All You Need to Know

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The well-worn hospital blanket draped over his shoulders gave him a Ghandi-like look.

“Everything that is, is; and everything that is not, is not,” was his opening gambit.

He looked me straight in the eye, commanding my attention. Though I couldn’t always follow his muttered words, his eyes compelled me to listen closely, telling me that he was no fool, that there was wisdom here if only I could hear it. This was not the first time that I heard profound wisdom in the midst of what appeared to be ramblings of madness.

“I am part of you, and you are part of me. We’re all connected. That’s all there is. That’s all you need to know.”

Sometimes angels—those bold messengers of God—are hard to recognize.

THE WOMAN I WILL CALL CLARA had been in the hospital for close to two months. The first time I saw her, she was hooked up to multiple IV lines and on a vent. Her eyes held an unbelievable look of terror. When I took her hand, she squeezed back as if that was all that stood between her and the terror that threatened to overwhelm her.

On this day, she actually was sitting in a chair though still tethered to the IV and vent. Her hands were cold as ice. Her swollen legs had an artificial yellow color. Someone had tied her hair into a small ponytail using surgical gauze.

“Hi Clara. Do you remember me? I’m the chaplain here at the hospital.” My words seemed as ridiculous as her hairdo.

Does she even know where she is or what’s happening to her? Does she know what day it is, or how long she’s been here? Does any of that matter to her? What happens to the flow of time when one is struggling for life?

The presence of chairs in a room speaks loudly. When I see several chairs bunched together, I know there have been visitors. There were no chairs in Clara’s room, which seemed to emphasize the loneliness, the lack of human presence in her circumscribed world. I retrieved a chair from another room, sat down next to her and reached for her hand.

The radio was playing. I sang along for a while, grateful for the distraction from the silence of the ICU—a “silence” that made the beep of the monitors, the whooshing of the vent and the gurgling of water through the tubes that much louder. This had been her world for nearly two months. Had these noises all faded into the background by now?
Clara slumped to one side, leaning toward me. I stroked her hand, murmuring a few words now and then—sometimes reassuring her that she was in good hands, sometimes acknowledging how hard it must be for her, sometimes reflecting that she was making progress, asking her to hold on a little while longer.

In response, she turned to me with the terror-filled expression that I knew so well. Then slowly her look changed to reflect sadness, extreme exhaustion, perhaps pain. She closed her eyes.

"Clara," I asked, "Can you feel my hand holding yours? She opened her eyes again and stared at me. Slowly and deliberately she nodded. I smiled at her. We sat that way for a long time.

I was the mother at the side of her sick child. At the same time, I was the daughter, longing to bring comfort to her mother. There, in that ICU room, Clara was Jesus in miserable disguise and I, the servant. In that lonely room that didn’t even have a chair, I sought for something to offer this child of God.

"In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will also live. On that day you will know that I am in my father, and you in me, and I in you.” (John 14:18-20 NRSV)

I am part of you, and you are part of me. That’s all you need to know. ♦