



No Accidents In Life

In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Sigmund Freud explained that when someone in his family reported some everyday accident, instead of receiving sympathy, Freud would ask, "Why did you do that?" Thus was born the psychoanalytic concept that there are no accidents.

This being part of the contemporary *weltanschauung*, it is no surprise that when Ken Whitacre and I, who have spent our adult lives together building this very publication, told our friends and family that our wives were due to have children on the very same day, more than a few suspected some conscious coordination..

They were wrong, but as I sit here writing, I feel the exhaustion of having lived more than most men will ever know and the serenity of having slept the sleep of the blessed.

Ken's wife, Kerry, did not have an easy time with her pregnancy. Her blood pressure rose in the latter months, and she was put on bed rest. When the call came that her water broke and they were on the way to the hospital, I was relieved.

The delivery was not easy either, and after 15 hours of labor, her doctor came out and told us that they had to do a Cesarean.

And then there was Shea Madison Whitacre, who met the world on May 23, 2003. I was already a father, with a 19-month old who inspires me daily and I am an uncle many times over. Yet I do not remember ever being as tense as while pacing the halls waiting for Shea.

I thought of all the cold winter nights walking with Ken back to the dorm from Cornell's libraries and of discussions where I learned what made Ken tick, and I remember thinking even then what a fine father this guy would be one day. And I doubt that little Shea will ever really know how much she was dreamt of and wanted and loved before anyone knew her name.

But after delivery, Kerry wasn't getting better. And in the moment of my friend's greatest joy, I heard the tremor in his voice of something verging on going terribly wrong...

Two days later, my wife's water broke and after calling the doctor, I called Ken and told him to get us a good room because we would be there in a bit. Many days later I was to check my voice mail at home and there was a message: Ken wanted to warn me that there might be some delay in checking in at the hospital. Kerry's blood pressure had fallen to safe levels, so she was feeling well enough to be pushed in a wheelchair to see her new daughter for the first time. Yet the nurse brought her back in the room before she got to see Shea, because there was an emergency on the floor and all hands were needed in the operating room.

My wife, Debbie, and my unborn son were that emergency. When my wife's water broke something went wrong: The baby's umbilical cord fell partially out of my wife's body.

It had been an odd night. A bolt of lightning had knocked out a cell phone and pager tower, so messages weren't getting through to our doctor. Debbie wasn't sure what had happened, but it didn't seem right.

When we arrived at the hospital, the nurse saw what was hanging out of my wife's body, she threw Debbie on a gurney, screamed "prolapsed cord" at the top of her lungs and everyone began racing to the operating room.

Fortunately, while Kerry's doctor had just given her the OK to get out of bed, he also had another patient who was waiting for a C-section. Had Kerry's doctor not been on the floor at that time, this story may have had a different ending.

We were given this other woman's operating room and staff and then, like the most meticulously trained army, people appeared. There was a phalanx of neonatologists, ready to grab the baby and whisk him off to intensive care, and a group set to restrain me if they had to deliver horrible news.

What happens with a prolapsed cord is that, typically, the head of the baby presses against the cord and cuts off blood and oxygen to the baby and the baby dies.

They wouldn't let me in the operating room, but I could see through the glass, and they left the door open so I could hear. There are often a few seconds when they remove a baby by C-section between when the baby is lifted from the womb and when the baby starts to cry.

I had been through it before, but not like this. I can still see the doctor's arms lifting my child from my wife's body and see the arms first flex then stretching out to hand the baby to the neonatal personnel. And I can still hear the silence, and it was louder because no one was breathing as we listened to hear if the baby would cry.

I remember feeling myself on the edge of a black abyss, and when I saw the baby but heard no sound I began to feel myself falling from the precipice and thought myself to be starting to tumble. And I remember praying and pleading and bargaining.

Suddenly I felt enveloped, I felt myself being lifted, my whole family being protected. And I don't know if I dare say it, but it felt like the hand of God had wrapped itself around my family and, just then at 8:50pm on May 25, 2003, I heard my baby cry. And if I live another century, I am certain of this: I shall never hear a sweeter sound.

And the earth closed before me and I knew all would be right. And so it was.

There was never a moment in which air or blood didn't reach the baby, and Ken and I both walked out of that hospital with healthy wives and children.

I have another friend who lost a child at birth. He has never mentioned it to me, and I wondered why he wouldn't speak of it. And now I understand. To stand on the brink of such loss is to know the possibility of sorrow more than a man should be asked to bear. To go, in a single moment from all the potential in the world, to none at all, is to give life a sadness that never truly lifts.

I have written many columns and have always tried to tell the truth, but by that I do not mean finding great secrets to expose; I mean, instead, to find the meaning and significance of events. There is a temptation for one who has looked into the heart of darkness to respond with a kind of nihilism, urging one and all to eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die. Or, as is certainly true, nobody on his deathbed has ever said that he wished he had spent more days at the office.

Yet, I cannot draw such a lesson. For Ken's wife and my child were saved not by self-indulgent pleasure seekers but by highly trained professionals who had deferred gratification after gratification to learn how to save a life.

There was a party on the ward that night, and one by one the doctors and nurses came in to tell us that God must have a purpose for our child, for there is no other reason why he should be alive.

So Matthew David Prevora and Shea Madison Whitacre, find your purpose and live it, for many gave much to make sure you have the opportunity. We all owe it to those who sacrificed to create our opportunities to make the most of the precious life we have been given.

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