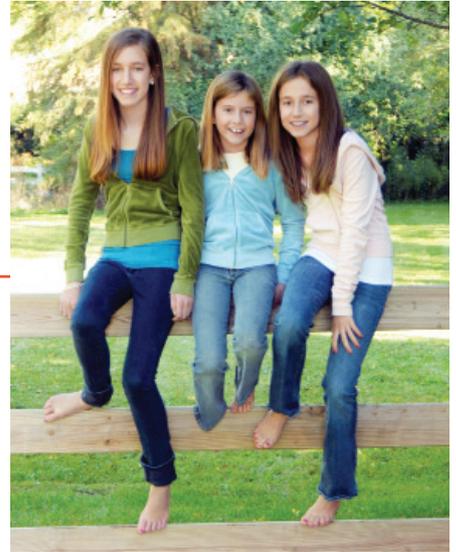


By Susan Miller

A Recipient's Second Chance— Just the Light & Hope a Donor Family Needs



"Please don't feel guilty," I pleaded with the older man in the audience who, minutes earlier, had been wiping tears from his eyes as I'd shared our family's donor story. Dressed in a flannel shirt and with his wife by his side, he told me that his liver transplant had occurred two years earlier and he had not yet connected with his donor family. "I'm just a retired factory worker," he explained. "I wonder if the liver could have gone to someone more worthy." His vulnerability and shame stunned me, but it shouldn't have. I had heard similar thoughts expressed at countless organ donation-related events: a sense of guilt that the recipient had survived because someone else had died.

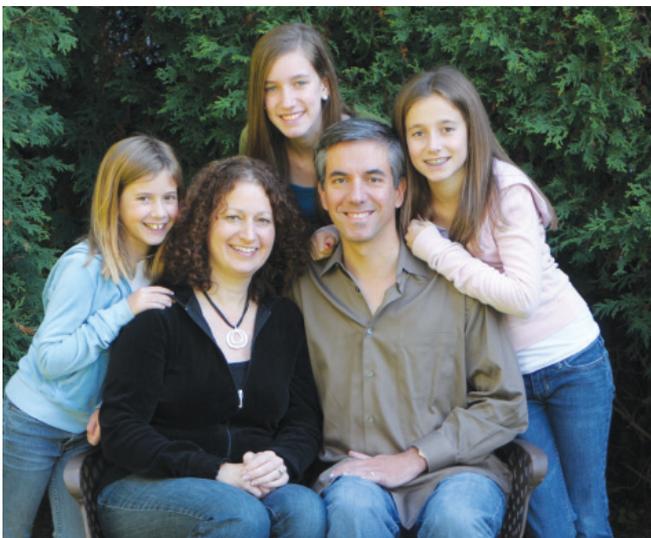
"I don't think the family would want you to feel any guilt," I responded. He heard my words although I could tell his self-doubt and insecurities remained. I would have liked to continue our conversation, but

it had already been an emotional evening. He thanked me for telling our family's story, clasped my hand, and turned toward the door.

As a member of that evening's organ donation panel, I had shared the details surrounding the tragic death, more than a decade earlier, of our 14-year old daughter Laura. On Saturday morning, February 21, 2009, just days after Laura had been rushed to the hospital with a seizure, the doctors confirmed our worst fear: Laura's brain had suffered irreversible damage from an aggressive, recently diagnosed cancerous brain tumor. We were confused and devastated. Days earlier Laura had attended her freshman high school classes and seemed as healthy as our two other daughters, aside from her complaints of recent intermittent, painful headaches.

We were now being told the unthinkable, that she was legally brain dead: her brain no longer functioned but her organs were being kept alive by her still-beating heart. As we absorbed this devastating news, an organ procurement coordinator approached us in the hospital waiting room. She offered her condolences and asked if we would consider donating Laura's organs, hopefully saving one or more lives and improving the lives of many more.

We were being asked to make a monumental decision, a decision we didn't know how to make. We had discussed many ethical and existential topics with our mature-beyond-her-years oldest daughter, but we couldn't ever remember talking about her views on organ donation. And, sadly, she had not yet reached the age of 16 when she could have expressed her own wishes on her driver's license application.



l-r: Rachel, Susan, Laura, Ron and Sara.

As for my husband and me, we had always believed organ donation to be a noble and generous concept and a way to create light and hope from tragedy. That had been our belief though in the abstract, never imagining having to make such an incomprehensible decision for our precious daughter, our precious daughter who had attended school just four days earlier.

Existential questions about what happens after death had now become a breathtakingly practical matter for us. Would Laura need her organs in some type of after-life? What did our religion say on the subject? What would Laura have wanted? Our twelve-year old middle daughter Sara interrupted our bewildered thoughts. “Mom and Dad, how could you not donate her organs if they could save someone else’s life?” Her passionate plea tipped the scales, and when our youngest daughter Rachel nodded her head in agreement, our answer became clear. We then looked to our rabbi who had been sitting quietly in the corner of the hospital waiting room. He told us that according to Judaism’s teachings, saving a life was considered to be the highest mitzvah you could perform.

A few hours after agreeing to the donation, we learned that a match had been found for Laura’s liver. A 40-year old special education teacher’s life had been saved because of our decision! We would later learn that the recipient had been in a liver-induced coma for the previous ten days. Recently approved for an organ donation, she had quickly risen to number one on the national waiting list. Without Laura’s liver being flown halfway across the country from Milwaukee to New York, she certainly would not have survived more than a few hours longer.

Three months later we received a thank you note, forwarded to us through the Wisconsin and New York donor networks with all identifying information blacked out. We now had literal proof that Laura’s death had not been in vain. We had been part of an unexpected miracle.

Eighteen months later, after the necessary confidentiality documents were signed, we received Trish O’Neill’s contact information. We spoke with her by phone and agreed to meet one day. In the Spring of 2011, two years after Laura’s death, we gathered in a hotel room in Time Square where we talked for more than three hours and shared our families’ intersecting and life-changing stories.

While our two families’ experiences were inextricably and forever linked, they were also events with profoundly different outcomes and completely independent



l-r: Susan Angel Miller, Rachel Miller, Trish O’Neill, Gary O’Neill, Sara Miller, Ron Miller

of each other. Although Trish is most certainly alive because she received Laura’s liver, that doesn’t mean her need for the organ precipitated or caused Laura’s death in any way. Laura’s illness and death could not have been prevented. She would have died whether or not Trish received her life-saving organ and then two families and communities would have suffered the loss of their family members.

Despite enduring every parent’s worst nightmare, I’m now empowered to share the healing impact of our donor family story – in conversations with recipients and transplant professionals, and in my memoir, *Permission to Thrive: My Journey from Grief to Growth*.

If given another opportunity to speak with the older man who still questions his worthiness of receiving a healthy organ, I would share my perspective. I would encourage him to write a thank you letter to his donor family, and even if he doesn’t receive a response, I would assure him that the donor family most certainly would be overjoyed that he is doing well and taking such good care of their loved one’s organ.

They might even tell him that his survival has infused light in their darkness, helped them accept and embrace their new reality, and provided them with meaning in an otherwise senseless tragedy. C



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Author: Susan Angel Miller

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