

“Counseling”

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“It aches right here,” he said, waving vaguely toward his shoulder.

The man faced me, slouching comfortably in the desk chair, feet resting on the corner of his desk. I had come to talk with him about significance, about accomplishing great things. I’m not sure why I was talking with him about such things, and looking around the room, my questions remained.

The office was small, no larger than a king-size bed. Every flat surface was covered, not with the neat stacks of the overworked, nor the windblown drifts of the creative, but with mere piles. Unwrapped CDs slid into books. File folders escaped from half-covered boxes. Coffee stains blended into the obscure purple of the carpet, having dripped from the accumulation of mugs lining the desk. It was, in short, academic.

The man facing me was vaguely familiar. He reminded me of a Midwestern mayor or a radio host, a public figure best suited for being offstage. He paused often, interrupting himself with a digression which led to an observation, which reminded him of a story which he interrupted to come back to the original topic. He was, in short, academic.

I had introduced my topic: “Five Years to Financial Stability.” I had developed a plan to pay down my debt and move into a new job as an independent tech consultant. There was risk in being self-employed but I was confident that I could pull all the pieces together quite well. He listened quietly, asking rare questions, probing, thinking. Looking into his eyes, watching his hands, I could not tell what he was thinking.

He raised his left hand to stop my words and asked, “and then, in three years, in the middle of the journey, what if your world breaks.”

I assured him that everything was well planned. I was an engineer.

“People with arthritis have a burning achiness in their joints,” he said. “That’s what I have right here, when the weather changes.”

Is it arthritis? I asked.

He smiled, one side of his mouth rising slowly, sadly.

“No, not so much.”

And then he told me a story about dreams.

“Once upon a time, a young man wanted to be deeply spiritual. He studied to be a pastor, one who could touch lives and bring hope and healing. He was known for his earnestness, for his passion. He had the look.

One day, this young man had a feeling. His campus was concerned about a young faculty couple, expecting their second child. There had been tests, they showed trouble. In the heat of the early summer, there was much uncertainty. Into this turmoil, the young man wanted to bring hope and healing. So he walked up the street in the middle of the day, intent on a mission of faith.

“I want to pray for you,” he told the wife. With the bemusement of a mother watching a child with a pretend suit of armor going to battle, she agreed. Laying his hand on the child in the womb, he begged God for healing of this child. He asked with confidence, he talked with passion. He was sure that this would be the act of miraculous intervention.

Then he left. And nothing changed.”

I told the man that his story lacked much hope for dreamers. It was, I thought, not much of a once-upon-a-time story. After all, the point of describing what happened once upon a time is the ending where everyone lives happily ever after. I was intent on creating the ever-after and this man’s tale suggested that in the mythic world and in the prayer world, the ending doesn’t always follow the beginning as expected.

He pointed out that I had come to him for counsel, so he was the one who could decide what to say. I agreed, but commented that I was the one who could decide whether to run my life on his advice.

He looked at his hands, resting in his lap. He reached for one of the mugs, sipped slowly, and then began to speak.

“Once upon a time, in a galaxy far away, there was a quiet rebellion against the evil empire. Scattered groups of truth-seekers carefully planned small but valiant strikes against the well-equipped armies. The empire was building a death star.”

I smiled, recognizing the story, and began to speak. He raised his hand to stop me.

“In time, this death star hovered over a planet, ready to destroy it and with it the core of the rebellion—as soon as construction was complete. Rebel pilots strapped themselves into small fighters and fearlessly pursued the weak spot in the death star. Everyone watching was thrilled with the hope of evil being destroyed, and as the fighters flashed across the screen, a baby in her father’s arms stopped breathing.

As the story went on, hers didn’t.”

Star Wars and a dying child. What kind of madman was facing me, I wondered. He looked at me steadily, eyes clear, voice calm. He wanted me to join him in this calmness, but at best his story-telling style of counseling was inept. At worst, obscene.

I was far from my own story now, caring little about the next five years of my life. I cared only for the next five minutes, and those short-term plans did not include this man.

I looked at my watch, politely acknowledging that I had taken enough of his time. We both knew that I was using the socially acceptable ways of escaping. Instead of standing as I stood, he began to speak again.

“Once upon a time, there was a small house full of mourners. They crowded into the kitchen, sipping coffee in the midday. They filled the small living room, forcing air out of their way. They flowed through the doors onto the lawn, breathing again and finding relief in watching the children.

Upstairs, far from the crowd though fully aware of their presence, stood a man. Stepping slowly into the closet, he yelled. As loud as he dared, he finally gave voice to the one sentence, the one doubt. Held inside for months, now bursting forth as quickly as the child five weeks before, he choked out, “I do not understand.”

And then, acting as if he were the strong one in a marriage of strong ones, in a family of strong ones, he walked back downstairs and out into the car waiting for the ride to the cemetery.”

In spite of myself, I was intrigued. These beads were becoming a necklace. There is a story in this madman, I thought, though I am still not sure where it goes.

I sat down.

The man was still drinking coffee, though it must be as cold as the...I shuddered at my own thoughts. He glanced up at me. I could not break the silence. I could not leave. I could not speak of my career in the presence of this pain, yet the man was showing no emotion.

Finally, I asked about the child.

“Once upon a time, a child was born. For those who believe in ill-fated stars, the night was bright. As most parents prepared for birth with a nursery, these parents prepared by visiting a funeral home. An intern on his first night stood helplessly watching as the nurses told him what to do. And then she appeared: hands folded, tiny features, blue, lighter than a bag of sugar. As her parents prepared to say goodbye, she said hello in a feeble whimper.

She had a gift, the geneticist had said four months before, one chromosome more than the allotted fifty-two. That third chromosome in the 18th pair of every cell in her body meant that her life would be short, if life she had at all.

Four months, her mother feeling little motion. She grew large, the mother did, but the child remained tiny. Days of wondering whether there would ever be movement again. Hours of aching and praying and aching.

She joined the family, going home with them after a short stay in the hospital. There were no treatments so she might as well live at home. They quickly learned to thread a tube down her tiny throat to give her the formula that would sustain her. During the next five weeks they slept little. Her fragile features masked hearing that did not work, cries that could not be comforted, eyes that looked past everyone.

She accepted gentleman callers and broke their hearts with her aloofness. She traveled across state lines, allowing three generations to gather at the home place. She lived with no potential to do anything and yet in her living showed that value exists in being. Until the night of Star Wars.”

There was no point in going on with our conversation. What started as stories were clearly his story. Though he showed no pain, the man clearly must be in agony. Years after the event, the pain was still fresh in his body. As he talked, he shifted in his chair, protecting his left shoulder.

I cannot imagine the pain that a person must feel in losing a child, in watching her die. What did they talk of during those five weeks? What thoughts of blame, of dread marked their lives?

I began to wonder about his five year plan. Was he in the third year when his world broke? Before I could ask, he put his feet down. He sat up straight and began to speak.

“Once upon a time, a man sat facing a hole. A particular hole. A hole the exact shape of a box. Once upon a time, a man sat facing a box. A particular box. A box the exact shape of the hole in his heart.

He knew that maybe he should have tried to make her breathe, knowing that it would have done no good. He looked at the tree overlooking the hole. He wanted to speak some word to his wife, his partner by his side. But there were no words, no right things to say.

And then, he gradually became aware of a new feeling growing in his midsection. He was a man frequently nervous. He taught students to communicate, but struggled with his own anxiety in approaching an audience. His heart was familiar with fluttering and right now, something was fluttering. And yet, this feeling was very different than his usual anxiety. It was if he was feeling the opposite of butterflies, as if there was an active moving peace inside him.

The ceremony started, the college professor who was pastoring the couple said something. There must have been some prayer, some words of comfort and encouragement, some dirt thrown into a hole. From the distance of years, however, nothing remains of that moment but the feeling of peace.”

He sat quietly, just the hint of moisture in his left eye. Then he leaned back in his chair, lifting his eyes to gaze into mine. And then he grinned.

We talked, finally, about a peace that made no sense. It was a much different conversation than I had intended, and more valuable. And then I left. When I looked back he was gently rubbing his shoulder, smiling sadly as he looked out the window.

For Kate