

Putting Things in Perspective

Stories from a Hospice Volunteer: Andy and Carol

- By Tim Tosta

The world of a lawyer is, at times, brutal. At first, the brutality is shocking - the lawyer who intentionally exacerbates the personality conflicts at the price of obscuring the substantive issues, the rich and powerful party who, irrespective of the merits, manipulates the system to vanquish a weaker opponent. But, as you proceed in this career, you inure yourself to brutality. You avoid it, you minimize it, you rationalize it, and some surrender to practicing it. But, we all are affected. Brutality chips away not only at our profession's stature, but to a greater or lesser degree on our individual well being and on that of our families and communities.

I have had the good fortune to be a part of a community of angels - my fellow hospice volunteers at San Francisco's Laguna Honda Hospital.

By angel, I mean a person who sees his or her duty to be in compassionate service to another. These angels come in all stripes, all ages, all races, all creeds, all orientations, rich and poor, highly educated and not, all working to serve others in their final months, weeks, days or hours of life.

Let me tell you a story about one of them.

Carol came to Ward C2 one year before me. She has served on the Monday afternoon shift for as long as I can remember. She stands maybe 5'6", with graying hair, gentle blue eyes and a sweet engaging smile. She reminds me a lot of my wife, Nancy, which perhaps explains my connection to her.

I see her at 5 p.m. each Monday for our "shift change" meeting during which our evening shift learns what has transpired that day and who might deserve special attention. The shift meetings accomplish something more. It provides the volunteers with an opportunity to share the emotional load that accumulates from this work. It permits us to "hold" one another, allowing us to be our best for the residents.

From our meetings, I noted the extraordinary humility with which Carol offers up her unique insights into how she was present for and responded to a resident's needs. I came to see that there wasn't a situation that was too challenging, too complex, too emotionally loaded to put her off. If there is a difficult person on the ward, Carol goes there. If a situation requires enormous patience, Carol engages. Yet, whenever she performs her miraculous service, she continues to question whether or not what she did was enough, when all of us sit in awe of her ability.



Andy was admitted to Ward C2 in late April last year with a number of health challenges. He was a diabetic, with failing kidneys. He was hypertensive with congestive heart failure. Andy was also developmentally "different," characterized as suffering "mild to moderate retardation."

With Andy's medical condition, we understood that he might not be long with us. Carol and Andy made an immediate connection. He told her about desire for female companionship. He revealed to Carol "I'm so lonely. Girls never liked me. They told me I was ugly. What good am I, anyway?" But, then he switched gears. Andy revealed to Carol his great unrequited love for British actress Hayley Mills with whom he had become infatuated upon seeing her in "The Parent Trap" released by Disney in 1962. "Hayley Mills is my favorite person in the whole wide world. I think about her every single day. I used to have a signed picture, but I lost it. If only she would write me a letter; if only I could get another picture from her, it would make my life worthwhile."

Carol suggested to Andy that they write Mills a letter making his request. Andy could dictate it to Carol. Carol then would write an accompanying letter describing Zen Hospice and Andy's situation. Andy agreed to Carol's suggestion, and one month after his arrival at hospice, his note and Carol's letter were sent off to the Hayley Mills Fan Club address in London.

About this time, I asked Carol if she would have some informal conversations with me about hospice and her approach to bedside care, which I could record. I had no specific purpose in mind except to share our approaches, and learn and support one another in our caring journeys. Out of those conversations, I asked Carol if she would journal on her special relationship with Andy.

Carol wrote: On several occasions, Andy and I mused, worried, wondered and/or wrote follow up letters begging Hayley to recognize how special she was to him and respond to his request. 'If only you knew how much it means to me,' he dictated in one letter, 'If only you could see how much I care. It means my WHOLE LIFE to me!' Carol confided "Sometimes I was sure we'd hear from her; sometimes I gave up hope, thinking how many letters she must receive every day..."

Carol went on: One morning as I was preparing to leave for my Monday shift, I was feeling a bit down. An old voice in my head was stirring trouble. 'What good do you really do at hospice anyway?' Feeling a little useless and lonely, I gathered my energy and opened the front door to leave, and there on my doorstep was a large envelope. "What is this?" I hadn't ordered anything. The return address was small. I put on my glasses. And there was the name Hayley Mills!

Carol raced to her car, her concerns instantly dissolving into gratitude. She couldn't wait to find Andy and open the package. But when she arrived, she learned that Andy was having a rough day. He had a herpes outbreak on his cheeks and his Playstation had broken. Carol describes what happened next.

Andy glowered as I approached his wheelchair. 'Look at what we got!' I told him. 'It's from HER!' Andy's face instantly uncrumpled into radiant expectation. 'Hurry up!' he whispered. 'Let's open it.'

Andy was sitting in the common room. Carol asked him if he wanted some privacy in opening the envelope. He declined. He wanted to open the envelope right there in front of everyone. Carol wheeled Andy over to the big table where volunteers and staff watched as he opened the large envelope, which contained a smaller envelope. Inside that envelope was a small letter sized envelope addressed by hand to "Mr. Andy Kaplan."

"I'm sorry to hear that you are not well, and I do hope you're not feeling too uncomfortable...I'm sending you a photograph and I'm thinking of you - with much love, Hayley Mills" Enclosed with the letter was a portrait, signed "For Andy, with love, Hayley."

Our chaplain ran for his camera, and the room pulsed with expectation. Carol and Andy pulled out the two page handwritten letter. "Dear Andy," it said, "Thank you so much for your letter..." She apologized for taking so long to reply, describing how she was stranded in the bush of South Africa, filming a television series, and the postal service was "terrible." She continued "I'm sorry to hear that you are not well, and I do hope you're not feeling too uncomfortable...I'm sending you a photograph and I'm thinking of you - with much love, Hayley Mills" Enclosed with the letter was a portrait, signed "For Andy, with love, Hayley."

As Carol described it, the Presidential Inauguration, the Academy Awards, the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize, a Pavarotti performance, could not hold for her any greater emotion than the time spent reading this letter. We were all grateful - for Andy's devotion realized, for the generosity and humanity of a famous person, for our remarkable good fortune at being a part of this extraordinary moment.

After a time, as excitement receded from the room, Carol wheeled Andy back to his bed with the letter and photograph carefully protected in a plastic sleeve. Her shift mate, Eleanor passed by. Andy reached out and lovingly took Eleanor's hand, "Thank you," he said. "We made it happen. We did it together! Thank you, thank you!"

Three weeks later Andy suffered a seizure and died at age 61. His last days were filled with extraordinary joy as he came to find that he had served his purpose in life. He had reached for the stars and touched one.

Carol wrote "Many of us were deeply moved and changed by our time with this dear and special man. Maybe our belief in his dream had meant something important to him. Surely his belief in his dream had meant much to us. Andy had become a part of us. He was our teacher. He was our friend. Yes, thank you, Andy, we did it together."

Every week, following my Monday night hospice shift, I vow to return to the practice of law with the same wisdom and compassion that I observe in the angels with whom I have the honor to serve. I know that such wisdom and compassion can serve my legal career. I know that I cannot default to the brutality that has become such a hallmark of our profession. Some weeks are more of a struggle for me than others.

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