

Even while, in early July, my car radio related the near miraculous story of survival among the tiniest premature infants, I thought of Chuck, a brash, irreligious nurse whose acquaintance served to remind me once again that there could be a complete disconnect between a book cover and its contents.

Driving to the hospital on July 10th with my car radio tuned to NPR, the StoryCorps tale captivated me. Entitled “Babies On Display: When A Hospital Couldn't Save Them, A Sideshow Did,” I share an excerpt with you:

“Close to a century ago, New York's Coney Island was famed for its sideshows. Loud-lettered signs crowded the island's attractions, crowing over tattooed ladies, sword swallows — and even an exhibition of tiny babies. The babies were premature infants kept alive in incubators pioneered by Dr. Martin Couney. The medical establishment had rejected his incubators, but Couney didn't give up on his aims. Each summer for 40 years, he funded his work by displaying the babies and charging admission — 25 cents to see the show. In turn, parents didn't have to pay for the medical care, and many children survived who never would've had a chance otherwise.

“Lucille Horn was one of them. Born in 1920, she, too, ended up in an incubator on Coney Island. She'd been born a twin, but her twin died at birth. And the hospital didn't show much hope for her, either: The staff said they didn't have a place for her; they told her father that there wasn't a chance in hell that she'd live. ‘They didn't have any help for me at all,’ Horn says. ‘It was just: You die because you didn't belong in the world.’ But her father refused to accept that for a final answer. He grabbed a blanket to wrap her in, hailed a taxicab and took her to Coney Island — and to Dr. Couney's infant exhibit.

“Years later, Horn decided to return to see the babies — this time as a visitor. When she stopped in, Couney happened to be there, and she took the opportunity to introduce herself. ‘And there was a man standing in front of one of the incubators looking at his baby,’ Horn says, ‘and Dr. Couney went over to him and he tapped him on the shoulder.’ ‘Look at this young lady,’ Couney told the man then. ‘She's one of our babies. And that's how your baby's gonna grow up.’

“Horn was just one of thousands of premature infants that Couney cared for and exhibited at world fairs, exhibits and amusement parks from 1896 until the 1940s. He died in 1950, shortly after incubators like his were introduced to most hospitals. At the time, Couney's efforts were still largely unknown — but there is at least one person who will never forget him.”
(www.npr.org/2015/07/10)

Had not an innovative physician seen the potential for life in little Lucille Horn, she would likely never have lived. But Dr. Couney had faith in the spark of life he saw in her; had faith, too, that he could fan that tiny spark into who Lucille grew to become. The doctor had plans for this tiny infant. So did God.

In the gospel passage we hear today, Jesus is talking with his disciples about what was to happen to him, telling them that betrayal, death and resurrection lay just ahead. But, uncomprehending, the disciples were engaged in tangled argument about who among them was the greatest. Assuring them that the greatest was the least, the servant of the others, Jesus called a nearby child to him and said to the disciples, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9:37)

Indeed, to welcome the child is to honor the seed of divinity implanted before birth within every person without exception. To welcome the child means to recognize, honor and nourish that divine kernel every person brings into the world and carries over a lifetime, blossoming into saintliness in some, remaining dormant in others. To welcome a child is to give honor to God's abiding home within the human heart.

I think of Chuck, the brash, irreligious nurse whose acquaintance I made several years ago and who served to remind me once again that there could be a complete disconnect between a book cover and its contents. Near burnout from his regular nursing assignment, Chuck sought a few month's refuge in the ER, caring for the broken and battered. When I first met him, he seemed to delight in trying to shock my religious sensitivities. That ended quickly, though, when other ER staff members took more offense than did I. After that, gentle joviality marked our interchanges.

Only after several weeks did I learn more about Chuck: that his regular nursing assignment was the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU); that his dedication to the tiniest babies and their families was near legendary; that his huge and gentle heart needed a rest from the intensity of his caring, hence his escape to the ER for a few months, patients coming and going in quick turnover.

Having returned to the NICU and his babies, I see little of Chuck these days, but whenever we pass in a hospital corridor, loud taunts precede a warm hug, the merest hint of what his tiniest charges receive from him.

At her premature birth in 1920, "The staff said there wasn't a chance in hell that [Lucille Horn

would] live. “They didn't have any help for me at all,” Horn says [today]. “It was just: You die because you didn't belong in the world.””

But Dr. Martin Couney insisted she did belong in the world, and made it happen. And today, NICU Nurse Chuck adds his own defiant assent to that belief, working tirelessly to bring to fruition the seed of divinity within the tiniest lives.