

She That Showed Him Mercy

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I am a physician—a retired one now. I loved my work. It was what I always wanted to do, and I loved the people I cared for. I enjoyed taking care of them in all places and under all circumstances. In the hospital, I took care of them in the intensive care unit, the medical wards, and the office. I especially loved caring for them in their homes when they could no longer come to the office, or when they lived in a nursing home. It was required in my work to provide a bill for my service. I wished I didn't have to do that, but I had student loans to repay and a family to take care of, and so the bills went out. I often thought of the parable of the good Samaritan and how he had paid for the care of the man he rescued, who had been beaten and robbed and left on the roadside to die. No bill was ever sent. He paid for that man's care himself.

As a senior medical resident in 1982 at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, I was assigned to the medical emergency room on the morning shift. This hospital is a sixteen-story-high county hospital in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, with twelve hundred beds and five different emergency rooms. During this rotation, I became friends with a Black gentleman who I will simply call our “newspaperman.” I was told by others that he was homeless. He came to the ER early each morning with his newspapers in one of those canvas newspaper bags you never see anymore, the kind we had as kids on paper routes. It had a strap that went over the shoulder. Printed on the side in large black letters were the words “Atlanta, Journal and Constitution.” He wore tidy old clothes and shoes and had a greying short beard, curly white hair, distinctive round wire-rimmed glasses, and a wool golf cap turned slightly to the side. His

smile was wide and charming, and his morning greeting was warm, friendly, and worth far more than the cost of the paper. After his usual "good morning," he would stop for a few moments and say, "Doc, how are you today?" We would chat for a minute or two about myself, and I would ask how he was doing. His answer was always upbeat and positive. I would buy a paper, although I rarely had time to read it. Most everyone in the various ERs would do the same. His earnings were meager, though enough to buy his daily food. We always wondered where he slept at night. Rumors were that it was a shack, but this didn't seem to match with his clean but old clothes and friendly manner. After visiting our emergency room, he would go to the other emergency rooms in the hospital and finish selling his papers. This ritual was one of the nicest parts of a day that was otherwise filled with illness, suffering, and pain.

On one cold, rainy winter morning, nurses and secretaries were doing their usual triage work near the entrance of the emergency room. They would determine to which of the five ERs in the hospital the patients would be assigned and record their personal information and insurance. Suddenly, at about 8:00 a.m., one of the triage secretaries came running through the doors of the medical ER area calling for urgent help. There on the floor was our newspaperman, having a grand mal seizure. When he had collapsed, he had struck his head on the side of a chair, causing a laceration to his forehead that was bleeding profusely. Placing him on a stretcher, we held pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding and rushed him through the double doors and into the medical area where I was supervising that day. In order to stabilize him and get his seizure stopped, we had to urgently remove the newspaper bag, which had become soiled with blood. To facilitate this, we cut the strap. An oral airway was placed and oxygen started. Intravenous fluids and an anticonvulsant were given. The seizure stopped. Then the laceration on his forehead was cleaned, anesthetized, and sutured. He remained in a post-seizure unconscious state.

His soiled and bloodied clothes were removed and placed in a plastic bag under his stretcher. He was bathed and placed in a clean hospital gown and covered in warm blankets. Searching his clothes for his ID, we also found an empty bottle of seizure medication that he had probably intended to fill that day. X-rays of his head were normal, so we thought it was probably the lack of medication that had precipitated the seizure. He slept for over an hour and a half. His stretcher was placed next to the wall across from the nursing station for close observation. I also kept my eye on him from a distance as everyone in the ER did their work.

This story might have been routine except for one remarkable person—the triage secretary. She was a distinguished-looking middle-aged white woman dressed in hospital scrubs. She had someone cover her desk and came to be at his side. She discarded his newspapers, which were soiled with blood. Unbeknownst to us, she gathered his clothes and newspaper bag, took them to the hospital laundry, and told the workers there she needed them washed and dried quickly. Then she circulated envelopes to the various ERs of the hospital with a note explaining his illness and informing them that they would not be receiving newspapers that day.

The note said, “Our newspaper friend has had an accident this morning and his newspapers have been damaged. You will not receive one today. This is his daily income, and he needs this to buy food and medication. Please contribute what you would normally for the paper and place the money in the envelope. I will come by in an hour to collect the envelopes.”

Employees gave more than the cost of the paper that day. When the envelopes came back, she put the money in his clean newspaper bag, the strap of which she had sewn together by hand. She had also taken his empty prescription bottle of seizure medication to the pharmacy and paid for the refill herself. She picked up his clean clothes from the laundry and put them in the bag under his stretcher. He never knew that she had been there.

When he awakened, it seemed to him like nothing at all had happened. He couldn’t remember anything about the morning because of the seizure. He looked at his shoes, his clean clothes, his empty newspaper bag with money in the bottom, and a full bottle of seizure medication. It seemed like an otherwise normal morning to him. He was puzzled and went to get up, but a headache told him otherwise. We told him he had experienced a seizure and fallen and cut his head, but he was okay now. He finished getting up, dressed, slung his newspaper bag over his shoulder, and said, “Thanks for taking care of me. I’ll see y’all tomorrow.” I walked him out to the door. He walked right past the triage nurse as he left, unaware that this woman had done so much for him that day. She smiled at him, and he smiled back and said, “Have a good day.”

The Savior was once asked which commandment was the greatest or most important. We all know his answer: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength.” He then added that the second great commandment was like unto it: love “thy neighbour as thyself.” The questioner then asked, “And who is

my neighbour?" The Savior then gave an insightful answer in a story that we all remember, the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25–37).

On this winter day in the emergency room at Grady Hospital, most of us just did our job that day, but that triage nurse gave our newspaperman what she knew he needed most—mercy.

We have two hearts, a literal one and a metaphorical one. So often we just see the obvious as we do our jobs. Sometimes, what is also needed is obscured and must be sensed by our metaphorical heart. What the newspaperman obviously needed was medical care, but this good triage secretary knew he needed more than that. He needed clean clothes, medication, and money to buy food. He needed to wake up each morning with hope and the ability to survive another day in a world that is often cold and not as understanding as it should be. She was his friend, and he was her neighbor. She showed him mercy. Sometimes there are angels among us. That cold, rainy winter morning in Atlanta, I met one of them.

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