

One Kind Act Changed My life

By Neal Nybo

Long before I studied kindness, I experienced it. One person's kindness made a difference in my life. It was one person's act of kindness that is the reason I am doing what I do today. For it to make sense, I have to tell you about the emergency room at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center.

I was a hospital chaplain there. The Medical Center provides nearly every medical specialty to more than 380,000 people each year from Los Angeles and around the world. Its emergency room treats 45,000 patients a year. At night, chaplains in the emergency room care for all the family members and friends of ER patients. They work with everyone from sobbing mothers to angry neighbors. They comfort and corral frightened, worried, and sometimes dangerous people.

One morning at 6:50 my pager buzzed. Within two minutes, I was dressed and heading to the ER. A high school senior was being flown by helicopter to the emergency room from Malibu. He had been surfing before school, and a wave had crushed him into the ocean floor and broken his neck. He couldn't move. Friends had pulled him to shore and called 911. As I took stairs because the elevator was too slow, I imagined I heard, the chopper blades as the helicopter landed on the roof many floors above.

As I walked into the back doors of the ER, paramedics wheeled the young man into an examination room, and his father walked through the front doors. It turned out this man was a neck and spine surgeon. All he wanted to do was to get a copy of the x-rays of his son's injury. Now, a chaplain in the ER has three responsibilities. One is to call loved ones. I didn't need to do that this time. Another is to comfort people waiting. This father had no interest in being comforted. And the third is to keep visitors away from hospital staff like nurses and doctors. I did my best with a surgeon who was pumped up on adrenaline and feeling all the anxiety of a parent but with the additional knowledge of a neck surgeon.

This man did not need God. He needed x-rays. And I couldn't give them to him. I stalled him for ten minutes while I wandered around acting like I was looking for x-rays I knew no one was going to give me. I finally went back into the room. I tried to comfort him. I tried to find out about his wife. I tried to ask him about his son. I was blocking him from moving out of the room. He was dodging me, trying to find a nurse or doctor. Finally, he stopped and looked down at me. This man must have been six feet, seven inches tall. He towered over me which is not an easy thing to do. He looked down at me and asked, can you get me my son's x-rays? I stared up at him. I looked him in the eyes. Then, I looked down and sheepishly, I said, no sir, I can't give you the x-rays. He looked down at me and just said, "then what good are you?" And he walked out of the waiting room. To be honest with you, I was asking myself the same question. In a hospital, when someone like me says God is real, what do patients and their families want from such a God? They want to be healed. That father wanted his son back good as new. If I can't give them that, what good am I?

That was on Monday. I don't know what ultimately happened to the boy and his family. Any recovery took weeks or months. Privacy requirements and just the number of cases keeps us from following up on individual cases. The rest of the week went downhill for me. That father's words rang in my head

and haunted my thoughts and filled my prayers. What good are you? I had begun to question everything I was doing. If I was no use in a hospital where everyone wanted miracles, what good would I be in the rest of the world? By the end of my shift on Friday, I had answered my question. I was no good at all. I had made a decision. I wasn't coming back to my internship. I was quitting. I would not return on Monday morning. I didn't know what I would tell my wife. I didn't know what I would tell my school. Without this chaplaincy, I couldn't graduate. It didn't matter. I had no idea what I was going to do next, but I wouldn't be a pastor.

At UCLA Medical Center there is a main corridor on the main floor. One side corridor leads to the parking garage. Once you turn that corner, there are no more turns, no more people to see. For me, there would be no more chances to change my mind. I had made my decision. I made the turn, knowing I would not be back. And, I ran right into the chest of that father. Did I tell you he was taller than me? I'm six four. I literally ran into him and stumbled backward. We both stopped, a bit shocked. Then he looked down at me, recognition in his eyes and said nothing.

It was all I could do to make eye contact with him. The painful answer to his haunting question lay heavily between us. With my last shreds of pastoral and emotional resources I said to the dad who wanted x-rays, not platitudes, we have all been praying for you and your son all week. He said that's all any of us can do now. Then he wrapped his arms around me and hugged me like someone who needed human contact. I hugged him back, not like men hug and pat each other. We hugged like two people holding on for dear life because we were. And we cried. And then I walked to my car, and I came back on Monday morning.

That man, during his worst week on earth, offered me kindness. He affirmed me in a way I couldn't have imagined. And, talk about unleashing the power of kindness, I heard God answer his question for me. Being my presence is what good you are. You are my hands and heart to those I love. You give the hug I want to give. You hold the hand I want to hold. You cry the tears I would cry.

That father's kindness changed my life. Credit for any impact I have had on any lives over the last twenty years goes back to that father's act of kindness.