

Da Boise on East 8

Lessons From the Chicken Soup Group Are as Valuable Today as They Were Over 30 Years Ago



By Faith T. Fitzgerald, MD
ffitzgerald@ucdavis.edu

I came to the University of California, Davis Medical School in Sacramento in the early 1980s, a time when cases of AIDS were multiplying rapidly, largely in gay men. Most of our infectious disease faculty wanted nothing to do with them, fearing that care demands would escalate, distracting them from their current research and swamping their clinics. There were only two internists in all of Sacramento who accepted AIDS patients into their private practices.

The number of men presenting to our ER with life-threatening pneumocystis pneumonia, Kaposi's sarcoma, and "slim disease"—profound weight loss—steadily rose.

One member of our infectious disease group, Dr. Neil Flynn, went into action. He ceaselessly begged, then demanded, that an AIDS ward be created. He made such a fuss that it actually happened.

It was a small victory: four two-bed rooms at the far end of a corridor in the oldest part of the "old hospital," a ward called East 8. The patients in these beds were in isolation; all their nurses, residents, students, and attendings had to be volunteers.

I noticed early on that almost none of our patients' families or friends came to see them. They'd been abandoned, it seemed, perhaps due to fear... or shame.

One day I was standing in a corridor of East 8, talking with my team, when I heard a gravelly voice behind me say "Where's da boise?"

I turned to face a woman who looked to be in her late 60s, with gray hair, a bulky purse hanging from her left elbow, and a very large styrofoam cup with a lid on it in her right hand. Behind her were three other women, all with purses and styrofoam cups, and all about the same age as the speaker.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I said. "I don't think we have anyone here named Daboise." She shook her head.

"We want to see da boise. You know... da ones with da terrible sickness."

These women had heard that our AIDS patients on East 8 had few visitors. So, as members of the local synagogue's "Chicken Soup Group" they had made and brought soup (as a medicinal) along with purses stuffed with books, puzzles, games, and decks of cards as gifts for "the boys" who agreed to see them.

They came regularly, always with chicken soup in hand and purses akimbo, and brought with them yet one more precious gift: They spent time with these men, told them stories, held their hands, fed them soup, listened to them, and mourned them when they died. It was, from these women, all holocaust survivors, the gift of empathy.

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In 1978 NBC produced a TV miniseries on the holocaust, and I am told that TV magazine reporters went to Germany during the filming to ask the still living percipient witnesses of the Nazi period why they did not protest. The majority of interviewees said, "We did not know."

Of those who admitted that they did know about the slaughter of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and the "unfit" (all of whom the Nazis called "untermenschen," or "subhumans") most of those interviewed answered: "You don't understand. The Gestapo and SS were everywhere. They had the guns.

"They were killing people. They could have killed me and my family. What could I do?"

Then the reporters interviewed some of the remaining rescuers (now called the righteous) who, at great

risk, hid or led out of danger these targets of Nazi “cleansing,” and they said: “You don’t understand. The Gestapo and SS were everywhere. They had the guns. They were killing people. They could have killed

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Exactly the same answer, but a totally different moral imperative. These righteous were men and women who simply could not deny that the “others” were fully human, like them.

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standing. It is, rather, knowing of someone’s suffering, an inescapable awareness that “it could be me.” Because of that shared humanness, the rescuers were compelled to help. Medical school admissions committees assay applicants for grades, test scores, and activities. We must—and many do—add evidence of empathy as a prerequisite for those chosen to be selected, just as the Chicken Soup Group showed “da boise.”

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916-783-6554 . 877-792-3667
pattyestopinal.com | pestopinal@rwbaird.com

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