

Local

Infant son taught father lessons of love, tolerance and faith

By Thomas Gravely

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Editor's note: This eulogy was delivered by the author at the funeral service for his son, Thomas, who passed away in February.

The author is a contributor to The Washington Post's [local faith leader network](#).

Good morning. On behalf of the Gravely and Passyn families, thank you for coming today to show your love and support for our amazing little man Thomas Arthur, Jr., a "Superman" in the truest sense of the word. Of course, the words "amazing" and "super" to describe our Baby Thomas cannot possibly encapsulate his true essence, which profoundly manifested itself during his seven months here on this Earth, and the warmth and joy that he gave to our hearts. As many of you observed during the viewing last evening, our Thomas today is proudly wearing his Superman outfit, equipped with a cape and all, which he wore for Halloween this past year. At the risk of being perceived as silly parents for dressing their son's body in a Superman costume for all eternity, we nevertheless found it a fitting tribute to his life; because if there ever was a soul deserving of the Superman moniker, it was our precious Thomas.

This is Thomas's inspiring story. Nearly a year ago to this day, Elizabeth and I received devastating and heartbreaking news that no expecting parent should ever have to hear. Shortly after Elizabeth's 20 week sonogram, we learned prenatally that our baby Thomas had been diagnosed with an extremely rare chromosomal disorder. In layman's terms, Little Thomas did not have all of the genes that he was supposed to have due to a deletion of a portion of his DNA. This condition affected, in some shape or form, every single living cell in his body. This we knew would result in several brain abnormalities and, as the medical experts would say, other physiological "anomalies." We were told that even if he did survive birth, he could very well have a trifecta of disabilities — [blindness](#), deafness and severe mental retardation. In other words, think of Helen Keller, but without the mental capacity. We were very scared. The doctors gave us a wide range of possible outcomes for Thomas. Although no one was absolutely sure what to expect, at least one doctor informed us that Thomas's chromosomal condition was "not compatible with life," and that he didn't expect the pregnancy to make it full term.

Needless to say, Elizabeth and I were despondent, lost, angry and depressed. We were particularly [angry with God](#) at the time, and the thought crossed our minds that perhaps we were somehow being punished by his divine influence. Sure, many family members, friends and support groups reminded us that many parents in

our situation go through the [similar emotions](#). Of course they were right, but words of comfort could not take away the pain and anguish that we felt. Thomas's diagnosis notwithstanding, we remained steadfast in our decision to honor the dignity of Thomas's life, and we carried on with the pregnancy. We placed Thomas's fate in God's hands, and we figured that God had a plan for Thomas.

But on July 13, 2011, our Baby Thomas was born kicking, punching, crying and sporting a rather sanguine skin tone (and yes, that was a daddy trait), and much to the astonishment and amazement of the team of doctors on hand in the delivery room, our Baby Thomas was alive! After six days in the NICU, we were finally able to take our Thomas home, which quite honestly, was not something we had prepared for given Thomas's very poor prognosis. What we initially thought of as a curse, turned out to be the greatest blessing from God that we had ever received. Our Baby Thomas was truly a miracle.

Soon after birth, we did learn that Thomas was certainly going to have challenges, but we also knew from the very moment he was born that he demonstrated a strong propensity and desire to live, despite his various syndromic ailments. We vowed that we would do everything within our power as parents to provide a loving environment for Thomas in which he could thrive and flourish. During the course of Thomas's life, he had numerous doctors visits, treatments and hospitalizations. I will not belabor you today with the details of Thomas's many courageous battles during his short time here, because it is ultimately not important, and we would be here, quite literally, all day. What is important is that Thomas fought each obstacle thrown his way with fierce tenacity, and he was triumphant each step of the way. He was a warrior with a strong, yet soft and loving, heart.

Those who had the chance to meet Thomas immediately fell in love with his peaceful demeanor. He was such a good boy, with a pleasant disposition. He had the innate ability to instantly make you feel happy and at peace even if you were in the worst of moods. Thomas did have some vision and hearing impairment, the degree of which we were never really able to determine for sure, but we knew that Thomas could hear our voices, he knew who his parents were, and he was particularly responsive to music, whether it was Coldplay or Beethoven. He knew that he was loved, and he certainly had many happy moments as evidenced by his gleaming smile and soft cooing. We also knew that he was very alert mentally. This gave us hope that Thomas would someday be able to live a fruitful and productive life despite his sensory disabilities. As late as Thursday of last week, and after several promising doctors appointments, we had every reason to be very optimistic about Thomas's progress and his future.

Then this past Friday morning, Baby Thomas suddenly passed away. Elizabeth and I watched in despair as a team of ER doctors and staff desperately tried to resuscitate him, but they were not able to do so. I immediately flashed back to the way Elizabeth and I felt last February when we first learned the news about Thomas's condition...powerless and confused. How could this have happened? Why did it happen? It was as if we were just pawns in some "game" (for lack of a better word) that we didn't understand, and no matter how hard we tried or how much effort we invested, in the end we could not save our Thomas. As parents, we were devastated because Thomas had shown so much progress and development in recent weeks, and we were

looking forward to raising Thomas and watching him continue to exceed expectations. Yet, as I stated earlier, God had a plan for Thomas. And for reasons only the Lord knows, Thomas was taken from us.

Since Thomas's passing, I have relied heavily on the words of the [serenity prayer](#) to make sense of what transpired last week. Although it is a Christian prayer, I believe its message transcends nearly all faiths and systems of beliefs. I'm paraphrasing, but it goes as follows: "God grant us the serenity to accept the things that we cannot change; the courage to change the things that we can; and the wisdom to know the difference." Granted, easier said than done....but poignant words nonetheless.

Although I do not pretend to have God's [omniscient abilities](#), I have spent considerable time during the past few days pondering the meaning and true purpose of Thomas's life, putting his life into perspective and reflecting on the experiences of the past year with our son and with others...I suppose in a way that only a father can.

What was the meaning of Thomas's life? What purpose did it serve for God to place Thomas on this Earth for nearly 7 months, only to take him away from us much too soon? At first, I didn't have an answer, but right or wrong, I eventually came to my own conclusion after some introspection. And my explanation necessarily begins and ends with the very people sitting within these walls this morning.

You see, Thomas was the epitome of love, in its most perfect and purest form. His life's experiences inspired and united so many people, including many of you, whether you realize it or not. It is, in part, why you are here today in support of his memory. Could it be that Baby Thomas was a messenger? Again, only God knows, but if so, what was Thomas's "message?" Perhaps, he was a reminder to us and our community about the importance of love, and the importance of tolerating imperfection in a society where imperfection has increasingly become intolerable....the importance of valuing all human life.

Thomas's story certainly sparked discourse among us about the importance of love, commitment, and self-sacrifice. I know, because I've had conversations with many of you about what you would do if you were "in our shoes," and if you were faced with the prospect of having a child as special as Thomas. To be able to think about these kinds of issues introspectively, in my opinion, makes one a more compassionate person and makes one appreciate more the fragility of human life and the important role that family and friends play in our lives. This in of itself, certainly gives meaning to Thomas' life.

Some of who communicated to us that you could not possibly understand or comprehend what we were going through, and that you couldn't imagine going through the "burden" of raising a child with Thomas's condition. Yes, last February, Elizabeth and I shared many of these feelings as well...and those feelings are perfectly understandable. But as I stand before you today, and I know Elizabeth feels the same way, I can tell you that having Thomas in our lives was not a burden, not for a moment, and we enjoyed every minute of our time with him, whether it was at home or in the hospital. He truly was a blessing from God. Thomas made me a loving father, a better husband and a better person. For that I am thankful for Thomas, and I am thankful to God for giving him to us, albeit for a brief time.

I was reminded of the importance of family constantly during the past year, where on many occasions I experienced the value of a loving wife, as well as many close and caring family members and friends, including medical professionals, who went beyond the call of duty to assist Baby Thomas.

I was able to witness my beautiful wife, Elizabeth, blossom into motherhood before my very eyes. I am thankful to God for having her in my life, and she was certainly "Supermom" to Little Thomas in every sense of the word. The experiences we shared together with Thomas during this past year reaffirmed why I fell in love with her in the first place, and our love is even stronger now thanks to Thomas. Could that also have been part of God's plan? I would like to think so. Thank you Elizabeth, for your enduring love and support throughout all of this. I couldn't have made it this far without you. I love you.

Elizabeth and I would also like to thank our many family members, friends and work colleagues for their love, support and invaluable advice during this past year. I cannot possibly name everyone, but you certainly know who you are.

Thomas's true miracle is not that he exceeded doctors' expectations, but that he united our families and friends through his love and our love for him. Ultimately, I believe that this was Thomas's purpose on this Earth.

Although there are genes that determine how tall we are, what color eyes and hair we will have, or whether or not we will even be able to see or hear, I do know that there is no gene for love, and there is certainly no gene for the human spirit. Thomas had both in droves and a power that transcended his bodily form. He is a true Superman.

And as promised, I will conclude my vision of Thomas's legacy with where I began, with all of you with us today. All that I ask is that you remember Thomas and his story. How he touched and inspired so many lives and taught so many the importance of love, tolerance and affection. For those of you who have young children, hug them just a little bit tighter before they go to bed tonight. Please make them understand that your love for them is unconditional and that you will always fight for them with all of your ability. You, as parents, are their number one advocates. That is what Thomas taught us.

And finally, I must say goodbye to my Thomas. I was honored to be your father. You made me so very proud, and I will never forget what you have taught me. Thank you my son. I will always love and cherish you, and I look forward to the day when we can hopefully meet again in the kingdom of Heaven. God bless you.

Thomas Gravelly lives in Rockville, Md.

 **6 Comments**