

Kelly's Gift

by David Corbly

"Mama, Papa--Kelly's having a bad dream and she's not waking up."

With these words by our 8-year-old daughter Megan hours earlier, all of our lives began a journey that would change us forever.

Now, as my wife Ann and I squeezed in close to Kelly in her bed in the Intensive Care Unit of Children's Hospital in Dallas, we were living through our own bad dream.

One look at Kelly told much of the story. Our sweet little happy-go-lucky 5-year-old girl lay motionless and silent. The only sounds were the beeps and hums of the medical monitors, the in-and-out breathing of the respirator--and our sobs. Half of Kelly's beautiful brown curly hair had been shaved off, and the staples that held her skull together after brain surgery curved around her head like stitches on a football.

"Kelly had a massive hemorrhage of blood vessels deep inside her brain," the doctor told us after surgery. "It's called an arteriovenous malformation. Large areas of her brain are damaged, and the pressure in her head is unsustainable. She's in a drug-induced coma while we try to bring the pressure down. She may not survive."

Kelly could die. From the moment we were unable to wake her, through the soul-piercing sound of the ambulance and then the beating of the helicopter that rushed her off to Dallas, on the agonizingly long drive as we raced to join her--throughout all of this we knew that Kelly could die. But to hear it said, and to see her after surgery: it was all too much for us to bear.

It was then that we knew we had only two choices: turn to God in anger, or turn towards Him for mercy. We chose to turn towards Him, and prayed: constantly, silently, alone and together. Turning towards God didn't mean we didn't ask Him why, or that we were thankful for what had happened. It simply meant that we trusted Him to take care of Kelly, whether through a miracle, or by taking her home to Heaven.

God chose to take her home. Ann knew it first--a sudden and subtle change in the room and in Kelly as her spirit left her body--and then the monitors flatlined on brain activity. Her brain stem was barely functional, and her lungs moved only because of the respirator.

We hit bottom. Over the past 30 hours, we had learned the difference between crying and weeping; now we wept as never before. We felt so empty...and then, after a while: God filled us. He filled us with a grace like we had never known before, a glowing inside, and an extra sensitivity and compassion for people.

Another source of strength for us--and the first realization that God wasn't done yet with the story of Kelly--was being approached about organ donation. Kelly was a perfect candidate: young, all organs intact, no illness--only brain death. As the organ donor coordinator, Mary, lovingly explained how each part of Kelly's body could save lives, hope filled our souls, along with gratefulness that God had entrusted us with a decision that could bless others through Kelly's gift of life. We said yes.

While we waited for organ transplant matches, our other children came with their Grandpa Corbly to say goodbye to Kelly. It was so hard. They were so young: Tim was 12; Sean was 10, Megan was 8, and Chris was 7. They

had made her cards, some with hopeful get-well wishes, some with little puppy drawings. Kelly loved puppies, especially five little stuffed golden retriever puppies that she carried everywhere with her. We had brought them with us to comfort her when she woke up. When the children left, they each took a puppy to remember her by. All but one, for Kelly.

Days passed as we waited on transplant matches. All of the organs had to be harvested at the same time, and the final match--the heart--was taking the longest. But God's reasons for the waiting became more apparent each day. The nurses talked about how Kelly's room was filled with a peace like they had never known before. Beautiful, healing music by our dear friends the Burnfields floated out into the hallway. Friends and family who came to console us left feeling as if they had been ministered to.

Finally one evening, Mary rushed excitedly into Kelly's room: "We've got a match on Kelly's heart! It's a little 2-year-old boy--and he's here, at Children's! This isn't normal procedure, but--would you like to meet him and his family?"

Did we ever! We could hardly contain our excitement as Mary wound us through corridor after corridor, level after level. Finally, we made it to his room.

Joshua. He was so small in his big bed, so out of place attached to heart monitors normally associated with late life. He had already survived several heart surgeries to try to repair a defect--hypoplastic left heart syndrome--but his only remaining hope was a new heart. Kelly's heart.

We had brought a picture of Kelly to show to Joshua's family, but Joshua motioned to see it. He couldn't talk because of a swollen throat, but he

communicated with us through deep, soulful eyes and gentle motions. Kelly was wearing a floppy straw hat in the photo. Joshua lifted his hands to his head, then slid them gracefully downward and out, curving a shape in the air like Kelly's hat. Then he studied her eyes, and touched his: they were the same dark, wistful eyes. It was a magical, mystical experience.

Later that night, Ann and I said our final goodbyes to Kelly as the transplant team prepared to harvest her organs. A doctor performed tests to certify brain death, and we watched them all, in their sterile finality, still hoping that by some miracle, she would suddenly come back to life.

God chose not to do a miracle that night...and yet...He did do a miracle. Many, in fact. We knew she still lived. Her spirit lived eternally in Heaven now, and her flesh lived in five organ recipients. Two young ladies in Texas saw the world clearly now through her corneas. Two adults in mid-life were given a second chance through her kidneys. Kelly's liver saved another 5-year-old girl in Nebraska who had been given only 10 hours to live. And Kelly's heart beat in little Joshua....

Joshua died of complications five months later. It wasn't Kelly's heart--the match had been miraculously perfect, almost as if they were twins. We don't know why God chose to take Joshua so early as well, but we do know how thankful his family was to have those months with him: we would have given almost anything for another day with our Kelly.

We also knew that Joshua treasured, for the last months of his life, in the heart that once was Kelly's, another gift she would have wanted him to have: the last of her five precious little golden retriever puppies.