

Twelve-Hour Talks

When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.
~Malala Yousafzai

John and I spent several weeks of twelve-hour night shifts together. He lay motionless and unresponsive, connected to IV fluids, a feeding tube, and a Foley catheter. As a registered nurse in a neuro-trauma intensive care unit, I cared for this twenty-something patient, comatose after a car crash. Although his other injuries were minor, his brain was jostled. Day shift reported that his mother visited each morning, but he had no company except for me from 7:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m.

As much for myself as for John, I kept up a running conversation each time I entered his room. "Good evening John, this is Saturday." "It's cold and cloudy outside. Do you like rain?" It didn't matter to me that John did not answer. I continued our conversations as though he had. When the television was on I discussed the program and the news of the day. When I bathed him and changed his linens I discussed the pros and cons of baths versus showers. If the traffic was bad on my way to work, I told him about it, along with running discussions about everything from sports to cafeteria food. When it was time for my day off, I told him what I would be doing and when I would return. John never responded but I talked anyway.

One evening, when I returned from several days off, John was not in his room. Fearing the worst, I swallowed the lump in my throat and focused on my new patients. I'd long ago learned that nursing is a job where crises are shared but outcomes aren't always known. Sometimes it's better that way.

Weeks went by. One night I noticed a woman walking in the hall beside a tall young man using a cane. They paused at each room as if listening for something. "They must be someone's family in for a visit," I told myself, as I watched their slow progress. I gathered the supplies I needed from the nurse's station and started to my patient's room when another nurse stepped into the hall and asked me a question. As I answered her, the young man's head turned. He quickened his pace and approached me. "I know your voice."

"Can I help you?"

"You already did," he laughed.

"John! I didn't recognize you standing upright and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt!"

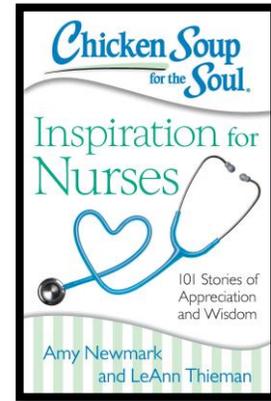
His mother explained that he had regained consciousness and had been moved to a rehab floor, where he made rapid progress.

"He did not remember his accident, but did remember a voice during his time in the 'twilight,' as he called it. At first I dismissed it as a dream or his imagination, but John insisted it was real," his mother explained.

John explained: "So I had Mom bring me to this unit, first on day shift and then again on evening shift, so I could listen for the voice. Your voice: the voice that calmed my fears and brought me comfort."

John's smile and hug reminded me why, for twenty years, I have been a nurse.

~Sharon T. Hinton



Confession of a Nurse

*Today was good. Today was fun. Tomorrow is another one.
~Dr. Seuss*

A heavy snowfall covered the ground of the nursing home as I pulled into the parking lot. On Saturday mornings the facility was quieter, without all the office personnel and sales representatives. I enjoyed weekends and looked forward to working as the charge nurse on the men's wing. My Big Boys, as I called them, were always trying to pull pranks on me.

The Big Boys sat in the men's lounge with the television blaring. I loved the stories these retired farmers and men of various occupations told. There were doctors and businessmen alike enjoying the questions I asked them about their youths. My question this day was, "Did you like to play in the snow when you were young?"

All of them had a story to tell about the snowmen they built or the games they played in the snow. They told stories about building forts and having snowball fights. They told stories of their cars stuck in the snow and demonstrated the depth of the snow with their aging hands.

"I haven't felt snow in many years," said Stanley from his wheelchair. The men gazed longingly out the large picture window. One of them remarked. "With the sun on the snow like that, it makes good snow packing."

"Snow won't last long," said another.

I saw the little boys inside these elderly men. I wondered... could I... dared I? Why not? I might get scolded and reprimanded, but I would not get fired.

I gathered up some huge containers from the kitchen and an empty clean garbage can. I told my nurse techs what I was about to do and asked them to get me a mop. I went out the back door and filled all the containers with snow. I took the first container of snow inside to Stanley. "Do you remember making a snowball?"

Stanley smiled, reached, took a handful of the snow and began forming a ball.

"Who would you like to throw it at?" I asked.

"Tom!" Stanley shouted as he tossed the ball at the man near the door. Then all the men got into the action. Workers passed snow to everyone and we all became victims.

"Better duck!" one man warned.

Catch this one!" another challenged.

Raucous laughter echoed throughout the men's wing.

The fights lasted until the snow was melted and the tile floor looked like a water line had broken. The slightly damp men sat grinning as we mopped up the water and handed out towels and warm blankets. Their smiles and energy radiated throughout the day.

I knew when some of them told their families they had thrown snowballs and played with snow, the relatives would laugh and think, "He's confused today."

No, on the contrary, he's alive and witty and well.

~Beverly LaHote Schwind

A Better Nurse

*The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.
~Albert Schweitzer*

The door closed again, blocking my view of life on the other side. Hot salty tears slid from my eyes. This was the morning of day number three in isolation. IV fluids flowed into my right arm and I was too ill to move. I assumed it was because I was expected to die.

Three days before I'd given birth to my third child, my second son. I saw him for a few minutes and then he was gone, taken away to the nursery while I was wheeled to a different floor. I had not seen my baby since. I had Hepatitis A, probably from drinking contaminated water, the doctor said. He also said I was dying when I was wheeled into the emergency room, but they were going to try to save my baby. That was all I could hope for. Before they could set up the OR for the emergency C-section, I went into spontaneous delivery.

My baby boy was healthy, but I was in grave condition. My liver had sustained so much damage that, even though I'd survived, the outlook was still grim. I tried to shut those thoughts out. I longed to go home with our new baby and mother my children. Breathing was difficult; my head swam.

My condition scared many people. Just to enter my room nurses had to scrub their hands, and then put on a gown, paper shoes, gloves and a mask, and carefully take them off again before they could leave. I felt like a burden to everyone. Few people came into my room, so I had spent the past two days in solitude with the exception of nurses coming to check my vitals and change my IV bags.

"God, please let me just go ahead and die. Anything is better than this." This was not the first time I had prayed that silent prayer. Fighting, it seemed, was futile.

The door opened and a large woman dressed in white walked in. "Good morning, honey. How are you today?" Her strong Southern accent was soothing. As she leaned over me to straighten my pillow, she saw the tears. "Why, sugar, what is the matter with you?"

Unable to speak, I just looked at her. I watched her as she assessed my condition. She checked my face, hands, arms, and then lifted the sheet to check my feet and legs.

"When was the last time you had a bath? And, where is your breakfast tray?"

Embarrassed and confused, I shook my head. "I haven't been able to get out of bed to shower."

"Oh, honey. You don't get out of bed. You get a bed bath. You're too sick to get up, child." She moved around the room as she spoke, bending over and removing a plastic basin from the bedside table, gathering towels and washcloths she'd brought in.

"Did you get breakfast this morning?"

"No. I haven't had food in two days."

"Well, you just wait a minute." She opened the door to the bathroom and returned carrying a basin filled with warm water, soap and shampoo. She pushed the call light hooked to the side of my bed. A nurse's aide came to the door and said, "Yes?"

"You call down to the kitchen and tell them the woman in this room has not received her breakfast and we need it right now." The aide disappeared.

The nurse bent over me, and using the warm washcloth, gently wiped the tears from my face. "Don't you worry, honey. I'm going to give you a bed bath and wash your hair. Then we'll put lotion on you and get you sitting up, and then you will get your breakfast."

“But I thought I wasn’t supposed to get anything because I may be dying.”

Her eyes widened as she pursed her lips together tightly.

She washed my hair, rinsing it several times with wonderfully warm water. I could not stop my tears as this wonderfully kind woman took such gentle care of me. As she bathed me, I felt myself come alive as a fresh breath entered my soul. Her gentleness and kindness brought me back to life as she ministered to me. She applied lotion to my arms, hands, legs and body. Still, I could not stop crying.

When she finished with her ministrations, I expected her to leave. She surprised me by removing her isolation attire and going out into the hallway to retrieve my lunch tray from which aromas wafted, making my stomach growl.

Gallantly, my angel reentered my room, again completely covered in protective attire. She rolled the head of the bed up, propped me up with pillows, smoothed out my covers, and then fed me. Food had never tasted so good. I still could not stop my tears. Gratitude filled me... filled my heart until I could hardly stand it. She talked to me softly while she spooned the food into my mouth. I will never remember what she talked about and I do not recall what she fed me. But I will never forget how her kindness nurtured me.

Years later, after I graduated from nursing school and went to work, I remembered how it felt to be ignored and how wonderful it was to be cared for with loving kindness. If I take a little longer with my patients, or do a little extra for them, it’s because of the gentle woman who showed me such love. I don’t know her name, but I will always think of her as the angel who taught me how to be a better nurse.

~Jo Davis



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