

Journeys

In my hospital volunteer work, I serve as a spiritual caregiver in the Rehabilitation unit. One feature of this setting is that I see patients for multiple weeks. Although our encounters may be brief and separated by days, I sometimes feel that I can piece together a story about their journey of transformation – physically, psychologically, and spiritually. In this paper I share some observations and reflections about having these kinds of ongoing chaplaincy relationships with people, centering in particular on one patient, and one encounter with this patient.

Quite a journey

I saw T. weekly for six or seven weeks as he recovered from a massive heart attack and subsequent stroke at the age of 46. This abrupt change in his life was a shock to him. It was not clear how much functionality he would regain. Although strongly supported by his mother, wife, and other family, T. was also undergoing a very personal journey that was taking him into unknown territory in his heart. In our first encounter, when his speech was barely comprehensible, he said, "I was so stupid.... I was an atheist..." and was unable to explain further. He often cried during our interactions.

Here is some of the conversation from our second-to-last meeting:

When I came in, his wife was there and asked him if he'd like to speak with me.

T: I'll just cry. [But also smiles, indicating he'd like me to stay.]

K: Maybe I'll cry too. [T. smiles again. Wife leaves the room. For some reason, this family always leaves the two of us alone, even though I've said they are welcome to stay].

I ask how he is, and he expresses frustration with his physical situation and concern about being burdensome. He asks how I am, and I give my stock answer of saying that I am well, then turning the conversation back to him. But shortly he asks a second time how I am, and somehow I sense that he is doing this to avoid something in himself.

I hear myself answering in an unusual way: "Sometimes it's heartbreaking coming to the hospital, but I choose to do it because it can also be quite beautiful."

T. begins to cry. Then he slowly nods and says, "Yes." His eyes grow pensive, and he says, "I used to be an atheist, but now I'm not sure."

K: Could you say more?

T: I think maybe there's a reason I'm here. Maybe there's something beyond the body.... We're not just chemical reactions.

[I am aware that T. had only a 2% chance of living, and that the fact of his survival has been weighing on his mind.]

I encourage T. to simply be with this, without any need for an answer. He nods, pauses, and heads in a new direction.

T: I'm a totally different person than I used to be. I wonder if there might be some way to help people, not just spend my time making a living.

Although I wished to hold space to explore this further, at this moment we were interrupted by T's mother coming in to get some things. She thanked me for helping him. In another spontaneous response, I said, "He's helping me too."

T. looked delighted and laughed. The visit wound down quickly at that point.

The play of internal responses

This was an intense encounter for me (it was longer; I just recorded the heart of it). I had also had another intense one just prior (of long duration), and I actually left the hospital at that point, deciding that I was done for the day. Much of the intensity of the encounter with T. came from being so close to his own raw openness. Our connection over six weeks had made me willing to stand pretty close to that. I feel that I held the space well – not falling in or getting too entangled – but it did take some effort on my part to "walk with T" into that deep spiritual space in his heart. Taking a break felt like an act of self-care.

I notice also that twice I came up with surprising verbal responses. Both of these were of a distinct type that I have observed from time to time: When I am well-attuned to a situation and my mind is balanced, it is possible to speak without quite knowing in advance what will come out, and yet there is no feeling of ethical danger. My mind is tracking the situation so closely – both consciously and in some intuitive way – that I can trust a spontaneous response to be better than one coming from my thinking mind.

I think the underlying feeling of ethical safety could be coming from the presence of *otappa*, also called "respect for others," one of the "Guardians of the World." The *otappa* is supporting a fully compassionate response: offering what the person needs in that moment, even if it does not look "conventional."

The first surprising thing I said was that I found the hospital heartbreaking, but also beautiful. From a conventional standpoint of what chaplains generally say, this is far too personal of a comment and also treads into territory that a patient might find disturbing. Indeed, T. began to cry. And yet, it felt to me in that moment that I was not saying something merely personal, but rather something that provided an opening for our conversation to go deeper (and was also true). T. often cried during our visits and had even stated at the beginning that he was likely to do so today. It felt like his tears broke his heart open in a good way.

My second spontaneous statement was to say casually that T. is helping me too. Truthfully, in the moment I did not have any particular example of his help in mind, although if I'd been asked to elaborate, I could have come up with true ways that T. had provided benefit – for instance, in giving me as a chaplain the opportunity to talk with him due to his willingness to share his feelings. T's actual response to my comment was to laugh and look happy (right there is a benefit for him!). In retrospect, I wonder if my comment resonated with his just-prior statement that he wished he could find ways to help. I know that he has been feeling "burdensome" with his nonfunctional body. Perhaps this offered the idea that it is still possible to help even in such a state. I hope it was a direct affirmation of that for him.

Another part of the intensity of this encounter was the sheer beauty of witnessing T's intention to serve others arising from within a situation of deep suffering. It touched my heart deeply. Even now I feel tears rising in recollecting it. I see that a vivid encounter with a Heavenly Messenger can indeed bring

forth the best in people's hearts. It is powerful to be present as this energy comes to life in another person.

On reflection, I can imagine a wide range of responses to having the opportunity to bear witness to T's good intention. At that moment, my response was to feel like I needed a break. I touched into the sacredness of the moment (an unusual word for me, but it seems appropriate) and somehow wanted to withdraw – it had made me feel quiet inside, and a little vulnerable. I did not want to step right into another room which might hold a totally different reality. But I can also imagine feeling energized, joyful, and inspired to carry that sacred energy directly into a new situation to bring benefit to someone else. The karmic conditions vary quite a bit from day to day and from person to person. This is OK – it is just something I am noticing while reflecting.

The creation of a story

I see how I have woven a story about T. even though I really know very little about him. What can I really know? I saw the pictures on the wall of his hospital room – pictures of his wedding (at a fancy hotel), his kids from a prior marriage, the hobbies he enjoys. I met some of his immediate family, observed them interacting with him, and heard what he said to me about them. I heard also some of his fears, frustrations, and hopes.

And yet, I'm very aware that I've seen a tiny part of the whole dance. I can't remember if we met six or seven times, but the total time together was no more than 2 or 2.5 hours. The broad strokes of my story about T. may be correct, but surely any details are inaccurate or unknown, and there are whole areas of his life that are invisible to me because they weren't relevant during his hospital time. This reminds me of the "iceberg" model of culture, except referring to an individual human. We see just the tip, and much more is underwater.

I can see my mind moving toward envisioning T. as a Wounded Healer: Struck down in the prime of life, he has the realization that working for a living is ultimately not the point, and he would rather find a way to help people. The suffering of his stroke is transformed into generosity and compassion that benefit both him and others for many decades as his path spirals into a whole new dimension.

I enjoy the taste of this genuine wish for good to come forth. And... I can't assume that the story goes on smoothly toward becoming a Wounded Healer. Sometimes the veil in front of someone's eyes is torn aside for a while by a Heavenly Messenger, but then life gets busy again – old karmic patterns come back strongly, and the good intentions are forgotten, at least for a while. But the seeds are planted. Because of faith and right view, I know that the karma of T's stated good intention will bear wholesome fruit, even as equanimity reminds me that I can't know when or how that will happen.

Letting go

My last encounter with T. (which I didn't know was the last, as we never do – I'm just saying that now) was rather top-level. He just said "I'll let you know" about any developments toward "helping" and then ran out of things to say. Was he just tired? I can't be sure, but to me it felt like he was in a more "worldly" frame of mind, his attention turning toward picking up his "outside" life again.

Indeed, I heard that T. went home a few days later. This made me happy; surely it is challenging to spend the better part of 2 months in the Rehab unit (on top of a month in the regular hospital). The

spiritual caregiver who saw him last told me that he said he was happy to be going back to his "man-cave" at home. Will he follow up and actually live a changed life? I don't know, and I can't know.

The task for me as the chaplain is to let go. T. and I did have a genuine chaplaincy relationship, and it actually lasted quite long for a hospital situation. Now we've both moved on. I debriefed with one of the hospital chaplains about T., and she seemed to be checking how I felt about letting him go. I actually think I'm fine with it. I haven't thought about him much since that debriefing, except to write this paper. The memory of him feels sweet – it was a real gift to bear witness to the journey he underwent in Rehab, and I feel joy at having gotten a glimpse of the sheer beauty that is potential in the human heart. It was a precious time together.

Food for my own journey

The chaplain is on a journey too. I am learning and changing from all these encounters also. My own journey is framed by a Buddhist understanding, making it just another story in a way – and yet the effects on my heart are real.

Some of the take-aways for me are: Respect, humility, compassion, truth, wisdom, patience. Rather than limit these boundless qualities with exacting descriptions of where and how they manifested, let me simply offer some reflections and understandings that have emerged from this chaplaincy relationship with T.

In some way, I am awed by the power inherent in a human life – and the fact that this power tends to be revealed through suffering. This is not a new insight, but one I am continually reminded of as I encounter the awesomeness of people's lives viewed through the lens of some illness or injury. Although they may be lying there seemingly tiny and motionless, somehow a hospital patient can evoke an understanding of the enormity of what we are doing here through all our life activities. We don't see it as easily in times of busyness and health, but somehow being stopped in our tracks brings the larger picture into view. I am grateful for the opportunity to remember this regularly. When I talk with a patient even for a short time, getting a brief glimpse of their world, I feel like I've touched a whole new Universe. (Sometimes an interesting one to inhabit, other times one I am glad to move on from).

I am also reminded of the importance and compassion of "speaking the truth." *Now* is the moment to say what is in our heart – when else could it be? I am happy that my mind was balanced, present, and confident enough to say a few surprising things to T. that might have helped open his heart, and happy also that he was willing to say some deeply intimate things to me about his changing view of life. I know that there have been times when I held back from speaking fully to my teacher, my parents, or others in situations where it would have been all right to do so. I hope I might hold back less in the future.

Getting glimpses of people's journeys – whether for 1 day, 1 week, 6 weeks, or whatever – reminds me that we are always just walking beside people for a short time. I've been with my current teacher for a decade, but I am aware that our relationship won't last forever. We are still just walking side by side for some finite time.

This highlights several things. First is the preciousness of each encounter. This encourages being as fully present as possible, with as much kindness and compassion as possible, and with the willingness to speak the truth as noted above. Of course my ability to do this will vary, but it's a good aspiration to keep in mind as I meet each person.

Second, I see that we are totally responsible for our own journey. No one will "walk with me" for the whole journey except me! And I will not walk with anyone else for their whole journey, so I can put down any sense of responsibility for their journey. I am still responsible for my actions, but not for the happiness of others.

This differs from common Western ideas about how to serve, which tend to focus only on caring for others, but points toward a subtler understanding of how things interconnect. As stated in the Sedaka Sutta (SN 47.19; Olendzki translation):

Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself.

And how does one look after others by looking after oneself? By practicing (mindfulness), by developing (it), by doing (it) a lot. And how does one look after oneself by looking after others? By patience, by non-harming, by loving kindness, by caring (for others). (Thus) looking after oneself, one looks after others; and looking after others, one looks after oneself.

At no time do we forget to "look after ourselves."

Finally, I feel that the most important journey is the inward one toward deeper understanding. The amount of physical functionality T. regained is far less important than the degree to which his heart opened. And for me, witnessing that with mindfulness and now reflecting on it will have the deepest impact. The Dharma is said to be *apanayiko*: Leading inward (or onward). We practice this by looking within at what is present right in our own heart. It is all there waiting for us to see, and is revealed successively as we look honestly and with care.

May we all have fruitful journeys inward, wherever we may be in the outer world.