

## Journey of a Wounded Healer

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### 16. Life or Death

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Two weeks before my stroke I received word that my partner's nephew was very ill. John was only thirty-three-years-old, apparently at the peak of his health and vigor, when he was diagnosed with bowel cancer. It was considered an older man's disease. My own father, in fact, had died of bowel cancer—or at least its complications and aftermath—at age eighty-one. Further tests proved that Anthony's nephew's cancer had metastasized and was now rampant throughout his body. He was given three to five months, longer with aggressive treatment.

I called John to offer words of encouragement and support, and was astounded by his positive attitude and strength. He thought that while he may not be eating as many White Castle burgers in the near term, he had every intention of ushering in the era of flying cars. He was looking towards a future that included him in it. He was determined to beat the odds on the dire prognosis his doctors had handed him. I thought that if anyone could, John, by his determination and will, would own a sporty red *Aladdin*. I was also gratified to note his sense of humor was completely intact.

I had said to Anthony and other friends, by way of contrast, that faced with a similar hardship, I would undoubtedly be a big whiny baby, bemoaning my fate and passively waiting for the end. I believed what I said but could not have been more wrong about what reserves of character and strength were in my own as-yet-uncharted depths. I was inspired by John's fortitude and courage even before I had any serious need for such a shining example. I admired him and told him so.

Owing to one of life's curveballs, I was laid low by a stroke a mere two weeks later and, confined to a bed and strapped to countless monitoring devices, barely able to move even on my good side and completely dependent on others for all of my needs, I had plenty of time to reflect and decide what my own course would be. Only two days later, someone on the fifth floor pushed himself out the window to his death. I had a choice, too.

While my situation seemed dire, I didn't think it merited crawling out my window—if I could even do so—and smashing myself on the concrete below. The next day I began this journal.

I do not claim to have the slightest insight into God or even to know who He is. On most days, I cannot even conjure up sufficient faith to state unequivocally that He exists. But I also know that if God had meant to finish me off that day in the woods, a single stone or hidden tree

root would have been all that was required to trip me up and bring me down, never to rise to my feet again.

Why hadn't He? I could only surmise in a vague and very general way that I had not yet proved myself worthy of the grace that had been bestowed on me. I had not yet paid for the good and rich life I'd already enjoyed. I read the stroke as a gentle reminder that I had work to do and that time was running out quickly. However it would develop or turn out, I felt that this journal might be a small way for me to pass on some of the extraordinary blessings I had received. I had, and have, no other purpose in mind. I haven't a clue what God wants from me or anyone else aside from generally godly behavior, if, in fact, He exists in any of the myriad ways we humans have imagined Him or Her. But I knew it felt like the right thing to embark on this journey of the wounded healer.

Earlier this week, out in the hospital garden, I saw a young couple wheel out a young child in a brightly-colored wagon lined with blankets. The child, a girl not more than two-years-old, was hooked up to various tubes descending from a wheeled stand that trailed along behind the wagon and which included three blinking monitoring devices. Though they were probably no older than thirty, the couple's faces were careworn. The child was cranky and only slightly interested in the games they devised for her. The father lifted her out of the wagon and held her to his chest while the mother walked beside them with the now unattached stand of fluids and tubes and wires and blinking lights. I nodded to them and smiled, but I could not bring myself to inquire what afflicted the poor child. It broke my heart to watch them.

I began fruitlessly to engage in the age-old pastime of trying to explain the afflictions of Job. I could understand why someone such as I, who had lived long and sinned much, might be struck down, but why a young man such as Anthony's nephew or a young child of whose complete innocence I could be assured. I feel embarrassed when non-believing friends challenge my half-hearted belief in a tenuous God who could permit such suffering. I have no ready answer for them for such dilemmas. I admit it perplexes me, too, how a loving Creator could behave in such abysmal fashion. I am not God's apologist; I simply do not know. I like the Alcoholics Anonymous concept of "a God of one's understanding." I am afraid I do not understand much of anything, least of all a Being light-years beyond my comprehension.

Does suffering make us stronger? By itself I don't think so. Suffering can also break us. It becomes a choice whose outcome only the sufferer can determine. I would not blame him if he chose to let himself drop from a fifth-floor window. But he may have denied himself many wonderful and beautiful experiences. They might well have been worth a little more pain in the short term. Only the sufferer can solve that equation. My God would not condemn him. He forgives everything.

The sufferer might also have deprived those around him of invaluable insights and a healing remedy for other troubled minds and spirits. But this choice is the sufferer's alone, even if we are inclined to see it as selfish. I think that the world could always use one more example of courage and determination in the face of great hardship. Such accounts describe what it means

to be fully human in an indifferent world. “Je m'ouvrais... à la tendre indifférence du monde,” as Albert Camus put it. “I opened myself up... to the tender indifference of the world.”

God knows no one has it easy.