Healing

Why do hospital rooms have that look of trying to be homey and comfortable yet carry the smell of fear and discomfort? A tray of uneaten food lays on the portable table. A water jug sits half full or half empty waiting to be needed.

Her student, John, laid on the bed sleeping in what could be called a fetal position except for his arm protruding with IV lines for fluid.

She looked at him quietly. This is not what she expected. She had stopped at Target on the way over and bought a kit of plastic balls and scoops. She had hoped to play a gentle and fun game. John was always a playful student. She was his school counselor and knew him as a quick witted, vibrant, and engaging student. John knew what was expected of him in his classes and, most of the time, knew the answers.

Now this was John, sleeping in a hospital bed in a room with pictures of nature on the wall. The pictures were a hope to distract him in his fight over cancer at the age of seventeen.

Softly she said, “Graduation is just around the corner, John. Hang in there.”

She stood frozen looking at him. She didn’t play; she reflected. Here she stood, a middle-aged woman, whose job it was to make things better for her students, in a hospital room with a young man fighting for his life. His challenge on one side of the coin, hers on the other.

‘How strange,’ she thought. ‘I was in a hospital room when I was seventeen holding Mom’s hand as she was dying. It feels like yesterday.’

Her inner voice began to ask questions. ‘Did I even have a clue where that was going to take me? How did I see my future? Did I see beyond the tears and fears?’ She stood wondering where John was going. How was he planning for his future? Was he even thinking he had a future?

A memory flashed in her mind of a woman reaching out to her at her mother’s funeral. I lost my mother when I was seventeen, the woman said. She remembered others mumbling expressions of sympathy that became lost and meaningless over time. The memory of the unknown woman’s simple statement became a part of her being.

She could not take her eyes off John. Maybe her presence would give him some strength to keep pressing on.

Thoughts of other students began to cross her mind. Students who complained about their teachers, what was expected of them, or their homework. ‘Hmm, I bet there are kids who wish they had those kinds of problems.’

Then Mary came to mind. Mary who was also a senior in high school, broke down in her office one day revealing her mother had died. She didn’t tell Mary that her mother had also died. She listened to Mary and gently shared how losing someone important at an early age leads to uncomfortable situations.

“People give a lot of attention at first but then later they seem to be distant, afraid to bring up sad feelings. They don’t seem to know what to say.”

“Some people look at you with sad eyes and then find a reason to move away.”

“Sometimes you feel like you are now known as Mary who lost her mother instead of Mary, my friend in Biology class.”

“Some may not recognize the need for laughter as a healing moment, but laughter belongs in sad times as well as good times.”

Mary sighed. “How do you know? That is so right with on with me.”

“Mary, every person has their shadow.”

While Mary was surprised her counselor knew these things. As her counselor she wasn’t. Her job was to go beyond the statement of ‘I was there too’. She believed she went through her story to help her students navigate their stories. She knew stories are the foundation for understanding the present. What is learned from stories is what is needed to be passed on.

With all these thoughts in her mind, she watched John as he lay motionless except for his rhythmic breathing. She held the scoop ball toy like it was a saintly beacon of hope and placed it on the foot of his bed. Her hope had been that he would play and give her that full blown smile of laughter. She had hoped they would have broken the hospital rules by tossing plastic balls in the air across to each other and truly make the hospital room feel homey.

Instead, she gently touched his feet. “Your story is not over, John.” She quietly reassured him. “There will be another day when we will play. I’ll see you at graduation.”