

Lenora

“There’s an angel who comes and stands by my bed”

Lenora was fifty-four years old, the head of a large Arabic family, and dying of a malignant tumor on her brain. Her family never left her side. They loved her and bathed her and fed her, and they did not talk about her dying. She sat up in bed surrounded by pretty linens and pillows and the wonderful smells of freshly cut flowers, and despite the number of people coming and going, there was never any question as to who was in charge. There was a constant flow of good food, friends, and family, and it was clear that this good mother had loved her children well and now they were giving back to her all that she had given to them.

One day while I was visiting, she asked to speak to me alone, and much to everyone’s surprise, she excused her entire family from the room. “This big angel comes and stands near my bed,” she said to me very sternly. “Right there,” she said, pointing to the corner of her bedroom.

“Is he here now?” I asked.

“No, he just comes and goes, and he is always smiling at me. Ms. Nurse, when I see that angel, do you really think I see that angel?”

“Yes, you do,” I said. “When you see that angel, he is really here in the room with you.” I explained to her that this is a very common experience for people getting ready to go to heaven, and that God often lets people have glimpses of heavenly beings before they get there. She smiled and nodded her head knowingly in agreement. She was right.

Visions of angels, loved ones who have died before us, family members who are far away, sweet smells, beautiful flowers, and angelic choirs are frequent experiences for those who are dying. We can try to explain these things away in lofty, scientific terms, but eventually we come to know that we are not meant to understand everything. In time that is a relief, since we no longer waste time trying to give our understanding and meaning to a dying person’s experiences.

Calling her entire family back into the room, Lenora said to them, “When I tell you that I see that angel by my bed, I’m telling you I see that angel.” She left no doubt in anyone’s mind that day about what she wanted them to understand, and I often think that she knew on some level the comfort this experience would bring to them later on in life.

For those who walk by faith during their lifetime, spiritual experiences at the end of life are readily understood and accepted. A life of devotion to others brings sweet contentment in the end.

Lenora died peacefully a few weeks later surrounded by loving family and friends who could easily be called her earthly angels. They cared for her the way she had cared for them, with constancy and attention. She remained a mother to the end.

Johnny

"But suppose I just don't believe in Him, what then?"

Johnny was a hard drinker and chain smoker. He had lived alone for a long time, separated from his only son, whom he now asked to take care of him. His son, whom he had left when he was a young boy, agreed. Johnny had very few soft edges, and now, diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer, he was even harder to please or make happy. He was angry and tired, and no amount of kindness or help was received well by him. For some reason that I do not fully understand, grouchy and seemingly mean-spirited people have always intrigued me. I think I always felt there had to be some good inside of them that not even they knew about, and I wanted to find it.

His son agreed to take care of his father at home for as long as it seemed safe to do so. He did exactly that. Being a local fireman, he knew all too well the dangers of older people living alone, and although he very seldom went

out of town, he wanted to be sure of his father's safety if he did. As Johnny began to decline, he often forgot to take the medications that kept him both out of pain and breathing easier. But after he forgot to turn the stove off one too many times, the decision was made for him to enter a long-term-care living facility. He settled in quickly and seemed grateful to be well cared for there.

Johnny often said that he did not believe in God, but he brought Him up often in conversation, out of the blue and for no apparent reason. In the middle of talking about something entirely different, Johnny would angrily ask how smart people could believe in a God they could not see. He thought that those who believed were weak and dependent, and he had no time for them or their thinking. He would often say, "Here comes that God person," when I visited him in the nursing home, all the while giving me a big smile and a wink. I think he recognized the cross I wore as a symbol of something he did not understand, and he both wanted and did not want to know about it. Little did we know what God had in mind to tenderize this heart that was longing for something and someone it did not yet understand.

We developed a very sweet friendship over the next three or four months, both of us knowing his time was growing shorter. His son watched with great surprise as his father slowly but surely softened toward him, and although they did not actively talk about the heartfelt things, his son understood that he wanted to but just did not know how. It seemed enough for them both to communicate with a gentle nod or touch on the shoulder.

Johnny had been an avid smoker all his life and he remained so, even now. He could only light up and enjoy his cigarette outside the nursing home in the gardens. He would

ask me from time to time to take him there in his wheelchair for a “smoke,” which I did. But as he grew weaker, getting in and out of the wheelchair was too difficult for him. One day he asked if I would take him “one last time” to the screened porch where he was also allowed to smoke. I knew his time was near, and so did he. So we went.

Sitting quietly smoking his cigarette, he looked up at the wall facing him, and pointing to the famous picture of Jesus knocking on a door, he asked me what it meant. “The picture is of Jesus,” I said, “and the door is your heart. Jesus is knocking on it.” Tell me what you see in the picture that is different.”

Leaning as close to the picture as he could get, he said, “There is no doorknob on the door. Why is that?”

“God is so gentle and tender with us, He will not force His way in,” I said. “He wants you to open it from your side and invite Him in. The door has to be opened from the inside, by you. He only wants to come into your heart and make Himself known to you and take you to heaven with Him.”

He did not seem a bit put off by my explanation but smiled a gentle and trusting smile as I wheeled him back to his room. “But suppose I just don’t believe in Him at all, what then?” he asked. As I tucked him back in bed for the night, I suggested that he just tell God that he had never believed in Him and ask Him to please show him if He really exists. “Tell Him you’re sorry for whatever you did wrong in your life, and ask Him to take you to heaven with Him, if that’s where He is,” I suggested.

He smiled as we said good-bye, both of us knowing it would be for the last time.

Here was a lonely, angry man who would have died alone if it had not been for a very forgiving and loving son

who took him in when he needed him most. Here was a son who was able to put aside the hurts of the past and accept this father as he was and give him respect and care, withholding nothing. Here was a man who probably was looking for God all his life but did not know how to find Him. And here was God, in the wings all the time, wanting to comfort and love this one lost soul.

Johnny died in the early morning hours of the next day. The nurse called to say that he never moved after I left and simply went off to sleep peacefully. She asked me to notify his son, who was out of town, and asked if I would come by for his clothes and things since they needed the room right away for another patient.

Visiting the nursing home later in the morning, I passed through the porch where Johnny and I had sat the evening before. Not seeing the picture on the wall, I asked the nurse about it. She reacted with surprise, saying there had never been a picture of Jesus on that wall, and yes, that was the only porch at the facility, and yes, that was where he sat having a smoke with me the evening before. After carefully examining both the porch and the wall itself for nail marks or fading, I realized she was right. No picture had ever hung on that wall. Needless to say I was speechless, and so was she. Who can explain the awesome power of God?

Zach

“He knows, he knows”

He was only three years old, but he was dying. His young mother was devastated, and his dad, an officer in the navy, could not believe even for a moment that this was true. The pain surrounding the impending loss of a child is too hard to describe, but when this pain cannot be shared or talked about, each person suffers alone. Time was becoming very short for Zach, and the anxiety, fear, and anger experienced by everyone was both palpable and overwhelming.

Zach’s dad found it impossible to give words to the impending loss or express himself in any way, and therefore was suffering alone. Zach’s mom, having no one with whom to really share the intimacy of her loss, was essentially suffering alone as well. We needed to help this young family deal with what was soon going to be an overwhelming sorrow, and time was running out. His wonderful nurse, Kelly, placed a large roll of drawing paper in front of Zach and asked if he would draw a picture of what

was happening to him. He was in his bed, with parents on either side, as he began to draw. A large ship emerged as only a three-year-old can draw. At the center of the ship was a woman with arms hanging by her sides and large tears falling from her face, onto her dress, and then onto the deck of the ship. At the far right was a stick figure of a man in uniform, with a hat and lots of colored buttons on his shirt. The line drawn down the center of his forehead reflected sadness and pain. In the far left corner of the large pad, a tiny boat was shown sailing away until it could be seen no more. Zach's dad began to cry. "He knows, he knows," he said. This little boy was telling his mom and dad what was happening to him, and he did not seem to be the least bit afraid, just anxious for them to understand. That day the floodgates opened wide with tears and kisses all around, allowing this young family time to prepare, as best it could, for the impending loss of this precious child.

He wanted to let his parents know what was happening to him, and he was finally able to do that, in a way they could understand.

His devoted nurse, who loved and cared for this young family and taught new hospice nurses many lessons with the gifts God had given to her, shared this story. She helped us all to hear and see in a whole new way and to develop the sensitivities and insights so important when caring for those who are dying.