At a time of tragedy, ritual helps family members deal with the painful task of letting go

by Megory Anderson

I always dread calls like this. A little boy was about to be taken off life support, and his family needed help.

David and Susie were a couple in their late 30s. Christopher, their youngest child, was not quite two. He had come down with a bad case of pneumonia several months ago and had quickly gone into a coma. By the third day, the doctors had told David and Susie that their son was brain dead and had put him on life support. For about six weeks now, he had been in the same state. Everyone was convinced there was no hope. It was time to let him die.

I would help the parents create rituals for the moments when the machines were turned off, to help Christopher let go of his life and to help David and Susie let go of their child.

We talked for several hours that afternoon. David and Susie told me about Christopher's life and his love of learning new things. They told me about his older sister, Emma, who was almost five. They talked about their religious beliefs. David was born and raised Lutheran, but his family only went to church now and then. Susie was Chinese-American and grew up with a mixture of Protestantism and Buddhism. Her grandmother, who was still alive, was a Buddhist. Susie wanted her to be with the family for Christopher's last moments.

The next morning I met them at the hospital. Susie's grandmother was there, and in a corner by herself was Emma. She was tiny and beautiful, looking more like her Chinese mother than her German father. I knelt down and introduced myself. She was silent, but her eyes were big.

The room was filled with machines making all sorts of sounds, pumping and beeping and swooshing. In the middle stood a huge crib containing a very small boy with black hair and pale skin who seemed to be swallowed up by all the tubes and monitors.

We gathered around Christopher's crib, and I began by asking God to be present in this room and with all of us. I asked that special help be given us in this difficult thing we needed to do. Susie's grandmother prayed something in Chinese, and Susie smiled, telling us that her grandmother asked especially that the good spirits come down to assist us. Emma looked to the ceiling, hoping — I imagined — to see an angel or two.

David rearranged Christopher's bed sheets. Susie put some new socks on his feet and placed a stuffed rabbit next to him. David placed their son's favorite bowl and spoon beside him and then laid a very worn-out copy of *Goodnight Moon* next to his hand. The grandmother had brought a red jacket she made for him, and she put it on him around all the tubes and monitors. And then David lifted Emma so she could give Christopher his pillow from home.

"Let's take a few minutes to tell Christopher thank you for being here with us for his short life," I said.
David began, taking Christopher's small hand in his. "Son, I remember when you were born. I was so happy. You brought such joy to me. I would look into your eyes and see all the things you were going to do when you grew up.

"Well, I guess you won't get much of a chance now. But we will always remember all the things you did do. You loved to dig. Remember when you dug up all those flower bulbs your mother had just planted?" He looked over at his wife, who was crying now.

"And remember last Christmas when we played all afternoon with your new train set? I'll keep it for you, Chris. I'll keep it going for you. Thank you, son. Thank you for being our baby."

"I want to go next, Daddy," Emma said, looking back and forth from her father to her mother.

David picked Emma up and swung her over the bars of the bed. She sat cross-legged next to her brother and began, "Christopher, it's me, Emma. Can you hear me?" She waited a moment and began stroking his hair back from his forehead.

"Chrisser, Mommy and Daddy told me that it was time for you to leave. You are going to die. I really don't want you to go, but they say you have to. Will you remember me in heaven? Will you wait for me to get there too so we can play together? I'm not sure when I can come, so watch for me, okay?"

Her parents' eyes were wide open.

"I will help you paint when we both are in heaven. Just let me know what you want to play with, and I will help. I like helping you. I'll even bring your jacket if it gets cold there."

"Why don't you tell him thank you for being your brother, Emma?" said David.

"Okay," replied Emma. "I like having a little brother. Thank you for being mine. I remember when you were a baby and cried a lot. I still liked you even then. Remember when you fell out of your crib, and I helped pick you up? Or when I tried teaching you how to brush your hair? Or when I showed you how to flush the toilet?" She giggled. "You did that all day long." Emma looked up at her parents with a grin and then back at her brother. She leaned over and began whispering in his ear, giggling and babbling at the same time. None of us could make out what she was saying, but the look of conspiracy in her eyes was delightful.

"Bye Chrisser," she finally said. "I'll see you when I get to heaven. Wait for me there." She lifted her arms up to her father, and he gently brought her out of the crib.

Then the grandmother leaned over the bars and began talking, half in English and half in Chinese. She stroked Christopher's arm and his face over and over again. She clearly loved this little boy, this great-grandson of hers.

As she stepped back, we each looked at Susie. This was going to be the hardest. "My baby," she cried. "You're my baby. Thank you for coming
to us. I love you so much, and you were such a good baby. You made me so happy. I wish I could make this all better, but I can't. I'm your mother, and I can't make it go away. I'm sorry, sweetheart." She burst into tears and fell into David's arms.

"Darling, tell him thank you for being here with us this long."

"Yes, alright." she said. "Chrisser, thank you for being my little boy. We will always remember you and keep you alive in our hearts. You're my baby, and I love you."

That was as much as she could say.

"Let's give him our gifts now, to help him know how much you love him and to help him feel strong for his journey," I said.

In turn they each put something special into his crib. The grandmother offered a beautiful red chrysanthemum and placed it on his chest. David gave him a little locomotive. Emma reached in and handed him her rag doll. And Susie placed a beautiful quilt around his feet.

"Oh," said Emma. "I forgot. This is for you too." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a little chocolate bar and put it beside her brother's hand.

I looked over and saw the doctor and nurses peering through the window. I invited them to join us. Then I rested my hand on Christopher's chest and began talking to him.

"Christopher, we are going to stop the machines now. That means you can begin to let go. You won't have to work so hard anymore to stay with us. You can move on. It will be alright. Your mommy and daddy will hold you while the machines are turned off. You will go to a wonderful place, and God will be there waiting for you. It will be just fine. Are you ready, sweetie?"

I motioned Susie to pick him up, and she reached into the crib to bring him into her arms. The nurse beside me helped her, rearranging all the tubes. I pulled over a chair for her to sit in.

"Talk to him. Tell him it's alright. Tell him how much you love him and will miss him. And that it's time to do this."

Susie sat with her child in her arms. David knelt beside her and held him too. The doctors began turning off the machines, one by one.

The grandmother began crying loudly, and Emma turned very pale. I picked up a Bible and began reading, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures."

Both Susie and David continued to talk to Christopher, telling him how much they loved him. I heard Susie say, "It's hard, baby, but you can let go now. It will be alright. We'll hold you until you go."

Suddenly the room was quiet. I had not realized how loud the machines were until they were silent. Then the heart monitor squealed. I looked up and saw a flat line. Susie buried her face in her son's body and wept.
We put a candle beside the bed, and the room took on a hushed feeling. I said a few prayers and excused myself. David walked me to the door.

"I understand now. He made that transition you were talking about, didn't he?"

I nodded.

"I can feel it too. I know he's gone now. We'll have to grieve, but I do know he is where he is supposed to be. I felt it immediately."

Emma came over and reached for me to pick her up. She spoke softly in my ear, "He told me something. He told me he was glad."

We hugged, and I left the family to grieve.

Megory Anderson is a theologian and author living in San Francisco. This article is an excerpt from her book, Sacred Dying, to be released next year by Ballantine/Random House.
Hundreds of children are being kidnapped in Africa and bought to the UK for voodoo rituals, a UN watchdog said, also voicing alarm about the number of British pedophiles who prey on children abroad. "We're concerned about reports that hundreds of children have been abducted from their families in Africa and trafficked to the UK, especially London, for religious rituals," Kirsten Sandberg, head of the CRC and a former Norwegian Supreme Court judge, said Thursday. She said that trafficking for rituals was part of a wider problem where thousands of minors are brought to the UK, who end up being child prostitutes or being sexually exploited.