



Annika

Annika Force
19 August 2004

Mala and Darrin are American expatriates who have lived in Singapore for three years. They were delighted when they conceived their first child. But a routine check-up almost at the end of Mala's pregnancy turned into a nightmare when Annika's heartbeat could not be found.

Written by Darrin Force, Annika's father

After an entirely uneventful, normal pregnancy, we lost Annika, our first baby, four days before her expected due date of 22nd August, 2004. One week earlier, we had seen our obstetrician for what we thought would be our final prenatal checkup. As with every other visit, things were just fine. Our doctor anticipated that labour would begin within no more than two weeks.

At our next checkup on the following Tuesday, Mala's routine exam began with the familiar fetal monitoring she had been receiving throughout the later part of her pregnancy. After several attempts to find a heartbeat, the nurse called in the doctor, who immediately ordered an ultrasound, and called for me. After repeated attempts to establish a heartbeat, it was clear that our baby had passed away. The utter shock of this instant in time, when every hope, dream and plan we had was irrevocably erased, will be forever etched into our memories.

This was supposed to be the time when we would be rushing to the hospital to start

the labour process, witnessing the birth of our child with a mix of pride, joy, and awe. We were supposed to be enjoying the first few moments of life of a precious little boy or girl. We were supposed to be making the happy phone calls to expectant relatives and friends. Instead, we were faced with decisions that no new parent's darkest nightmare would conjure.

We were lucky in that our doctor couldn't have been more compassionate and supportive. After confirming and reconfirming that our baby was indeed gone, her next action was to find a quiet room to just be with us. Seeing Mala in utter shock was very difficult for me, but our doctor's calm, steady and loving presence gave me the boost of strength that I would need to comfort my wife. Next, our doctor immediately called a grief counsellor who had also lost her baby at full term several years prior.

Within 40 minutes the grief counsellor was with us. Sharing our experience, she could relate first hand to our deep shock, pain and loss. With her calm, soothing presence and compassionate, caring advice, she helped us sort through some of the most important decisions we would face. First, and most important, was the decision to go through with a full delivery. Given the options of (a) immediate Caesarean section, (b) induced labour or (c) waiting for spontaneous labour, she counselled us to seriously consider going through a full delivery, as difficult as that sounded at the time. While an immediate Caesarean seemed the most expedient way to stanch our grief, we came to feel that a full delivery was the most appropriate way for us to honour our baby. It seemed to us that she deserved the privilege, attention and commitment of a full delivery, even in death.

So labour was induced and Annika was born the next morning at 9.00 am, on Wednesday, 19th August, 2004. She was a beautiful, 3.2 kg baby girl who had Mala's dark wavy hair and my lips and chin. She was perfectly normal, except that she wasn't awake.

The hospital staff were absolutely wonderful in their compassionate understanding of our need for time with our little baby. We held her for a long time, talking to her and trying to memorise every detail of how she looked and felt. We told her that we loved her, that we knew she was in a good place, and then, after nearly three hours, it was time to say the most difficult goodbye either of us had ever said. If anything, we now wish we had spent more time and taken more photos than we did. For us, this was our chance to finally meet her after waiting for so long. We got to see and enjoy all the unique physical features we had wondered about. We also felt that we were honouring her short life by affording her the respect and attention she deserved.

The following weeks were a blur of tears, anger and desperation as we pleaded with God to turn back time and bring Annika back to us. Then came the weeks of understanding that this had happened followed by slow acceptance. The support of our families and friends, combined with our own spirituality, allowed us finally to let Annika go.

The final autopsy results have ruled an inexplicable, sudden death. We hoped that

we would find some cause that would help us regain control and the ability to do something different next time. Instead, we are left wondering why this happened. We do take comfort in knowing that there is no medical reason which prevents us from having another child. It is this hope for the future that enables us to get through each day.

Not an hour passes where we don't think of Annika and how much we love her. Though she lived for a very short time, she has had an amazing impact on our lives. Her little life has forever changed us. She has brought us spirituality, an appreciation for those we love, and the joy of parenthood. Though she's not with us, she will always be our perfect little daughter.

COPING WITH LOSS AFTER ANNIKA'S DEATH

FINDING COMFORT IN HINDU RITUALS

Annika's parents found great comfort in the Hindu traditions and rituals surrounding their daughter's death. Annika's mother Mala was raised a Hindu, and her father Darrin had a deep appreciation of Hindu philosophy, so after her death they consulted a Hindu priest (*pandit*) and decided to follow Hindu death rituals. Each ritual has a profound psychological and spiritual significance, which they found deeply consoling. Hindus hold that our souls are immortal, and must pass through many births and deaths, learning as they go, before finally merging with God. But due to their attachment to worldly life and the physical body, departed souls may linger in the earthly realm for some time after death. In order to help the soul move on, the remaining relatives must perform certain ceremonial rites.

Annika's father Darrin tells how these Hindu rituals were integral to their healing and search for comfort and peace:

Helping the soul on its journey

After coming home from the hospital, our first step to helping Annika's soul on its journey, and to helping us let her go, was setting up a small altar with her photo, some of her clothing, and an oil lamp that remained continuously lit for nine days. Each morning, Mala and I tended to the lamp, and ritually fed our baby by preparing a simple offering of milk mixed with honey and ghee (a form of clarified butter commonly used in Hindu rituals. It is revered as the essence of the cow's love for her calf). Caring for Annika in this way gave Mala and me real solace, comfort and a deep sense of peace when we needed it most during those first awful days. We both felt profound comfort and satisfaction from taking care of our daughter in this very intimate and unique way.

Cleansing and dressing her body

The next set of rituals surrounded cremation. Accompanied by our dear friend who had flown over from the States to be with us, we met the funeral director at the hospital for the preparation rituals. Following tradition, I bathed Annika with special herbal water, then dressed her in the suit she would have worn on her first trip home from the hospital. The funeral director and I then draped garlands of flowers over her body. Mala placed into her coffin a bottle of milk, a small stuffed animal, and a letter we had written to Annika. On the drive from the hospital morgue to the crematorium, I had the privilege of carrying Annika's open coffin on my lap. This was an indescribably significant time for me, one that I will always cherish. These few quiet minutes together with my daughter allowed me to tell her how much I loved her, tell her about all the things we would have done together, and wish her a speedy journey to her next destination. I felt my own grief and loss, but these were eclipsed by a sense of peace, knowing that Annika was on her way to where she needed to be.

Collecting her ashes, fulfilling a role

After waiting the prescribed time following the cremation, the next ritual involved gathering Annika's ashes. This is traditionally done by the wife's oldest brother, but I realised with perfect clarity that this was the last thing I would ever do for my daughter, so I felt very strongly that I wanted to do it. After being led into a small ash collection room I, with my own hands, carefully separated Annika's remains from the debris (small coffin nails, etc) in the cremation ashes. As morbid as this might seem to non-Hindus (or members of other religions following this practice), this was a profoundly peaceful experience for me. Any sense of repulsion or fear was overwhelmed by the feeling of doing my duty, of fulfilling my proper role in serving Annika. I can't adequately describe the sense of pure, quiet peace and rightness I felt as I tended to her final mortal needs.

Preparations for funeral

The next step was to plan for Annika's funeral and the release of her mortal remains. Hindu tradition dictates that this should be done into a natural body of water. Living in Singapore meant easy access to the ocean, so we chartered a boat and prepared for the funeral. Although Mala is of Indian heritage, she was born in Guyana and grew up mostly in the US, so speaks no Hindi or other Indian languages. This made communicating with the local *pandit* nearly impossible. But just at the right time, another beautiful soul, in the form of one of our dear friends, came to our aid to help translate and assist with the preparations.

Prayers

Based on our *pandit's* counsel, we went through a series of three separate but related ceremonial prayer sessions, called *pujas*. After ritually cleaning our home, and donning a set of new, white clothing, the first *puja* took place at 5.00 am at our apartment. This *puja* invoked the help of our departed relatives to help Annika on her journey. After preparing an elaborate offering consisting of various herbs, fruits and incense, the *pandit* chanted Vedic mantras (prayers to various gods) and made offering to a small camphor fire (*agni*). Both Mala and I were integral parts of the ceremony, variously making offerings, chanting the mantras, and performing other symbolic gestures, all intended to invoke a smooth, auspicious transition from this world to the next. Finally, the *pandit* passed through each room of our house, blessing them and symbolically setting the stage for a new beginning.

Offerings

Next, we travelled to the beach at sunrise for the second ceremony, which was intended to help Annika's soul feel at peace, and to show her that it was time to move on to her next destination. It was a beautiful, poignant ceremony rich with symbolic offerings. Part of it involved Mala making cakes of rice flower and milk to symbolically feed Annika and her departed relatives. We also offered bananas, grain and ghee to the ceremonial fire (*agni*), symbolising our release of her soul. At the conclusion, Mala and I gathered the offerings and walked them out to the sea. We disposed of our clothes, again symbolising our realisation that this chapter of our lives was at an end, and a new beginning was on the horizon.

Releasing her to nature

Following the *pujas*, we all boarded a boat, sailing across a calm sea, under a beautiful, bright sky, and stopped in a beautiful, peaceful spot. Mala and I placed Annika's ashes, some flowers, and a beautiful letter our very dear friend had written onto a small white cloth. We carefully rested the cloth on the water's surface, then watched as it slowly sank into the clear, blue water. Slowly but irrevocably, our daughter's mortal remains dispersed into eternity. Naturally, part of us was deeply sad over our loss, but that bright sun, the expansive blue sky, and the love of our friends and family heralded a new beginning.