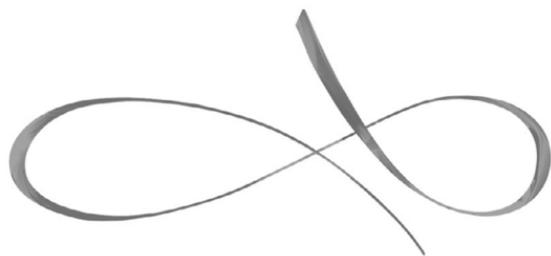


# 1 First breaths





As someone who is now pathologically early for everything, it always strikes me as ironic that I arrived almost two weeks late. I was born in the middle of a heatwave, facing the wrong way and took nearly three days to make an appearance and take my very first breaths.

My mum recalls that the first time she held me was in a cupboard, as there was no room left on the ward, while my dad tells me that when he left the hospital that night without his wife or baby daughter he shed a few, very rare tears.

It was perhaps not the most auspicious start.

The first days passed, however, with the photos and hospital visits common to many babies born all over the world. Photograph albums annotated with my mum's beautifully written captions show a small dark-haired bundle being cradled by various family members and friends of my parents.

It soon became clear, however, that all was not well in my tiny body. I was unable to feed and had a piercingly high-pitched cry, accompanied by a rapidly rising temperature. As I dropped nearly a pound below my birth weight, I was admitted to the special care baby unit at Whipps Cross hospital. The two weeks that followed were filled with confusion and a battery of tests, not to mention agony for my parents and wider family and friends as this tiny little human seemed to be getting more and more unwell.

The medical team treated me for various possible ailments, including meningitis, prescribing me antibiotics and performing two lumbar punctures and countless other tests as they desperately tried to work out why on earth my temperature kept rising.

At some point in those first weeks I had a neonatal fit. A brain scan showed that I'd had a cerebral haemorrhage, causing fluid on the brain. It was an answer to the question of what was wrong, but it wasn't the one everyone had hoped it would be.

The whole of my church family was praying, my name appearing in the faded newsletters my mum has kept in my baby box. There are stories that give that period a light-hearted slant, though, from the feeding tube I insisted on pulling out every five minutes to the bald patch and cup on my head, there to administer medication, which made me look like a monk.

In the midst of those days, my mum became a woman of prayer like never before. She prayed with the fervency of Hannah praying for Samuel all those thousands of years ago. It's described in 1 Samuel 1.26–28:

and she said to him, 'Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he shall be given over to the LORD.' And he worshipped the LORD there.

In her prayers, just as Hannah did, she offered my life back to God, for him to do with what he willed, and hoped that she would be able to bring me up. It was a brave prayer and a powerful one because, before I knew anything of her prayer and its significance, I knew that my place in the world was to be

found in some kind of Christian ministry. It's easy to think that somehow this was an expectation I grew up with, but I never experienced it like that. My faith grew as I did, but I had no comprehension of how it had been sown right at the beginning of my life.

I find it hard to understand the enormity of what my parents went through. I know that these things happened. I know my small, very new body was put under a great deal of pressure. I know that the legacy of those early weeks marked me, not only physically but also mentally, in ways I can't imagine. I can't possibly know the trauma of watching your daughter fight for life at only a few weeks of age, but I do know that it marks a family in ways that resound through the years.

When I finally came home, just shy of a month after I was born, life began. I was sent home with the warning that some damage had been done to my brain, but they couldn't be sure what it was. They knew my motor skills were unaffected but they didn't know what the seizure and swelling had left in their wake. My parents bought me brightly coloured educational toys they could ill afford in order to stimulate my brain and ensure that I would grow up 'OK' – whatever that means. Despite weekly and then monthly visits to the hospital to have my head measured and anticonvulsant medication every day, I had the kind of life that a million children in the 1990s did – full of bright clothing, Disney princess regalia and play dates.

There was a lurking anxiety beneath the surface. I was physically weak, and countless episodes of bronchitis and breathing difficulties saw me return to hospital on more than one occasion for steroids and antibiotics, with an eventual diagnosis of asthma when I was just over a year old.

A psychiatrist would note many years later that I had grown up with a sense that my body could not be trusted. It hadn't occurred to me before I read his words, but it is true. When you grow up with a chronic illness such as asthma you learn caution. You're cautious about how much you challenge your body, cautious in terms of making sure that you always have your inhaler, checking if you're wheezy enough to tell your mum, how tight your chest is. These things didn't stop me enjoying my early childhood, but they did make me aware, very early on, of my limitations.

Despite the lurking health difficulties, my first memories are happy, of times spent with my family and my church. I'm an only child and our close-knit family was a bedrock of support. When Mum went back to work, I was often looked after by my grandma. They were golden days; I attended a nursery I loved and I was growing into a confident child.

One of my favourite pastimes was pretend cooking. At home with Mum I watched her cook, helping her with my small hands as she made my dinner; and with Grandma I did the pretend stuff. Grandma would line up the ingredients I was allowed to use, usually a combination of instant coffee granules, dried spaghetti and flour. I would spend hours making concoctions, proudly serving them up as lotions and potions. Grandma's garden was a wonderland, covered in ivy with a pond holding countless koi carp (eventually joined by my goldfish), which I would proudly feed on Grandpa's behalf.

Then every year, when summer rolled around, so would the annual church holiday club. I loved it because I got to spend time in my favourite place with my favourite people. And the year when I was five, in the aptly named 'upper room' at my church, we were asked if we wanted to say the commitment prayer.

I'd never experienced a time when I hadn't thought God was real, but as I prayed that prayer, something in me clicked. I had the most tangible experience of the Spirit moving through me. I knew without doubt that this Father God was someone I wanted to get to know better and I knew that I could trust him.

We sang a song about being safe in the Father's hands and I felt a swell of love, pure and uncomplicated. It wasn't a dramatic, Damascus road conversion experience, but a quiet realization that I was created by God and loved by him. That realization changed everything – not because I was leaving behind a sordid life of difficulty (I was five, after all!) but because I was beginning to gain confidence.

I also became aware, through the wonders of *CBBC Newsround*, that there was a world outside my safe home. The genocide in Rwanda had happened a year before and I calmly announced to my assembled family (and later to half my church) that I wanted to be a missionary there. This dream lasted for a while before I realized that Rwanda is definitely not close enough for me to get back for dinner at home every night! From then on, however, I was almost certain that I would work for the Church in some way or other. While I vaguely entertained the idea of being a teacher, a singer or an actress (sometimes all at the same time), I always returned to the knowledge that I was going to do something for the Church.

For a long time I felt as if my conversion story was somehow deficient. There was nothing dramatic about a five-year-old promising to follow God for ever; the sins I repented at that age were far from heinous. Throughout my primary school years I gave talks about my infant faith at school and spoke about Jesus all the time. I also asked at least once a year to be baptized – but was repeatedly told that I was too young.

When I was ten, however, I stopped asking.

It was a few weeks into the new millennium and my dad came to pick me up from school. It was a rare treat, as his job in a hotel often meant he worked long hours, getting home way after I was in bed. That day I skipped happily along beside him, slightly perturbed by his silence but happy nonetheless.

When I arrived home, however, the reason for Dad's silence was revealed. Mum was in the lounge, face pale and eyes red-rimmed from crying.

'Rachael. I'm really sorry, angel, but Uncle Den died today.'

I stared at her, unable to comprehend what she was saying. Den was one of my grandparents' best friends and he and his wife lived in a bungalow by the sea. We'd spent many a happy hour with them, even as, over the past few years, Den had grown frailer and been confined to his armchair.

I didn't know how to deal with the grief I felt at his death and the sadness I felt for his wife, Rita. I began to ask, for the first time, where God was in this.

Where had God been in Den's last days?

Where was God for his wife and all of us left behind?

They were questions I dared not voice, but they nonetheless dampened my faith. I didn't stop believing in God, but I stopped seeking him.

Ironically, the year that followed was one of the happiest of my life. I loved being in Year 6 and I loved singing the lead role in the end-of-year show. I felt confident and happy.

The photo albums show me proudly posing in my new oversized school uniform; but as the summer wore on, I began to feel increasingly anxious about starting 'Big School'. There seemed to be countless things to worry about: getting my homework in

on time, finding my way around the maze of different buildings, making sure that I had all the equipment I needed in order to avoid my great fear – detention.

On the first day, I met the girl who would become my best friend. I was seated alone in the large English classroom, feeling breathless and disorientated as everyone else paired up. The teacher, Mrs R, seemed to be the sort who took no nonsense and I was afraid of her. Fifteen minutes after the start of the lesson, a girl came in shyly and quietly apologized for being late, explaining that she had gone to the wrong class. Mrs R waved her excuse away and gestured to the empty seat next to me. I shrank into the wall, unsure of what to expect from the pretty girl beside me, her bright blue eyes framed by the curliest eyelashes I had ever seen.

Around halfway through that first lesson, we became friends. Spotting a poster of Winnie the Pooh on the wall directly in front of where we sat, I smiled to myself and gently gestured to Jessie, as she had introduced herself. A giggle emanated from her body like bubbles in a bath and we became firm friends. A loose group of other friends formed around us and I began to feel if not comfortable, then certainly more settled at school.

When the new minister, Simon, and his family came to our church, his daughters also became great friends of mine and I threw myself into the opportunities afforded me by being a member of the youth group. I sang regularly in the worship band and, after one particular youth service, I found myself praying again the commitment prayer I had first prayed at the age of five. It wasn't that I had ever stopped being a Christian, but the questions I'd had about where God was when life hurt had felt like a block, preventing me from really committing to him.

I grew in confidence and was happier at school. When, in February, I attended the baptism of a couple of close friends, I was in tears even before the service began. Everything I read and heard both before and during the service stirred something in me that made me feel that I should be baptized.

I was 12 years old and the sermon was on the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter. Mark's Gospel gives us Jesus' words to the girl, *Talitha koum!* (which means 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!') For perhaps the first time, I felt that words from Scripture were speaking directly to me. Jairus' daughter is believed to have been 12 at the time the story took place and I, being the same age, felt that the words applied to me. After asking so often to be baptized and being told no, I felt as though this time God was asking me to 'get up' and be baptized, to start a new life.

After the service I approached Simon and Mum and prayed with them. Simon agreed to baptize me a few months later, once I turned 13. Perhaps this was my first lesson from God that his timing is better than ours (it's a lesson I'm still to learn many years later!)

The day of my baptism proved to be everything I had hoped. I was filled with overwhelming peace as I declared my love and commitment to the Lord in front of everyone I knew and loved. The gnawing sense of calling I had first felt at the age of five was further strengthened by the many scriptures, both written in the numerous cards I received and read to me by members of the congregation during the service, that spoke of me taking the word and comfort of God to others.

Although only 13, I knew that my future lay in the Church. It would take me much longer to work out exactly what that future looked like.