



## Changed by a Gift

by Liita Forsyth

*Most of the announcements were stamped and sealed in a pile on the dining room floor. I'd even written and sealed a "thank you" note to my obstetrician along with a photo of Nathan and Miika in front of the Christmas tree. Then I got the call that made time stand still.*

*"This is Dr. Mercola."*

*"Yes."*

*"Well, Nathan does have Down Syndrome."*

*"He does."*

*"Yes."*

*"Wow."*

*"I know it's a lot to swallow."*

*"Yup."*

On August 8, 2005 I had an ultrasound.

"It's a boy!" said the tech.

Paul and I looked at each other amazed. We were "girl" people. This would take some getting used to. I'd always had visions of two little girls, one holding each of my hands, and we're all running through a meadow and dancing in the sunshine.

A boy...OK.

The ultrasound was on a Monday. A day or two later, I woke up around 4:00 a.m. as I'd grown accustomed to doing during this pregnancy. But this was different. My eyes opened and my only thought was a name, as if someone had infused my mind, "Nathan." I didn't even have time to gather my thoughts as to what day it was or where I was...Nathan. That name had never even made it to our top ten list, but I kind of liked it. So, I got out of bed and went downstairs to look it up in our name book. Paul and I agreed on one thing about choosing a name, it must have meaning.

I opened the name book right to "Nathan." No flipping through pages... It means "God's gift."

On Thursday of that week I met with my obstetrician to go over the ultrasound results. A small white spot was seen on Nathan's heart. Dr. Tong explained that it "could" be indicative of Down Syndrome, but that he'd seen this same spot many times in his 30 years of practice and it almost never turned out to be anything. Did I want to do amniocentesis?

"No. We'll wait."

Just like Miika, Nathan was born four days early on a Monday. On December 26, after only 3.5 hours of labor our gift arrived. The moment I saw him, there was something about his eyes that made me wonder, but apparently no one else



Paul Forsyth with Nathan and Miika

noticed what I saw. He was robust and perfect, but a little cold, so the nurse whisked him away to get his body temperature up. Waiting seemed like an eternity, so we went to the nursery to be with Nathan. After about two hours, he was warmed up and with us.

The next day in the hospital, I studied his face, sometimes seeing perfection, sometimes seeing mystery eyes. My obstetrician looked him over and believed he was just fine. The pediatrician did the same, but he observed the same thing I had about Nathan's eyes. I requested that a chromosome test be done.

Wednesday, January 11, 2006, at 5:30 p.m. the results were being explained to me on the phone. Paul was taking an evening class and couldn't be reached right away. So, Miika, Nathan and I were home alone. My tears were uncontrollable. Not even three years old yet, my dear, sweet girl told me, "Mommy, take a deep breath and settle down."

This story was written only a few days after we received the positive test results, and it became part of Nathan's second birth announcement. Emotions were raw. We grieved the loss of dreams that wouldn't come true, and traded them for a new reality which we didn't understand yet. It was as if we had one foot in our old reality and the other foot in a new dimension. I felt like I was given a damaged gift. I felt guilty for having a child so late in life and felt like God's poster child for when not to bear children. I fought depression. Consequence and providence collided. Of course most of us don't notice this collision unless something difficult and life-changing happens.

A few days after Nathan's diagnosis, I received some junk mail promoting stock photography. Each panel of the brochure had a phrase: "change my opinion, change my persuasion, change my life, change my mood." It was as if God was showing me how to pray. I've had it hanging in my home office ever since, to remind me that my heart *must* change. You see, I was that person who used to walk the other way when I saw someone with a disability. I always thought, "That's someone else's gift and ministry, not mine. I can't handle those kind of people."

Several Sundays ago, when I picked Nathan up from the church nursery, he had one of those hot pink stickers on his shirt that said, "I've been changed." I had to laugh because that statement was the answer to my prayer. I put that sticker on the brochure in my office. I *have* been changed. I can't imagine life without Nathan. He is our beautiful shining star

and I would not trade him for a “perfect” child for all the world. We will never go back, only forward. The sunshine in his smile fills me with a love that fuels my hope. Yes, there are challenges. Yes, there are fears. There are also many unknowns, the biggest being the extent of his retardation as he grows up. But I can’t focus on those things because we have so much to develop today through therapy, medicine and stimulus. Giving Nathan all that is available to him now will be the foundation of his future.

Nathan is not “damaged goods.” God created him for His purpose. I’ll never forget the phone call from Chris Castaldo after we told everyone about Nathan. Chris shared the story of his son who suffers from hemophilia. Then he read 2 Corinthians 4:7–9, 16–18:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

In the first days after our announcement of Nathan’s diagnosis, we were flooded with gifts and cards full of encouraging words. The most remarkable gift was a resource shower coordinated by Shelly Swanson and Dawn Clark. Moms and grandmothers of children with Down Syndrome were invited to Shelly’s house for a brunch and they were asked to bring their favorite resource as a gift. The

women brought me books, DVDs, websites, newsletters, developmental toys, and a file full of folders to be filled with Nathan’s future personal information. I was overwhelmed with gratitude and the need to somehow give back or multiply these gifts. As a result of that shower, Dawn, Shelly, and I are working on a resource packet to give to parents who discover that their child has Down Syndrome or another disability. There are a lot of resources on line, but I’ve not discovered any with a Christian-based perspective. The resource packet will be available as information accessible from College Church’s website as well as an actual packet that can be distributed to medical professionals and anyone who knows of parents who need encouragement and information.

A parent of a child with a disability has so much to learn, and must do so quickly. It’s overwhelming. As for my husband, Paul, and me, we’ve had to read up on cardiology, thyroid, inner ear, gastrointestinal issues, and all aspects of developmental therapy. By developing this packet, the STARS ministry will be able to reach out to “new” parents by helping them weed through the vast world of information and direct them to the core of what they need to know. When this resource is ready for distribution, an announcement will be made in the *Fellowship Weekly*.

I’ve learned so much in just eight months of our new journey. Unfortunately much of it is troubling—particularly the statistic that 80% of children with Down Syndrome are aborted. There are approximately 5,000 live births in the United States per year of children who have Down Syndrome, and that’s just one disability among many. If Christian obstetricians who are on the frontlines of the abortion battle have a tool to persuade parents to save a life, what an amazing ministry opportunity we have by providing information and real stories

about beautiful children. An issue that is rarely discussed is the horror of the emotional aftermath which haunts women years after an abortion.

The thought of having a child with a disability was probably one of my worst nightmares before Nathan was born. Now that I’ve come down this road a bit, I can’t imagine why I was so afraid. One of the goals of creating this hope-filled, Christ-centered resource tool, is to have an immediate, 911-rescue-gift to deliver at a time of crisis just as Dawn, Shelly, the pastoral staff, and so many friends from College Church did for us by arriving at the scene of our crash, helping us up, and supporting us.

Our eyes and hearts have become tuned in to the special people all around us who used to be invisible. One of Nathan’s gifts to me has been that I don’t walk the other way anymore. Often, I walk right up to them and strike up a conversation. ☺

### What Can You Say?

Breaking the news to friends and family about our son’s diagnosis was awkward. Many were honest enough to say that they didn’t know what to say. Some had wonderful stories to share about a neighbor or a family member with Down Syndrome. Then there was the whole category of people who put both feet in their mouth saying things, like, “Maybe God will heal Nathan,” or “I can’t imagine better parents than you and Paul to handle a situation like this.” I heard this a lot: “God only gives us what we can handle.”

No, no, no! I don’t believe that God will take away Nathan’s Down Syndrome in this life. I can think of many parents who would be *much* better at raising a child with a disability than us, and sometimes God allows events to happen that we *can’t* handle so we will turn to Him for strength.

Don’t pretend to understand the range of emotions that your friends are going through. If you have had your world turned up-side-down, share *that* experience. Your vulnerability will most likely be comforting. Don’t avoid your friends because you don’t know what to say. Talk about their situation and ask questions. Do some “googling” to better understand their circumstances. The fact that you have educated yourself will show how much you care.

### Our STARS ministry meets at the following times during the school year:

#### SUNDAY MINISTRIES:

Adult STARS, 9:30–12:00

Teen STARS, 9:30–10:45

Young STARS, 9:30–10:45

Inclusion Buddies, 9:30 and 11:00

#### MUSIC PROGRAMS:

Sunday Night Autoharp, 6:00–7:15 PM

Wednesday night Praise in Action, 6:30–8:00 PM

Friday Night Fun: 6:00–8:00 PM,  
2nd and 4th Friday of the month

Shepherd’s Arms Respite Care, providing care and friendship to a child or adult with a disability in their home

For more information please visit our website at [www.college-church.com/disability.asp](http://www.college-church.com/disability.asp) or call the church office.