

AJANI

“HE WHO OVERCOMES IN THE BATTLE”

“Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack, a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.”

(Anthem: Leonard Cohen)

Simon Cross

INTRODUCTION

I feel the need to start this particular piece of writing with something of a trigger warning, which is not something I've ever done before. In this essay I'm going to tell some of the story of my son, Ajani, who was stillborn – he never lived outside of the womb. This is an emotive subject, not least for me. But those for whom such experiences are particularly raw or recent may wish to think twice before reading this piece of writing, which will combine candour about what we went through, with honest reflection on some of the things I learned from the experience. It has now been twelve years since Ajani was born, and his story remains one of the most formative experiences in my life. I'm not usually a great fan of people who dwell on stories of things they experienced years ago, and to be honest this isn't a story I tell a lot any more, but the reality of facing mortality in this way is that it continues to have an effect on one over a period of years. Anyway, with that trigger warning out of the way – this is part of my truth about Ajani Josiah Cross, who was born, and died, on April 20th 2007.



I remember the autumn of 2006 as unremarkable – at least in terms of weather. It's one of those curious void spaces that we keep in our minds, unpopulated by specific time bound memories. At that time we lived in Llanelli, South Wales – working as part of a Christian mission movement which has its UK headquarters there. Perhaps that's a clue that this was now some time ago: I'm perhaps not the obvious candidate for 'missionary' these days, much too pluralist, and far too used to living in the gray areas of life. But the truth is that I was probably quite like that then too, people at the time would sometimes describe me as 'a bit liberal' – which I wasn't really, at least not in the way that I understand the word.

As a youngster I read a few Christian autobiographies. I was entranced by characters with exotic back stories, the London gangster turned evangelist 'Fred Lemon' is one I remember, and John Smith the conservative Australian preacher who grew his hair long and started 'God's Squad' a 1% biker gang; and others spring to mind. Although I never met Fred, who I assume has passed away now, Smithy had an enduring influence on my life, I corresponded with him a little by letter, and much later had a few exchanges with him on social media. By that point it was clear that our theology was somewhat divergent, but we shared a passion for social justice which I think he helped to inspire in me at a formative age.

Other people I read about I later came to know – one is now a friend of sorts. The point is that I have always been interested in the power of Christianity to change lives and in doing so, to change societies. I'm much less interested in debating the rights and wrongs of the specifics of what people believe (as if any one of us has a monopoly on understanding the truth), than I am interested in how we behave towards each other. So perhaps my friends were right – perhaps I was then, 'a bit liberal'.

Our time in South Wales was a wonderful one. We were part of a close-knit community, for a while we even lived in shared accommodation (which had its challenges, but generally I feel very positively about it), our two little girls were very small and I think they benefitted as much as we did from the whole experience. By the summer of 2006 we were living in a terraced house a short walk from the place where we worked, which in turn was another short walk from the waterfront. The pace of life was not too frantic, people were loving and kind, we had great friends and there were lots of fun things to do. That's not to say everything was 100% wonderful of course, we were always broke for one thing, but that didn't seem to matter too much – we were living with a purpose.

I don't recall exactly when we found out that Kelly, my wife, was pregnant for the third time. But we were delighted, excited, all the things that you would expect. We'd both just turned 29 years old, in the last gasp of our twenties, and this felt like a completion point in terms of the development of our family unit. Our two little girls were excited about the prospect having a new baby in the house – as you would expect little girls to be. Dates don't stick well in my brain, unlike certain aspects of pop trivia. (*The 13th release on Stiff Records? One Chord Wonders by The Adverts, fronted by TV Smith who I saw performing solo sometime in the late 90s. The date of Christmas Eve? Errrrmmm... is it the 24th?*) So really it's hardly a surprise I'm somewhat hazy on when we went for the first scan – there are aspects of it I remember quite well though. I remember parking the car, and going in to the building, I remember the side of the room I was sitting on, with the lady doing the ultrasound opposite me. I remember her going quiet as she did the scan, and then making an excuse and leaving the room to get a more experienced colleague. I don't recall the form of words they used, but I think that's when I first heard someone say 'not compatible with life outside of the womb'. Memories are funny things though, and they can play one false: it may be that they said nothing of the sort, but instead told us there was something wrong and set in place an appointment with a consultant. I remember ringing my friend Gareth. Eyes stinging.

Other details blur into one another, individual moments stand out. Like the time a day or so later, when I was walking from our house to the place where we worked. I had crossed the main road, walked down the sloping path which got very slick when it rained, and where I once fell off my bike, turned left and then met a guy who I knew a little from our organisation. I had once accidentally been publicly rude to him – something he had graciously forgiven me for – but we'd never been best of friends. He greeted me and asked how I was, as you do. I remember my knees crumpling, my body sinking down, the breath going out of me as I tried to tell him. It was too soon, too raw, for me to be anything but broken. I didn't faint, just sank. Stayed on my feet but dropped into a crouch. And sobbed.

It was, the consultant explained, our choice. Some people, when faced with a situation like this, choose to take the pregnancy through to full term, others – knowing that the baby will die anyway – will have a termination. We could never have imagined a situation where we would genuinely consider an abortion before, but now we were being asked to think about it. The logic was clear – the baby could not survive outside of the womb, his skull hadn't formed properly – he had a 'neural tube defect' and this was something that could not be remedied. So what should we do? I'd hesitate to give anyone advice in a situation such as this – it's intensely personal. But ultimately our decision making didn't take very long. 'While he's alive in the womb, he's part of our family. He's with us, we can love him and take care of him, and perhaps he can enjoy spending time with us.' All of us will die some day, his life was to be a very short one, but we chose to enjoy it as long as we could. So for the remaining part of the nine months, that's what we did. Interspersed by regular trips to the consultant for further scans, punctuated by desperate prayers that God might somehow work a miracle, and populated with words, looks and hugs from friends and family members, some who didn't know what to do or say, others who got it just right, and some who got it dreadfully wrong.

Of those who did get it wrong, I don't really blame them. It's a very difficult thing to try and navigate, someone else's deep distress at the impending loss of a child. There were one or two, however, who really stood out for their crass statements. Like the self-appointed 'prophet' declared that not only would God miraculously heal the baby, but he would go on to be (and I quote) "a youth leader, and then a church leader". Quite the trajectory. In the guy's defence, he was fairly young and had been primed and encouraged by people who should have known much better to mistake his youthful arrogance for God-given authority.

That sort of pronouncement though is hugely dangerous and potentially very harmful, particularly to the more credulous, and I've had cause to reflect over the years on the dangers of false promises made by religious zealots, spurred on by that memory.

I won't, now, go in to the details of the whole pregnancy, except to say that it was of course, much harder for Kelly than for me. It was Kelly who physically carried our boy within her for all that time, she was the one who stayed at home with our little girls when I went abroad on a pre-arranged trip and had to cope with the stresses of life while all the time preparing to give birth to a child who wouldn't live. The man definitely gets off lightly when it comes to bringing a child in to the world. Let's fast forward then, past the bizarre trip to a faith healing service where the preacher spoke exclusively in rhyming couplets, past the heartbreak of repeated trips to Swansea to see the lovely consultant who was so gentle and generous with us, past the scan photo which showed Ajani with a great big grin on his unborn face, past the extraordinary amount of movement he used to do in the womb, past the hugs and tears and difficult phone calls, to the final trip to Swansea hospital where Ajani would be born.

Like the other days, I don't remember the weather or anything like that, I do though remember where we parked. And I remember the kindness of the staff who helped us through the whole process. And I remember the birth. There are a number of things one expects from a baby: They should be alive. He wasn't. They should have (in our case) pink skin. He didn't. They should be warm. He wasn't. His life had ended as he was born, before he could breathe. And afterwards, when he had been washed, and wrapped up, and given the little hat our lovely friend Beth had made for him, I remember going out in to the corridor to bring in the members of our family who had made it down to us for the birth. And my two little girls. I think that series of very vivid memories is the hardest of all – certainly they provoke more tears than any moment other than the cremation service.

Skip forward then, to that service, and the memory of walking in to the chapel, carrying the tiny white coffin in my arms. Good grief that was awful.

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For all that I've long burned with a passion for social justice, for a more equal and just society, and for all that I took what steps I could to try and bring that about – even founding a campaigning network with a friend of mine, I became aware as I went through

my twenties, that a lot of my passion burned hot but not deep. I knew that I was not a deeply loving or caring person. I cared, but on a level of rationality, not a heart level. I remember talking to a mentor about it, and saying that I wished I was a bit more loving. That I felt more compassionate towards people. The compassion that developed in me since has been very much a gift from my son. He taught me to feel a depth of compassion that was previously unknown to me. Really, he gave me many gifts, I'm a different person now than I would have been without him. It was partly due to him that my interest in contemplative spirituality developed, that in itself a response to the inadequacies of my own spirituality to address the reality of what we had been through. And the reality that this was far from being an isolated incident. In some places this kind of experience – the death of a baby – is commonplace. Even among people I know and love, people have had far tougher things to deal with in their own lives, unimaginably tough things. I came to see that my Christianity had not been big enough to take this reality in. This was another gift my boy gave me.

We called him Ajani Josiah: Ajani means 'he who overcomes in the battle', Josiah means 'God heals'. It's been twelve years, I wouldn't say that we're entirely healed of the hurt. I went running this morning and my back and leg were hurting from a couple of injuries I had picked up kickboxing recently – the pain at times dull, at times sharp. Neither as keen as when I first sustained them. Likewise I jog/potter/stumble through life every day and I still sometimes feel the pain from that time twelve years ago, but it's nothing like it was. Mostly. But that's just my truth, for others in my family the story is different. I learned particularly that children process grief in stages, four-year-olds can't fully process the loss of a sibling – even one they never 'really' knew. The mourning comes back again, and again, and again.

I've been amazed by the amount of people I've come to know who have been through a similar thing, I've sat with too many women who have lost babies at different stages, the pain is palpable, the loss is very real. Ajani taught me a few things about that – he taught me about the inadequacy of answers and explanations too. He taught me about the value of uncertainty and the folly of thinking there are solutions to every problem.

I didn't write this with the intention of it being an exhaustive account – it would take more than even a book to do that. I didn't write this so I could say thank-you to all those who gave us gifts, spoke words of kindness, helped us in small or big ways, who still remember with us. I hope they know how much we are grateful. Those lovely big-hearted

beautiful people full of their own inadequacies and inconsistencies who hurt and cried alongside us.

I wrote this in part because we have just celebrated the 12th anniversary of his birth – and death. I wrote this in part because it's important to acknowledge that out of suffering can come goodness. I wrote this in part because I was once in a room with a well-known person who gave a very clever talk. At the end of the talk he was asked about any really hard times he had been through, and I thought: 'this will be good', and then he gave an example of how he had worked really hard on a big project which should have brought him fame and wealth, and then the project had been shelved. And I thought – 'seriously? Is that it? Your hard time?' Because the illusion is that real hardship or real suffering is a failure, that successful people sometimes just miss out on greater successes. But life is not possible without death. Mortality is a truth for us all. That pain we feel is a reminder that we are alive.

I said earlier that I am not the same person I was back then, that's true in a number of ways, and also false in a number of others. I think I am more compassionate, more ready to take time for people, more loving. But at the same time I'm still rude and insensitive, still likely to rush to judgement, still hard hearted. But the process of growing up is learning to see one's immaturities, and for the part that my son played in helping me with that, I'm enormously grateful. I feel a little guilty sometimes that I don't think about him more often, that he's not as ever present in my mind as my two girls are. But I recognise that this too is the way of things, and that it is the way we work. Our focus must largely be on loving the living, if it wasn't, we couldn't go on.

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