



Faith

Faith Yaw Fong Yin
11 September 1996 – 31 January 1998

Faith was the firstborn of Christopher and Jacqueline. After a bout of measles from which she couldn't seem to recover, a check-up showed that she had a large tumour in her brain. First diagnosed as benign, the tumour was actually fiercely malignant. After three operations, it was found that the tumour has metastasised to her spine and her chances of recovery even with chemotherapy and radiotherapy were slim. She passed away peacefully at 16 months on 31 January 1998.

Written by Christopher Yaw, Faith's father

The longest walk of my life was carrying our eldest (and at that time only) child, Faith, from the children's ward where she had passed away about an hour ago to the mortuary at the basement of the hospital. It is said that when you are about to die, your whole life flashes before you. Our daughter had just died and, during that very long walk, her life and her bravery played continuously in my mind.

While we were relieved because it was the end of a nine-month long ordeal that drained our resources—financial, emotional and spiritual—and took us through hell, it was also a very painful and lonely time. Very few friends stayed on with us during this long journey, many because they didn't know what to say to us when they were with us and felt awkward. While some relative were supportive, ultimately, we had to depend on ourselves to keep vigil during Faith's numerous hospital stays, taking turns to be with her, something that only parents would do.

Faith was born normal and healthy, though we had a fright during Jacqueline's pregnancy as doctors detected a cleft in her brain. Little were we to know what the cleft would become nine months later. While her development was slow, we didn't notice it as

we were first-time parents. It was only after a bout of measles when she was seven months old and she didn't seem to recover from it that we thought something could be wrong, though the GP who diagnosed her measles kept telling us that some children do take longer to recover. But we did notice that there was some regression in her development. Certain things that she was able to do when she was younger, like sitting up straight, became difficult. She would topple backwards when left to sit on her own.

So on a June afternoon in 1997, we took Faith to the hospital for a check-up. The doctor ordered a scan and, to our shock, they discovered a huge tumour in her brain. We were sent reeling. Where did it come from? After a long wait into the night, we were told that she had a benign tumour that was affecting her motor functions. How naïve were we to believe that. If it had not been our daughter and I had been of clearer mind, I would have questioned how a “benign” tumour got to be so big in nine months. But we were in shock and our mental faculties were temporarily addled. We believed the surgeon who told us that hers was a rare form of benign tumour.

After an operation to reduce the size of the tumour, Faith seemed to recover well from it. But that was not to last. Her symptoms came back within a month. This time, the same surgeon who operated on her told us that she had hydrocephalus, a blockage in her brain where fluids could not drain. So another operation was scheduled that left her with a tube running from her brain to her stomach; a tube that would supposedly drain the fluids from her brain to her stomach; a tube that was to be there for life. It was difficult but we accepted that if that was how she had to live, so be it.

But that was just the beginning of what was to become a nine-month journey into hell. The results of another check-up a few weeks later shocked her surgeon as much as it did us. The supposedly benign tumour had re-grown back to its original size. In panic, the surgeon told us that we should consider sending Faith to the UK for treatment. It seemed that he had given up.

It was then that we moved Faith to another hospital at the suggestion of a relative who was a doctor. At the other hospital, Faith had her third operation. Again, part of the tumour was removed as the new surgeon was operating under the impression that the tumour was benign. It was only a week later that the final shock came. After testing the tissues removed, the surgeon confirmed that Faith had a malignant tumour in her brain, one of the more common types. How the professionals at the previous hospital missed this common tumour (called medulloblastoma) was a mystery. The options to try to cure her were straightforward—chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy.

But time was running out. Another check-up later confirmed that the malignant cells had already metastasised (medical term for spread) to other parts of her body, particularly her spine. The doctors gave Faith no more than a 10%-chance of survival with treatment. It was now six months since she was first found with a “benign” tumour in her brain. We were drained, financially and emotionally. Jacqueline and I had also used up all kinds of leave that our respective organisations had to offer, official and unofficial. We didn't think we could go on any longer, hoping against hope. And do we want to put Faith, who had braved through three operations, through chemotherapy and radiotherapy for a 10% chance of survival?

As Christians, we believe in miracles. But we also believe that the Lord giveth and He taketh away. The choice was taken from our hands when Faith had breathing problems during a stretch when she was at home shortly after Christmas 1997. By then, she was bedridden and incapable of swallowing. We had to feed her using a tube through her nose. And often, she would throw up her feed. She also couldn't lift up her neck any more. It pained us greatly to see her in that way, even after the surgeon told us that she was not feeling much pain because the tumour was pressing on her nerves. Little comfort.

We rushed her to the hospital. She recovered after a week but had to remain in hospital as she caught something infectious. That also precluded any operation. There was no Quiet Room then but the kindly surgeon who operated on her ordered her to be put in isolation because of her infection. We couldn't afford a single room any more and had to put her in a four-bedder when we checked her in. And that would eventually be the room where she would die. In a way, God had made the decision for us and even provided a room for us to be alone with her.

On the Saturday that was to be her last, Jacqueline had just gone home after staying the night with Faith. Her blood pressure and oxygen level dropped suddenly that morning. Doctors rushed in, pumped oxygen in and got her pressure back to less dangerous levels. They told me to expect anything. I called Jacqueline to come back to the hospital. Strangely, on that day, three pastors came to visit her. They had been coming to visit her in the hospital and at home irregularly. Jacqueline came back in the afternoon and Faith seemed to be back to her responsive self. After a visit by her friend, Faith soiled her pampers. As we cleaned and changed her, we noticed that her muscles had relaxed. We didn't know it at that time but she was about to leave us. We called her but she didn't respond. It was then that we realised that that could be it. I grabbed a stethoscope that was hanging on her cot and tried to listen for a heartbeat. I found one—the last one.

After nine months of suffering, God had decided to take Faith to a better place. We hugged her and stayed with her for some time before I went out to call for the nurses. Faith was cremated two days later at a small gathering of the relatives and friends who hung in there with us. We didn't call many people because we thought it would be meaningless to call people whom we had not seen in months just to come for a funeral.

Through the maze of questions of whys and wherefores, we have come to accept that God's way is higher than our way. And this is the road He has set for us. When we took Faith's ashes to a small chapel for internment, an old elder there told us not to be sad; God would bless us with many more children. Cold comfort, I thought. We were feeling definitely morbid. So morbid that I guess God decided to wake us up. During a drive to the chapel a week after Faith had left us, we were talking in the car about maybe God should have taken us all home. Why leave us here? Suddenly, I lost control of the car. It spun once and ended on the kerb, facing the oncoming traffic. Miraculously, none of the cars behind us hit our car. It was at that point that we suddenly realized that the living must go on living. Our time was not here yet.

And the cold comforting words of the old elder is becoming a reality—we now have three children, a girl whom we named Lois Faith in memory of Faith, and two boys, Luke and John. Though Faith has left us, faith will never die.