

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
Reflection November 27, 2011
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Reflection

This morning I'm reflecting on both a recent experience building on those
I've had in the past—about hospitals as a microcosm.

My husband recently had heart surgery and I was with him for ten days in
the hospital.

Unfortunately in the past 30 years, I've spent a fair amount of time in
hospitals—both for family surgeries and long-time treatments
and as a couple of periods as hospital chaplain,
as well as visiting friends and parishioners.

I suppose it hasn't been unfortunate in many ways,
in that we have the facilities in this country
and in many others to keep people, not only alive longer,
but in remarkably good health longer than ever.

I wish we had such possibilities in all countries, but we do not.

As I sat with my husband Bob, visited the various spaces he was in
in the hospital recently,
as I sat eavesdropping on strangers' stories in waiting rooms,
I realized I was in an intense microcosm of the world.

People were troubled; people were healing;
babies were being born; others were dying.

Written on some faces I could see they had just received devastating news;
on others the joy of taking home a new baby,
or the apprehensive countenance of a woman giving birth soon.

I wondered how we all get through such times as these.

One day when Bob was showing signs of getting somewhat better,
a cleaning woman came into the room. I thanked her for taking care of
the room and she turned to me and graciously spoke.

Smiling she said, "I am always happy to serve."

I was a bit overwhelmed at her simple and beautiful answer.

We talked a while and I told her

how much it helped to have someone's kind smile in the room.

She was fairly close to my age, I would guess,
and like me grew up in the south.

She said simply, “My mother told me that no matter what anyone says to me, I was to be kind.”

I was so moved—for at my age, in the south, she could have had very ugly things said to her. She’s black; I’m white.

I’m sure the two of us went to segregated schools when life was not pleasant between our colors. She eased my morning and smoothed out my day.

I began to think about what I had seen and experienced in this particular several days in hospital—neither as patient nor minister, but as the worried family member of a patient.

That first busy night we were in the hallway for 7-8 hours in the critical care unit—all the little rooms already filled when we arrived—and they were still full when we moved to another unit at midnight.

Emergency folks and police brought in a teenager with an overdose and she was left in the hall right next to my husband.

Incoherent in her raving, she tried to bite anybody nearby, had to be restrained, and finally when the medical, emergency, and police people sorted out her age, she was rolled off to pediatrics. She was unable to tell the emergency people what drugs she’d ingested because she had no idea what drugs her friends had given her. No parents accompanied her, no friends. So easy for me to forget how difficult life is for so many.

Victims of car accidents, hearts pains or attacks, starvation, and other serious life-threatening events brought us all to that critical care unit—some with worried or angry family members with them.

The medical people worked fast and as efficiently as possible.

I watched, thinking I was once again in this condensed version of human existence—a kind of fastforward way of living, from birth to death—that is a hospital with a trauma unit.

I realized later, as I listened to the cleaning woman, how important civility is in a condensed atmosphere—how dependent our fragile communities are upon not only competence, but kindness, courtesy, and a gentle word.

Compassion—that is what Alex, our interim minister—is teaching about in a class this winter—and surely we human beings require, for a good life, compassion. ‘Passion with’ others.

In the heart institute's critical care waiting room, I watched as my son listened to a couple of elderly men.
All of us were there in that space because someone in our families was on the cusp of life and death.
These two gentlemen—certainly not people I might run across in my regular day—were talking hunting, and the relative merits of squirrel or rabbit stew.
I had to leave at that point and missed the decision—on which was best! Though I secretly voted rabbit having eaten it as a child.
But when I returned, our son (who grew up in this congregation many years ago) was in conversation with these men.
Now my daughter, my son, and I always take our laptops with us; we get a lot of work done in waiting rooms and hospital rooms; we've had a lot of practice in the weeks and months we've spent there.
Our son Walter is a writer and had a deadline on a book that week, so I know he was frantically trying to write, but instead he was helping the two elderly hunters with something that they wanted to see on the computer, but didn't know how to find. They all seemed to be engaged, and distracted for a while from the concerns for their sick relative. And I was grateful to my son, for making their long day pass easier—and probably his as well.

So I began to notice all the people who were making others' miserable hospital visits bearable.
Each Sunday morning in the hospital a chorus—clearly volunteers—met in the atrium downstairs and sang—both familiar and unfamiliar music.
Pleasant volunteers worked in the gift shop.
A wonderful nurse in the intensive care unit that answered our dozens of questions, explaining all the pipes and tubes, bags and gizmos, understanding that we needed to know exactly what was happening in order to assuage our fears.
I thought of the cheerful, yet quiet, and reassuring fellow that took vitals at 2:00 am; the doctor who smiled, lingered for questions, and made us all feel better.
I think of a nurse who was engaged on the computer finding the right medications for one of her patients while we were in the hallway that first night. We were quietly speaking to each other of our apprehensions—what sort of good thing could chest pains mean?—when she got up, peeped over the glass barrier between us and tried to

assuage our anxieties. She didn't have to do that, but how reassuring it was to have her tell us what was going on and that we were not forgotten in that busy hallway.

Then, of course, I remembered the hours and years my husband volunteered at Mayo Clinic (where we lived for many years) leading tours of the magnificent art in the Clinic for patients and their worried families.

There are so many small acts of kindness.

Think of those who can wipe a frown off your face—if only for a moment.

Who are these people? You know them—the ones that help you in the grocery, that answer your questions in a kindly manner after you've been on the phone *on hold* for twenty minutes.

The persons here at church who have time for a word and a smile when you enter. A small gesture, so often, is kindness, compassion.

Our civilization is fragile—maybe it's always been fragile.

Our world, our lives today, are fragmented.

Our relatives may live hundreds or thousands of miles away.

Divorce is common among us—dissolutions of all kinds shatter our society.

Small children are no longer taught to trust strangers or people in their neighborhoods even.

We saw last week in the main service that we don't trust each other enough to speak freely here in this congregation—because our different political opinions have become too volatile and we are afraid or, at least, hesitant to say who we are.

Let us find compassion deep within our selves.

Let us trust enough that we might say to another, "I am happy to serve you."

I learned a lot from this hospital visit, from the cleaning woman and others, and I am grateful for all those who made my family's lives easier as we trod those hospital halls and sat apprehensively in waiting rooms.

We expect competence and efficiency in hospitals and we found that, but what made the place human for us, was the compassion we encountered.

So I ask you, are there occasions in your lives when a word, a smile in an elevator, a small courtesy has occurred that helped lift your spirits? Are there occasions when civility saved you?

Reflect on these questions as you go through this next week.