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A Different Question

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A Different Question



▲ INGRID WEISS SLIKKERS

MY COLLEGE SON WAS IN THE HOSPITAL. HE HAD EXPERIENCED A SPONTANEOUS PNEUMOTHORAX, RISK FACTORS BEING MALE, YOUNG, TALL AND THIN, ALL CRITERIA THAT HE FIT COMPLETELY. DUE TO COMPLICATIONS SURFACING FROM INSERTED CHEST TUBES, HIS HOSPITAL STAY WAS EXTENDED.

One morning, upon my arrival, my son happened to comment to me that his nurse for that day “wasn’t very nice.” As I inquired, he stated that it was not about a lack of medical care but more about her general responses. After some college friends came to visit and left, he reported that they had commented “what’s wrong with her?” because she seemed rude. Wanting to gently guide, especially knowing he is beginning his training to be a mental health therapist, I gently said, “We need to remember to ask a different question.”

Trauma theory urges that many of the behavioral symptoms we see in individuals are a direct result of coping with adverse experiences that have occurred or are occurring. The trauma aware perspective moves us from “what’s wrong with that person?” to “what’s happened to that person?”*

Over the next couple of days, whenever present, I tried to talk with this nurse more intentionally. On the following afternoon, it was just my son and me in the hospital room when she came in. Again, I attempted to connect with her further and this time she slowed a bit and engaged. As the general conversation moved from pets, to kids, to living locations, she looked down, and remarked in a subdued way that she might have to move. “About

two months ago my husband of 15 years, out of the blue, told me he wants a divorce and now he’s moved in with someone who is young enough to be his daughter.”

She paused, obviously pushing back tears, “I’m sorry ... it’s only been in the last few days that I haven’t had to stop in the bathroom as I got off the elevator before my shift to get myself together because I’ve been sobbing so hard the whole drive to work after dropping my kids off.” The story poured out even as her pager rang and she called the nurse technician to cover, stating she was already in a room with a patient.

We were able to talk about community and not going through anything alone. I mentioned the cross necklace she wore, and we discussed faith momentarily. Then the conversation had to end due to another patient with a pressing need. As she hurriedly left the room, my son met my eyes and nodded a few times. No words were needed.

If that precious nurse happens to be reading this piece, know that you are brave and courageous, that you are prayed for as this is written, that we heard and saw you in those brief moments in a hospital room and you touched our lives by being willing to share a part of your story—once again reminding us of our need to pause and ask a different question of each other. ■

*For more information go to: thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model/

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