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Smuggling Beauty

Peacemaker and author Anne Herbert advocated practicing “random kindness and senseless acts of beauty” in response to the random violence and senseless acts of terror that pervade the daily news. From the perspective of its most defenseless patients, a hospital is not without its acts of random violence. People arrive stressed and the hospital can push them further. This is true for staff as well as patients.

There is a modest power to the random act of kindness that greatly outweighs the smallness of the gesture – an unexpected reminder that beauty exists when the world itself seems to be fading into the distance. Beauty is a salve for a fragmented world, a gift to the giver as well as the receiver. And being surprised by beauty is also a gift. I remember such moments for years on end. An orchid, green-veined, left at the nurses station by a patient’s husband. The fragrance of a bearded iris on a bedside table. Packing an old man’s bedsore with saline gauze while an elephant birthed on television. Cupping a yellow and black spider in my hand to deliver outside to the flowers. Or just the light that rises in anyone’s face when they feel recognized and connected with. Beauty is an oasis. In it is found replenishment.

Smuggling beauty to vulnerable patients often requires small conspiracies.

The only way to learn Romanian is in bed,” said Sylvia, my Romanian nurse’s aide.

“For God’s sake, Sylvia, I don’t want to learn Romanian. I just want you to translate a few lines. And please don’t make them too sexy. It’s a quote from the Koran. And besides, the patient is eighty-five years old. And demented. Like you.”

“Pot calling the kettle black,” she sniffed. “Okay. What is it?”

“If I had but three loaves of bread, I’d sell one and buy hyacinths, for they would feed my soul.”

“What? That’s not sexy? And why do you want to give the Koran to an old Romanian? Is she a Muslim? There are no Muslims in Romania, I can tell you that.”

“No, she’s Catholic. And out of her mind and lonely. She could use a little beauty.”

“Hyacinths?”

“Almost.”

Sylvia translated the Koran and I transcribed it onto a styrofoam cup. I’d pilfered some flowers from the chapel and went to Mrs. Codrescu’s room on the fifth floor. I’d admitted Mrs. Codrescu the previous night. Intractable nausea and change of consciousness. Her daughter nervously left Mom behind, nervous because mom was so confused and didn’t speak a word of English. I wanted to leave the flowers for her daughter as much as for Mrs. Codrescu so she knew someone had an eye on her mother.

When I arrived in her room with my little bouquet – feeling, I confess, like a paramour – I was surprised to find her gone.

I went to the nurse’s station and asked the secretary, “What happened to the Romanian woman in 545?”

“Romanian?” replied Donna. “I don’t know nothing about no Romanian.”

I paused and regathered. “Do you have any lonely, really screwed up patients who might like a flower?” I decided it best not to mention the Romanian Koran.

“Lots. Lots and lots. What kind you’d like? There’s a Mexican woman in 516. She’s completely nuts.”

“Thanks.”

As I approached 516 I was hoping the patient was asleep. My Spanish is not good enough to explain why a strange white guy with a stethoscope felt compelled at 5 a.m. to bring a flower in a cup inscribed in a language which he did not know. The woman could simply wake up to the mystery of it. And the beauty. The message in Romanian wouldn’t matter, flowers have a beauty everyone recognizes.

Sometimes serendipity just happens. The Mexican woman in 516 turned out, in fact, to be Mrs. Codrescu—alert, not the least agitated, looking as if she’d been expecting me. Raising my finger to my lips and handing her my gift, I pointed at the Koranic verses and nodded my head as she read them. My role was simple: The village idiot had arrived. Her smile was simplicity itself.

I searched the web looking for different flower poems. No luck. All so sappy and sentimental, sub-Hallmark. Japanese poetry had possibilities, but I loved the body and meaning of the Koran, and so it found itself at the bedside table of many patients, some that I knew, some I didn’t. Co-workers were happy to translate. I even had the hyacinth poem translated into contemporary Arabic for an Egyptian gentleman on the oncology floor.

I don’t remember when it was that I started smuggling beauty into the hospital – as much for myself as for the patients. for the sheer pleasure of it in a sometimes harsh work life. Sometimes I’d just sing. Once, walking the hallways down to the pharmacy to get a medication, I passed a room where someone was crying out. An old black woman, not entirely coherent. I paused for just a moment to sing her one of the Yoruba sacred songs I know, and to whisper that it’s all right. And for a moment it was, the way beauty sometimes makes things all right for a moment.

And then there are the Braille origami cranes. A blind Japanese woman, grateful for the care she received at UCLA, made hundreds of cranes out of Braille paper as benedictions for the health of fellow patients. The chaplaincy would leave a couple of dozen a week in the chapel. At the beginning of my work week, I’d take a few and keep my eyes peeled for who I could pass this woman’s gift on to.

Marsha was an attractive forty-five-year-old professional woman and a stone cold alcoholic. She had finally put the bottle down and was admitted with extreme withdrawal. Delirium tremens, the proverbial snakes crawling up her legs. I was her nurse for all of four hours before I was floated to another floor, another bunch of patients. A nurse’s aide was scheduled to sit at her bedside through the night so she wouldn’t harm herself. Her wrists and ankles were fastened to the bed with four-point restraints.

“Untie me! Untie me! Get me out of here. I demand you set me free! You can’t do this! You can’t!” It wasn’t at all clear that she knew she was in a hospital or why she should be.

“I wish I could untie you but I can’t. I know this must be humiliating, but you’re withdrawing from alcohol and if I undo you, you might hurt yourself.”

She paused. It was clear that she didn't know or had forgotten that she was crazed from lack of liquor. "Screw you! Release me. I will sue you. You'll see. I need to urinate."

"I'll get you a bed pan."

"No. Untie me!"

And on and on.

The doctor wrote one of those impossible orders. "Foley catheter to gravity" to drain her bladder of urine. This would mean having two strong people pry her legs open while I swabbed her with betadine, dipped the catheter tip in surgical gel, spread her labia with my free hand, and inserted the cath into the urethra of this writhing, angry woman.

Sterilely.

Right. Sure. Done it before. But in Marsha's case I decided it would be less denigrating to convince her of the virtues of the bedpan or to clean her up after she soiled herself.

Before heading off to the other floor, I reported off to my replacement, sheepishly explaining why I didn't place the catheter. No nurse likes to leave "dirty work" for the new shift, but Anne understood that this woman was in no frame of mind for such a procedure.

I returned briefly to Marsha's room at 6 a.m. with my little Braille crane and the well-used wisdom from the Koran. She looked truly ragged, but the first wave of DTs had softened. Her hands and feet were untied, and I helped her up to the bedside commode.

When she finished I gave her the origami.

“I brought you this because I’m so moved by your courage. Dropping the alcohol may be the bravest thing you’ve ever done. This was made by a blind patient for other patients. You’ll find your way through the dark. There is a life on the other side of hell. Thank you for teaching me about courage.”

“Thank you, thank you,” she said a couple dozen times amid gales of laughter. I spent just a few minutes with her because I had to return to the floor I was working.

Mr. Hewitt was a financial consultant in his late fifties, a man of great character and presence. A mistake had been made—I don’t remember what—but the hospital had almost killed him. He was coded and brought back. He had such an intimate knowledge of his mortality. I asked him, “What is it to live with death over your left shoulder all the time?” He’d also had a heart transplant a few years earlier—and was much concerned about matters of the heart. At 1 a.m. he called me into his room.

“I’ve been tossing and turning for hours. I can’t get my son out of my mind. He’s 17 years old. What can I offer him now? He’s being taken by the materialism of the culture, and I’m afraid he’s going to give his life to that nonsense.”

Listening to Mr. Hewitt I felt that thick fatherly helplessness before a teenager—mine before the anger and sense of futility of a friend’s son, my father’s when I was 17 and homeless. Helplessness seems woven into the vulnerable truths of fathers and sons. This helplessness is stretched by the knowledge, no, the blues song, of the ordeal we’ve gone through ourselves to become men. And *that* we are just beginning to digest.

Not knowing what to say, I started with what I was sure of. “You know,” I attempted, “after my fortieth birthday I went into the forest for a few months to pray and meditate.

After a couple of months of sitting still, I began to hear the murmur of my mother's prayers that have sustained me through some very dark times. They were almost audible. I certainly couldn't hear them when I was homeless—I was so full of my passion and desperation. It's strange what passes from generation to generation and how it passes. My grandfather I despised until a few years before his death, when I saw what a remarkable man he was. And my father – well, we got close only after his death."

"So you're saying I should trust the light that's in him and live by the values that I have suffered to understand—and somehow this is passed on to him? By what, osmosis?"

"Somehow passed on. Or not," I replied. "That's the rub, the helplessness. Your spirit is with him and will persist after you're gone. You're in him. But you remember well what it took to get real with what's in you. All you're left with is being faithful to your own soul and believing in him until he believes in himself."

An hour after he fell asleep, I admitted a new patient to the adjacent bed. His roommate was thirty-five, homeless, with a nasty, oozing cellulitis on his left calf. He was in a lot of pain, and so I kept him still with morphine. It was January and we talked about being homeless.

"Damn it gets cold this time of year," I said. "Cold and lonely."

"You got that right, brother."

As the sun rose both of them were sleeping, I left a Braille crane on Mr. Hewitt's bedside table with a note: "This is for your son and for whatever dark passage he must walk learning to be a man. Live by the best of who you are. Seek his light and praise it. Blessings."

I signed it "Michael," with my address.

I received a letter from him a couple of weeks later:

I wanted to thank you so much for your gift to my son. I wept as I ran my inadequate fingers across the symbols that have given sight to so many. Those without sight must see so much more.

I put the origami in a box with your note and a note to my son. Basically I told him in the letter that when he feels his anger take over, to reach into the box very gently and retrieve this remarkable work of art and heart. Close his eyes and gently rub his fingers across this tremendous accomplishment and think of how you would have to be at peace with yourself to complete such ardous work.

When we were kids, my sisters and I used to make up words to describe my dad. One of the words was “wisdomious,” defined as “one having done deeds which took wisdom.” One cannot always be right—unless of course you’re my dad. If you think about the heart of a person and not so much as what comes out of his mouth, you would see that all he wanted was to be perfect in his son’s eyes.

I put together socks, razors and other essential in a box for Keith, the homeless man I met in the hospital. My son and I are meeting him on Saturday so that my son can experience the pain and degradation of those who pine their existence.

Warmest personal regards,

Lew Hewitt

This is quintessential conspiracy—the gentle power of these origami cranes quietly threading healing beauty and good will from patient to patient without the patients ever meeting, or me even meeting the maker of the cranes.

We can all do good to others this way—just send it out, like the Japanese woman did.