

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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28. Thank-yous and Good-byes

28 August 2014

As I expected, the day of my release from the neurological rehabilitation center felt as I imagine it must feel when, having served one's time, the prisoner is finally sprung. But the joy is slightly salty, mixed with tears.

The good-byes began at seven in the morning when the burly Daniel hugged me and engaged me in what I guess was a soul handshake, as though I were a bro' from the 'hood. He thanked me again for the art print I signed and gave him.

Also as in prison, the daily routine is highly regimented. Meals arrive at nearly the same time every day, and the menu varies from day to day, but it repeats on the same day every week. The nurses are the wardens in this analogy, but with a kinder attitude and purpose.

One by one as their shifts ended, the nurses said their good-byes and thank-yous and encouragement. I teared up and got choked up with nearly every one of them. There were none I would not miss, even the ones who gave me an injection in the belly in the middle of the night. The PCAs came in and out between the nurses. I realized I knew each of them by name and demeanor and had some notion of their backgrounds and aspirations. I realized, too, that I genuinely liked each of them and there was no instance of it not being reciprocated. My two roommates offered me their hands and their wishes for good luck and continued progress. They were not as quiet and considerate as I would have liked, so I would not miss them terribly much. I liked their wives much better, and admired how tenderly they tended their annoying husbands. They offered their men advice they expected would be heeded and brooked no recalcitrance, especially about working hard at their therapies. The men's expressions told me they heard it, if at all, as nagging. But both women would outlive their husbands. They were both in the room on the morning I was released and they added their voices to the general farewells on the floor.

The two doctors made their rounds, today perhaps more perfunctorily and with fewer questions, but they were clearly pleased with my progress. Dr. Forrest again mentioned how pleased he and his family were with the print of my artwork "The Healing Hand" I had given him. The social worker who oversaw all matters relating to my discharge told me what I could expect in the following couple of months. She came in and out of the room several times with papers requiring my signature and with reams of other papers and forms. I learned a good deal about her, too, in the two hours I had dealings and small talk with her. It was a day in which I liked everybody.

Deciding to take part in the final sessions of both occupational and physical therapy, though it was not required on the day of a patient's discharge, I got to exchange good wishes, handshakes, kisses, hugs, prayers, and encouragements with my fellow patients and therapists. I was not the only one to get teary and choked up. The bonds formed among patients who share the same, or nearly the same, infirmity—as well as those who work at helping them get over it or at least get better—are incredibly intense. I recognize these friendships as one of the most powerful and rewarding experiences of my life. I have a long list of addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of a good many of my fellow patients and therapists.

As I reflected on all of this, I discovered I had committed to memory the names, histories, and personal details of nearly fifty people I had not known a mere two months ago. Each of them was important in himself or herself, but also, taking them together, as a factor in my recovery. I bless them all, and say my prayers for their health and recovery.

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But the person I found it hardest to say good-bye to was my physical therapist, Jean. She also cried and sobbed, each of us in the other's embrace. "I'm just no good at this," she admitted. "It breaks my heart."

Struggling to get the words out, I told Jean I felt the same. I realized I was bidding farewell to a true friend. I knew, too, that I had a bit of a crush on her, almost like a schoolboy's infatuation with his teacher. She was witty and intelligent and absolutely dedicated to healing. There were many sessions after which she gave up her breaks or going home early to "keep me after class" with up to one-and-a-half hours of additional therapy. I never said, "No."

I have cried a little each day since my release. I know that it will be like all the other heartbreaks, sorrows, and farewells. The edges will get more rounded and the hurt will begin to seem long ago. But I also know that it is better to have a heart that is broken than one love has never graced.

Jean took me from infancy to my first steps as a toddler, ever as protective as any parent. She gave me confidence and urged me on. She laughed at my jokes, and her smile lit up her face—no doubt mine as well.

I had a notion that this was a classic Freudian situation of falling in love with one's therapist, albeit one who worked with the brain rather than the psyche, though they are certainly not easy to distinguish. I was not going to deny these feelings or lock them away. I wanted to allow them to develop as they would. I suppose I had flirted from time to time. I have no expectations, but I do hope Jean and I—and Lisa, too—manage to keep in touch through correspondence and phone calls. Visits from time to time might also be possible and I would welcome them.

Even if we never see each other again, Jean has touched my life more profoundly than people I have known for decades. She has given me my future, however long that may be, and has taught me to give of myself in ways that can influence others positively and deeply.

One of our last exchanges before the day of my discharge went thus: I had just given her a print of one of my artworks, "Reflections," to thank her for all she had done for me. I asked whether, for our final session, she might go easy on me and be nice to me for a change. She replied without hesitation, "Not a chance."