

Healthcare Talk

January 2017

One of the truths of life is, I believe, that if you ask someone to give a talk, or a series of talks well ahead of the event, they will most likely say yes - and then as time draws nearer they will regret the ready acceptance.

I gayly said 'yes' to Sr. Margaret when she asked me to give this talk, but when I began to put my mind to the theme '*Time from the Perspective of a Patient*' I really wondered why.

But Sr. Margaret assured me that given my medical history, I was someone with a fund of experience.

In reality I have, mercifully, had a very limited number of hospitalisations (33 nights over 71 yrs.) and none of them for extended periods.

- I had nine days in hospital in 1997 with blocked arteries and the emergency insertion of two stents which resulted in my being given a heart attack.
- Seven years later I had an 11 day stay in the same hospital in order to have the full triple bypass.
- I also had 5 days in the Holy Spirit Hospital near the Vatican with a bad case of flebitis of the leg and a similar period of time in a Leeds hospital for minor treatment for a prostate problem.

Other than that I would add to the list three one night stays, two for sleep monitoring and one because of cellulitis and the need for intravenous antibiotics.

When I mentioned to one of the Carmelite sisters (formerly a midwife) to whom I am chaplain the nature of this talk, she exclaimed

"what can you meaningfully say, every person's experience will be different!

There, thought I, speaks the voice of experience.

Perhaps I should mention too that (like her) I have had the onlookers experience since I served as a hospital chaplain for 10 years, 6 1/2 at St. James Hospital in Leeds, deemed, at the time, to be the largest General Hospital in Europe.

Clearly every individual will undoubtedly experience periods of hospitalisation, (ie times when one is out of control of one's life, vulnerable and facing the unknown), differently. How we handle the heightened sensitivity that is a necessary as result of being a hospital patient, will depend greatly on our personality, our psychological make up and our life history.

In conversation with a friend of mine, I was fascinated to hear her speak of a feeling that she experiences when in hospital. It is a feeling I must confess to but might not have dared voice, namely a feeling of relief or even joy that, whilst in hospital, I need no longer be nattered or troubled by the expectations of others and the demands of normal social niceties. No one any longer, whilst I am in that bed, expects anything from me. People are even forgiving and understanding if I fail to thank them for coming to see me.

It is a time when I am given permission, or perhaps better, I give myself permission, to be totally self absorbed without any guilt.

It is of course a time when one is completely out of control of one's life. You are told when you can stand up and when you must sit down when you may eat and when you can and may not go to the toilet!. Most medical decisions are taken on your behalf and if you are lucky the rationale is communicated to you.

Inevitably such vulnerability engenders fear. I am particularly prone to fears such

as: " are they monitoring this drip or will it run out with life-threatening consequences? "

or again. "are they being careful enough about the spread of infection? ",
"am I safe in their hands or will they be careless? "

Whilst time free from control and responsibility offers space for disproportionate fears to arise, it also offers time for deep contemplation. Very often, particularly in the wee small hours when one can't sleep questions of theology arise. When you look around and view suffering more acute than your own the question always arises - why does God allow this? And where is God in all this?

In my early days as a priest, in my first parish to be specific, One particular hospital visit gave me a very valuable lesson in spirituality.

Since my parish was near to Wakefield, I was asked by a colleague in Liverpool to visit a young man in his 30s in Pinderfields paraplegic unit who had had an industrial accident, - a load of bricks had fallen on top of him and broken his spinal-cord.

With little experience, I visited the ward for the first time with great trepidation, wondering what on earth I would or could say. I was amazed to find, at the far end, the man that I was looking for. He and his wife (a veritable blonde bombshell) were all smiles as they welcomed me. During our conversation he said "but father I have a lot to be grateful for, I am better off than Dorothy".

Dorothy was a quadriplegic who was in a side room further up the ward. Before I left the ward I made a point of going round and having a few words with the other 11 patients. There was a black man, Tommy, who had been on a water bed for 18 months because every time they got him into a wheelchair his skin broke down and he developed new pressure sores. But Tommy, like all the others, spoke of being blessed because his situation was not as bad as that of Dorothy. Eventually I came to Dorothy in her side room. She was a beautiful 25 year old Scottish girl with yet another radiant smile. She asked could I give her her lunch sandwich which was sitting on the locker. "The staff are so busy", she said very kindly "they haven't had the time this afternoon to feed me". With embarrassment I fed her and then listened to her story of her car accident and the compensation that she was to receive which meant that she could have a house purpose-built for her needs. Then, would you believe she said "but I'm blessed father, I have compensation. Poor old Tommy is far worse off he has no compensation and his skin won't heal!"

Their long hours of total dependence had given them such an opportunity for deep reflection. They had learned to live St. Paul's injunction "Always be thankful".

It is beautifully put in the poem 'Suffering' by Louis Everly, a French Jesuit

Suffering transforms, matures, and instructs.

Suffering increases our capacities of love and understanding.

*All suffering makes us have something
in common with any of those who suffer.*

It is a power of communion.

Undoubtedly, suffering sometimes hardens us.

It does not necessarily bring us closer to virtue.

But it always brings us closer to truth.

*Suffering and death are the only unavoidable obstacles
which compel the most mediocre man
to call himself into question,
to detach himself from his existence,
and to ask himself what would permit him to transcend it.*

*What neither love, nor prayer, nor poetry,
nor art could do for most people,
only death and suffering are capable of demanding.*

*But maybe the day will come when love, art, and prayer
will have enough power over us so that
we might be exempt from suffering and death.*

There is no doubt about it, those patients at Pinderfields had allowed their suffering to mature and instruct them and it had brought them into deeper communion.

Suffering can harden us. One only has to note how commonplace it is to hear on the lips of in-patients and out-patients incidents of critical and complaining chatter displaying understandable frustration and anxiety that arise from being vulnerable and out of control.

One vivid personal negative experience came for me when after my stents had been inserted I had to have a press put on my groin artery to stem the bleeding. I had been pumped full of heparin before the procedure and so clotting was not easy. I had to have the pressure applied for more than 24 hours and it was painful. I dare not move lest it slipped and the blood spurted out of me. During the long night hours the nurses had gathered at the nurses station just round the corner from my bay but I could hear their giggling and merriment. I became increasingly irritated, frustrated, and angry and blamed them unfairly for my not be

able to sleep. By the end of the night there was not a godly thought or feeling in me. I am not actually sure whether I have ever forgiven them for what I perceived, in my heightened sensitivity, as a total disinterest and disregard for me and my suffering.

The experience of being at death's door on the angiogram table when the consultant told me my life was hanging on literally by a thread became a watershed moment in my life, and marker between life before and life after. Up until then I had had no real sense of my mortality, I happily pushed stranded cars, lifted any weight I could and so on without a thought.

But now I am much more careful. I am aware of my aches and pains and possibility of another heart attack. It doesn't nowadays particularly limit me but I am aware of my mortality.

For a couple of years the experience was vivid. When a celebrity or an acquaintance of mine died at an age within a few years of my age, it gave me serious cause for concern. Thoughts of the imminence of my death and how unready I was would crowd my mind.

Leaving hospital has always been a traumatic event for me in the sense that, after being relatively safe in the hands of the experts with their daily and sometimes hourly monitoring of me my condition I have suddenly found myself struggling to regain confidence in my independence and the absence of the constant professional oversight.

In one of my conversations with Sr. Margaret I realised that she had intended for me to take the idea of time for the patient more broadly so as to include medical experiences other than only those necessitating hospitalisation.

I began to reflect upon all the times I have been an outpatient but I can only say there are too many to catalogue.

They began when I was four years old and developed asthma. I have an abiding memory from the early 1950s of the then iconic smell of ether.

At the age of 16 early signs appeared of sleep apnoea which for some years was wrongly diagnosed as narcolepsy and then I developed ankylosing spondylitis. At the age of 53 the heart history appeared and at 55 a blood clot in my eyes nearly

cost me my sight and led to my becoming a lifelong warfarin patient. In the last two years I have had numerous appointments in an attempt to limit a progressive glaucoma.

I cannot begin to quantify the hours I must've spent in doctors surgeries and hospital outpatient clinics since the age of 4. And it gets worse not better! They say that one can recognise a 70+ person because the first 20 minutes of conversation is always about health matters. Certainly time waiting at the disposal of medical personnel increases.

My experience of all those hours has been of hours of lost or wasted time - yes necessary, but only so that the rest of my life and work could continue to be active, productive and useful. It was, for me, a sense of lost or dead time.

Sometimes I have used the hours as opportunities to pray the office, the rosary or arrow prayers for those who are suffering more than myself in an attempt to make them useful hours.

But waiting in hospital queues has created too much disruption in my life, - not just on the day itself, - but because of uncertainty created by the times of waiting for subsequent treatment or follow-up appointments that in a way have put my life on hold, - Evidenced, may I say, by the fact that I nearly couldn't fulfil this appointment because I was not sure when my 2nd cataract would be removed.

I have often comforted myself with that line from Milton's 'Ode to Blindness'.
"they also serve who only stand and wait".

Recently I came across a CTS pamphlet entitled "Five Loaves and Two Fish". It contains a series of seven reflections by Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan written during his imprisonment in Vietnam.

At one point he realised that he was enduring the hours of imprisonment as lost time while he awaited release. It led him to see that the hours of waiting could be valuable in themselves.

In his book "The Road of Hope" written during his incarceration, he wrote

"I will not wait. I will live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love.".

He goes on "Only one moment exists for you in all its beauty and that is the present

moment. Live it completely in the love of God. If your life is built up like a large crystal from millions of such moments, it will be a wonderfully beautiful life. Can't you see how easy it could be? "

W.H. Vanstone in his book 'The Stature of Waiting' develops a similar and very pertinent reflection. He develops the point that after 3 years of active ministry, in a position of control over his life and decisions, Jesus then voluntarily allows himself to be handed into the power of others, his own people, the Jews. At this point he becomes a waiting figure, waiting on others decisions and actions. He becomes utterly vulnerable and a true expression of the full cost of unconditional love.

It was at this point in the Garden of Gethsemani that St. John tells us that He was glorified and in Him God was fully glorified. It was only at this point that the total unconditionality of God's love was finally revealed in Him.

This perception throws an entirely new light on our experiences of waiting and of dependence.... The situation of waiting is generally resented: it is regarded as frustrating, and considered a diminution of man's proper status.

But given that we are made in the image of God and called to reveal his nature through faithfully imaging Him in our world, our times of waiting, of being in the control of others and thus utterly vulnerable, take on new significance and importance.

In our activity we reveal God's loving creative activity on behalf of his world.

But **in our passivity** (our waiting) we reveal to the world the equally important passivity of God which is the ultimate expression of his unconditional love.

Our Waiting takes on a whole new stature and meaning.

Would that I had read this book 40 or 50 years ago. Perhaps I would have approached these many hours of waiting as times of the upmost importance

in the process of evangelisation and not merely interruptions in the spread of the Good News.

I will end by quoting a poem I came across by Ursula Fanthorpe in a Compendium of her Christmas poems. It has the title 'BC-AD. The Journey with Jesus'

I will read it in full but then offer a liberal adaptation of the second two stanzas which make the point I have been making in the latter part of his presentation.

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment
When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect.
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

This was the moment when even energetic Patients
Could find nothing better to do

Than watching visitors at others beds.

And this was the moment
When a few thoughtful sufferers and
People with a contemplative bent
Walked haphazard by pensive path straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.