

A Patient's Vow to Improve Himself

Category: A Fresh Start

written by Marilyn Barton | January 29, 2019

A middle-aged man, holding a cloth bag, stood in the doorway to my intensive care unit. In a soft voice, he said, "Umm, I was a patient here a couple of months ago. Remember me?"

I did indeed recognize him, and a number of scenes flashed through my mind. Of a forty-five year old patient, lying motionless on the hospital bed, still under general anesthesia after emergency heart surgery. Of the ventilator breathing for him. Of overhead warming lights slowly bringing his body temperature back up to normal. Of his blood pressure spiking high then dipping low. Of lethal ventricular arrhythmias appearing on the monitor and of the heart surgeon's and the nurses' feverish efforts to correct them. Of lots of IV medications. Of his chest tube cylinders filling up with uncontrolled bleeding. Of wide-open infusions of IV fluids, protein solutions, and the patient's own cell savers to build up his blood volume. Of still more plasma and blood products going in. Of talk about taking the patient back to the operating room. Of the worried look on his wife's face as I told her, "Sorry, you can't come back for visiting hours. Your husband's not stable yet."

"Sure, how are you?" I responded. "You look good."

Yes, I remember you. We almost lost you several times.

He smiled. "I'm well. The doctor said y'all worked hard on me that night."

Then he lowered his head and blurted out, "Before my heart attack I was so mean. I needed to change, to do better."

His statement intrigued me, as most people say more self-focused things like "I'm going to take better care of myself, stop smoking, lose weight, exercise more. . ."

Handing me the bag, he continued, "I made these for y'all nurses."

Before I could respond, he disappeared down the hall.

Inside the bag were handcrafted, wood-framed Christmas ornaments, each a different design. On the back were his initials and the year.

For over thirty years now, whenever I place his small wreath ornament on my Christmas tree, I remember the patient who saw a silver lining in his heart attack and made a fresh start in life.

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