

Welcome by Judith Leipzig

Only a person who intended to enter room 520 would walk to the end of the long hospital hallway, and that morning I had gone there as part of my rounds. I was in the midst of my second unit of training to become a healthcare chaplain, this one in a struggling hospital that served the most disenfranchised. Our patients were those without friends or family, or those whose friends and family could not care for them: elderly patients stranded in public nursing homes; people who lived in shelters or on the street or who had just been released from jail or a psych ward; men who survived on their social security benefits in SRO's; immigrants without documentation who slept in utility closets in the back of the offices they cleaned; residents of the local rehab centers. It was often the case that mine was the first hand that they had held in a very long time.

M's bed was on the far side of the room, next to the window. His roommate's bed was empty, the blankets in disarray, lunch tray untouched, a sign that he had probably gone for a test and might not be back for hours. The fabric curtain that separated the two beds was still drawn. The room was silent.

On the other side of the curtain M. was poised upright on the edge of his bed, looking as if he was ready to spring into action to defend himself from circling predators. He looked enraged. His big body seemed caught in an energy meant to repel but which had turned back on itself, a kind of imploding power caged in the frame of a man. I had never been so close to this kind of aggression. I stood at a distance. The census sheet in my hand—always the touch point for the daily rounds-- indicated that M. had been admitted for "renal failure." I had not read his chart that might have told me that he was also struggling with psychosis.

I introduced myself to M. and asked if he would like a visit. In a bitter tone, he told me he wanted me to do something for him. I was very aware that we were alone in the room, far from the nurses' station. I was very aware of my smallness. Instead of pulling up a chair close to his bedside, as I would have with other patients, instead of leaving the curtain in place in case his roommate returned, I pushed back the curtain and moved the chair to a spot where I could be seen from the doorway, a place from which I could escape if I needed to.

M. began by ordering me to get him his birth certificate so that he could apply for public housing. He berated me loudly and at length when I told him that this wasn't something I knew anything about, and that the hospital social worker would be able to help him get that done.

Then he moved to the other side of the bed and faced the wall, his back to me, and began a torrent of stories, pouring out like the bitter water of a contaminated spring, one after another, filling the room with his fury, with his despair. Only much later did I realize that

turning his back on me may have been an attempt to shield me from the full force of his anger.

He ranted about a treacherous girlfriend.

He railed against a group of friends who weren't really friends after all, who had repeatedly "used" him.

He raged about the landlord who had evicted him, "He really wanted me to kill him. He was making it so I had to kill him. But I'm not going to do what he wants, I'm not going to kill him because then I'm going to go to jail and I don't want to go to jail."

He held forth about how the world would come to an end in 30 years, what signs he had seen, what he had garnered from the newspaper headlines. He was insistent about the need for me to pay attention to this, to not be naive about the impending end of the world.

M. repeated his litany of betrayals with a kind of devotion, turning now and then from the wall to emphasize a point, though he certainly did not want me to think that I understood how it was for him. Once or twice I tried to join in, saying gently, "That sounds very difficult." and he quickly rejected my words, "What are you talking about? I didn't say that!"

To stay with M., really stay with his story and what was behind the story, required heart-strength and a focused intention to be present to what his brokenness was stirring up in me—fear, confusion, and powerlessness. If I really wanted to companion M., I couldn't simultaneously make him "other" by dismissing him, or diagnosing him, or spending energy weeding out what was "true" and what wasn't. To stay with M., I had to offer to myself and to him the same thing: a kind of faithfulness, a welcome.

I listened for a long time to a ferocious grief that could have come straight out of the Psalms: I am misunderstood and deceived; there is cruelty everywhere; my enemies lay in wait for me; the world is unpredictable; I can't go on and I need to be rescued.

He came to a stopping place. I asked M. if he would like me to pray with him. He grunted his assent, and watched me closely. The prayer that I spoke was rooted in the story within the stories; indeed, his lament became my prayer. By the time I had asked for peace, for dignity, for rest, for home, for trustworthy friends, M. was sitting still for the first time, with his eyes closed, and remained that way for several minutes after the prayer ended. It looked as if he had been gentled by the prayer.

And then, he turned to look at me, his eyes soft, and said quietly, "That was a good prayer. You listened."

"Yes."

We sat enfolded in the quiet. A few minutes later I left the room to continue my rounds.

Almost everyone I know is burdened with some version of the belief that if we could only fix ourselves, clean up our act, then we would be really welcomed. If we could finally get it together, we wouldn't have to acknowledge that much of what we're doing is meant to medicate our fear of not belonging, or make it seem as if we do belong. We push ourselves to become what we imagine we are not: acceptable, evolved, accomplished,

enough of whatever we think is called for. And if we can't become that, then we work to hide what we are.

Who could feel safe, or welcome, in a world so untrustworthy as this toxically fanciful one we've spun from the notion that it's not only possible, but necessary to be perfected? To be filled with Light. Instead, in our dystopia, we are steeped in shame and alienation, and the conviction that we, alone, have been betrayed by our woundedness.

When M. and I were listening to what was, after all, our shared story of sorrow and longing, something was being created. We were not exiling what was within us. We were not trying to blot out the terror. We were not pretending, or fixing, or presenting. We were, together, making a space where welcome lived.

It was not the kind of welcome that one person bestows on another. It was the kind that comes alive when two people—perhaps by intention, perhaps in desperation—stop running from the dark, and simply offer what they have to the moment they find themselves in. M. was speaking into the space that only came into existence when we brought ourselves to the room. I was listening into that enlivened, sacred space. Together, we were exchanging perfection for completeness. And this was the welcoming that brought us home.