

Notes from a Hospital Stay

by Richard Ranger

If you spend a couple of unanticipated nights as a recovering surgical patient in a major metropolitan American hospital, you witness an America at work that is profoundly different from the vision of our nation and its society than what you hear from many politicians and commentators. In fact, you depend upon that America at a time of deep personal vulnerability.

I want to pay tribute to my caregivers from that America, and celebrate the image that I found of the true Kingdom of God.

“Five South” - a wing at George Washington Hospital - was my home for four days. It is a surgery recovery ward, separated from “Five North” by elevators on one side and the GWUH Transplant Institute on the other side. Physicians and surgeons come and go, but it is mainly peopled by the administrative staff at the big central desk, and a team of nurses and techs who perform the messy grunt work on which the patients depend. In some cases for their very survival, as evidenced by the moans of the gentleman in the room adjoining mine, who was apparently recovering from a surgery more significant than mine.

This team - in their scrubs color-coded by job and role - mirrored the extraordinary diversity of our region and country. With names changed to respect their privacy, they included: **Natalia**, the senior clerk at the desk, who was from Belarus; **Saidu**, a tech, who grew up in Northern Virginia, and whose parents emigrated from Sierra Leone; **Angelica** and **Daniel**, nurses originally from the Philippines; **Derek**, the head day nurse, from Maine; **Rachel**, the head night nurse from Walnut Creek, CA; **Marie**, who was from China, and whose Chinese name on her badge involved a couple of ‘Q’s’; **Ahmed**, one of the night techs, from Egypt; **Celeste**, a day nurse, who came to DC as a young girl with her family from Haiti by way of Montreal; **Selina**, a nurse originally from Guatemala; **Maria**, another night nurse, from Bolivia; **Jamila**, who grew up in DC and was in her final semester of nursing studies at GWU; and **Julius**, a night tech originally from Nigeria. And they are just the ones I got to speak with who came to my room to give me meds, or injections,

or to clean me up when I needed cleaning up. They are all children of God and of His Kingdom.

When you are lying in a hospital room in a time of COVID, when visitors are strictly limited — and particularly in the middle of the night, when sleep is interrupted by pain and discomfort and visits of various techs and nurses — you seek human company and conversation. So that is how Saidu and I fell to discussing the beauty of the beaches in Sierra Leone, how Daniel showed me pictures of the transparency of the tropical waters near his family's home island of Palawan in the Philippines, and how Rachel and I would joke about whether she studied Chemistry or Oenology as an undergrad at UC Davis, and shared our memories of the raptor exhibits at Walnut Creek's *Lindsay Wildlife Experience* where she had worked as a high school summer camp counselor. And how her mention that her peers in Israel headed into their military duty as she was heading off to college led me to mention how a group of Israeli soldiers befriended our son Owen one time in a sketchy Rio neighborhood, and that led to me recommending that Rachel watch the film 'City of God'.

In discomfort and fatigue, I was blessed to run down wonderful rabbit trails of conversation - a blessing to me and to those who served me. I particularly remember when Julius invoked God's blessings on the work Catherine and I are planning in Uganda and giving thanks on behalf of Africa — but then, a moment later, noting as a footballer, that Uganda would never rise to the level of Nigeria's *Super Eagles*. Just saying. I could go to Uganda, Julius said, but he recommended that I follow Nigeria when it came to the Africa Cup.

That was my community, and those were my conversations, some fragmentary, some more extended, as when the wound around the port for my B-K Drain needed to be cleaned yet again, bandages and blood-stained pads underneath me again being replaced. Yes, caring for me and the other patients was their responsibility, their job. But I could see them interact in the all outside my door. I could see the teamwork, called for in the signage posted here and there, expressed in the handmade awards posted on the bulletin boards, and expressed in the

smiling eyes and pats on the shoulders. I sought to be a cooperative patient. They responded with welcome and friendliness. And they extended to me the love and dignity of our Lord, regardless of the faith they actually practiced.

In the Baptismal Covenant, there is a prayer that reads: “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” I’ve posted it on my Facebook page, because more and more it is a prayer that is vital for us to take to heart. We are often all too ready to ascribe dignity to another as a result of position or achievement, education or wealth, or power, beauty, or celebrity.

Let me tell you about what dignity is. It is at two o’clock in the morning in a hospital, standing in an open hospital gown and bleeding again, holding the chamber of a B-K Drain in one hand, wearing a catheter and a thigh bag, and my friends, Saidu and Maria, are cleaning me up, and Maria, crouched on her knees says, “we will take care of you, dear”. Such a time brings the realization that at some point in life, the only dignity you have, the only dignity that is yours, is the base level of dignity given by God and that you share with every human being. If you do not have that – as Julius said to me in another context during one of his visits – your pockets are empty. And I had no pockets.

I share this because like many of us, I spend a lot of time focused on what I am against. What is it that I am for? I am for a society that respects the dignity of every human being given to them by our Creator. I am for a society where people from just about anywhere can come together, work together, be in fellowship together, help each other, and support each other in the work of helping others. As the hours of that hospital stay wore on (and one observes hours, not days, in such a situation), what struck me was that I was only one recovering cancer surgery patient in the heart of our Nation’s Capital. And I was being cared for by people from around the world. The faces of the world are the faces of the medical profession in our country today and, really, the faces of our country. Period.

Together, we have dignity. Can we acknowledge that in each other? Can we celebrate the America we actually live in and not an America

that is a false construct of our memory? Five South at George Washington University Hospital shows the blessing of the multiracial America we have, and that we can model the offer of dignity to all. That is the vision of a Godly society that I want to work for.