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My baby was born on the brink of death, with multisystem failures. One day in the eighth month, I felt him slip up in the womb, not reporting for his usual afternoon acrobatics. I reported this diminished activity, and we ended the day with an emergency C-section. Doctors were stymied by his condition—one in a million, they said, cause unknown—and nothing to do but monitor him in his little ICU crib, with all manner of wires attached, and hope his body kicked in.

Prayers poured in for him. He was prayed for by Sunni, Shia, Ahmediya, Sufi, Islamist, Salafi, Nation of Islam, and secular Muslims; by Orthodox, Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular Jews; by Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, an entire congregation of Universalist-Unitarians whose minister visited me in the hospital, Mormons, Baptists, Methodists, Hindus, Buddhists, and Wiccans. Agnostic and ardently atheist friends offered good thoughts in lieu of prayers. A dark-haired, olive-skinned friend came in one morning and stood in a sort of asana and intoned over his crib. “Family only,” the nurses cautioned, but let her stay when they took her for clergy (and she really was ordained—by Internet). They probably thought she was doing some sort of Islamic thing, with her arms upraised like that, but she was actually an Italian American from Long Island who believed in yoga and intoning, in conjunction with her very Christian belief in Jesus.

“God doesn’t need *their* prayers,” one of my orthodox Muslim visitors sniffed, dismissing the non-Muslims and heretics among them. But I and my family were not in the mood for turning away prayers—from anyone. We had broken through to a place where all prayer came to One.

The neonatal doctor told me, in the early days when there was nothing really to be done about the baby’s condition but stand bedside and make such conversation, that he’d read medical journal statistics saying that patients who were prayed over tended to fare better than those who didn’t. Survive the baby did, thank God, rallying after seven weeks, in an unexpected recovery his doctors called “miraculous.” This is not one of those “proof of the power of prayer” spiels, though. It’s bad taste to talk about the ineffable so glibly. And for anyone who has prayed for the healing of a loved one who then dies, it is difficult not to hear, in those well-meant “power of prayer” talks, undertones of “You must not’ve prayed hard enough” or, worse, “You must not be among the deserving,” as if God metes out survival from cancer or a hurricane as some sort of reward.

Yet I am going to talk about the Ineffable, breaking my own rule. When my daughter, then nine, asked me in those first uncertain days what was going to happen to her baby brother, I tented her under the sheet of my hospital bed and whispered, “He’s going to be okay.”

“Either he will get better and come home, or he will leave us. And both those things,” I said, although here I had to take a moment, “both are good places for him. Both are sweetness and mercy for him. I mean”—I struggled to find a better way to say it for her—“Angels will hug him. Here or there. So no matter what happens, he will be *okay*. See?”

My daughter, wise child that she is, saw Jacob, son of Isaac, also got it. When Jacob’s older sons bring him news that his younger son, Joseph, has been killed by a wolf, the Quran says that he knows they are lying about what really happened—still, he knows his little Joseph is out there in some sort of terrible trouble. And there is nothing the father can do about it. “Beautiful is patience,” Jacob says. He says it twice over the course of the story, that Yoda-like, grammatically inverted phrase: “Beautiful is patience.” It isn’t that he’s a cold one; he weeps until, the Quran says, his eyes are blinded, from grieving the missing Joseph. Still his heart has assurance, in its bottom-scraping place. No matter where the boy may have gone, or how he may suffer, the father knows—knows because of some profound link he has with deeper levels of Reality—that the child will be okay. In the infinite womb of mercy that

stretches beyond all possibility, nothing has been lost.

“Do not seek to be master in everything,” Sophocles’ Creon says in *Oedipus Rex*, “for the things you master do not follow you throughout your life.” What does follow you throughout your life? Yusuf Islam, in his Cat Stevens days, called it a “moonshadow” in a song that says, if I ever lose anything precious, if I ever undergo extreme pain, an underlying resilience of heart stretches to encompass it. “Moonshadow” is a celebration of the absurdity of infinite mercy. It is a song for Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, who knows that God’s banquet is laid out, in the here and now. I later read somewhere that it was this surrendering type of prayer that was shown to be a factor in the well-being of patients and their families. Not prayer for a specific outcome.

My more traditionally religious visitor, who had overheard my exchange with my daughter, chided me. “How could you tell her he will be okay? Without even saying *inshallah*? You don’t *know* that he will be okay!”

She missed it: my little girl and I at that moment were in the caul of *inshallah*, inside the womb of surrender. We were in “the thin,” in Celtic terms, the moment of permeability between worlds, also called the miraculous. We were detached from all moorings but detachment. There was nothing *but* *inshallah*. Every breath we took under that gray-white sheet was *inshallah*. The visitor understood “okay” in a limited, rational, human-centered way, to mean “he will get better.” She mistook it to mean a specific result. It’s all right. She was not under the veil with us. She had not just experienced a childbirth, as I had, or been its witness. Though physically present, she was not in the liminal state where we were.

Surrender to all this luminous whatnot didn’t mean we weren’t trying to learn all that was wrong with the baby and why. I still sent friends to pull articles out of medical journal databases for me. It didn’t mean I wasn’t calling my doctor relatives long distance to go over what the baby’s doctors were doing, asking them to tell us if we should second-guess treatment options. It didn’t mean I did not scream “My baby!” in a horrific voice and lunge forward and the nurse have to hold me back when, during one of our Arkansas summer thunderstorms, the power went out and all his machines flickered—terror in my heart—before they went to emergency generator. It did mean I saw the baby’s state unfolding in the hands of greater power than the doctors’, however, and did not see humans or their machines as the ultimate causal agents whether the child’s health succeeded or failed. And yes, this correlates to being less likely to pounce on a lawsuit as the answer if things did not go

the way we wanted—which is not the same, at all, as passively accepting real malpractice. This is not the same as an embrace of irrationality or a turning away from science. Don't get that gleam in your eye, minions of Nietzsche. I didn't go all "Oriental fatalist" on you, and my ability to be an efficacious citizen of a modern democracy was not obliterated.

The afterglow of birth lasts only so long, and the heart moves from a state of grace to states as dull as Ohio. It's been four years, and the boy is a dizzying handful who needs time-out constantly, and we're back to things in their divisive, attached-to-outcomes, human meanings, the flat Midwest of the soul. The other day I flicked on a *Family Guy* episode, and Chris Griffin, the affably dim-witted teenaged son on this animated TV series, was playing with dead rats on puppet strings. How much time in a week do I spend doing that? Not playing with dead rat puppets literally, but meeting the human experience with my snarky, cynical face (I do snarky especially well).

Why am I so dim-witted most days, when there is also such beauty and joy in the things people do with each other, in the Oneness of being? I delight in the fact that my baby was prayed over by many different kinds of believers, was prayed for with joyful abandon, with sorrowful surrender, with purpose. Yes, here it comes, so get your rat puppets out if you are feeling snarky: *It was all good.*

I say this knowing the outcome was that the baby lived and has, thank God, flourished. If things had gone differently, if the insight had been gained at an even higher cost, it perhaps would be much harder to say this—but possible still and, in that case, called "letting go." It's still a letting go when the outcome is the one you want. We swam in the womb of sweetness and mercy for a small while, helplessly, and a moonshadow follows us ever since, to remind us that this state is always there, should we wish to seek the pathways to it.