

Tales from the Edge

It was a quiet evening; not late, really; just dusk.

Suddenly a volley of shots rang out and the General fell from his horse as did several of his aides. In the ensuing chaos, cries of the wounded, shouts to reload, arms thrown upward in surrender, the shooters and the horsemen recognized they were on the same side.

It was the evening of Saturday, May 2, 1863 and General Thomas Stonewall Jackson lay upon the ground severely wounded. Earlier he and some of his aides had gone out to check his front lines near Chancellorsville; to make certain his troops were deployed in such a manner as to be able to fend off an enormous body of Union cavalry rumored to be close at hand.

They had gone out on horseback and, after completing their reconnaissance, they had taken a brief shortcut back towards the town where they were billeted.

On that same road was a company of Jackson's own infantry moving up to bolster the position. The shots rang out as the troops mistook the General and his galloping aides for the dreaded Union cavalry.

Jackson was taken to the rear to a field hospital and treated for his wounds, in part, through the amputation of his left arm from his terribly shattered shoulder. The operation was conducted by a Dr. Hunter McGuire. In the days that followed, Jackson was thought to be recovering but, unknown to Dr. McGuire and other doctors, Jackson already had some classic symptoms of pneumonia - complaining of a sore chest - a symptom perhaps masked by his other wounds.

Then, on Sunday, May 10, 1863 Dr. McGuire recorded that Jackson tried to sit up and said "It is the Lord's Day; my wish is fulfilled. I have always desired to die on Sunday." As further reported, by Dr. McGuire, a few moments later he muttered what sounded like orders for some of his generals, and then stopped, leaving his sentences unfinished.

He then lifted his head and torso - and appeared to peer into the distance. And I quote Dr. McGuire:

“Presently a smile of ineffable sweetness spread itself over his pale face, and he said quietly, with an expression as if of relief, “Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the green trees.”

And he died.....

When I was just a teenager I became something of an expert on the civil war - second only in expertise to my God brother Phillip Katcher - and we read and talked intently about it. In our study of that bitter war this particular story stuck with me; especially that last phrase of Jackson’s. And it still does, today, as I work with so many people at the end of life as we know it; at the edge of what we think we know.

What did Jackson see - and how did he see it?

The stories that follow are real reports. They happened to people I count as friends; people who granted me a rare privilege at a very important time in their lives. They are but a few of the literally hundreds I have worked with these last eleven years, and they speak of what it’s like there at the far edge of life.

They have a unique perspective. They know how it turned out; this life that we spend so much time trying to figure out: what will happen if I do this, or do that? These people know how it turned out; and I have been fortunate to be with them when they tell me what they see, what they think, what they feel, not so much at the end, but rather perhaps, at the edge of this life.

These are some of their tales -

I She Saw It Too

On Monday morning I got a call from Carla, the daughter of a patient named Caroline, and I assumed she was going to tell me that her mother was dead.

“Mom wants you down here right now!”

“What?”

“She wants to see you right away.”

“But I thought”

She interrupted; “We did too but now she’s sitting up a little and wants to talk to you.”

Caroline was the patients name. She lived in Dayton Kentucky in a run-down house; really a menagerie. I would have to say that I’m not sure who else, or for that matter, what else, lived there. I know that her daughter Carla lived there with her. Carla was a woman who as far as I could tell had never done anything for herself, and had done it all for her mother. Unkempt might be an apt term; when one visited, the little children and babies underfoot were most distinctly unchanged. or at least not often. Also in the house were a dog or two, one cat, several kittens, a couple of rabbits, a few cages that had held I’m not sure what; and some chickens who felt free to wander from their shed in the backyard into the house and back out again. I don’t think chickens can be house broken. And kittens are very tough. Presiding over all this was Caroline; in the circumstances, she was surprisingly clean and well fed, albeit, dying of cancer.

Going to visit was always an adventure. Caroline loved to talk about life in Dayton, her less than friendly sister and brother, and, as she got to know the hospice team, about us. When asked about her faith she had said she was a Baptist that had always gone to church – until she fell ill. She also said her father’s religion was whiskey. And that her mother's was slapping him around when he came home drunk and rude.

And then she began to die. And her anxiety began to get higher as she got weaker. She felt compelled to explore ideas like the afterlife, heaven, and grace. But she didn’t buy any of it, she said. She called them fairy stories, ok for her grandkids but of no interest to her. She said you got to the edge and then you were, well, just gone. She was resigned to that view and sorrowful at leaving her family and friends.

But she never wanted me to pray with her, or for her. So I just became someone who visited from time to time. She once introduced me as her friend to someone who happened to be visiting her when I showed up.

I had last seen her before that call on a Wednesday, and she told me she was fading away; that she was going to die soon. But she declined any prayer, just thanked me for visiting. So I left and reported to the nurse that she looked a little pale and weak. Late on that Friday the same nurse left a message in the team mailbox that Caroline was unresponsive, that her heart rate was a little low, and that the nurse doubted Caroline would make it through the night.

During the weekend there was another message in the mailbox from an on call nurse. She had visited when Carla thought Caroline was dead. The nurse reported that she had thought so too; but then the patient had coughed slightly, and the nurse had found a heart beat.

I hurried down to the house – and came in quickly to her bedside. She gestured me closer

“I saw it. – I did. I saw it.”

“Saw What? When?”

“I don’t know when – while I was dead since Friday.”

“What?”

“Heaven Tom, Heaven. I saw it.”

“Really, wow, uh. What was it like?”

“It was beautiful, all green and shiny and sunny. There was a bunch of people I never seen before, and some looked real familiar. I thought I saw my sumbitch father, but I didn’t have to go near him.”

“Any one else?”

“Tom, that Peter, he’s the handsomest man I ever saw.”

“No kidding. Well, what did he look like?”

“Oh, very handsome. And the most beautiful robes, all red and gold!”

“Well. Wow. Uh, well, how did you get there?”

“Well I died. You know, on Friday night. I died.”

“Well, yes. But how did you get from being dead to heaven?”

“Well that’s the strangest part. First, we went somewhere. It was really boring, kind of dim, dark, kind of scary; but then we went right on to heaven.”

For just an instant my mind, as it is wont to do, reacted. I thought, but fortunately didn’t say; “My God, the Catholics are right. There is a purgatory.”

But I said, “Gee Caroline. That’s wonderful. Thanks for telling me. You know, being a chaplain, people sometimes ask me about heaven, about what it’s like.”

“That’s not why I asked you here, you idiot. I want to know what the hell I’m doing here. I didn’t want to come back here. That’s your job – what the hell am I back here for?”

Chaplains always get the really good questions; Nurses and social workers get the ones with facts or evidence or knowledge based probabilities. If it isn’t one of those; call the chaplain.

I looked at Caroline, fumbled around with some vague talk about not time yet, or some unfinished business still to be done. We finally agreed maybe that she was supposed to come back and tell me so that I could help others with her information. That idea seemed to please her; and then, that quickly, she really did die.

II The Edge

Maureen stood leaning over him, as if listening to hear something. She looked up at the nurse, her face almost pleading. But the nurse shook her head. Maureen choked slightly, and took a short stumbling step towards the door of the room. I took her upper arm with my hand, and stepped with her into the hall. She stood silent; the tears rolled freely from her eyes and down her cheeks, but she did nothing to wipe them away. I said nothing, just stood. The nurse handed me a box of tissues, and stepped back into the room.

She looked up, took a tissue from the box I held, and turned slightly away to blow her nose. Through the tissue, her face still turned away, she said, "Do you know what he said?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

She turned her head toward me.

"Do you know what he said?"

"No."

"He said he was going, but he'd be back."

Ever insightful, I replied, "Oh."

"Oh, my God, why did he say that? Why? He's going soon; you saw the way she shook her head. I know, I know, he's dying, any moment now, I know, I know. Why did he say that? Why?"

Her face began to dissolve into tears, huge tears. I don't remember them that large.

"Tom, why did he say that?"

As I've already said, the trouble with being a chaplain is questions like this one. And, worse, they think you can or will answer them. And somehow the answers, or evasions, that all the learned have thought up, never really work.

Such as, “Why do you ask?” Or perhaps, “There’s an interesting question.”

Or the ultimate evasion, “Perhaps the strong medications we are using have caused a little disorientation.”

I opted for honesty. “I don’t know Maureen. She doesn’t know either. We never really do. It never happens on time.”

“I’ll stay with him. Can I stay with him?”

“Of course. Those easy chairs open out into a bed of sorts. You can get some sleep and still be here with him.”

“I won’t go to sleep, not now. Not if he’s coming back.”

“You’ll be with him, even if you fall asleep.”

“Tom, pray for him.”

“Dear Holy One, stand close at hand. Look out for Jack and for Maureen, Lord. Bless them with your kindness, your mercy, your grace – as they go on before you in this night. Amen.”

“Thank you.”

I got the call the next morning around 8:00 from the nurse. Jack had died, and Maureen seemed to be ok. She had been asleep when the nurse found him dead. But the nurse asked me to hurry over; she needed to clarify something with me. I agreed and drove straight there.

The nurse met me outside the room where Maureen sat vigil beside her husband’s body.

“What is this?” the nurse asked.

She handed me a small hand-written piece of paper. She said “I wanted you to see this. I think it’s his hand writing – I checked it against his signatures back in the chart.”

“Where did you find this?”

“Under the hospital bed. I noticed it just before I pronounced him. And I picked it up. There was a pad on the bedside table last night when I went in to check on them, but I don’t know how he could have held a pencil. It’s very weird”

I read it

“Dearest love – I can see over there – it’s wonderful and yet I can still look back and see you asleep in that chair. And there’s no boundary - between this living place where you are and this other side - where there are water and green trees. I can’t find the edge – I thought there was an edge, a line but the boundary seems to fade, the difference makes no difference - My choice isn't whether I live or die; my choice in each moment is whether I react with fear to leaving you or with love to going on before you. I... “

“Are you going to give it to her?”

“I have to. He named her.”

I did. She looked at it, held it close, looked at me. Then she said, “He did it. He came back to tell me.”

III The Grass and the Trees

Early on in my career as a chaplain I was assigned a patient who lived in Grants’ Lick. That’s what the Kardex said. A Kardex is a simple record of a patients name, address, illness, caregivers and, most importantly, how to get to wherever they are. Grant’s Lick is allegedly on State Route 27, the main road down the spine of Campbell County. In reality it consists only of a store, a funeral home, a gas station and a few houses. Most of the people are scattered over the ridges and little valleys that pass for “hollers” in

this part of the state. So I drove, squinted at the instructions, and drove some more and wondered if I should have trailed bread crumbs to get back out again. And then I came to an area, at the foot of a ridge, under an old apple tree, where there were two very old junked cars and a worn truck. So I decided this was where one parked, turned off the engine, grabbed my notebook and headed up the hill.

A voice rang out,

“You must be the preacher man. Come on up here!”

I came up on a small one story frame house, gray with age, and a porch with a bench, a rocker and an overstuffed, over rained on easy chair with a short elderly man sitting in it.

“Howdy, sorry I shouted at you, but I’s e deaf!”

“Oh, that’s ok.”

“I’m Henry. Her’s my wife, Nellie, you’re seein’! What kind of preacher are you?”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Tom Bennett. I’m a chaplain for Hospice of the Bluegrass.”

“Ain’t that a preacher?”

“Well, sort of; we study some of the same sorts of things preachers study, but many of us don’t have a church or a congregation. We mostly tend to the sick.”

“You ain’t one of them Romans is you? Guess not. You ain’t got a black suit – with one of them funny little collars!

“No, I’m not. What faith are you and your wife?”

“Mam and Pap was Baptists but I didn’t take to it. She’s always been her own.”

“May I see her? Introduce myself?”

“Oh, yeah, yeah – sorry I get’s to talking you know. Her’s inside.”

I knocked on the door that was a little ajar, and pushed through into a living room; neatly furnished with a fireplace against the left wall, two doors left and right of the wall straight ahead, and a little half wall to the right that separated the living space from a large family size kitchen. On the couch against the facing wall there sat a little white haired woman mostly covered with a small throw rug.

“Hi, I’m Tom Bennett, the chaplain from Hospice.”

“How do you do? I’m Nellie. I guess I’m your patient.”

“I’m honored to have the chance to be of help.”

“Sit down.”

I sat and watched her. She seemed about to speak, but then she didn’t.

I hesitated.

She started again, then paused again.

I asked, “Is something the matter?”

“You’re not what I expected. Pap said you was a priest. One of those Romans.”

“No, I’m not a priest.”

“What are you?”

“I’m a chaplain. I’m just here to make sure that whatever your faith, your spirituality that it’s of help to you now.”

“You mean now, now that I’m dying.”

“Yes. If you are.”

“I am. I’m sorry. I don’t know nothin’ about religion or, what did you say, spirituality. If I want to talk to God I just walk down the hill and watch the wind in the grass and in the trees.”

Well for a chaplain, the next line in the instructions could easily be: Exit Chaplain. She had her own beliefs, and they didn’t need a middle man. She felt she had a direct, unfiltered, unedited way of being in touch with God. What did she need me for?

But I felt needed to go on. So I scrambled a little.

“Yes, up here on the ridge the views of nature must be wonderful.”

“Isn’t it God that makes the wind?”

“Some people think so. That’s what it says in some parts of the bible.”

“His Mam and Pap used to have one of them, a bible, around. But they couldn’t hardly read. They lived up here too, and all they had to do was look around. They didn’t really need a book or a church.”

“Yes. It seems like some folks believe they know God like you do. For others I guess a church helps put them in the mood, helps them get in touch.”

“In the mood?”

“Yes; to feel a presence, an awareness.”

“Yes. I guess that’s it. Something - I go down the hill for lots of things; to the barn; to get in the truck to go to town. But sometimes I just go, nothing to do, except walk down there. It’s like that little voice - how does it go?”

“A still small voice? Or maybe a whirlwind?”

“Yes. That’s what it’s like. The wind blows, the grass hisses, the trees groan, and then there’s a little stillness. And I hear a voice I can speak with, be with.”

“What’s that voice say now?”

“Can’t hear it right now; think it’s all right. I’m dying – but we do. Worry about Henry though.”

“Yes – you’ve been married some time?”

“57 years.”

“That’s a long time.”

She then went on and talked about her family, and her falling ill, and her worries about all of her family. Sort of what one expects. Then as she wound down I said I had to ask her a few health questions – about pain, eating, eliminating, sleeping, medicines, supplies, and our next visit. Then I asked her if she wished to pray but she said she already had.

I thanked her for her time and asked if I could come back in the next week or so.

She looked at me. “Perhaps.” Then she smiled and asked “Is the wind blowing outside right now?”

“It was blowing softly when I came in.”

“Yes, up here it’s not hard to notice if there’s any. It’ll blow harder tonight.”

I gave a brief blessing and left.

That night it blew quite hard. It took down branches in many parts of Campbell County and around the area. And then, just before dawn, it stopped. According to her husband and eldest son, it was just then that she died.

IV The Lawyer

He had been a successful lawyer here Cincinnati. And then retired to a small farm not far from where Northern Kentucky University is today. He was, according to many we met, a good man. He had loved his wife for nearly fifty years, had several children, grand children, great grands. He was a gardener, a hunter, a sports fan, a local pol, and active in his church – what one might call an upstanding citizen.

But as he drew near the edge, the team noticed he was becoming sort of less focused, almost hard of hearing, or confused. But there were no supporting symptoms to indicate a problem. In such circumstances, who gets the call?

So I sat down beside him and took the direct approach.

“What’s up Jack? You seem so distracted recently. Something on your mind?”

He looked at me a little surprised.

“You people are pretty good at this aren’t you? You notice everything.”

“We try. That’s how we help out. We hunt for signs.”

He paused, stared at me for a moment, then began to talk.

“I can’t get her out of my mind.

“I was sitting in my office one Friday afternoon. It was almost 3:00 and... Do you remember what it was like before they had cash machines ... and the banks closed at 3:00?”

“Yes. I’m that old.”

“Well there I was. No cash and the weekend coming up. And I had a lot planned. So I jumped up, told my secretary I would be right back, and headed for the bank”

“I was about half way there when I came to the corner of 4th and Vine and I saw her.”

He stopped. It looked as if a tear squeezed out of one eye. And his breathing got a little stressed.

“Who?”

“I don’t know her name. I never found out.”

“What about her?”

“She was standing at the corner, waiting for the light to change. I thought, she looks really old, really frail. She oughtn’t to be on a busy street like this by herself. I wondered for just an instant if she could cross the street.”

“But it was almost three. I dashed on to the bank, got my cash, chatted with some of the bankers for just a few minutes, and then came back out onto the street. In the plate glass across the street I saw flashing lights but thought nothing of it until I got near the corner where I saw her dress just past two policemen and a small crowd. My first thought, it wasn’t a thought, just fear. I ducked across the street and there she was, lying just on the sidewalk. One arm was clearly broken, and there was a large gash on her forehead. Her eyes were closed.”

“What happened I asked the policeman?”

“He said it looks as if she tripped on this curb and tried to stop her fall with that arm. She’s unconscious but she’s breathing ok. The ambulance is coming. “

Jack stopped talking, head downcast, his breathing slightly gasping.

I waited. Then said, “What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh.”

The silence stretched out. And then he looked up at me, questioning.

“That’s it. I did nothing. That’s the problem, I did nothing.”

“Jack, you’re not a doctor, or an EMS tech, or a policeman.”

“Oh, no, Tom, that’s not it. I did nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I saw her standing at the corner, I did nothing. I knew she was shaky, with all those people around, all that traffic, she looked shaky. She wasn’t safe. I think I knew she wouldn’t make it.”

I foolishly interrupted saying. “You couldn’t have known.”

He looked at me in a way that suggested I was blind, deaf and dumb.

“It’s not about what might happen. It’s what I knew I should do. I knew to help her; I knew to help her.”

I said nothing.

“Tom, is this the way it always is? At this time of life, that we suddenly see that it isn’t about what we did do but rather about what we didn’t do?”

“Isn’t that what Socrates meant; the unexamined life isn’t worth living? Isn’t that what he said?”

We talked a little longer about what was on his mind at the edge. And then he asked me to pray for his forgiveness. And I did, and never spoke to him again.

V The Adventure

I knew something was different as I walked up to the house. There were no parking spaces near the little house in South Newport, so I parked about a block away. It was a beautiful fall afternoon and the leaves were making lovely crunching sounds as I walked up the block. There was a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk in front of the house and, as I drew closer, I could hear they were arguing. I couldn't really understand the words at first but I heard something different. I caught phrases like "Damn it to hell she's been here for two weeks." and then the unique part, "it's my turn, my kids deserve time with Aunt Lora."

That was the right name, and this was the right address. I introduced myself and asked if the patient lived inside. They all quickly introduced themselves as nieces' nephews, cousins. And they told me to go on inside and one said, "But she'll be coming to my house soon." As I headed up the walk I heard the retort, "Like Hell."

I remember thinking we usually hear them fighting over whose turn it is when they are tired and fearful and worn out, struggling to get someone else to take the burden.

But this was just the opposite. As only a cynical ex-New York investment banker would do, I guessed to myself there must be a lot of money involved.

Anyway I knocked and the door was opened by a slender middle aged woman, another niece, who said that Lora was in the next room. So I went in and introduced myself.

Now, we are taught not to have an agenda when we arrive as chaplains - that our job is to let them have the agenda. It's important because when someone comes into medical care they have already lost a lot of what we all value most, our autonomy.

For example, a patient with a broken leg is robbed of personal mobility, and then a hospital finishes the job. Takes away their clothes, tells them what to eat, when to sleep, when to wash.

I was told, to be a good chaplain, you walk into a room, sit down, shut up, and be the one thing the patient can control.

Except – I had an agenda. She was 102 and I really wanted to know what that’s like. But I remembered, so I didn’t just blurt out something brilliant like, “Wow. You’re really old. What’s that like?”

So we began with the usual niceties, how are you feeling, any pain or discomforts, how eating, how sleeping, and then the explanation about how the hospice team works and what the chaplain does. Then I asked about her faith, and she played right into my hands. She said she had been baptized in a little church in Indiana that probably wasn’t there anymore. What an opening.

“Oh my yes Lora, you must have seen a lot of changes over the years; being 102 and all that.”

She smiled and launched into nearly twenty five minutes of a life story that made me ashamed not only of my own whininess and blaming; but also about my premature judgments about her family and money.

She talked about what life was like at the time of the First World War when she was a teenager. And then about the great crash and the Second World War when the local boys went off and some didn’t come back, including some in her own family. And how Newport was when it was a wild place, as she said, a bordello and gambling hall for those rich Cincinnatians. Although, as she put it, it was fair payback for the lousy jobs they gave poor Kentuckians.

And about how the prejudices ran wild against the German immigrants especially from the Irish. And about how, during the Depression, she had figured out where the wild chickens in Newport laid their eggs so she would go out at dawn and collect them to give to her family and others who had no work or food. She also

remembered the wonders of the automobiles, the trains, and what a thrill it was to find out people could fly; and then to the moon!

It was a tale of a family that had dealt with poverty for near a century, but with humor, and with a loving commitment to each other to make the best of whatever came. She said

“Tom, it has been an adventure. Always something; but when most people say that, they usually mean something always comes along that’s aggravating, irritating, a nuisance. Well Tom, those things are just part of the adventure, part of what makes getting along so interesting, so challenging, and in the end so satisfying. My family dealt with a lot. We didn’t have nothin’. So we had to make do. But we all knew somehow this life was an adventure.”

“And now I know how it turned out; we did our best, we loved one another, most of the time, and we made it this far. And they’ll keep on. I know I won’t be part of this adventure much longer.”

And she stopped. And I hadn’t a clue what to say, and then knew in an instant I didn’t need to.

And she leaned back into the cushions behind her shoulders, sort of smiled a smile of great sweetness at me and said, “And now I get a whole new adventure.” And she died.

I still don’t know what Jackson saw, or how he saw it. But he was scarcely alone in his vision, his sight. And the means by which we see then, near the edge, remains a mystery.

But all these, and many others, do seem to see with an awesome clarity, there at the edge.

Lora is my hero.

I think she’s right. After all, adventures are something we make from what we find or where we find ourselves.

I remember her words from the edge. That it's an adventure, and when this one is done, there's probably another, just over the edge.