

On Duty and Delight by Erin Dunigan 12-4-19

“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

—Howard Thurman



It was summer. The last place I wanted to be, if I admitted it, was in the hospital. But that is where I found myself, not by choice. The good news was, I wasn’t there as a patient.

A summer chaplaincy internship was one of the requirements for my graduate program and since I had avoided it the summer before by taking Greek, if that gives you any indication of how much I wanted to avoid the summer hospital chaplaincy. I had heard horror stories about it from others who had gone before me – dealing with intensely traumatic situations, screaming family members, fear, grief, anxiety, anger – none of which said ‘summer’ to me.

But there I was, in the hospital on a bright sunny Southern California day. My ‘job’ was to cover the third floor, knocking on doors and asking the patients something along the lines of ‘how are your spirits today?’ Kind of like the people who come knocking on your front door selling their God or religion or their politics – except these poor people were confined to hospital beds and couldn’t pretend not to be home. It was awful. What made it worse was that when I introduced myself as the chaplain many people assumed that the chaplain visit could only mean one thing – they were dying – and so panicked. It was awful.

So, on this particular sunny summer day, I made an executive decision. I would ditch. Not completely, as I needed the internship credits and couldn’t justify leaving the hospital. But I would ditch my door to door work on the third floor and head down to the hospital lobby where I knew there to be a coffee cart. An ice blended mocha sounded like the perfect solution to my predicament.

With my deliciously chilly ice blended mocha in hand, I looked for a place in the lobby to sit down. “If I sit down and talk to someone, then I can justify ditching in case my supervisor walks by,” I thought. I know, not the best of motives, but alas.

So, I spotted an older woman sitting alone and went to sit near her. She too was drinking something and we struck up a conversation. She was a delight. As it happened, she was there waiting for her husband, the patient, to have some tests. We chatted about life. When she asked what I was doing there I explained that I was working as a summer chaplain. "Oh, I hate chaplains," she responded, not intending any ill will toward me, just stating her obvious opinion. We continued chatting. As we neared the end of our drinks she said, "Why don't you come with me to visit my husband – I'm sure he'd love the visit." I was dumfounded, but agreed. We walked down the hallways on the first floor until we came to his room, where she introduced me to him and I sat down. About an hour later a nurse came in to do some more tests and so I took my leave. "Please come back and visit again tomorrow if you'd like," he said as I was leaving.

Again, I was dumfounded. What had just happened? A woman and her husband who 'didn't like chaplains' and 'weren't at all interested in religion, church, or religious people' had just asked the Presbyterian chaplain to come back for another visit. But more than that, the Presbyterian chaplain (me) who didn't want anything to do with cold calling people in their hospital beds had not only just had a delightful 'chaplain' interaction, but was agreeing, willingly, to go back for more the next day. What I thought had been cheating – going to get an ice blended mocha instead of dutifully fulfilling my assignment – had actually turned into the most life giving interaction I had had all summer. I had viewed my responsibility as one of duty and drudgery.

But the real magic happened when delight snuck in the back door.