

Prodigal Patient: A Reflection on Loss
by Richard Ratzan, M.D.

LAST week a patient died. It was not on my watch. And he was a hopeless alcoholic whose death was a long time a comin'. Yet his death has unhinged me and many - most - of my colleagues, from nurses to doctors to aides - in a way that no other death has affected an ED staff in my 40 years of practice. I did what I ordinarily do when an event intrudes upon and usurps my consciousness - I analyzed it from the perspective of a writer whose assignment it was to understand it well enough to convey to a reader what and how and why it meant what it did for us. For I intuitively realized that only when I could write about it for a reader who did not know Jamie (name changed) would I have achieved clarity of comprehension for myself.

Jamie was 54, and a man for whom I had cared at least 30-40 times in the 13 years I had known him. That's me alone. For the purposes of this essay, I counted up his visits - most of them, if not all of them, un-reimbursed. 1034 in 16 years. Jamie's first recorded visit to our hospital - the ED - was in May 1995. His last - in our ED - was not quite 16 years later. Most of us had cared for Jamie primarily as an alcoholic but also as a patient with known coronary artery disease, increasingly severe hepatic failure and occasional DT's. We watched in horror as he developed all the stigmata of alcoholic cirrhosis - those landmarks of a life "drowned in booze", as W. C. Fields humorously intones in a saccharine Hollywood movie free of the real horror of gynecomastia, a female escutcheon, pre-parotid swelling - the entire physical diagnostic panoply one finds so fascinating as a third year student, when the exotic has not yet acquired the personal emotions attendant upon a patient one has come to like a great deal.

When I first began working at this hospital, I had as a major part of my assignment the psychiatric/substance abuse ward, named the Purple Pod in the usually prosaic way hospital management goes about identifying its parts. It was predictably depressing, with an occasional moment of interest or light. I had to perform a "medical

clearance" on all patients admitted to the Purple Pod, many of whom had become as familiar to us as a residential hotel's folk to its desk clerks. I therefore assembled what I called The Purple Pod Hall of Fame. It was a Who's Who of our Frequent Fliers. I wanted to do a good job with past medical history, family history and the like since I had no interest in gathering what I knew to be immutable historical fact each and every time. I therefore did a rather thorough job once and for all, photocopied this ur-history and simply augmented each Hall of Famer's medical record with only the most recent incremental information. I read now the highlights from Jamie's personal Hall of Fame record dated January 3, 2004:

“Many, many ED visits for EtOH abuse
Past medical history included coronary artery disease with acute inferior wall
heart myocardial infarction in 2002 and stenting of proximal right
coronary artery.
Positive family history of a sibling who died of abdominal aortic aneurysm.”

A discharge summary only several weeks before he died, some 7 years later, added:

“Discharge diagnoses: acute decompensated congestive heart failure; coronary artery disease; atrial fibrillation; hypertension; type 2 diabetes mellitus.”

One year I was on duty for three consecutive evenings on either side of New Year's Eve. After I'd admitted Jamie to the Purple Pod on December 30th, he announced that he had made a New Year's Resolution: "No more EtOH," Jamie said, dramatically waving his right index finger back and forth like the windshield wiper of negation. (He pronounced it in the medical way: Eee - Tee - Oh - H.) "Right, Jamie," I replied, and proceeded to admit him the next two shifts, for a veritable hat trick of encounters. Jamie spoke medical-ese since he used to be an EMT. In fact, he used to bring patients to our ED. Several of his former colleagues were those now finding him on the street, loading him into the back of their ambulance - formerly his ambulance - and bringing him to our ED. He had gone from the front

of the rig to the back of it, from steering to steerage. This irony was lost on no one. Many was the time that a crew would bring him in to Purple and announce, Jamie is here, much as one would announce the arrival of a mutual friend whom he had met on the way to your house. It was the same affection, albeit disappointed and sad affection, we all felt.

Jamie was a calm person whose face had two expressions: a smile and a grimace. In the early years, there was laughter. Seldom the face of pain and concern that he wore the last few years. Most of the time Jamie entered and left with a smile. He would play the peace-maker, the self-appointed resident Marshall of Purple Pod City, at least the corner of it inhabited by the alcoholics, a room we brusquely referred to as "the tank." And then there was his signature move, bringing his hand up to his mouth whenever I went to examine it with a tongue blade, in real horror lest I experience what he knew to be his foul breath. This was no false modesty, an incongruous propriety in a drunk tank. Jamie's was a true concern for others. Helpless to stay sober and thereby prevent that inconvenience to us, he could at least rein in his breath.

Jamie was a master apologizer. Explicitly for his troubling us. Implicitly for failing us. He apologized regularly and with practiced sincerity. We came to expect it and he never disappointed us. The only other person I can remember making such an art form of the apology was Murray Burns, in "A Thousand Clowns", the lovable play and movie by Herb Gardner. In it Murray, an out of work TV writer and the eccentric guardian of his 12 year old nephew, Nick, falls in love with Sandy, the social worker who comes to take Nick away from this unemployed, single and highly unusual, but loving and financially solvent, uncle (remember: this is 1962). He fails, near the end of the movie, to get the job he promised Sandy he would secure in order to keep Nick. When he first sees her, upon his return, and before Sandy understands what he is saying and why, Murray launches into one of Gardner's more memorable passages - an effusive encomium on apologies, with descriptive examples. It does not succeed, of course, in mollifying Sandy, leading to a frustrated exclamation from Murray, "You gotta love a guy who can apologize so nice."¹ Jamie apologized nice. And no one I can remember ever told him not to. Which was, in my reconstruction of the part Jamie played in our lives,

telling.

As I struggled to understand why it was that Jamie - alive and dead - had had this effect on us, I came to realize that it was fairly simple - he was a genuinely nice man who routinely looked at you with sweetly intoxicated eyes and said, "I love you." And fairly complex - he had become family.

We certainly would not expect one of our other Frequent Fliers to apologize. At least as regularly or as often. Whereas Jamie felt he was letting us down, as a friend or family member might, the Frequent Fliers felt no such relationship; nor did they express it if any of them did. We knew many of them and even liked some, but there the similarities ended. As I reflected on this and other differences between them and Jamie, I realized that Jamie met most of the criteria one assumes for family, albeit not biological.

Jamie had established the bonds he and we felt towards each other by virtue of intense interactions - some happy and funny; others not so. These interactions also fulfilled what I remember from Latin as the description of those prepositions that took the accusative: duration of time and extent of space. We and Jamie existed together over a duration of time and in the familiar extent of space that families often share. If our ED was not exactly a household, it was certainly a second home for him and for us. And we met there, with regularity, with intensity. We met there with shared emotions and in encounters that involved all permutations of each other - for years. We all grew older and changed with each other - some of us for the better; some, for the worse. Like families.

Jamie was more like the prodigal son. Or the black sheep of the family, to be sure. But every family has its problem child, its irascible uncle, the curmudgeon for a grandfather, or the nasty cousin one loves to hate. But they are family nonetheless. The bonds that define the loving mother apply to the nasty cousin. Definitions of relationships are not dependent on affection. Denotations are not connotations. Just so Jamie troubled us often, occasionally delighted us and, most recently, distressed many of us. He is, was, the only patient I have met who insinuated (the word derives, after all, from the Latin for "bosom") himself so inextricably into an ED family, trouble-maker or

not. And yet not all of us felt that way.

When some of us were less than kind, as family members can be - I remember one nurse refusing to call him "Jamie" since she did not want to encourage his feeling of familiarity, of any privileged status vis-à-vis other patients - I empathized with both sides. There was an entitlement he seemed to feel, a naturalness to his disease and our response to it. Jamie would have understood and, it seemed to me, not been surprised had such feelings been articulated or, if they were, he had been sober enough to remember them. However, such occasions were rare. Most of the time, Jamie seemed above such matters - benignly, almost saintly, uninvolved in pedestrian concepts like transient vicissitudes of emotion.

The more I pondered Jamie and our mutual relationship, I began to wonder: who was Jamie? Who was he to us? He was said to work in a funeral home, another irony, albeit proleptic until recently, that hovered in the background, like the enigmatic chess player in films like Bergman's "Seventh Seal" or the mysterious stranger in Camus' "Black Orpheus", making brief appearances until, like Jamie's final scene, the irony was no longer just a cognitive or cinematic exercise. He had been one of us as an EMT, and then one of us as a resident in the space of our ED, showing up with a regularity that exceeded most of our full time workers' attendance records. Jamie was a "There but for the grace of God go I" figure, a walking, stumbling reminder of the wages of alcoholic sin, a weak will versus a stronger addiction.

At times I wondered if he were more than the object of our affection. Was what we felt a kindly regard or, in truth, amusement at Jamie's stereotyped mannerisms? Or a displaced pity? Or, worse, a schadenfreude one hesitates to admit as a health care provider? I wondered, and still do. Perhaps Jamie represented a Girardian scapegoat, a sacrificial loser or anti-hero, like Cool Hand Luke, a figure who eased all our tensions by assuming them onto his omnipresent and forgivingly alcoholic shoulders.

Often, when I contemplated Jamie in Purple or out on the floor with a more serious disorder that occasionally got him admitted for a day or two, I thought, "We should do something about and for Jamie. He's not just another drunk." The next thought or two would, less

articulately than this essay, sum it up as follows: he'd earned our affection and loyalty; we should try harder to get him sober and to keep him that way. To my eternal discredit, I never did more than think this, or elaborate it, aloud, to more than a random colleague who would, more often than not, agree with me and then shrug. "We are all so busy and it's so hopeless," the unspoken translation of the shrug. If more than one of us felt that way - I do not know - then the sociological phenomenon of the diffusion of responsibility took over with no one taking charge, each waiting for the other to initiate change, to take the lead, knowing no one would.

Then Jamie died. And I wanted to apologize to Jamie, the way I've wanted to apologize, and could, to a family member after an especially egregious wrong. But I can't. I can't say I'm sorry to Jamie now.

As I often do when even the remotest semblance of a crisis in my life suggests "A Thousand Clowns", which again came to mind, I harked back to a scene in it, the end of the scene noted above. Murray has stopped trying to apologize to Sandy, and explains his attempt:

"That's the most you should expect from life, Sandy, a really good apology for all the things you won't get."¹

But this time "A Thousand Clowns" has, for perhaps the first time, failed me. We did owe Jamie, and we failed him.

References

1. Gardner H. *Thousand Clowns*, A. New York, Sam French; 1962: page 65