

Precious Life; Precious Loss

Ellen Beaudry

ABSTRACT

The author, the mother of a tiny newborn, shares her story at the end of her son's life in the neonatal intensive care unit.

The news was delivered abruptly, almost violently. The neonatologist flew in the room, launched himself up on a stool next to Truman's isolette, and said, "We just received your son's white blood cell count. It is 600. He is not going to win against whatever infection he has. You need to hold your son now."

Little one-pound, two-ounce Truman's heart rate and oxygen saturation continued to fall. The chaplain arrived with shells and holy water. She asked for our son's full name. I spoke carefully, "Truman Mark Beaudry."

There was an almost palpable sense of reverence in the room. I was grateful for the professional, human respect. He was baptized, as everyone in the room paused with heads bowed. I whispered, "Amen."

Truman's nurse worked quickly to disconnect him from all support. The respiratory therapist opened the sides of the isolette and carefully placed him in my arms. I cradled my son as tears began to

roll down my cheeks, onto his raw, pink skin. Most of the staff cleared the room, leaving us alone.

I realized that while Truman had struggled mightily for 10 hours, this was my one wish: I just wanted to hold him. I whispered how much we loved him, how badly I wanted him, how sorry I was—for everything. I pulled him in close and began to sing softly,

Terry asked the nurse to listen for Truman's heart. She brought over her stethoscope and listened carefully, allowing Terry to listen, too. Every once in a while there was still a soft beat. I tried my best to rock him in the wheelchair. I kissed his little head again and again. He never moved or seemed in pain. At some point, Truman silently slipped away.

We thought our four older boys deserved a chance to see their brother. So Terry called our family and explained what happened, asking my dad to bring them to the hospital. We asked to speak to the child-life specialist. She offered to help Terry meet the boys and to talk to them before they would come in Truman's room. She planned some activities. We requested that a lot of the big equipment be moved from the room. Also, my wonderful postpartum nurse traveled back and forth all day from her unit to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) to care for me. She brought me a clean nightgown and even styled my hair to make me more presentable.

The daytime NICU chaplain was present and took tons of photos. While we were extremely grate-

Ellen Beaudry is the Mother of Baby Truman, who died shortly after his birth.

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ful for those, we were sad our repeated requests for a professional photographer from Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep¹ were unfulfilled. We also would've loved to have video footage of Truman in life and in death. What a treasure that would have been.

I was holding Truman as the boys entered his room. They were mostly excited to see the baby. They each took turns holding him. The boys completed a handprint project and colored pictures. Then they went with Terry and my family to have lunch at the Ronald McDonald house in the hospital.

Alone with my son, I cradled him close, rocking back and forth, and crying. Sometimes I could hum a tune. Mostly I just breathed him in, taking deep breaths of the son who was growing cold in my arms despite the love I felt in my heart. I prayed he would forgive me.

Two hours later, the boys came to say good-bye. I didn't tell them they wouldn't see Truman again.

Once our family left, my nurse convinced me to go back to my room to lie down. My ankles were so swollen and I had never even been cleaned up after surgery. My sister was there and offered to stay with Truman. I reluctantly went back to my room.

Later, I asked to go back to the NICU. Terry's mom and sister were on their way and my nurse had suggested that I give Truman a bath. I unwrapped Truman, took off his diaper and removed all his bandages. It was good to see all of him. The nurse helped me fill a tub with warm water and she held Truman's head while I bathed him. It felt good to wash clean some of the wounds left from his IV and respirator. I sang "Rubber Duckie" to him, just like I do for all the boys at bath time. It made me feel like his mother and I am grateful his nurse suggested it.

When the last of our family left, Terry suggested I say good-bye before Truman's body changed even more, but I just wasn't ready to let him go. I knew this was the last time I would ever hold him in my arms, kiss his tiny face, caress his tiny hands and feet. I held him close and rocked so vigorously. I pulled back his blankets and kissed him a thousand times on every tiny speck of his body. I handed him over to the nurse. I thanked her for all she did for us. I said good-bye to our son forever.

NOTE

1. The mission of Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep is "to introduce remembrance photography to parents suffering the loss of a baby with a free gift of professional portraiture." According to its webpage, the 501(c)3 organization has "approximately 1,500 active photographers [and] reaches every state in the United States and . . . 40 coun-

tries worldwide." <https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/about-us/our-mission-vision-reach/mission/>