

I AM A PERSON:  
REFLECTIONS ON A HOSPITAL STAY

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I am astonished to find a world that is more glorious than ever, astonished by this life. I want it all. I want this day, these moments, this man in front of me, the black dog on the couch, asleep. I want the sound of the school bus pulling up in front of the neighbor's house and the sight of the pretty girl, Riley, stepping up, going off to her third-grade classroom. Last night, she pulled *Charlotte's Web* from my shelf, said "I saw this movie, can I borrow the book?" "You can keep it," I said. Riley could wander through the house, riffle through everything I own, want something. I would let her keep it.

On Wednesday morning, January 20<sup>th</sup>, the storm moved in with no fair warning. Even the calm before it I mistook for a recurring bout of vertigo. The mistake would cloud the picture and cost me dearly in wasted time, unnecessary tests, and suffering. It would confound all but the most competent and persistent of doctors. By noon I was sick and scared enough to call my family doctor. She told me to go to the emergency room. My husband, Kenny, was two hundred miles away. Riley's mother, Tara, took me to the emergency room. She stayed with me for six hours, reminded me to breathe, and later told me she would have stayed all night if Kenny hadn't come. Stripped to my bottom-line existence, I needed someone to stay with me. I would probably not refuse Tara's daughter, Riley, almost anything.

It mattered more than anything: I did not want to be alone. A nurse, too busy to sit and chat, sat and chatted anyway. When a friend came to visit, I tried to make interesting conversation to keep her with me. A headache woke me at four in the morning, signaling another storm. I called my husband, said, "Please come." He came and stayed, put his cool hand on my forehead.

I was unprepared for an illness that moved in with no fair warning, knocked me off my feet and landed me in the hospital. I was not ready for an illness of "unknown origin" that would raise questions only I could answer. I needed a doctor who listens. I needed to be heard and helped with good questions to say it better. I needed someone to acknowledge what I was not saying, that I was scared, that I did not want to die in the hospital, alone, in the night, that when I saw people carrying on in the normalcy of their ordinary, workaday lives, I wanted to be normal again, too. I wanted to shout, "I have things to do, too."

My last hospital stay had been thirty-seven years earlier – in Ethiopia – when I had given birth to the last of our four sons. I wanted people to know who I had been before I was this exiled, flat-on-my-back, moderately hysterical patient in a hospital bed. I had been a normal, healthy, active woman.

A friend died last summer. During a hospital stay, stretched out on her side on a treatment table, her back to the door, a doctor walked in and began to insert a drainage tube into her chest cavity. "Whoa! Wait a minute," she said. "I am Sue MacDonald. I am a wife and mother. I am working on my Ph.D. in public health. And who are you? Please come around so I can see your face. Tell me who you are." Before my friend died, she fought for her due.

I learned to fight, too. I argued with a doctor who was impaled on a vertigo diagnosis. The crystals in your ear that make you dizzy get bigger as you grow older," he said.

"It's not vertigo," I said.

"You don't have high blood pressure," he said.

"It's high for me," I said.

I never saw him again. I went to another hospital.

My husband, a doctor, prodded me. "Pay attention so you can describe exactly what is happening to you."

During the first attacks, I told people what I noticed, that I was dying, and please, won't you help me? By the third attack, I noticed I had lived through two attacks and so could begin to notice a few more things.

I said I was dizzy.

"Does the room spin when you sit up?" a doctor asked.

"No," I answered.

Someone used the word "light-headed." It helped.

Sometimes I had a headache but not every time. Sometimes I got hot, felt like I was burning up, but not always. A nurse who witnessed an episode said I turned white. My husband said I was flushed. Constants were that my blood pressure spiked, I felt lightheaded, too weak to lift my head off the pillow, couldn't eat, felt something was terribly wrong, was desperate for an answer, and scared to be alone.

Specialists examined me, posited what they believed was going on and ordered tests.

When the results were negative, most walked away, scratching their heads. One puzzled doctor said, "I'm going to do some research," and never returned. One doctor breezed in, breezed out, and with a wave of his hand, said, "Get out of here." He has a point. You can get a fatal infection in a hospital, the wrong medicine, over-radiated, and have an identity crisis. Don't count on a good night's sleep.

I stayed, waiting for an answer. I stayed because I was afraid to go home. My attending physician offered to discharge me. "Maybe the attacks will go away on their own," he said before he left for good. Another doctor, the only doctor who hung in there, said, "You can go home and be seen as an outpatient...these episodes will not kill you." This was the doctor who, in the midst of his work-up, paused, and asked the only question among hundreds I would remember: "You're scared, aren't you?" I went home the next day.

At home, I struggle to make sense. Life is too various and exciting to let a week – even (or especially) a week in a hospital – slip by as wasted and expendable. I do what I usually do when I am struggling to make sense. I head for my books. I wander into my

office, look at my books, and see, at a glance, that my interest in many of them has vanished. I wonder why. If there is no answer to my illness perhaps I will find answers to what the illness has meant to me in my choices over which books I get rid of and which I keep. I begin to pull books from the shelves, divide them into those I don't want any more and those I will keep. It becomes an intriguing, telling study. Before I heave a book from the first category into a box, I consider what it once meant to me. I wonder: What was it all about, the studying, exploring theological and philosophical questions? How has my decades-long search, digging through pages of logically-threaded arguments helped me gain practical wisdom and stamina for tough times – help, say, during an illness?

My parents were agnostics. My faith was challenged by loyalty to them. I still hear my father's voice in moments of doubt. I married a budding scientist and we both internalized the predominant Western "seeing is believing" mindset. We took in without question the split between the objective and subjective, fact and value, belief and truth, between the sciences and the humanities. He was a physician teaching and conducting research at a well-known California university. I was a stay-at-home Mom with an interest in literature. I needed good reasons for my faith. I was driven to ask "epistemological" questions even before I knew the word. What counts as a valid knowledge claim? How do I know belief in God isn't just wishful thinking? I searched books by writers who raised questions such as: Does God exist? If God is good and powerful, why so much suffering? Is there any hint that the material world is not all there is?

I sought answers in Christian apologetics, heeded the most popular apologist of them all, C.S. Lewis, whose faith, for a time, became mine by proxy. Returning to college and graduate school in my early forties, I continued to hope for a God who would show up on the pages of a philosophy book and in books on the science-religion debate. I hopped from stone to stone confident that – eventually, ultimately – I would find myself on firm ground. These books had kept me moving. Yet I no longer wanted many of them.

In the hospital, I scoured the face of every person who came into my room, hung on their every word, the man who came to replenish supplies, the woman who scrubbed the floor and emptied wastebaskets, those who drew blood, carried food trays in and out, made my bed, brought flowers. I wanted to know who they were, asked them where they lived, what tune they were humming, how long they had worked in this place, what the day was like outside these walls. My questions startled one woman who, once she began talking, revealed her belief that the harsh winter was a sign of End Times. “Jesus will be coming soon,” she said. I blossomed into an irrepressible extrovert, pressed people into engagement. I wanted people to be fully present. I wanted to be a person to them, not a patient.

I had collected nearly fifty books written by or about C.S. Lewis. In one of his books, writing in the third person, he takes up the age-old argument about the problem of pain. In another, using the personal pronoun “I,” he walks us through his own pain – his grief after the loss of his wife. I toss the first book into a box. I keep the second. I don’t want abstract ideas from those who inquire about God. I want writers who speak of their encounters with God and others. I want writers who bring spiritual realities into the everyday by way of the poignant and painful and grace-filled particularities of their lives. In one sitting, I re-read *Memories of God* by Roberta C. Bondi who points to a loving God by way of her story.

I keep books written by those who link knowing and loving God with knowing and loving the other – books by Martin Buber, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Annie Dillard, Gerald May, Brennan Manning, Elizabeth Johnson, John O’Donohue, and Richard Rohr. Bishop John Robinson points out that we sometimes treat people as things or as means to an end. We may seek to control or use or manipulate them. But, it is possible, for us to give ourselves to the other in a pure person-to-person, loving and trusting relationship. One of our greatest mistakes, Robinson claims, is that we have separated our relationship with God and our relationship with the one in front of us. When we give ourselves over in addressing the one in front of us, we are, at one and the

same time, addressing God. I hold on to Fran Ferder's *Words Made Flesh* in which she claims that "the search for human intimacy is deeply rooted in the search for the divine."

I became ill in the middle of a serious conversation with my husband. We met as teenagers, have known each other fifty-eight years, are not done working things through, and the biggest obstacle to what I long for – intimacy – is a pattern I have carried from little on up: withholding, the fear of the risk of saying what needs to be said. In the hospital, I lived through a nightmare of unpreparedness, a little like the one in which your plane is revved up ready to take off while you're still home packing – only much worse. I had left home without telling Kenny I loved him. I had more to say to him, more to hear from him. I wanted another chance. I wanted to go home again.

Eventually, five hundred books are packed up, ready to be carted off, to be donated to my alma mater. The last vestiges of the notion of a remote, distant God "up there" or "out there" or "above it all," sovereignly aloof, are gone, packed up, will soon be out the door.

I keep books written by Abraham Heschel and Elizabeth Johnson who, drawing upon Jewish Scriptures, offer the prophetic understanding of the biblical God of pathos, the suffering God who enters into a relationship of passionate participation with the world. I keep Dietrich Bonhoeffer who claims that only a suffering God can help and that the manner of God's suffering is to suffer as the fruit of love and of the infinite capacity for solidarity.

In the hospital, I thought of Jesus who, on the night before his crucifixion, in the face of his impending death, had asked his disciples to stay with him. I heard my room-mate, drowning in her own fluids, pleading with the nurse: "Please don't leave me."

In the ways patients are parented and scolded by some and dismissed by others, a hospital stay may become a nightmare of no small proportion. Just as between husbands and wives, parents and children, Democrats and Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians, for example, so also, between doctors and patients, there is need for a way of relating that is

mutual, fair and restorative. It is a given and not judgment to suggest that this kind of engagement between people – in and out of hospitals -- is rare. And it is made nearly impossible when patient and doctor collude, when a patient is desperate for answers and a doctor is reluctant to say, “I don’t know.” I could have made it easier for myself and for others if I had been able to say, “It’s okay if you don’t know, if you say you don’t know why my body is acting this way.” A good friend, a doctor who has suffered serious illness, been a patient himself, needs to remind those of us who hang our hopes too heavily on doctors, of the obvious: “Doctors are only human.”

My husband heaved a book once. He found me on a Sunday afternoon curled up behind a book, grabbed it, and hurled it across the room, said something like, “I am sick of seeing you behind the covers of a book.” Even after that, too often, that is how he has found me – behind the covers of a book. He must have given up. Perhaps it is another reason I shipped five hundred books out of here. I want to be ready to respond to Kenny’s footsteps in the hall outside my office door as signal that it is time to put the book down.

Recently a friend spoke of a meeting with a doctor that lasted only seven minutes. “He was present to me,” my friend said. Time is not the essential variable. Imagination is. “The imagination is capable of kindness that the mind lacks because it works naturally from the world of Between: it does not engage things in a cold, clear-cut way but always searches for the hidden worlds that wait at the edge of things.” I keep all of John O’Donohue’s books.

Two months later, there is still no definite answer though an endocrinologist says my thyroid was causing the storms. I would be relieved to have my thyroid be the answer.

In the meantime, I want to try to live out the rest of my days as nobly and purely as my dog, to pursue my calling as playfully and obediently as he chases after his ball. I want to live in love instead of indifference. I want to move beyond the passivity and reticence I learned early on. I want to muster the courage to risk taking the initiative to create

moments in which, by God's grace, I and the one in front of me know that we are standing on holy ground. In their book, *Truth, Trust, and Relationships*, Barbara Krasner and Austin Joyce put it this way: "Epiphany, awe, and grace are the ineffable manifestations of healing through meeting. They are the still, small voice now breaking into a passionate cry for uncorrupted connection."

Says Heschel, "How embarrassing for us to find that though we claim to have been created in the image of God we still claim that we can't see God."

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The long winter is over, the big one that broke us, the worst Philadelphia winter on record. I drive to Pennsylvania Hospital through streets narrowed by piles of snow. No matter how hard we push back, Nature has her say, shows up our limitations, in moments, our mortality. But today, the sun is out. It is sixty degrees. I walk through the hospital door and remember the last time I came through this door. I was on a stretcher. In the waiting room, people make eye contact and smile. The person next to me strikes up a conversation. There is nothing like a brutal winter to make one of the first good days more than a good day. I tell the lab technician I was in the hospital for a week in January. "You don't look like you were sick recently," she says. I don't feel like it either and I don't take feeling well for granted. I don't think I'll ever again take my good health for granted. It's like the weather. You never know.