

Carol Abrahams

DANCING

When Donna told me about this project several weeks ago, my story came to mind and I quickly volunteered to share it. I must admit that, since then, I've grown increasingly anxious and spent a lot of time trying to rationalize my way out of this. But here I am.

If you know me, then I apologize in advance, because you must have heard some version of all of this before. If you don't know me, I'll tell you that I've given birth to one child. She was born on December 23, and we brought her home on Christmas day inside of a baby-sized red stocking they gave us at the hospital. She was perfect in every way. I quit my job, much to my ex-husband's displeasure, and spent the next 2 ½ years watching my darling daughter grow.

There are those times--watershed events, benchmark events—that define our lives, I think. I'm speaking for only myself of course, but I expect that everyone has their own defining time or two. They are the times by which we measure all other times: That was 2 years before the event, this was 3 years after.

Looking back now, my defining time began with a busy telephone signal—before the age of cell phones even. It was July 5, 1994, and we had just returned from a gathering of friends at Deep Creek Lake. Amy was about 2 1/2. Something seemed “off” with her, maybe a fever, she seemed like she lacked energy. I'd called the pediatrician for advice and gotten that blessed busy signal. Not wanting to wait (maybe another blessing, mother's intuition?) I decided to just take her in anyway and they could hopefully squeeze her in.

We were in luck. Dr. Tang began the exam, and her brows creased when she felt Amy's round, hard little belly. (This felt worrying.) She called one of her colleagues in to consult. (I was getting concerned.) Then the senior physician from the practice was summoned. (I became frantic.) They told me that they felt a mass in her belly that they needed to identify and sent me to a nearby radiologist for an emergency ultrasound. (Panic set in.)

Amy was compliant and sweet and giggled as the cold jelly tickled her abdomen. I will never forget watching the radiologists face: I saw an expression of profound sorrow come into the doctor's eyes. He told me there was indeed a mass, but insisted that he didn't know what it was. (I didn't believe him, not for a second. Silent hysteria was taking hold.) He told me, though, to return to the pediatrician immediately for the results.

They had detected a large tumor of uncertain origin. (I felt denial, disbelief, and just praying to wake up.) I was told to pack the minimum necessary, do not pass “GO” and take her to Children's Hospital immediately. With me working on emotional auto-pilot, I got Amy to Children's where she was admitted to the pediatric oncology ward. Amazingly, this took only minutes. I didn't leave the hospital for a week.

One very distinct memory from that day is this: After getting my Honey Bunny settled in her hospital crib—she just a baby, after all—I remember standing at the rails gazing at her, unable to stop crying. I didn't want to cry in front of my child, but it was as if a spigot had been turned and I couldn't stop. She reached over the railing to pat my face, say, "Don't cry, Mommy. Everything will be ok. Don't cry Mommy."

Amy was soon diagnosed with Wilms' tumor, a childhood cancer of the kidneys. The tumor had started in her left kidney, completely filled it, as large as a cantaloupe, I was told. It then crawled up the largest vein in the body, the interior vena cava, or IVC. The tumor was classified as advanced stage 3, because it was at, but not in, her heart. The doctors told me that the tumor was right at the entrance to the heart, though, so depending on the beat of the heart, could be considered stage 4, the end stage of cancer.

Well, the next six months were a blur of hospital visits, chemotherapy treatments, daily cleaning of Amy's port-a-cath (installed in her chest so she didn't have to get stuck for every chemotherapy infusion). This would test the patience of even the saintliest toddler, and Amy stayed pretty much cheerful and sweet. We went to the zoo, then on more private walks when she needed to avoid crowds. We read scads of books and hosted many tea party with stuffed animal friends. We celebrated holidays like "Wednesday" with little cakes with funny faces. After all, the doctor said, "Sugar is your friend now." She may have lost her hair from the chemo, but she didn't lose any weight.

Trite as it might sound, we learned to celebrate every day. There was a sense of desperate joy in loving her—maybe other parents of very sick children feel this too—knowing that we might lose her soon. As the time for her surgery grew closer, this became even more intense. During our final pre-surgical meeting with the surgeon, he told us that there was "a significant possibility" that Amy would not survive the surgery. The proximity of the tumor to the heart was a serious complication.

Amy's surgery took place over the longest 14 hours of my life. We surely owe her life to the skill and teamwork shown by the medical staff. Legend has it that there were 23 surgeons involved or at the ready, as well as a heart-lung machine.

Amy's prognosis improved dramatically once she survived the surgery. Her recovery was miraculous. After a day she left the intensive care ward and the next day she sitting up and talking, cheerful as ever, and her IV was removed. She was thrilled with her first meal of dry cheerios. I remember that she gave me a thoughtful look after a taste of cereal, stood up, and held out her arms to me. She said, "Mommy, let's dance!" And I lifted her from her crib, we sang "La la la la la" to the tune of the Blue Danube and we waltzed through that hospital room cheek to cheek.

We're still dancing together, most recently at her wedding celebration last summer. Amy is now 26, happy, healthy, a newlywed with a blossoming marriage and career. She has been nurtured and loved by many in this church for over 20 years now. She still lights my life.