

A Bathroom without Soap

Category: Loss

written by Neeta Nayak | July 2, 2025

“Life without hope is like a bathroom without soap,” our mathematics teacher Mr. R—who often lapsed into unexpected philosophical musings—said aloud to a class of seventh graders.

The class of twelve-year-olds burst into giggles, finding it funny.

It took me a decade to realize the profoundness of the loss embedded in that statement.

The final intern year of medical school in India is chock-full of intense, unforgettable experiences. Infectious diseases were so common that we treated them without alarm or discomfort—until an unusually high number of patients began arriving from a particular village, all presenting with diarrhea. A trickle became a deluge. Within twenty-four to forty-eight hours, hundreds of patients overwhelmed a ward meant to hold half that number.

Beds were overrun, and we laid severely dehydrated, hypotensive patients on floor mattresses or sheets—many too weak to stand or sit. My fellow intern and I struggled to start IV lines on collapsed veins using blunt needles that had long seen better days. We administered IV fluids and Tetracycline, running out faster than they could be replenished.

Among the many preventable deaths that week was a big-built, sturdy thirty-two-year-old man, the sole breadwinner of his family. His young, hopeful wife stood outside, holding their tearful two-year-old daughter, praying desperately. It fell upon this inexperienced intern to break the news of his death. As I hesitantly spoke, she dropped the baby, the color draining from her face, collapsing to the ground in uncontrollable, loud sobs: “Why him, God? Why didn’t you take me instead?”

Hope was replaced by devastating loss in a matter of minutes.

As I reflected on the tragic loss meted out by this epidemic, I oddly remembered soap and hope.

If only handwashing with soap and proper hygiene were accessible, if only every bathroom had something as simple as a bar of soap! There would’ve been hope to prevent this deadly gram-negative, facultative anaerobic comma-shaped bacterial infection.

The unfortunate young man would’ve been spared his life, and so would his wife and child.

Mr. R’s words had literally come true—but in a surreal, unintentional, contrarian manner.

“A bathroom without soap leads to loss of life (or rather a life of loss)”

without hope.”

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