

This is a pastoral care story about a 40 year old man named John, whom I first saw as a Chaplain in a civilian hospital Emergency Room. John was being admitted for severe tremors from alcohol withdrawal and feeling suicidal. He was using alcohol to deaden the pain of his frequent battles with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from his combat experiences. I visited with permission and respect: I introduced myself, offered my hand, made good eye contact, asked his okay to meet with him and sat at eye level. John shared he is an Iraq War II combat veteran. His military identity seemed important to him. I thanked him for his service to our country and addressed him as “Sergeant.”

As John began to cry, he grasped my hand firmly and told of being a helicopter pilot one day that was shot down, having taken a rocket propelled grenade in the tail. He struggled to bring the bird in for a crash landing. In the aftermath, he lost 2 of the 6 men on board. Since then, he had been blaming himself, unable to understand “Why I lost 2 of my men,” and slowly killing himself with alcohol. John shared he was the best and most experienced copter pilot in his unit. I leaned forward as he concluded, “What about the wives and kids of those 2 soldiers who never saw their men come home because I couldn’t save them?”

John’s misplaced but very real sense of overwhelming guilt was compounded by a deep misapplication of his abiding Christian Catholic Faith, bringing him no solace in spite of past receiving of The Sacraments and pastoral counseling. His life was riddled with, “Why GOD?” and “Why not me?” Since then, he had drifted away from The Church. As I listened attentively, I reflected back the events and feelings he shared with me so intensely, affirming where he was. He knew he had been heard. As I did so, I recalled PSALM23:1, “The LORD is my Shepherd” and MATTHEW 11:28, “Come unto Me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

I saw John doing something that I had done for so many years in my own life, scourging my own soul daily for 100% of the blame for a failed relationship that I owned no more than 50% of. For years I had despaired of receiving GOD’s Grace and Mercy, in spite of receiving The Sacrament of Reconciliation and much love & fellowship within The Church. Like this brother before me now, I had insisted in placing – and keeping - myself on The Cross on Which The Savior died and refusing to come down at The Victory of The Empty Tomb. I connected with John’s relentless self-punishment where the familiar pain of loss becomes the only narrative, refusing to take GOD’s hand to emerge from the darkness of denial-anger-bargaining-sadness into the acceptance of His Light of healing.

But how to help him find Peace beyond *being present* with him and providing *pastoral listening*? Could John’s search for meaning of his story somehow be *reframed*? And then it came to me. I shared the following with my suffering brother: “**First**, I hear and affirm your feelings of guilt for the deaths of those 2 soldiers, but I say it is a misplaced guilt. **Second**, you did not kill those 2 soldiers in that crash. The enemy on the battlefield did. **Third**, you yourself said you did the best you could in that combat experience. You did your duty honorably to the fullest. **Fourth**, I say that GOD put you on that copter that day as the pilot because no one else could do in those moments what you did. GOD used you to *save* 4 lives that would otherwise have been lost, including your own. By your own admission, no other pilot in your unit could have landed that copter as well as you did. **Fifth**, the *enemy* took 2 lives on that copter that day, but *you* saved 4 lives. My brother John, it’s time to come down from The Cross.”

A light turned on in John that I could see suddenly shining through his eyes! He had never thought of that day in this new way. It suddenly dawned on him that The Hand of Providence put him in that copter’s pilot seat that day to save 4 human lives. He himself was GOD’s instrument to save 4 lives in that crash, including his own. The Sergeant was able to verbalize this insight as his tears abated. A Peace that passes all understanding came over his face for the first time since that day.

And then John asked me to *pray* with him. We prayed together around *The Scriptures* of PSALM23:1 and MATTHEW 11:28, “Lord JESUS CHRIST, GOD The Father sends You to be our eternal *Good Shepherd*. You call us to rest humbly to Your very side at all times, especially when we are burdened and heavy laden, that You would lift us up and bring us to Your Peace. Lord, we thank you for being with Sergeant John that day in battle, as you always have been and always will be. We thank You for using him as the pilot of that helicopter that day to save the lives of 4 soldiers, including his own. We pray also for the souls and families of those 2 soldiers who died at the hands of the battlefield enemy that day. We ask You to pour forth The HOLY SPIRIT upon our brother, that The Light of Your face would shine upon him, bringing him *healing and peace*.”

I then remained silent to give the Sergeant the space to pray if and as he wished. John was able to thank GOD that He placed him in that copter’s pilot seat that day. And though he wished all 6 soldiers had lived that day, John was able to thank GOD for the 4 lives saved that day, including his own. He prayed for the families of the 4 soldiers who lived, including his own, who received their loved ones back alive from that War. He was able to pray for the 2 soldiers who perished that day, and their families. And then John prayed for me.

I was aware of decentering. I marveled that GOD used me for a time as this man’s Chaplain, that He was already Present and that He would send others to help as breakers of aloneness. The Sergeant gave me permission to have our hospital Priest follow up with him that day to offer The Sacraments and spiritual direction. I gave him referrals to a Veteran’s Administration counseling service, a local veterans fellowship, our hospital grief support group and a Catholic Parish in his area.

I was aware too of a balance between distancing and empathizing. Although I didn’t share my own story in detail with John, I did share generally of my own profound woundedness and healing. This enabled a deep connection of shared common experience between us that allowed me to feel with the Sergeant in a mutual nonjudgmental vulnerability. This invited John to feel safe to share with me most deeply, but prevented me from being neutralized as the pastoral caregiver by becoming overwhelmed myself.

I was profoundly aware of this process, as was John, made possible by The Presence of The Lord. The assurance of my own healing I had received from GOD and through The Church as a “Wounded Healer” helped renew John’s Faith that Hope in Divine Love would bring him healing as well. As I closed the visit, both of us together rested in Thanksgiving (Eucharistos) as we grasped hands. But for The Grace of GOD go I. We both had come down from The Cross!