

# Grief and Grace – Two Memorable Patient Encounters

By Dr Tan Su-Ming

## Grief

“How are you today, Mrs Toughie?” I leaned forward till our knees almost touched. Mrs Toughie sat in her wheelchair and was a little deaf, so I always tried to let her read my lips whenever she came to see me.

“My eyes hurt,” she wept.

A closer look showed that she had an abscess on one of her eyelids. “This is easy to fix,” I smiled, and patted her hands reassuringly. “There is no need to cry.”

This was unlike Mrs Toughie, who was usually very stoic. She continued to cry, as her daughter stared vacantly into the distance when I looked to her for clues to her mother’s emotional lability.

“How long have you had this?” I asked.

“One week,” she replied.

“Why did you wait so long before coming?” I queried, as I started writing her prescription.

At this point she began to wail, and I was frankly quite taken aback. I pieced it together later that Mrs Toughie had been trying in vain to get any of her ten children to bring her to the doctor since a week ago. No one could spare her the time of day. Finally, after a week, with the abscess festering, child number 5 did.

Those tears rolling down her face were not tears of physical pain, but that of heartbreak.

## Grace

Not long ago a deaf and mute man was brought to see me. Fixing me with frightened eyes, he made whimpering sounds. He was about 60, small and slight, with beard and hair as white as snow. He had been carried in by a young Chinese national and was accompanied by a tall, handsome Indian woman.

I soon figured out who each person was. The Indian woman, Shanti, ran a bryani restaurant. The old chap, Ram, was a waiter in her eatery, and the Chinese national, Ming, was the dishwasher.

I tried to get a history from Ram’s boss Shanti, who had taken him in a long time ago, providing Ram with a job, food and board, after his family had abandoned him. She wasn’t able to tell me much about his current condition, besides finding him crying, beating his chest and holding his head that morning.

I looked into Ram’s tearful face, and realised that even if I spoke Tamil, we would still be unable to communicate with each other, as he could neither speak nor hear.

“Please help me out,” I prayed silently. “I won’t take any credit, God.”

After carefully examining Ram, and trying to make some educated guesses based on whatever other history present or past that I could glean from Shanti, I finally made my diagnosis and prescribed him some treatment. I told Shanti I would call her the next day to check on Ram’s progress.

The motley crew of three then left my room, Ming gently carrying Ram, while Shanti went to settle the bill.

Had I just been a witness to Grace? Grace and kindness shown by Shanti the Good Samaritan, to Ram, whom I honestly didn’t think could really work as a waiter? And Grace and kindness bestowed from the divine on me, on a day when I needed a little divine help and wisdom, whether I deserved it or not, after I uttered what I deemed my “non-influential” prayers (as I have long stopped going to church and am no longer of any religious persuasion).

Some days I feel as if I have grown hardened by the sad things I witness in my patients’ lives, and the inhumanity of humankind that I read about in the news every day. But then, there are days like this, when I feel that there is still much hope and goodness in this world. ■



*Dr Tan Su-Ming graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1990. She is married with a daughter and runs her own general practice.*