

# Finding God in the Hospital

**Tatiana Bouteneff**

Last week I had a visit with a patient who had been in the hospital about ten days, I think, and hadn't been visited by a chaplain. I just wanted to check in. He was lying on his side, facing away from the door. I see God's hand in chaplaincy work so often, because so often the patient that I just happen to visit is the patient who, it turns out, really needs it.

So I came in and we started talking. It became evident that he really wanted a visit, or needed a visit, that he was really feeling alone and abandoned. He said, "You know, I don't even know why I'm here. I only drank two little shots—two little shots!—and they brought me in here and I've been here for ten days! That's crazy!"

A chaplain's role is absolutely never to judge. That can be hard work for the likes of me, but I have learned so much about letting go of judgment. So I'm listening to him, entering into his world, in order to hear how this feels to him, how he wants to share it. Another thing I've learned as a chaplain is how important it can be to refrain from talking. Sometimes the best response I can give is just to leave a silence, in which the patient can say something more if he or she wants to. It's a balance, because you don't want the silence to become uncomfortable. But sometimes silence can bring things to the next level.

So with this patient I left space for that silence and, when he started talking again, he went a little deeper. He touched on the fact that he used to drink a lot. I was curious whether he wanted to explore these issues further. In some situations, I feel I have established enough trust that I might ask a question directly; in other situations it's a matter of just opening the door, and letting it come out if it's going to come out and not if it's not. So I said, "I'm wondering whether you ever attended A.A.," to which he responded, "Oh, I was in N.A. for decades!"—referring to Narcotics Anonymous. "And it did help," he said.

Before long he is telling me, from the heart and with some emotion, "I was a junkie for 20 years. You can't imagine what it's like to wake up every morning and the first thing and the only thing on your mind is how you're going to get some dope." This is a man who doesn't fit preconceived notions—my preconceived notion, anyway—of what a junkie should look like. But now he's shared it. He has been generous and trusting enough simply to tell me. He's not very articulate, but he's saying all this so vividly, and I can tell that it's important for him to be sharing. As we talk more, he starts really sinking into what a nightmare his life has been for decades: that he was on heroin for so long and quit, he'd been on methadone and quit, he'd

had binges of drinking. He alludes to family issues too.

As he spoke, it seemed as though for him this was his entire reality. I began to feel that it might be helpful for him to dip into another aspect of his life, if that's where he can go or wants to go. So I asked him, "What if you think back, way back, before the drugs, before the alcohol, do you have memories that it gives you pleasure to look back on?" He paused, and then he said, "Well, I was raised on a farm, and what I liked most of all was the outdoors. You know, the sounds of the outdoors, the water running in the river, the leaves on the trees." Right in front of me, he became a poet! And then he said, "My grandpa lived with us, and what I loved most of all was going fishing with my grandpa."

I had a sense, from the way his face, body language, and tone of voice shifted as he spoke, that he was glad to be remembering this. He seemed to soften to it. The nightmare continued for him now, you know. But he had dipped in at least temporarily to a part of his life that, chances are good, he maybe hadn't remembered in ages—this life he had before the nightmare began.

You'll notice we never really got into God. We never got into faith, because

what he needed at that moment was the emotional support. And yet, in my opinion, it was a spiritual visit. It had been a pretty long visit so I began to shift to bring it to a close. As I was leaving he thanked me a couple of times, and said, "That was very insightful." The next time I'm in the hospital I'm going to stop in and see how he's doing.

That's an example of a recent visit. Each visit is utterly unique.

If I sum up what happens in my patient visits as a chaplain, it's a pretty sacred thing. God is the presence that makes the difference. I come as a person who truly cares about this patient, who listens deeply—with that as a starting point. And it might sound corny, but I can truly say that I love each patient as the visit continues. Fr. Richard Rohr, a Catholic priest very interested in contemplative spirituality, said on a podcast I heard the other day, "Anybody who comes in contact with a truly vulnerable person cannot help but be affected or changed." That put into words one of the things I feel so, so grateful for, in what I do as a chaplain. I am blessed to be very affected, to really love each person, because that person is giving me the huge gift of sharing his or her vulnerability. It can't help but affect me, change me. It allows me to see God in that person. ✱

© 2017 THE WHEEL.  
May be distributed for  
noncommercial use.  
[www.wheeljournal.com](http://www.wheeljournal.com)



After some 35 years as a teacher and school administrator, *Tatiana Bouteneff* graduated from this career to a calling. She trained as a hospital chaplain, completing her clinical pastoral education at two different hospitals, and was commissioned by the Orthodox Church in America in June 2015.