

One of the earliest memories of God's presence in my life is the nightly prayer I would say with my sister, Stephanie, my mom and dad. It was the typical "Now I lay me down to sleep" prayer, but one night, it changed. My mom found out that she was having a baby, but there was something wrong. As she explained it to my four year old self and my six year old sister, the baby's heart was the size of a kiwi and it had a hole the size of a dime. It was important that we pray for this baby every night so that God would heal her and make her healthy. My parents said it was important to call the baby by her name, so every night we prayed for Lydia Marie. As the months passed by, my excitement grew, and I began to plan everything that I would do with my new baby sister. I was excited to bike to grandma's, play hopscotch and jump rope with the neighbors, and plan tea parties with her. Ultimately, God had a different plan.

My baby sister was born on Memorial Day. Stephanie had been tying red and blue ribbons into my pigtails for the annual parade, and we giggled in anticipation of meeting our baby sister. This excitement halted when I heard my grandma start to sob. We rushed to the kitchen just as she was hanging up the phone. "Congratulations! You have a baby sister!" she managed to say with a painful smile. Somewhere in my little four year old mind, I knew that my life was going to change.

That day at the hospital, I learned two words that I grew to hate: Down Syndrome. I also learned that my baby sister, the one who was supposed to bike to my grandma's and fight over clothes with me, had it.

When she was five months old, Lydia underwent open heart surgery. I remember my teacher bringing all of my classmates together in a circle and saying a prayer. Somehow this support calmed my heart and made me feel more secure. When I got into my grandma's car that

day after school, she told me that the surgery went well and Lydia was okay. Our prayers had been answered.

In eighth grade, my friend's dad died of cancer. Just as we did in preschool, my entire class gathered again to say a prayer. I will never take communal prayer for granted or the healing love expressed through it.

As I continued on in my Catholic education, I was challenged in my views of many important issues and had the opportunity to think and discover God for myself. I have learned to question the world around me, and make decisions based on my beliefs that I have developed through my Catholic education.

I used to think that I have a pretty scientific and mathematical mind, believing that if I follow the correct procedure or inserted the right variable into the equation, everything would turn out exactly as expected. I would become frustrated if I could not figure out a math problem or if a scientific theory did not make sense to me. But as I continued my education and matured through my faith, my mind became less empirical and more open to questions that made me think about the answer or did not have a set answer altogether.

Throughout my life, I've wondered why God did not answer the prayer of that four year old girl, but maybe He did. My Catholic education has taught me that God works in mysterious ways. He has plans that are bigger than what we could ever imagine. Could it be that Lydia is healed and I am the broken one? She has taught me more about love, compassion, and forgiveness than I could ever learn on my own.

In short, my Catholic education has led my four year old self through a greater understanding of God's wisdom, love, and divine mystery. Now as I step out of my small

Catholic high school and into the real world, I know my greatest joy will come through surrendering myself to God's ultimate plan and listening to His voice as He leads me in my life of service to Him.