



A Family's Decision

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Atlanta Journalist Roger Witherspoon and his wife Cynthia lost their first child, a daughter, in childbirth. A year and a half later, when Cynthia prematurely went into labor with their son Dax after only 22 weeks of pregnancy, the obstetrician warned them that the infant's lungs had almost certainly not developed enough for survival. Extraordinary measures could

be tried if the parents wished to subject the baby to the process. Witherspoon's account of their decision:

I had seen the neonatal intensive-care units, big, immaculate rooms with stainless-steel-and-glass machines called Ohio beds, which cradled the premature infants. They were miniature people whose arms bristled with a series of tubes and needles going to a bank of computer screens and monitors. In a few cases, the infants thrive in that controlled, constricted environment, designed to give them the best chance to live. But most do not make it. They spend their brief existence in a sterile world, devoid of any real warmth or affection, a world filled with pain and discomfort. In my own view, the odds just were not worth it. I found it impossible to confront the vision of my child dying alone in a room full of machines—never having known what it is to be loved.

He was very still when born, and we thought he was dead. Then I thought I saw a hand move, slightly. But I had been up for more than 24 hours and thought it was just fatigue. Then he moved again. And the nurse gave him to me. He was strong enough, at that point, to hold one adult finger. He had my eyebrows, Cindy's long thin fingers, a head of hair, and a mouth that seemed a cross between us both.

The hospital was very accommodating. Cindy was wheeled into an adjoining empty recovery room, and her mother came in to join us. For a while, we were a larger family, taking turns holding the boy and letting him grasp and hold a finger. Memory says he smiled—though logic says that was probably not possible.

After ten minutes he could no longer muster the strength to hold on. His breathing became labored, and his heart was beating at a noticeably slower rate. The color of his skin, starting at his feet, began to lighten as it became starved for oxygen and blood. We watched death move upward in neat, horribly incremental stages. After 45 minutes, it embraced all of him, and it was over.

It took two weeks for the results of the autopsy to prove that Dax would not have survived the ordeal of the neonatal room had he been sent there. I was not aware that I had been worrying about it, but the news was a relief. In our case the decision was not life or death. The decision was between the sure odds of being a family, for however brief a time, and the odds of not being able to be a family at all. Though many of our peers disagreed, if fate forced a similar decision in the future, we would do it again. It was worth it.

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