room and this hospital free of the disease, then by all means doctor, please do it. But if you revived him after cardiac arrest, and he would still feel the same pains and sufferings after the procedure, please let him go. We don't want him to come back for more rounds of torture. Coming back, he would only be living an artificial life beyond the will of the Almighty. We would then be encroaching on His power to give and take back what He has given."

The doctor nodded and said, "You have to sign the DO NOT REVIVE form".

Joshua, "classmate" of my son, was also being treated of cancer by the same doctor in the same hospital. His mother approached me and said. "You are right; you made the right decision."

Joshua, fourteen years old, had been suffering from cancer of a different kind for more than three years. He had been confined in that hospital for one and half years, spending the last five months in the Isolation Room of the Intensive Care Unit. He was being kept alive artificially, but he was unconscious

The boy had suffered much in the operations, injections and chemotherapy sessions. These supposedly curative procedures had ruined his body and shattered his spirit.

His condition had left a heavy toll on his loved ones. They too, had hoped and prayed for a miracle.

Ironically, man's wisdom no matter how advanced and sophisticated is still unable or incapable of treating many diseases. Most men of science and medicine still do not understand the mystery of life—that in the microscopic world of our body, not only the cells exist but also the spirit, the breath of life that God has given us.

Available treatments today offer only a short life extension, a hit-or-miss approach that does not guarantee total cure. With conventional treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the patient suffers great emotional anguish. These treatments destroy the bodies even of those who aren't that ill to start with—how much more the bodies of those who are truly sick? When the body is destroyed the spirit is likely to be destroyed also for the two are inseparable and closely fused together.



My son Carlo in April, 2004 six months before he stated having colds and fevers

Without faith we will never understand and appreciate that death is a cure by itself for the spirit and eventually for its mortal body. Though the body ails, the Spirit remains alive. As we look beyond our bodies and into the realm of our Spirits, we will begin to understand the mystery of life. Death is merely the door towards a complete recovery of the whole being. To enter that door is to be completely healed.

This was the reason I agreed to sign the "DO NOT REVIVE" form. By doing so, I was allowing my son's body to enter that door of eternal healing.

While walking back to our room, a nurse beckoned us, "Your son is in a critical situation. He will go any time now." I froze and for a moment, I could not move. Those words were like bullets which disabled me instantly. At that time, my son's brothers Luis, John Gerald and John Angel arrived. I motioned them toward the ICU.

At the ICU, doctors, nurses and hospital aides formed a circle around my son's bed. A man stood at a foot stool above everyone else, his palms pressing my son's chest at regular pace and pressure. At the time, I could see that my son's vital sign was still fluctuating.

A nurse approached me and handed me a chart and a pen. Almost halfway toward the bed, I signed it—the Do Not Revive form.

In an instant, the monitor went flat. My son was dead.

Everything seemed to stop. Silence, then crying and weeping filled the room. I moved to my son's bedside. I held his cheek on my left palm. There was only a thin layer left between his bones and skin. Emaciated, he had gone through an involuntary cleansing. I had wondered where the dark and murky stools he was expelling were coming from since he wasn't eating anything.

Later I realized that it was physical purification—he was ridding his body of earthly nourishment, to prepare him for another set of treatments. But this time a very effective one for it was divine treatment; not developed or made in America, Korea or India, but prepared in heaven.



My son Carlo in February 2007, after his radiotherapy

I brought my lips close to his ear. Tears were rushing from my eyes, finding its way on his left cheek, "Good-bye my son, I am sorry for the things I may have or have not done to spare you from all these. Good-bye."

Then I blamed myself for this fateful end. He trusted me with his life. I made most of the decisions in all his treatments, medical tests and procedures. I dropped most of my daily activities, including my job to spend full time with him in our search for finding the cure. I spent many nights up to the wee hours of the morning scanning the internet for clinical information, stories of success, and of new drugs and protocols. But all my efforts proved futile.

For his part, he followed religiously all directions and advices, took the bitter tastes of medicines, and endured the pains of injections and operations. Most of all he willingly submitted his frail body to eight months of chemotherapy plus two months of radiotherapy on. Unafraid to die he was rather afraid of the harm his death may bring to me and his mother. He persevered knowing that we weren't prepared to let him go.

He bravely endured all long and immediate side-effects of these treatments by looking forward to the day he would be delivered from the disease and makes us happy. My tears flowed unabatedly as I ushered his wailing mother and weeping brothers out of the ICU.

In the passing minutes after he was pronounced dead, I was in a state of shock, wailing and crying profusely. Mixed emotions enveloped me as if an enormous blanket of dark clouds embraced my being. I shook uncontrollably trying to convince myself I was asleep. I told myself that all these events happening were mere parts of a long bad dream. I must wake up from this nightmare and move to a happy, altered state of reality. I tried to flee from this grim reality but I could not.