

## A Nurse's Journey - Good Friday 2021

If you'd told me a year ago that I'd be here, I'd have said you were crazy.

Mind, I'd have been too busy to listen. Day after day, the ordeal continued. Up at 5:30. Quick breakfast before grabbing my bag and driving to the Infirmary. Up in the lift to the converted theatre fitted out to serve as a temporary ICU. Wash hands. A quick briefing from our consultant. Another three removed overnight to the mortuary, only to be replaced by freshly admitted patients, all critically ill. We looked at each other and shuddered. Then, the routine of kitting up in our stifling surgical gowns; double gloves, masks, face shields. Another demanding 12 hour shift, caring as best I could whilst trussed up like a mummy. All my instincts fought against my confinement within my bubble, as I watched each heartbreaking struggle for survival unfold. I longed to reach out to them, to hug them...

As a healthcare professional, my training was to get on with the job. I'd be monitoring bodily functions, connecting tubes, adjusting doses to optimise each man or woman's chance of making it through. But it was the terror in their eyes that I hated the most. Realising you couldn't breathe was scary enough. But nothing as bad as anticipating the approach of the Grim Reaper.

What was amazing was the way some patients 'got to you' despite the barriers. Randall was a West Indian in his late fifties, one of several bus drivers who'd caught Covid 19 before masks for bus passengers became compulsory. It was on the day we turned him onto his stomach that I realised how unusual he was. Randall was frightened, yes. But despite this, he was overwhelmingly grateful to us for caring for him. And as the days passed into weeks, we became fond of each other. Every evening I called Marjorie, his wife, and was touched by the warmth and gratitude that shone through their fear and distress. He was frightened, but not like other men – he was prepared to die. In the deepest sense, he was at rest. And I found myself drawn into that same rest. It even helped me cope with my other patients.

As it became clear that Randall was losing his fight, Marjorie pleaded with me to let her come to see him. It took all my persuasive skills to convince our consultant that it was worth the effort. I stayed

after my shift had finished and was just beginning to kit Marjorie up as if she was a nurse, when she produced a small bottle.

“You what?? Seriously, you’re asking me if you can anoint him with oil?” I couldn’t believe it when she explained this quaint custom that came from the letter of James in the New Testament, to heal the sick man. Yes, we do this every week in church, she replied. Well, not here, my lady!

In the end we found a way to pour a little oil onto Randall’s head. I watched as a peaceful smile spread over his face. Even in such unlikely circumstances, you could feel the chemistry between them. I wept. Of course, the oil didn’t work. Randall died on Easter Day, two days later. It brought back memories of my 25-year-old aunt Sarah whom I had idolised. Sarah fell awkwardly off her horse whilst jumping and ended up in a coma. I prayed and prayed, but my nine-year-old hopes were in vain. She died. So much for God.

Two months after Randall passed away, our hospital began to return to normal as the lockdown started to ease. One day the receptionist told me that a West Indian lady had brought me a book, to ask if I’d like to make an entry. It was a tribute for Randall. A mere bus driver indeed! Tears gushed down my cheeks as I read eulogy after eulogy written by members of his family and his church. He was a leader, a preacher, and it was obvious he used to visit the sick. On one page I read,

“Randall, we owe you so much! Your prayers and anointing with oil brought our daughter Ellie back when the doctors couldn’t save her from leukaemia...”, along with many more loving words.

I wrote a single sentence,

“Randall, thank you so much for helping me think again about what life really means.”

So here I am, exactly a year later, in church. I’m discovering about Jesus, whose enemies said that he’d saved others but that he couldn’t save himself. Now I see that Jesus needed to die, so he could save me. And it’s interesting that Randall’s suffering and death has helped break down the barriers to my making this journey.

John Hearson