

## **Seeing Clearly**

***By Warren Spencer***

On a sunny day, a family of four walks down a street. Suddenly, in front of a house, they slow down and, one by one, they begin to stare. In the yard is a boy on an enormous net suspended by ropes from trees. The boy swinging above a gigantic cargo net must be what they are staring at, but it isn't. No, it's something else. It's a girl who is standing in the yard. Her face has been badly twisted by surgery intended to help her, but it has also left her with a permanent deformity. The boy watches from the net, angry and frustrated. The family slowly moves on, whispering amongst themselves. Finally, they move out of sight, but not before they steal one last glance at the girl. The family stared at her. They stared intently at her, but they never really saw her.

I know about people who stare but don't really see, because I am that boy and that girl is my sister. My sister, who had a brain tumor from her birth, has gone through surgeries, chemotherapies, and radiations because of it. She can't eat through her mouth, can't hear, and can't talk. She is fed through a stomach tube, has seizures, and constantly coughs. When she has seizures in public, there are few people who are kind enough to come forward and try to help, but they frequently have no idea what to do. Most people just give us a wide berth and act as though nothing has happened! But whether they come forward or walk away, they all stare.

It's sad to say, but it isn't only strangers who behave in this way. Sometimes even people at our church, people who know us, are the ones who stare but don't really see. If I am alone or with my parents, most people will smile or say hello and are friendly. If for some reason, however, I have my sister with me, no one smiles or says hello. Instead they stare or walk quickly by. This confuses me. These people are kind, loving, and good-hearted. They are in a place where God's love for all humans is being

proclaimed and praised. It is a place where we hear Bible passages--like the one that tells us that because God has loved us, we should love each other. How can these Christian people be so unfeeling?

To try to answer this question, I decided to look inwards, to see if I, too, was guilty of being cold in the presence of the needs and frailties of other—like the time I was so uncomfortable on an airplane flight being around a man with a deformed face. I wondered if sometimes I, too, was staring but not seeing.

When I was still quite young, I remember my family going to places with my sister, and young as I was, I realized even then that people were gawking at us. I often wondered why. We were just normal people so why did they gape like that? As I grew older, I gradually began to realize that my family was different because my sister was different. I didn't want to be strange, and I tried to distance myself from her. In a crowded room, I would stay away from my family to make people think I didn't have anything to do with them. At school, when someone picked me up (with my sister in the car), I made the person drive up to a place where I knew my friends couldn't see her. I was afraid that if my friends noticed my sister's physical differences, they would begin to think I was strange too. This became so bad, that at one point, when I was asked how many siblings I had, I'm ashamed to say that I didn't mention my sister at all. By that time, I had stared so hard at her that I had stopped seeing her entirely.

About two years ago, my family was returning from our vacation in New Mexico. My sister hadn't been doing well for several days, and my parents were worried that she might be getting extremely sick. As it turned out, she went to the hospital that evening with pneumonia and other problems. I visited her the next day in her room, a room filled with medical equipment and machines in and around her body. I was staring at her, and, suddenly, I actually saw her. I saw a person who had been given more

problems than anyone else—certainly far more than I've been given—and yet she still gave everyone her crooked smiles. I saw a person who had been put through more pain than almost anyone else and who had been braver than almost anyone else I have ever known. I saw a person who didn't deserve to be treated in the way I had been treating her. I saw a person who had never asked for all of her problems to happen. Finally, I really saw my sister.

When I come home from school each day, I might not be able to study as much as my friends for a test because my sister pulled her stomach tube out again, or I might miss the closing seconds of an important basketball game because she's distracting me, but because of her, I have an understanding of the world that I wouldn't have without her. She has changed me in ways that no one else could. She has made me much kinder and more determined, but above all, she has made me more patient. If one wish of mine could be granted, it would be that the people who stare at her could finally really see her. What a change in their lives that would be.