

Gifts of Healing

BY PEGGY FRANK

Being blinded and burned is an unforgettable experience. Every time I pass by Robinson Memorial Hospital in Ravenna, OH, I think about an emergency room nurse named George who helped stabilize me while I was in shock. Then I remember the people at MetroHealth Burn Unit in Cleveland, where I spent the Christmas holidays that year. Their commitment and kindness were real gifts of healing.

THE ACCIDENT

The accident happened in the blink of an eye. It was the week before Christmas and I was home alone, merrily making an Ohio holiday favorite, chocolate-covered peanut-butter balls—"buck-eyes." I was puttering about the kitchen humming "Silent Night" with the carolers on the radio, oblivious to the disaster brewing on the stove.

Suddenly my world changed. The candy recipe had called for a double boiler, but, since I didn't have one, I improvised with two large pots—the wrong two. The boiling water in the bottom pan created a steam combustion and blew the top pan off like an explosion. It shot to the ceiling, crashed off the stove hood, and dumped scalding chocolate and paraffin wax over my face, eyes and throat, and down my right arm.

A VOICE IN THE DARKNESS

Somehow, I managed to rip off my sweatshirt, flush my eyes with cold water, and call 9-1-1. Thank God the paramedics were there fast. I'll never forget how terrific they were.

My eyes were swollen slits by the time the paramedics arrived, but they managed to flush them again. They kept pouring something

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cold on my face and arm. I felt like I was on fire. They kept talking to me, helping me hang on. Trying not to faint, I started humming "Silent Night" again, and one of the guys hummed along, all the way to the hospital emergency room.

That's where I met George the emergency room nurse, or rather heard George. By then, and for the next five days, my eyes would not open. The disorienting darkness and second- and third-degree burns threw my system into shock. George covered me with heated blankets and talked to me as I shook with chills. He was my voice in the darkness. He let me know what was happening. It was one of the doctors, George said, who was whistling "Silent Night" in the background.

EAVESDROPPING

Once stabilized, I was transferred to Cleveland's MetroHealth Hospital, my new home for the holidays.

Sixteen days in a burn unit must be equivalent to purgatory time. Much of the treatment involves pain, like cleaning and scraping the dead, charred skin every few hours, watching for signs of gangrene.

We "inmates" knew it was necessary, but it didn't always make the folks in white our favorite people. The burned babies and little ones screamed mercilessly whenever a nurse came near.

I listened to it all. Learning to live in the world of the blind, I listened intently to everything, even *Star Trek* with my "trekkie" roommate Allison. I lived in the pulse, the routine, of the hospital that never slept. The staff just changed shifts. I knew

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I could never do their jobs, facing so much trauma and pain with patience and perseverance day after day.

Developing my sense of hearing, I found myself unintentionally eavesdropping. I learned about other patients like Allison, whose flannel shirt skimmed the flame of a gas burner and caught fire.

There was the 8-year-old Amish boy in the next room whose legs and feet caught fire in a farming accident. His mother burned both arms pulling him from the flames.

I overheard bits and pieces of shattered lives everywhere as I walked—on a nurse's guiding arm—to the tub or treatment rooms.

I also heard the hospital staff, and they were all terrific. The doctor who did the skin graft on my arm often attended Mass with the motley crew of patients ambulatory enough to get there. The lady who made my bed each morning told me about her family's Christmas, and how I reminded her of her daughter.

PATIENCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT FACILITATE HEALING

I can't say enough about the nurses. Their tasks were often difficult. We patients were not always pleasant, but the nurses worked on with guts and grace, a touch of humor and a smile I could hear in their voices.

It struck me how they could maintain such caring, committed attitudes in the middle of such debilitation.

They could have done their duties with mechanical efficiency, but they did more. They listened, they cared, they talked, and they taught us. They taught me routine things like how many steps it was to the bathroom, how to eat without missing my mouth, and more difficult things like how to accept the fact that my blindness might be permanent. I believe their patience and encouragement facilitated my healing process.

They helped me through a hard time, and believe me, I'm one of the lucky ones. My scars are minimal. A skin graft saved my arm. My face and neck didn't disfigure. I can see.

On Christmas Eve, the staff that shared my suffering also shared my joy when my swollen eyes opened. No one knew how extensive the damage to my eyes might have been below the lids that wouldn't open, but there wasn't a dry eye in the place when they finally did. Like the blind man in the Bible passage (Mk 8:24), I first saw men "like trees walking," but an exam confirmed the blurriness would subside and healing would come.

All day people from different departments and shifts stopped to say how happy they were. They were great, and some even hugged me! So I knew I wasn't alone as I gazed out the window that night at a blurry but beautiful Cleveland skyline. The tears came when I heard my song, "Silent Night," being played over the hospital intercom system. □

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