

“Keeping the Faith”

August 12, 2007

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

United Congregational Church, UCC

Maggie Worthen loves animals. She has a boyfriend named Josh. She grew up taking dance and gymnastics classes at South County Movement Center, where she crossed paths with my daughter, Anna. I recall those annual recitals where Maggie put more energy and personality into her performances than most. Maggie was raised attending church in the Unitarian Universalist faith, and spent time at Star Island, a Unitarian summer camp, where she made lasting friendships. While attending Smith College, she studied abroad for a year, and took in all Spain had to offer, and has gathered friends both here and abroad. Summers were spent in a beach community surrounded by family and even more friends. On May 10, 2006, Maggie was writing her final college paper in her dorm room, eagerly anticipating college graduation and all that post-graduation life has to offer a talented, intelligent, energetic and beautiful young woman.

Maggie suffered a stroke that day and has been in a coma ever since. The graduation caps that her faithful friends wore a few days later had Maggie messages written on them. Her mother, Nancy, was later presented Maggie’s diploma.

While it has been many years since Nancy and I crossed paths at gymnastics pick up and recitals, what parent doesn’t get drawn in by their story? I learned of a website called caringbridge.org, where Nancy passes on information about Maggie’s condition as well as her own thoughts, and others can, in turn, send messages to Nancy and Maggie. In the nearly 15 months since Maggie’s stroke, Nancy has clocked nearly than 300 entries, and Maggie’s site can claim more than 65,000 visits.

I confess that I am a frequent visitor to the site, because I feel compelled to follow Maggie’s difficult journey, as she remains on our prayer list each week. Equally compelling to read, however, is Nancy’s journey. Being a member of a club that no parent wants to join, and tested beyond the limits of many people’s comprehension, Nancy has embarked on a journey that has seen lows deeper than the deepest ocean, and highs that are measured only in molehills. But I can’t tell you how much joy and energy Nancy gets from those molehills. It is clear that this mother’s faith in her daughter, in the powers of healing, in the possibility of miracles, in her ability to lean on others, and in the conviction of her spirituality are what get her through each difficult day.

When I contacted Nancy to ask permission to use her and Maggie’s story, and to tell her how much I admire her strength in this journey, she told me that the journey is all about love, and that the love she has for Maggie is the foundation of her faith. Reading the almost-daily entries, there is no question of Nancy’s love for her only child, as she has to make decisions about the best placement for Maggie, the traditional and alternative treatments she is seeking, and the stimulation she provides through music, touch, favorite videos, and trips into the sunshine.

One project that I’m sure has helped to keep Nancy focused and grounded is her efforts to raise funds to purchase a van so she can take Maggie to church, her favorite restaurants, or to the movies. While Maggie’s prognosis is questionable, and even at times discouraging, as she repeatedly contracts pneumonia, Nancy’s quest for this van shows her undeterred faith that Maggie will one day be able to leave the confines of hospitals and rehabilitation centers and venture out again. Nancy’s faith shines brightly, as does her spirituality, as she asks for prayers of healing, energy, and peace, always for Maggie, never for herself.

In Hebrews, we heard that the meaning of faith “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” By faith, Abraham and Sarah, despite their years, became parents, by the grace of God. By faith, also, Abraham later offered up his only son as sacrifice. As William Sloan Coffin has said, “Faith is not acceptance without proof, but trust without reservation.” Faith is larger than hope and faith is different than belief. Faith is a knowing of the heart. Faith is a way of living that allows us to move forward, take another step, even when it seems impossible.

Faith is not only about belief. It is also about trust, and sometimes even about gut instinct. It is about

relationship with God and with others. It is about the hope we have that the seeds of peace, justice, and kindness we try to sow in this life will flourish, even though we may not live to see their fruition.

Doubt is integral to the faith journey. Not an obstacle, but integral. To doubt, to question, to challenge, is to take seriously the faith journey we travel on. We do not and cannot have all the answers, and faith, like love, is always unfinished, because we do not place a period where God has placed a comma. As Nancy shared with me, "The love I feel for Margaret connects me to an eternal love that may be the only way that I can understand the love that a creator might feel for all creations."

Anne Lamott, a popular writer, shares this story of faith among the most vulnerable of God's children. She heard a doctor talking about autistic children who were so severely withdrawn, that if you stood them up, they'd just fall over. They'd make no effort to stand or even protect themselves when they fell. People working with them discovered that if they ran a rope from one end of the room to the other and stood the kids up holding onto the rope, they would walk across the room. Over time, they kept putting up thinner and thinner pieces of rope, until they were using something practically invisible, like fishing line, and the kids would still walk across the room if they could hold on to it. Finally, the adults cut the line into pieces, about 12 inches long, and handed one to each child. The kids would still walk. What an amazing statement of faith.

Maybe some fishing line doesn't give us the ability to walk. But maybe that fishing line helps us to hold on to our faith in our ability to move forward. Maybe there are times when we each need a little fishing line.

Where is each of us on our faith journey? It is not a race; it is not a destination, but a journey. Sometimes we take detours, and sometimes it is an uphill climb. Sometimes we even get to glide smoothly for a while, but hopefully not for too long. Ann Lamott has also said, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns. Faith also means reaching deeply within, for the sense one was born with."

Through the caringbridge site, I have come to know Nancy Worthen's emptiness and despair, with the occasional blessed light, as she strives to make the best decisions for Maggie. And she rarely feels certain. She questions the best placement and treatments for Maggie. She questions whether Maggie can hear her and perceive her presence, and feel her love, though on a gut instinct mother's love level, she truly believes that she can. I do too, by the way. She questions whether Maggie will ever wake up and have a life that can be defined as quality. She is beginning to question whether pursuing the van is the best choice right now. And she questions what Maggie would want. Nancy's lack of certainty is confirmation of her faith journey. She is experiencing the mess, the emptiness, and discomfort, and they are guiding her decisions until some light returns. But the one thing Nancy is always certain about is her love for Maggie, and wanting what is best for her.

Nancy has also reached a vague but comforting understanding of what eternal life means, because, as she puts it, "My love for Maggie is not a cliché, but something that moves and flows through me so strongly that I have no doubt that I will feel that love forever, whether Maggie is alive or dead." And she says that, "In some strange way, this journey with Maggie has brought me to a love for all, for God, for life." While some people might lose their faith under these circumstances, it is a testament to Nancy that hers has been strengthened.

Having faith saves us precious time and restores precious energy. It makes our problems seem more manageable and makes us more patient. Having faith keeps the picture in perspective and decreases our vulnerability. Having faith enables us to take constructive steps.

Faith is a choice. Please join me on this uncertain journey. Amen.