

The Day After...

Last week I had a dream, of sorts, about the day after Lauren died. I don't know that it was really a dream, because I was in that state between consciousness and unconsciousness, and could have forced myself "awake" at any time...at least that's how it seemed. The events of that day unfolded with details and clarity that surprised me - and I didn't want to stop the images and memories from coming. It started on Tuesday, July 19th (2005) with me standing outside, in front of Duke Univ. Hospital. Lauren's mom and the 2 girlfriends that accompanied us on the trip had dropped me off at the hospital. They were leaving by car, driving back to PA.

Lauren had been declared brain dead the day before, Monday, around 5:30 pm. I considered joining them for the ride back - we had been assured that after Lauren's organ donation surgery, the arrangements we made for her cremation would be carried out - and her ashes shipped back to us in time for the services on Saturday. But conversations with the funeral home people earlier in the day left me uneasy - as if we didn't have enough to deal with, these people turned out to be bumbling fools, who contradicted each other with regularity - so I decided to stay - stay and identify Lauren's body, make sure I received her ashes... yeah, they were that incompetent - picked more or less at random by the local (PA) funeral home we hired.

So, I headed into the hospital to be with Lauren. Her surgery was scheduled for 1:00 pm or so. I would have less than an hour... I went to her room in the neurology ICU, where she had been since late Friday night. I stroked her arm, her hair, kissed her face over and over, and talked to her. The ventilator was still connected, keeping her blood oxygenated and her organs viable... A little while later, the donor medical team arrived in scrubs, ready to go. It was time to prepare Lauren for her surgery. I was told I could stay, and walk down to the operating room waiting area with her. The doctors and nurses began the process of disconnecting the telemetry - so many tubes, sensors, IV's... I was asked to leave momentarily while the ventilator tube was removed. When I returned, a hand operated breathing bag had replaced the ventilator, and a doctor was working it methodically. They were waiting on some other breathing apparatus that never showed up - so they decided to proceed without it.

It was time to go...locks on the gurney wheels were released and, with the team of doctors and nurses alongside, rolled out of the room. I followed alongside, holding Lauren's hand and arm. It was a surreal experience, as we passed other rooms, other doctors and nurses who knew where we were headed, other patient's family

members who didn't know... I remember thinking that they probably thought we were going for a CT scan, an MRI, or maybe having surgery that would heal... Down the corridors, almost in slow motion, doors opening by optic sensors as we approached, to the elevators. One opened and Lauren was rolled in with me alongside - but there wasn't enough room for everyone, so they waited for another elevator, while a couple rode with me - including the doctor operating the airbag.

We arrived at our floor. The knowledge that I was only minutes away from never seeing my daughter alive again was overwhelming. How could this be happening... wasn't there someone who could do something, anything? Yet all the while, knowing there would be no rescues, no second chances - not this time... The medical team regrouped and the gurney was rolled toward the big OR doors. The common area outside the elevators also served as the waiting area for surgical patients (yeah, it was pretty pathetic...), so there were people around, waiting for news on their loved one's surgery. Some looked up as we passed by; others were lost in their own thoughts and circumstances. The gurney came to a halt - we had reached the point where I could not continue on... The doctor working the breathing bag, who seemed to be in charge, said "time for Dad to have a few minutes," and the rest of the team headed through the OR doors.

I took Lauren's face in my hands - it was nice to see her without the ventilator tubes and hoses running everywhere. Whatever shred of composure I had been able to display up to that point disappeared. My tears fell on her face, as I spoke to her for the last time. I told her how much we all loved her and how very proud we were. I told her I was honored to have been her father, and thanked her for all the wonderful lessons that she had taught me - most of all, how to love unconditionally. Then I told her it was time for me to go, that we were going to honor her final wish to help others. With a final "I love you, Lauren," I stood up and watched as she was wheeled into the operating room.

The tears were falling uncontrollably now. I looked around to see others watching, wondering... expressions of indifference and impassivity in some cases - in others, understanding, compassion - some that seemed to say "don't worry, she'll be OK - the doctors here are very good..." And I wanted to say "but you don't understand...." I left and caught a shuttle back to my hotel room. I would be contacted when the surgery was completed. At that time, the funeral home would be notified to come pick Lauren up. The funeral directors would contact me, so I could arrange to meet them and identify Lauren. After I identified Lauren, they would proceed with the cremation and I would be able to pick up her ashes and catch my early morning flight back to Philadelphia.

The call from the hospital came around 5:00 or so. They were finished. I called

the funeral home to advise them of the same - they would get to pick Lauren up 2 hours earlier than expected. Yet, somehow, these morons became non-committal about proceeding with the arrangements as planned - suddenly, they weren't sure they could get the person that runs the crematorium to stay - it would have to wait until tomorrow. I was infuriated. My daughter was dead, and I had to deal with assholes who didn't seem the least bit concerned or helpful - knowing that I had a 5:45 am flight to catch. More phone calls, screaming tirades - I placed a phone call to the PA funeral home to express my outrage. A short while later, I got a call back. It seemed that the PA funeral home was able to convince the stooges in Durham to proceed as originally planned and agreed upon. With that news, I called then front desk to arrange for a hotel shuttle to take me to the funeral home. I could barely get the words out as I explained what I needed - where I needed to go...

I went down to the lobby to wait for the shuttle. Fifteen - twenty minutes went by. Concerned that I might be giving the funeral home jerks a reason to cancel the cremation, I went to the front desk to inquire about the shuttle. I explained to a young woman at the desk that I was waiting for a shuttle. Turns out she was the one I had spoken to on the phone. She assured me it would be coming shortly. There was compassion and sadness for my circumstances in her voice and manner. I took the opportunity to arrange for the early morning airport shuttle that I would need. When she asked if anyone else would need the airport shuttle, I told her "no," explaining that Lauren's mom and friends were driving back home - except that I just lost it in my explanation. I started sobbing and started to turn away, when this woman grabbed my hand, squeezed it and held it for a few seconds...an act of kindness and understanding from a total stranger that I will never forget...

Finally, the shuttle came. I got on, along with two chatty women who were going to a restaurant. I sat in the back thinking..."if you only knew..." They were dropped off, and I took a seat near the front. I explained to the driver where I needed to go - and why. He seemed in disbelief at first... He dropped me at the funeral home and agreed to wait - I wouldn't be long... I went inside and one of the knuckleheads pointed to a white door. I opened the door to see my baby girl lying in a white cardboard box, shrouded in white linens, only her face exposed. I pulled back the shroud covering her hair and forehead, held her face and kissed her. She was still warm, or so it seemed. She looked peaceful, beautiful - the f---ing tumor unable to wreak any more havoc... I cried and cried. I looked at the spot on her head where they had shaved to install the pressure monitor a few days earlier - the one that showed her intracranial pressure at 7 times the normal amount... I looked at her body, realizing that under the shrouding was a long incision, where her organs had been removed. She was so selfless, so generous - just ask the 5 people

who received those organs... More hugs and kisses, words spoken, but not heard... and then I turned and walked out, never to see my Lauren again.

The funeral director assured me they would complete the cremation that evening, and that he would personally drop off the ashes. A long, silent ride back to the hotel - nothing to do there but wait... I think I went into a room with computers for guest use and emailed the BT group that night - maybe it was the previous night - updating those that had been so caring, so supportive. Eventually, I went down to the bar, to order some dinner. I think I had a salad and a beer, wondering just how seasoned this bartender's ear was...but I decided not to find out. Then back to my room, mindlessly watching the TV, glancing at the clock often. 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, still no word. Sometime after midnight, the funeral director called. He was on his way with Lauren's ashes. I went down to meet him in the hotel lobby. He handed over a white cardboard box, mumbled some condolences and left. I headed back to my room. The box was very warm - I hadn't expected that and it crushed me to think that this was it...all that was left... I got back to my room and looked inside the box to find a bag of ashes and bone fragments, still so very warm. I called Lauren's mom to let her know I had received them - she was anxiously awaiting word, as well. We sobbed on the phone together at the incomprehensibility of it all - how could our vibrant, loving, stubborn, bright daughter have been reduced to this box of warm ashes...??

A couple of hours of sleep, then off to the airport, Lauren's box of ashes tucked carefully in my carry-on bag. I figured I would be the only one on the plane carrying his daughter's ashes with him. Again, I thought, "if they only knew..." but this was my personal tragedy, not theirs...