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A Professional Friend

A chaplain in training learns to find himself while helping others

by Kevin Avery

Through the fourth floor window, I watched as the helicopter was taking off. Soon, the trauma team would be gathering downstairs in the ER, ready to save another life. I exhaled, praying that the trauma would not be fatal, that we could give the family good news. But I had to be ready for the worst.

Perhaps it was an unconscious movement, but as I turned from the window, I moved away from the present, away from the complexity of the hospital. I smiled, remembering a time when making a difference seemed so simple. I was working as a face painter at an indoor amusement park.

“You know what?”

I had grimaced, trying to keep up with the squirming little girl. I certainly didn’t want to get any face paint on her clothes. “Hold still,” I said. “I’m almost finished.” I dabbled red on my brush and leaned forward. But just as the brush touched her cheek, she bounced, causing the paint to streak. Her large blue eyes were staring up at me. “You know what?”

I laughed — either that or cry. I grabbed a napkin. “What?” I said.

“McKenzie’s having her birthday party today. She’s five, and I’m four.”

“That’s great. Is the party going to be here at Kids Town?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, you’ll have to tell McKenzie happy birthday for me.”

I tried to wipe off the red paint, but I only smeared it. I knew I needed to use the red somehow or else start completely over. “Hey,” I said. “Do you like red hot chili peppers?”

She nodded. “Uh huh.”

“Good,” I said. I picked up the mirror for her to see her cheek. “Because now you’ve got a puppy dog with a red hot chili pepper across your face. See?”

She nodded and hopped off the chair to run and show her mother. Her mother chuckled and then looked up at me. “Thank you,” she said. I smiled and meant it. I enjoyed adding color to life.

“Kevin?”

I blinked, regaining focus. The chaplain who was about to relieve me was at the door. “Sorry,” I said. I handed her the on-call pager. “What did you say?”

“How’s the day been?”

Actually, it had been a rather good day – at least, in a hospital sense. It may not have been as



cheerful as painting cartoons on faces, but there had been no codes or tragedies, and I had been able to make an impact in people's lives. I had been able to help a family work through a living will. I was able to pray for a woman who was scared about an impending surgery and for a young family who had just been blessed with a new baby girl.

And I'll never forget one older man. When I asked him if there was anything special he'd like me to pray about, he replied, "No, but I could sure use some more Jello." I couldn't help but grin, though I was serious when I assured him I'd let his nurse know. "Thank you, sir," he said. "God bless you."

In fact, it had been such a good day that the most traumatic moment was when I announced that fact at a nurse's station. "Everything seems calm and quiet today," I had said. I might as well have yelled out profanities. The nurses gave me an unsettled look. "Shhh. Don't ever say that out loud." A nurse then scribbled down words I was not allowed to say: quiet, calm, slow. "If anything happens, it'll be your fault."

"Then I'll have to pray that nothing happens," I said.

"Yeah, you better get down on your knees."

They laughed as I left with a better idea of what not to say. It was particularly funny, though, when one of the security guards told me later that he always gives the nurses a hard time. "It's sure quiet in here today!"

Now, the calm was vanishing. I turned towards the chaplain. "The helicopter just left," I said. Of course, just because the helicopter had left did not necessarily mean that we would be paged. The helicopter might be transferring a patient to another hospital for all we knew. But it was getting later in the evening, and chances were good that our response would be needed. And indeed, it wasn't long before we got the 911 page. The other chaplain left while I finished documenting my shift on the computer.

I knew that when the other chaplain reached the ER, she would assess the situation, uncovering information about the patient and family. If the patient were alert, she might be needed in the trauma room, focusing on the emotional and spiritual state of the patient. When I have been involved with the trauma patient, I always try to pray, although sometimes I have only been able to pray from a distance. At times, I have held onto the patient's hand, or I have been present when the doctor explained what the CT scan revealed. In some instances, I have moved close to the patient and read from the Psalms, allowing the words of worship to soothe and strengthen. In fact, there are times when only Scripture seems to calm.

If the patient were not alert, the other chaplain's primary concern would be the family. The medical team would be trying to save the patient while she would be providing pastoral support. In addition to bringing prayer and empathy, she would focus on providing clarity — relaying information between the medical staff and family, helping to relieve some of the uncertainty. At times, letting the family know what is going on is the most redemptive thing that we can offer.

I exhaled, wondering how the trauma was unfolding. I moved back towards the window, but there was nothing to see but my faint reflection. The setting sun had already begun to turn the window into a mirror. I half-smiled, half-frowned. Over the last few months, I had grown weary of looking at myself, though I realized I had only begun. I knew that a large part of my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) would be finding out who I am. Not who I think I am or who I think I should be — but who I am when everything else is stripped away, when I am open and vulnerable like the patients on the examination table. Such exploration is not at all fun, but the question that chaplains are asked is a valid one. "How can you assist healing in others if you have not found healing yourself?"

Before I even entered the CPE program, I had to write a book about myself – or at least what seemed like a book. Then, during the interview process, I had to answer all kinds of questions. “Kevin, why do you want to help people? What is it that drives you? Why were you smiling just now? Kevin, how do you view women? You seem a little feisty; do you see yourself as an underdog?” Often, I was only able to muster a nervous laugh and say, “You think I’m a feisty underdog?”

I was taken aback by the whole experience. I had expected a typical interview, not psychoanalysis. However, I learned later that I was being tested to see if I were capable of rising above the pressures of trauma and grief and death. Every pause, every word and every facial expression was being used for assessment. Was I capable of serving as a hospital chaplain? Well, the director must have picked up on my shell shock because the interview ended with, “Is this something you still want to do?”

I nodded and said “yes,” although at that moment, I was only about 70 percent sure I was making the right decision. But I figured that 70 percent was greater than 30 percent. Besides, I knew I loved helping people and praying for them, and here was my chance to be a professional friend. I had always wanted to be a professional friend growing up. Some kids wanted to be a NBA basketball star or a rocket scientist, but I wanted to be a friend in the name of Jesus. Also, while I have found fulfillment in pastoring a church here in Waco, the church has not been able to provide a livable wage. So I realized that in order to stay in Waco long term, I needed an additional source of income. It seemed, then, the path towards chaplaincy was the best fit. It would even utilize my seminary degree.

As soon as the chaplain returned, though, I put myself aside. Her face already told me. “There’s been a death.”

I nodded, faced with a decision. I knew I was no longer on call, and I knew that the easiest thing would be to leave, choosing to read about the crisis later. But I needed to stay for this. I had shadowed chaplains when dealing with other traumas, but I was still new to such situations. It would be good for me to have a chance to minister alongside this chaplain as well.

As soon as we entered the ER waiting room, we were confronted by grief. We hadn’t been with the family but a few minutes before a woman nearly fainted. “Someone get a nurse!” Two men had to help her to a chair. “I’m OK,” she said, but of course she wasn’t. She could barely sit up. Other family members were crying, and others were outside, pacing back and forth in shock. “I want to see him,” a sister said. “When can we go in and see him?”

“Soon,” we promised.

When I approached the wife, her eyes were red and swollen from sobbing. “I’m sorry I have to ask you to sign anything now,” I said. “But signing this form allows the hospital to release your husband to the funeral home.” She nodded and took my pen, assuring me she understood. She signed for the release as well as the acceptance of her loved one’s personal items — a cell phone and a wallet. “Have you thought about a funeral home, yet?”

A brother shook his head “no.”

“It’s OK if you need some time,” I said. “But when you do decide, please call the hospital and ask to speak with a chaplain.”

We returned to the ER to call the Texas Organ Sharing Alliance (TOSA). We had to report the death as soon as possible, initiating the donor process. Understandably, some families do not want to even consider their loved one donating organs, but thousands and thousands of people are waiting for transplants everyday. I assure families that even if their loved one is approved as a potential donor, TOSA still must contact them. The next of kin makes the final decision, whether or not the deceased

had signed a donor card.

After we placed the call to TOSA, an ER nurse got my attention. “The family can come in and view the body now.”

We gathered the family together, and in a hushed procession, we moved behind the doors and around the nurse’s station. As we entered the room, we could see the body under the clean white sheet. Only the husband’s face was visible. The wife kept whispering in his ear, “I love you,” and one after another, family members broke down. As the lament grew, my heart ached for them. “I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said. The other chaplain and I stepped back, and for several minutes, we stood in the shadows, allowing the family to have a final moment.

I drove home that night in silence, running through the events in my head. The tragedy had been so disheartening. It had been excruciating. There were no answers to the questions of “why,” and yet, I had a sense that I was doing exactly what I was meant to do. The 30 percent uncertainty that I had felt during the interview was now gone. It’s ironic in some ways. When I had first entered Truett Seminary a few years earlier, I had checked “no” when asked whether I was considering chaplaincy. I had never seen myself anywhere near a hospital. But the path that I had taken — a path that God was unfolding before me — was a path that now included the nine floors of the hospital.

And as the wife and other family members were leaving the ER, several stopped and said, “Thank you.” It was not merely a polite thank you; it was tear-stained and genuine. As horrible and chaotic as the night was, I believe our lives touched each other, and I believe that God was in the midst of the touch, whispering that yes, he did still care and yes, he did still love them.

It was comforting to arrive home and be greeted by my wife’s smile. “I’m on the phone with Linda,” she said. Linda is one of our Chinese friends that we still keep up with after teaching English in China. “Here, she wants to talk to you. I was telling her how you’re training to be a chaplain.”

I was exhausted, and I really didn’t feel like talking on the phone, but I knew I should. And I’m glad I did because after I explained what being a chaplain meant, Linda surprised me. “So a chaplain is like an angel.”

I smiled, having never considered the comparison. It wouldn’t hold up in theological court, but it was an uplifting thought. “Maybe,” I said. “In some ways, anyway.”

Chaplains are simply people who want to make a difference. Besides, who ever heard of an angel tracking down Jello?

(Some details were changed due to confidentiality.)