

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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14. Skin-to-Skin

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Before my stroke at age sixty-five, my previous stay in the hospital was sixty-five years ago when I was born. The great grace and good fortune of that long stretch of good health was not lost on me. All my previous experience of hospitals was as a visitor who had gone to spend a couple of hours with sick relatives or friends. I was often aware of their discomfort and pain, and even boredom, but other than interceding on their behalf with the doctors and nurses, there was little I could do for them but read to them or offer a caressing touch and some gentle words suffused with humor. Yet now, as a patient of more than a month, I have come to regard what efficacious medicine touch and humor are. For my own health I did not want to see long faces or hear cross words, and I did my best with all my fellow patients to lighten their load by lightening their mood. I have no medical, surgical, or pharmaceutical skills, but I can tell jokes, make puns, relate stories and anecdotes, and offer a couple of words of encouragement. I would have thought these skills paltry when up against illness, debility, and death, but when I was on the receiving end of them, I recognized what good medicine good humor was.

The nurses, assistants, and attendants, being around grumpy sick people for most of their day, I realized, were as much in need of a good word as any of the patients, and, at the very least, if I did not know them, I offered a nod and a smile. It cost me nothing. It was the cheapest treatment available and there were no side effects except, perhaps, an aching side from laughing and a tendency to pass it along to the next person. In a matter of days I became known as a joker, a disciple of the Good Humor man, and I did not mind the epithet. Their joining in the fun only encouraged me further.

The other layman's medicine of great value was touch, even in the overly germ-conscious atmosphere of the hospital. A handshake, a touch on the arm, a pat on the shoulder or back were freely given and gratefully received. Skin-to-skin was better, but a touch even through clothing was more effective than none. Not having slept with anyone for the longest stretch of my adult life induced a sort of skin hunger in me. It could be satisfied in so simple a fashion and without the sexual overtones of libido that could make one uncomfortable. And yet, like the best of sexual intercourse, it could be given and received simultaneously.

The physical therapists and, to a lesser extent, the occupational therapists, were in near constant physical contact with me throughout our sessions. I had more female than male therapists, but that was more a result of their numbers within the profession. I quizzed them on whether they felt more comfortable with same-sex or opposite-sex patients, but never received the sort of definitive answer that one could say constituted even an anecdotal survey. Their

therapeutic energies were well-sublimated and I was not in the business of making anyone feel uneasy, least of all those whose touch was restoring me to health and wholeness.

A young male nurse's assistant, a twenty-year-old Russian who also attended the hospital college in order to get his nursing certificate, became the one to tuck me in each night that he was on duty. With his classes on hiatus for the summer, that was most nights, varying only by the time he was assigned his break. He got me from the wheelchair to the bed, helped undress me, got me into a hospital gown, adjusted the pillows, and covered me with a sheet and blanket. We had our ten- or fifteen-minute conversations before he turned out the light and bade me a good night's sleep.

It struck me early on how well-suited Ivan's aspiration to the profession of nursing was. He was strong and gentle at the same time, and had great enthusiasm for his calling, and could cite many interesting facts and ideas about the human nervous system. During our nightly chats, we each managed to learn something and that is the best sort of conversation.

I was slightly surprised to find the male nurses as caring and careful as their female counterparts. Did I find Ivan sexually attractive? Perhaps, but only from a distance. He was awfully young for my tastes. Our ages were sufficiently spread to suggest grandson and grandfather more than anything else. Obviously, he sought my company, too, and I learned there were only a slightly older brother and his mother at home. He'd been in the United States for less than four years. I quizzed him on his future plans and he cared for me in very tender fashion, as though we had actually assumed the grandson-grandfather roles. The relationship was almost entirely about touch and healing and wishing for the other's well-being.

I realize that I may next find myself in a hospital situation some years hence near the end of my life—or it may be just around the corner. The prospect of death does not frighten me, but I think I would like someone like Ivan to be holding my hand as I slipped from this realm towards whatever, if anything, might lie beyond.