

Tiny Tim

by Sharon Dunsmore

It was a relatively calm day in my hospital's NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit). Two other nurses and I were trying to have a conversation amid the customary sounds of ventilators and heart monitors.

I was in midsentence when the shrill ring of the red emergency phone halted all conversation. "Come fast", the voice said urgently. "We need a neonatal nurse stat!@

Fear gripped my heart as I ran into the delivery room. Instantly, I knew the situation was critical.

"What's happening here?" I asked

"It's an 'oops abortion', and now it's your problem!" responded one of the nurses. For us, an "oops abortion" meant the mother's due date was miscalculated, and the fetus survived the abortion procedure.

A pediatrician was called to the scene. He ran by me with the fetus (now called a baby) in his hand and yelled in my direction, indicating he wanted me to follow him into the resuscitation room adjoining the delivery room.

I looked into the bed of the warmer as I grabbed equipment. Before my eyes was a baby boy. A very, very tiny baby boy. The doctor and I immediately made an attempt at intubation (inserting a tube down the trachea from the mouth or nose of the infant to the tip of the lungs to ventilate, expand, and oxygenate them). The doctor's effort at intubation failed, which further traumatized the baby. I glanced at the doctor and hesitantly asked, "Will you attempt intubation again?@

"You've got to be kidding," he replied. "It would be inhumane to attempt to intubate this poor little thing again. This infant will never survive.@

"No, Doctor, I'm not kidding," I said "and it's my job to ask.@

The doctor softened for a moment. "I'm sorry, Sharon. I'm just angry. The mother doesn't want the inconvenience of a baby, so she comes to the hospital so she can pay somebody to get rid of it - all neat and tidy. Then the whole thing gets messed up when the fetus has the audacity to survive.

"Then everybody takes it seriously, and they call the pediatrician, who's supposed to fix it or get rid of it." With anger in his voice, he went on, "Some lawyers will fight for the right to do whatever we want to our bodies, but watch out for what they will do when these abortions aren't so neat and tidy! A failed homicide - and oops! Then all of a sudden everybody cares, and it's turned from a 'right' into a 'liability' that someone is blamed for!@

We looked at our pathetic little patient. He was lying in the fetal position in the wrong environment, trying to get air into underdeveloped lungs that couldn't do the job. In a calmer voice, the doctor said, "Okay, Nurse, I'm going back to the office. Keep him comfortable and let me know when it's over. I'm sorry about this. Call me if you need me. I know this is a hard one. If it helps, please know it's tough for me, too.@

Holding His Hand...

I watched the doctor retreat and then glanced back at the infant before me. He was gasping for air. "Lord, help!" I prayed.

Almost instinctively, I took the baby's vitals. His temperature was dangerously low. I pushed the warmer settings as high as they could go. His heart rate was about 180-200 beats per minute. I could count the beats by watching his little chest pulsate.

I settled down a bit and began to focus on this tiny little person. He had no name, so I gave him one. Suddenly, I found myself speaking to the baby. "Tiny Tim, who are you? I am so sorry you weren't wanted. It's not your fault." I placed my little finger in his hand, and he grasped it. As I watched him closely, I marveled that all the minute parts of a beautiful baby were present and functioning in spite of the onslaught. I touched his toes and discovered he was ticklish! He had a long torso and long legs. I wondered if he would have become a basketball player. Perhaps he would have been a teacher or a doctor.

Emotions swept over me as I thought of my friends who had been waiting and praying for years for a baby to adopt. I spoke aloud once again to the miniature baby. "They would have given you a loving and a happy home. Why would people destroy you before ever considering adoption? Ignorance is not bliss, is it, Tiny Tim?@

Hanging On...

Meanwhile, Tim put his thumb into his mouth and sucked. I hoped that gave him comfort. I continued to talk to the baby. "I'm sorry, Tim. There are people who would risk their lives for a whale or an owl before they'd even blink about what just happened to you.@

Tiny Tim gasped, and his little chest heaved as if a truck were sitting on it. I took my stethoscope and listened to his tiny pounding heart. At the moment it seemed easier to focus on physiology rather than on this baby's humanity.

He wet. And with that my mind took off again. Here was Tiny Tim with a whole set of kidneys, a bladder, and connecting tubes that functioned with a very complex system of chemistry. His plumbing was all working! I turned the overhead light up and Tim turned from it, in spite of eyelids that were fused together to protect his two precious little eyes. I thought about them. They would never see a sunset, a mother's smile or the wagging tail of a dog.

I took his temperature again. It was dropping. He was gasping for air and continued to fight for life. I stroked him gently and began to sing: *Jesus loves the little children, All the children of the world...*

A nurse walked in. "How's the mother?" I asked.

AOh, she's fine. She's back in her room resting. The family said they don't want to see or hear about anything. They said, >just take care of it.=@

The nurse retreated with one last glance at the tiny patient. "For such a little person, he's sure putting up a big fight.@

I looked at Tiny Tim and wondered if he knew that what he was fighting for so hard was life C and I knew he was losing it. He was dying and his family was resting. Their words tormented me. Just take care of it! No muss and no fuss.

Then Tiny Tim moved and caught hold of my little finger. I let him hang on. I didn't want him to die without being touched and cared for. As I saw him struggle to breathe, I said, "It's okay, Tim. You can let go. You can go back to God.@

His gasping started slowing down, but he still clung to my finger. I stroked the baby ever so slowly and watched him take his last breath.

AGoodbye, Tiny Tim," I whispered. "You did matter to someone.@

Epilogue...

A few years later, Sharon Dunsmore became the manager of a psychiatric unit. One day, Kathy, a young, severely depressed woman, came to see Sharon following an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

As Sharon interviewed her, Kathy said she had gone through an abortion three years before, and she was having recurring nightmares. A baby was crying for help and kept calling her name. In her dreams, Kathy searched for the baby, but she could never find him or her.

As Kathy gave the name of the hospital and the names of doctors, a disturbing realization dawned on Sharon. Kathy was Tiny Tim's mother. Because of hospital regulations, she couldn't tell her what she knew.

Time passed. Sharon was no longer a nurse or a therapist. Kathy was no longer a psychiatric patient. They ran into each other at a restaurant, where Sharon gently unfolded the story that had been hidden for so long. Tears flowed as she gave Kathy the gift of answers. Her baby was touched and loved by a mother. He was given a name. He didn't die alone. He was sent back to a loving God.

As the visit neared an end, they held each other and wept. Sharon looked into Kathy's eyes and saw new strength and calm. There were scars, but she was beginning to heal. The nightmares were being put to rest.

Sharon still lives with the haunting impact of this experience. A *choice* that was intended to be "no big deal" turned out to be a *very big deal* for everybody.

(From *Focus on the Family* via *Guardian of Truth*)