

## Action Reflection *February -- March, 2016, Ying Chen*

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It's a Tuesday afternoon. I went for a round of patient seeing in the Kaiser hospital. I went up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor where I usually start my rounds. It's the floor that houses general hospital patients. The first few patients I was about to see based on the clergy report were either asleep, or not around in their beds. So I asked the nurse manager on the floor to see if there was anyone who might need spiritual care. The nurses on those floors usually have much more knowledge about the patients they cared for. The nurse manager walked around the hall a little bit and walked into one room to check if the patient there needed me.

There was only one patient in the room, and a female family caregiver was around with the patient. The nurse manager quickly came out and said that they wanted me to go in. I did my normal ritual of bowing to the Gel-in-Gel-out sanitizer box to clear up my head and went inside.

The patient was an elderly with white beard around his face and white / gray hair. He looked very frail and somewhat sad. His face was pale. He lied in the bed very uncomfortably with tubes plugged into both of his legs and his right arm. He was in the bed about 1/3 way down from the top of the bed. I suspected that he probably had been sliding down somehow when the bed was lifted. I don't know how long he's been in that position. The hospital gown looked so thin that I felt chills in my body. Plus, half of his legs were exposed without any cover due to the attached tubes. The legs looked a bit swollen as well.

The nurse manager came back in right after I walked in. She got another nurse to help move the patient up in his bed and lift the bed up so he can eat some lunch. His wife was next to him trying to give him help as well. She seemed a bit distant, irritated or frustrated. Before the patient was completely situated, another nurse delivered a lunchbox. The lunch smelled unappetizing. It looked like airplane food with some sort of green sauce, some beef stew, and maybe smashed carrots. There was a cup of orange juice as well. The wife was eager to feed the man right away. She moved the little table over the bed, put the lunch box on top of it, and got the juice, fork and spoon ready for the patient. The tiny room was quite jammed.

While all of these was happening, I tried to stay out of the way observing until the nurse all left. I introduced myself while the wife was preparing for the lunch. The wife was grateful that I was there. She said that the man's sister just passed away and that same day, Tuesday, was when his sister's memorial service was happening, and he couldn't be there. She also explained that the patient ended up in the hospital mostly because of the grief from the loss. He had some kidney issues that recurred. They really hoped that they'd be out soon. She insisted that the patient must eat something in order to get well soon. While she told me the story, she put a spoon into the man's right hand and asked him to eat himself. His right arm had a few

tubes plugged in. He tried to hold the spoon, but it kept on sliding out of his hand. His wife finally scooped up a couple of bites and fed him. He very reluctantly ate it.

When the wife stopped talking, I asked the man if this was an unexpected death, and how his relationship was with his sister. The man's eyes looked down and he didn't answer my questions. As we all stayed in silence for a few seconds, the man looked up and directly at me. He said in a very faint voice, "You look like a really nice girl, tell me why God is like this?" For a split second, I didn't know what and how to respond. I was still trying to gather some basic pieces of information. Yet, I realized that somehow, by introducing myself as a "chaplain in training", it did signify some form of spiritual power that he's trying to connect with. Looks like he believed in something about God. I paused a second and asked him back as gently as I could: "How is God like for you?" He waited for a few seconds, and slowly said: "I thought that God cherished all." After a couple of more seconds, he started talking. I could barely hear him, since his voice was very faint and soft. But I was able to make out most of what he was saying based on the words that I could hear.

He started telling me that his name was Jxx, but for some reason, people called him J. His face lightened up slightly as he was telling about his name. Then he went on saying that he had some ups and downs with God. He didn't know why things happened like the way they did, and he believed in God. But at some point, he had a "downfall" with God. He talked for a few minutes. His wife tried to get him to drink some orange juice, but he kept on complaining that it felt like coffee. The juice was in a coffee cup. He drank a little bit.

As he was taking a breath, I echoed back to him what I heard: "You said that you had a downfall with God, can you tell me more about that?" He took a few breaths, and started to talk about his sister. I wasn't sure if her sister had anything to do with his relationship with the God. He said that her sister was always a "fighter". She worked hard, and fought for her rights. It sounded as if that she was a lot of strength for him. He repeated that he thought that God would have cherished everyone. I stayed with him as fully as I can while he spoke.

It was not until when I was reflecting in the evening, I realized the words he was saying about his sister were like his memorial speech, trying to honor his sister. Since he couldn't be at his sister's memorial service, he probably needed a priest, a minister, or some sort of spiritual presence for him to share his words about her sister, on his sister's memorial service day. I happened to be there.

As he finished talking about his sister, I sensed that he's probably tired. He looked up at me and murmured, "This is probably enough. I am a bit tired." I asked if he would like to say a prayer, even though I'm still afraid of saying Christian prayers. My gut feeling was that prayer might be good and I asked them after all. Jody lifted his hands up to hold mine. His wife reached her hands out as well. As all of us held our hands, both of them started to say the Lord's Prayer themselves. I was relieved that I didn't have a lead a prayer.☺ It was amazing how those moments play out. My

momentary anxieties vanished just like that. Somehow, all of these moments work themselves out naturally.

As we finished the prayer, I took out a few ceramic glass hearts from my bag, and asked him if he wanted to pick one. He looked at them, and picked a white heart with a cross sign on it. I said, "God's love is within all of us", and left the room. They both seemed more relaxed than how they were ~10 minutes before.

## ***The teachings and the dharma***

This Dukkha, as I go about meeting patient, is becoming an increasingly profound and pervasive truth in my understanding. From small physical discomforts to grueling cancer treatments, from flashing momentary mental unease to seemingly endless immense distress, depression, and all combinations of mental and physical interplay, as long as we cling and not let go, we suffer immensely. I can't help thinking "how can one not be interested in finding ways out of all of these!" I have never felt this dukkha so deeply in me until I now.

A significant loss, like losing a dear sister, could be like a tornado striking down on us, taking with it the big chunk of physical well-being, the faith, the clarity, the inner and outer strength, and those from the family members as well. I saw this happened again and again with the cancer patients too. The entire world is shattered when the doctor breaks the news. "Why me, why now, how could it happen?" We know that birth, aging, illness and death are natural part of our being; yet most of us believe this would never happen to us.

I observed my own mind carefully, noticing moments of unease, doubt, and self-judgments, when I put expectations on myself or when I try too hard and hold on – "I hope J and his wife felt better. Maybe I could have done something different..." The good news is I am now more and more aware of all of these thoughts happening, and I'm more and more capable of not getting involved in the intellectual thought process. It is important that I learn something from each encounter and I stay easy and present with others and myself. It's not worth losing the ease. What's the point if I bring more suffering to myself when I'm trying to help ease the pain from others?

Meeting these patients allowed me to see that it is also possible to be free from all of these dukkha – The noble truth of awakening and cessation, even just momentarily. When the cancer patients from the Thriving group come to terms with their cancerous conditions and started to live their lives much more fully, they started to show some of the most beautiful human qualities, e.g., love, care, compassion, fearlessness, presence and strength. They supported each other and truly inspired people like me. When I let go of my own fears, expectations, and my identity, I feel tremendous sense of grounding, freedom, humbleness, and confidence.

I learned so much from these patients. I also learned a lot about myself. I learned that my mind would get restless if I start to think about doing a lot or trying too hard to solve problems and fix other people's minds. I learned that I would become anxious if I start to expect myself to be something different from what is. I learned that mistakes are part of the process. I learned that I could trust my body more. I learned that in these interactions, a lot of times I am the student, and the patients are the teachers. I learned that some times, my presence is all that is needed. What I say or do may be extra. I learned that there is much to learn, but it is also very important for me to pay attention to "how" I learn things. Is there "selfing" going on? Am I trying to become something, or be someone? Who am I? Why am I doing all of these? What inspires the learning? I also learned that peace and ease is within me. If I care enough to get in touch with them, they are easily accessible. I have come to deeply trust the present abiding.