

“Carry each other’s burdens...” Galatians 6:2

Human Connections

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“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today, Dr. Walker. There are a lot of things I still don’t understand about the twins’ birth. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?”

Laura Rosenberg had left Dr. Walker’s practice shortly after Zack and Alex’s birth nearly thirty years earlier, feeling he was to blame for the poor outcome of her pregnancy. He was just starting out in private practice when she first consulted him. She found him unpretentious and easy to talk to, and after their meeting, she knew he was the one to bring her future children into the world. Within a few months, she became pregnant. Dr. Walker attended the pregnancy and delivered identical twin boys ten weeks early. Immediately after their birth, the babies were rushed away from her to the Intensive Care Nursery in a frantic effort to get them to breathe. They stayed there for months. After their release from the ICN, Zack was left with cerebral palsy and hydrocephalus, devastating and permanent conditions. His twin, Alex, had more minor problems--delayed speech and language processing.

When Laura and her husband, Joe, brought the babies home, they were fragile and required constant care. Conscientious about parenting at the outset, Joe eventually withdrew into his work, leaving Laura largely responsible for raising the boys. Zack’s implanted brain shunt provided the greatest challenge. Placed when he was six months old to remove fluid from his head, its malfunction constituted a life-threatening emergency. The symptoms of shunt failure, headache and vomiting, were the same as those of the flu, and over time the

words, “I have a headache, Mom,” sent panic coursing through Laura’s body. She didn’t know whether that headache would develop into an ordinary childhood illness or send them rushing to the emergency room for a CT scan followed by emergency surgery to replace the broken device.

The twins had been extremely close as infants, sucking each other’s thumbs and refusing to sleep apart from each other. They had their own language and Laura recalled feeling like a traveler in a strange land when she came upon them as toddlers, playing on the floor and babbling away to each other. With time, however, their profound differences complicated their relationship. By adolescence, they had grown apart, and rejection from peers made Zack’s life lonely and sad. He would come to Laura’s bedroom in the evening, sobbing that he hated the paralyzed arm and leg that made him different from everyone else. Laura tried to comfort him, but felt overwhelmed by the difficult realities he faced.

Over the years, unanswered questions about her pregnancy had haunted Laura, but she had never recontacted Dr. Walker, fearful of revisiting the raw emotions that had filled those early days. Her recent health issues, prompting thoughts about her own death, made talking to him feel like an urgent matter now. She wondered if he would even remember her after all this time. Finally, she mustered the courage to write him, asking if he would meet with her to discuss her pregnancy. He replied cordially, saying that he did remember her and agreeing to the meeting. As she sat with him today in his private office, she anticipated a heated confrontation. Her heart was pounding. She had steeled herself for this moment for months, years really, but nothing had prepared her for the tension she felt.

Dr. Walker nodded at her to go ahead and Laura looked down at the pad of paper in her lap. “What do you think caused my premature delivery?”

“That’s actually a difficult question, Laura,” Dr. Walker replied, leaning back in his swivel chair. “We don’t know for sure what causes premature birth. Multiple pregnancies alone are a significant factor. Your boys were born a long time ago and I’m not sure I remember the details.”

“I’ve always felt you could have prevented this. You didn’t do an ultrasound until the twenty-sixth week to find out if I was carrying twins. That seems very late to me.” She ran her fingers through her graying hair, placing a stray strand behind her ear.

Dr. Walker began, “Laura, at the time of your pregnancy, ultrasounds were just coming into use...” but she barreled over him, unable to stop herself. “When you finally figured out I was having twins, you didn’t recommend bed rest. Every woman I’ve heard about who is pregnant with twins is prescribed bed rest and you didn’t do that for me.” Laura’s voice rose. “It seems to me you weren’t diligent enough, as though you didn’t care. Zack ended up with cerebral palsy and hydrocephalus, terrible conditions that he’ll never get rid of!” Laura was shaking. She couldn’t believe she was expressing aloud these sentiments she had felt so deeply for so long.

“I know you’re upset, Laura. Things didn’t turn out as you hoped or expected and you’ve had many difficult years.” Dr. Walker tried to calm the situation but his voice caught in his throat at the mention of the young man, burdened by serious disabilities for a lifetime. “I’m sorry that Zack’s life has been so hard, and yours along with him. I wish I could have done something to make things turn out well for you, but at the time of your pregnancy there was nothing I could do. There was no evidence in the literature that bed rest was indicated in a normal twin pregnancy, which it looked like you had, as I recall.” The telephone rang and

Dr. Walker answered it. Pushing the Hold button, he told Laura he would take the call in another room.

Laura's eyelids fluttered and closed. She was back in the Intensive Care Nursery. She could feel the heat of the bright spotlights shining on Zack and hear the rhythmic clicking of the respirator that was breathing for him as he lay on the open table that served as his bed for his first few months. Tubes drew fluid from his lungs and the respirator pushed air into his mouth. Eyes closed, his tiny body barely stirred, following a cerebral hemorrhage that occurred in his first few days of life. His breathing was labored and his color ashen. With his condition deteriorating by the moment, the doctors took increasingly extraordinary measures to keep him alive. It seemed a form of torture.

Laura and Joe had never held Zack. After deliberating, they decided to express their wish that the nursery doctors stop their painful, invasive, high tech treatments and let nature take its course. The doctors rebuked them angrily; naturally, they resented parents questioning their good will and lifesaving efforts. Finally, after meeting with the hospital Ethics Committee, they agreed to unfasten Zack from the respirator for a few hours one night to allow Laura and Joe to hold him, and, they advised, to say good-bye. Laura recalled the nurse handing Zack to her, swathed in a blue cotton blanket, and his snuggling into her arms with a peaceful expression on his face. She rocked him back and forth, comforting him with a lullaby, while shivering with the enormity of the decision she and Joe had made to ask for the removal of his life support, to play God, so to speak. Then, as the hours passed, in remarkable defiance of all predictions, Zack himself voted on his fate: he continued to breathe on his own--and lived. Laura always believed that it was the affection, the human contact, she and Joe gave Zack that night that infused him with the will to survive.

When Dr. Walker returned, Laura was sitting with her eyes closed. “Where were we?” he asked.

Laura opened her eyes. “I was just remembering Zack in the Intensive Care Nursery, the night they unplugged the respirator and let us hold him, telling us to say good-bye.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “This is why I couldn’t come to speak with you sooner--because it’s so intensely painful to go back over those early days of the boys’ lives.” The tears spilled down her cheeks. She dabbed at them with a Kleenex and blew her nose in an effort to recompose herself.

“I feel you should have been more watchful toward the end of my pregnancy, Dr. Walker. You seemed distracted the last few times I saw you. Maybe there was something you missed. And yet you were able to walk away from all this scot-free.” She paused and then continued with a wry laugh, “You’ve probably never even given my life a second thought over the years!”

“You couldn’t be more wrong, Laura,” he replied. “I often inquired about you. Your neighbor, Joan Nicholson, continued in my practice, and I used to ask her how you were doing. I knew that Zack had serious disabilities and I felt very upset about that, but I didn’t think it right to contact you since you had made the decision to leave my practice. When I got your letter last month, I was looking forward to seeing you, but I have to admit, not to this kind of anger.”

“Of course I’m angry. Wouldn’t you be angry if you were in my shoes?”

A look of distress crossed Dr. Walker’s face. He closed his eyes and massaged his forehead with his fingers, as if to smooth away a bad headache, before returning his gaze to Laura. “This is my worst nightmare, Laura--to have a patient return after many years and

say, *'This is your fault. You didn't do enough. You didn't care.'* I did my best at the time. I followed the standard of care and I don't consider myself at fault." His tone softened. "Nonetheless, I feel very bad about how things turned out." Laura could see that her words had affected him, transferring to him some of the pain that she had carried alone for so long, and she thought that was only fair. "Your pregnancy would be treated very differently now," he continued. "The field of obstetrics has made tremendous advances over the past three decades and we can diagnose and treat problems now that we couldn't even see back then."

Laura's tone shifted from accusation to reflection. "Do you think I had a problem that couldn't be diagnosed then?"

Dr. Walker gazed into the distance in an effort to recall events from long ago. Laura noticed that he looked tired and wondered if he were still delivering babies in the middle of the night, or if he left that to his younger associates now. She thought of him shepherding women through the enormous stress of childbirth, some with serious complications; carrying the awesome responsibility of bringing new life into the world healthy and intact; and likely experiencing painful emotions if things turned out poorly, as they had for her. She saw how vulnerable he was and, surprisingly, felt compassion for him.

His words brought her back to the present. "I don't remember what problems developed in your pregnancy. I'd have to review your medical chart to recall what occurred, and after all this time, I don't think I have it."

"I have the chart, as it happens," Laura said. "I requested it when I left your practice." She pulled the frayed file from her handbag and passed it to him.

Startled, he took the chart and began to thumb through it. “Ah, yes...here’s a report from the birth: *Twin A larger and redder in color--that must have been Zack--and Twin B blue in skin tone and smaller.*” He looked up at Laura. “Those findings suggest that there was a twin-to-twin blood transfusion *in utero*, a very dangerous condition that was probably the cause of the boys’ premature birth. Wasn’t this ever explained to you?”

“I don’t remember hearing anything about a twin-to-twin transfusion. I do recall that Zack was much bigger than Alex at birth and redder, too. Alex needed a transfusion in the delivery room,” Laura concurred. “We thought he would be the one with the problems, not Zack.”

“Ironically, the baby with the extra blood, Zack in this case, has more difficulties. This baby produces more amniotic fluid, which can strain the membranes and lead to their rupture. The condition can be diagnosed now with ultrasound and treated with a laser before birth, but it couldn’t be diagnosed or treated at the time of your pregnancy. Bed rest would only have made things worse. The babies needed to be born when they were.”

Laura was stunned. How could this be? Were all the stories she had created over the years about Dr. Walker’s negligence wrong? Apparently there had been a serious complication that she had never even imagined. “I honestly feel dizzy hearing this,” Laura said. “I guess that over the years I’ve developed a story about what happened that includes your being at fault. I think I may have wrongly blamed you and...I’m sorry.”

“I understand, Laura. You didn’t have much to go on. I wish you had come back sooner for this talk.” He handed back the chart.

Laura knew their meeting was over. “Thank you for discussing this with me, Dr. Walker. It meant a lot. I know that many doctors wouldn’t have bothered.” She rose to leave.

“Thank you for sharing your experience with me, Laura.” He shook her hand and saw her to the door.

When Laura returned to the waiting room, it was dark outside. The staff had already left for the day. She sank into a chair, trying to digest what she had heard. Had she been of a religious nature, she might have wondered why God had chosen her for the rare circulatory anomaly that affected her twins in the womb and for the rest of their lives, but her mind didn’t travel in that direction. Instead, her thoughts drifted to Zack and Alex and the deep love she felt for them. No, they weren’t the twins of her fantasy, running through the park, chasing each other in equal measure, but they were, nonetheless, remarkable in their own asymmetrical way--Alex in the lead, Zack coming along behind. She smiled as she thought of them working to resolve the complex issues in their relationship as they entered adulthood. Her thoughts turned to Dr. Walker. His kindness and authenticity had drawn her to him long ago and she had experienced those qualities again today. Though hurt by her anger, he had taken the time to address her troubling questions and had not walked away from her. For that, she was grateful.

The door opened and Dr. Walker entered the waiting room in his street clothes to turn out the lights and close up. He looked surprised to see her. “Laura, are you all right?” He came over and, standing in front of her, reached out to give her a hug. She rose to accept it and felt enfolded in comfort. Then he stood back and looked into her eyes. “I hope our talk today gave you what you needed. I know things are still difficult for you, Laura. I want you to know that I care about you and your family--very much.” At that moment she felt a deep

connection to him, a visceral closeness that reminded her of a night long ago in the Intensive Care Nursery, when a similar deep connection with Zack comforted and sustained him.

As they left the office, Laura could hear her favorite violin concerto playing inside her head. For the first time since the twins' birth, she felt free. The burden of raising a disabled child had been heavy and she had carried it largely alone. Today someone had shared that burden with her. Unfortunately, no one would ever be able to fulfill her deepest wish—that Zack's chronic conditions be cured—but Dr. Walker's willingness to engage openly in their discussion touched Laura and soothed the wound that was still raw from the twins' traumatic birth and the years of anguish that ensued. And wasn't that what medicine was supposed to offer-- comfort and healing? Yet it so seldom seemed to. The violin played on, drawing her forward into a new phase of her life...

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