

A Journey of The Heart: Discovering Humanity in Inhuman Places

Essay by Mark J. Wilson

It is apparent that the mere knowledge that a man was . . . a prisoner tells us almost nothing. Human kindness can be found in all groups, even those which as a whole it would be easy to condemn. . . . we must not try to simplify matters by saying these men were angels and those were devils.

– Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search For Meaning*, (1959), p. 107

My mind and pulse are racing as the nurse leads me onto the prison infirmary ward, into a world that I did not know existed during my first twelve years in prison. I am not prepared for what greets me here.

I am confused by the big, toothless grin of a man, stricken with Lou Gehrig Disease – Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) – who lies trapped in his broken body, unable to move or speak. A tube in his throat leads to a ventilator. Another runs to his abdomen, feeding him from a hanging bag of gray goo. How could he possibly be smiling?

A rapidly growing brain tumor grossly distorts another man's facial features into a ghoulish mask. One eye is swollen completely shut. An angry, dark purple bruise covers half his face. His appearance strikes me as a cross between a rodent and something monstrous, seen only in nightmares, horror movies and haunted houses.

A man with bright yellow eyes, orange skin, and a taut, distended belly – the telltale signs of end stage liver failure – occupies another bed. He is deep in an animated conversation with someone who isn't here, at least someone I cannot see. I learn later that this is the common affect of a body full of toxins that his liver can no longer process and expel.

Next to him lies a young man whose left leg was amputated just below the hip, in a failed attempt to save him from a massive cancerous growth. The stench of rotting, gangrenous flesh

turns my stomach. Fearing I may vomit, I cannot move away quickly enough.

Another man's catheter empties into a large plastic bag of liquid that looks like dark black coffee. I soon learn that he has bladder cancer and the "coffee" is the result of his body eliminating far more blood than urine.

An emaciated, frail young black man's body is covered with lesions, due to a fatally compromised immune system caused by AIDS. He winces in pain as we shake hands. The most tender and caring human touch and connection have become unbearable due to severe chronic nerve pain throughout his entire body.

My mind is reeling and my heart aches. Each bed is filled with a different form and degree of profound suffering. Death occupies every bed, and everyone knows it. The weight of their suffering, grief and depression presses down upon me like an oppressive black storm cloud. I am quite certain that each of them resents my smile and good health. I cannot blame them. I'm sure I would feel the same.

My head feels like it is being squeezed in a vice and my palms sweat. With each step, the nagging voice of doubt rages louder in my ears: I don't know the first thing about caring for a dying person. What if I missed something important during my recent hospice training? What if the patient doesn't like me? What if I can't do this? What in the Hell made me think *I* could be a hospice volunteer?

I am suddenly certain that I cannot possibly do this. I will surely fail the first patient unlucky enough to draw me as a hospice volunteer. Everything in me cries out to turn and run, back to my naively safe world where infirmaries full of dying prisoners do not exist. But it is much too late for that. There is no turning back now.

As the nurse leads me to a bed at the back of the infirmary, I vainly struggle to push my

fears away and assume a shaky facade of confidence and competence. She introduces me to Benito* and walks away.

This cannot be right. He does not look sick. He does not act sick. He does not seem sad or depressed. He is like none of the dying patients in the sea of broken humanity that I just waded through to reach him. He laughs and smiles, brightly and often. He is friendly and very talkative. He seems to welcome my company and instantly puts me at ease. Benito cannot possibly be the 23-year old prisoner I was told is dying of a very rare but aggressive form of muscle cancer found most often in children. But, of course, he is.

Benito has been in prison since he was seventeen for recklessly killing a 21-year old man during a fight. Initially charged with Murder, he was ultimately convicted of the lesser offense of Manslaughter, because he acted in self-defense. Yet, he was sentenced to a 10-year mandatory prison term without the possibility of release.

Only three years remained on Benito's sentence when he was diagnosed with the cancer that would kill him within six months. Yet, he speaks of his rapidly approaching death with a peaceful resolve. I am amazed that he can be so calm.

Becoming a "Lifer" myself at 18 years old, I fear that I will spend the rest of my life behind bars. Benito's words awaken my own deepest, darkest fear of dying in prison, the ultimate failure in life. A prison death shatters all hopes and dreams – however faint or undeserved – of a second chance; of the opportunity for a new life that is not defined, distorted and limited by the shameful, self-inflicted, wreckage of my past. I cannot escape seeing myself in the prison hospital bed that Benito now occupies.

We talk for only thirty minutes before I must return to work. As I leave, Benito admits that he hadn't really wanted a hospice volunteer, but now he wants to give it a try. I smile,

knowing that I passed my first test.

Back at work in the law library, I can think of only Benito and the journey that I am about to embark upon with him. Racing thoughts and waves of emotion wash through me, as the gravity of what I volunteered to do sinks in. What was I thinking? Will I have the courage to be there for him as his disease progresses? I have no choice. I *cannot* let him down. This is exactly where I need to be.

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Locked in a jail cell, charged with capital murder just four months after my eighteenth birthday, I was certain that my life was over. Raised by loving, law-abiding parents who taught me the difference between right and wrong, I understood the distinction.

I felt deeply ashamed and disgusted, both for what I had done, and for *what* I had become. In the eyes of the world, I was now nothing more than an evil, hated “Monster,” who deserved to die, as quickly as possible. I could not disagree. I *wanted* to die, but I was too cowardly to end my own life.

Seeing that Monster staring back at me in the mirror made me nauseous. Doing everything I possibly could to change my life was the only way I could go on living in my skin. I had to “get as far away” as possible from the *monster* I had become.

I knew that I owed it to my victims and my own family to do everything I possibly could to change my life. That seemed like the only meaningful way I could ever say “I am sorry.” Doing anything less would say that the crimes I committed, and the endless suffering I caused, means nothing to me.

I immediately enrolled in every available prison treatment and rehabilitation program and class: mental health, anger management, and substance abuse treatment, insight, empathy and

victim awareness groups, college classes, vocational training; and spiritual development groups.

As I changed my own life, I learned that I could, and should, help others do the same. I shared my story, choices and consequences with at-risk youth, who attended prison crime-prevention programs. I helped create opportunities for prisoners to meet with people who have had family members murdered or have suffered other violent offenses. I used my job as a law clerk to encourage new young prisoners to take advantage of every opportunity prison offered to become better people; if not for themselves, for their children or their mothers and fathers.

That was the path that led me to January 6, 1999 – day 4,199 of my life sentence – when a small ad in the weekly prison newsletter profoundly changed my life. Prison officials had created a hospice program for terminally ill prisoners and were seeking applicants to serve as hospice volunteers. I immediately recognized this as the proverbial “once in a lifetime opportunity.” This was like nothing I had ever been offered, or would ever be given again, in my lifetime. I simply could not let it pass me by.

Hospice seemed like the greatest opportunity I would *ever* have to atone for my crimes: walking with someone on the dark and foreboding journey of death; simply being a friend to people for whom *nothing* can be done; helping ease their fear, loneliness, pain and suffering, in some small way; and hopefully helping them forget for a while that they are dying.

Today I know without a doubt that *nothing* I ever do or become in life can “make up” for *any* of the suffering I caused as a teenager. Yet, in 1999, I still naively hoped that “atonement” and “redemption” were possible. Hospice seemed to be where I might find it.

I applied immediately, but was far from alone. More than 100 prisoners – from a population of 2,200 – volunteered. The odds of being selected were slim. I had no experience caring for anyone who was seriously ill or dying. What could I possibly offer that 100 others

could not?

After an initial screening, just thirty-five applicants were invited to personal interviews. I was shocked to learn that I was one of them. I could hardly believe my eyes when I read the notice congratulating me for being selected to serve as one of the prison system's first eighteen hospice volunteers. I had to read it a second time to make sure I read it correctly.

Joy and excitement quickly gave way to something much darker, heavier and ominous. It wasn't fear, exactly, though that was undeniably part of it. I was about to do something very real, serious and sad. I was going to be helping terminally ill people "die with dignity." This was nothing to feel "eager" or "excited" about. It was serious, life and death, business.

Fifteen of us (83 percent) were in prison for homicide. Yet, "Lifers" made up just 24 percent of the prison population. Most of my fellow volunteers expressed motivations similar to my own: an unremitting compulsion to atone for the suffering they have caused.

"They took something they know they can never give back, so they are trying to make amends to the extent they can," observed prison Chaplain Judith Steele. "I listen to them talk about it all the time. They are always trying to atone for their crimes."

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I was still quite anxious when I arrived the next day, but Benito quickly put me at ease once again. I incorrectly assumed that our lives were very different because Benito maintained such strong ties to his Mexican heritage and community.

I soon discovered, however, that we shared far more in common than not. Benito and I talked for hours about our lives and the things that mattered most: love, memories, fears, regrets, spiritual questions, grief, pain, cancer and death.

Benito saw my life sentence as a terminal illness of sorts. One day he asked his mother if

she wished he had a life sentence, like me, instead of cancer. She refused to answer such an “ugly question.” Both of them understood that a life sentence evokes the same kind of devastating emotional storm for Lifers and their loved ones, as the grief, loss and helpless despair suffered by the terminally ill and their families. Since I had been living with my “cancer” for twelve years when we met, Benito believed that I could understand and empathize with what he was going through. He was right. We shared a common, painful fate and bond.

When it came time for me to leave, we were both shocked that the evening had passed so quickly. I sincerely wanted to be his friend now and I hoped that he felt the same. As we shook hands and said goodbye, Benito asked if I could visit every day. He was asking me to give him more, but his request felt like he was giving me a gift. I smiled and said “Absolutely!”

In that moment, I realized that mattering to Benito was the *only* thing that mattered to me. Seeing his smile and hearing his laughter filled me with what I can only call joy. For the first time in my life, I felt like someone needed me; that my life had meaning, value and purpose.

I could already feel that Benito’s death would be tremendously painful for me if I allowed myself to get close to him. Yet, for the first time in my life, I wanted to open my heart completely and give all I had, no matter how much it would hurt. As handshakes quickly gave way to hugs, I was reminded of our first night of training when the instructor told us that we were embarking on “a journey of the heart.” No truer words have *ever* been spoken.

Our relationship quickly consumed my life. I no longer had time, energy or interest for anything that had previously filled my days. I was willing to sacrifice everything. Yet, it was no sacrifice at all. *Nothing* was as important or fulfilling as the look in Benito’s eyes whenever I entered the room.

I arrived immediately after work at 3:00 p.m., every day. Most nights I stayed until at

least 11:00 p.m., but on Benito's bad days – when he was overcome by pain, fear or sorrow – I stayed until morning whenever the nurses allowed me to.

Some nights we talked until dawn. When he hadn't slept in days because it was too painful to lie in bed, I spent the night supporting his head with a pillow as he napped in a wheelchair. Some nights I massaged knots from the pain-ravaged muscles in his back, neck, arms and legs. Other nights I just sat quietly with him so he would not be alone.

As Benito became too weak to sit up or move without assistance, I was with him every moment that I could be. He often voiced his greatest fear being the day when someone would have to take care of him "like a baby." But I felt privileged to be able to help him *any* way I could. I constantly tried to ease his fear, embarrassment and shame, reassuring him that I was willing to do whatever he needed, without hesitation.

The intimacy we shared was like nothing I had *ever* experienced. I felt at once exhausted and more alive than ever before. I had never allowed myself to connect with, or care for, anyone so deeply. Every barrier between us crumbled. Neither of us had any need to hide from the other.

At work I could not concentrate on the tasks I needed to complete. It was becoming difficult to empathize with the people who asked for my help. Their legal problems seemed so incredibly trivial compared to what Benito was enduring. I felt angry that life continued as normal within the prison. Nobody even knew who Benito was, much less that he was dying in the infirmary. I wanted *everyone* to know and care.

Family was incredibly important to both of us. Sadly, crime and long-term incarceration often prove much too painful for most prisoner families to endure. Oregon prison officials reported in 2012 that an estimated 8,260 of the state's 14,000 prisoners (59 percent) did not receive any visitors. In the best case, nobody cares when a prisoner dies alone, ending a lifetime

of selfish, destructive choices. In the worst case, that lonely ending is celebrated by those the prisoner has hurt.

Benito and I were blessed to not know such a sad and painful ending. Our families chose to serve every second of our sentences with us, steadfastly continuing to love, support, and encourage us, despite the shame and heartache we caused them.

No matter how bad things got for Benito, his first concern was always how his family was holding up. He constantly worried about them and did his best to always laugh and smile during their limited time together. Benito needed to protect his family from his worst moments of fear, despair, pain and sorrow. He desperately wanted to show them that he was “at peace with this,” in hopes that they would be too.

Benito felt responsible for their suffering, as if it were his fault that he was dying. He regretted making so many bad choices and not being a better son. Now he would never have the chance to be the son his parents dreamed he would be, the son they deserved.

During the last months of his life, Benito’s family moved into an apartment near the prison so they could spend as much time with him as possible. Still, prison officials allowed them to visit just four hours a day.

Each visit’s end was torture. Forced to leave, fearing that he would not live long enough for them to ever see him again, tears streamed down their cheeks. They held each other close and his mother sobbed uncontrollably as guards callously herded them from the prison infirmary. I will *never* forget the heartbreaking image of Benito helplessly watching his grief-stricken parents and siblings being pushed from the infirmary, wracked with grief. Tears filled my eyes each time I witnessed this painful, heartbreaking daily ritual.

As our relationship grew, Benito’s fear, pain and sorrow became my own. I no longer

merely witnessed his pain. I felt it deeply in my soul, as if my own brother dying before my eyes. I frequently struggled to hide my own grief and fight back the tears that were sure to undermine the confidence of my words, as I attempted to ease his fear and anxiety. When I returned to my cell, I wept alone in the dark, for both of us.

I felt totally helpless. His pain was frequently unbearable, causing him to writhe, shake and gasp for breath. One morning Benito's pain and anxiety raged so out of control that he couldn't stand it any longer and he begged to be "put to sleep." I worked hard to calm him as nurses tried to get his pain under control. The storm finally passed, but it left both of us shaken by the realization of the intensity of what was yet to come.

Every day, Benito did whatever he could to fight back against the cancer that was ravaging his body. He forced himself to eat when he had no appetite. To shave when he was depressed. To smile when he wanted to cry. To walk when he felt weak and knew that he should probably ride in a wheelchair. He did everything he possibly could to convince himself that he was not losing his fight to live. Benito and I struggled together, often and intensely. Whatever he wanted – needed – to do to fight his disease, he knew he would not do it alone.

One evening, Benito insisted on forsaking the wheelchair and attempting to walk the sixty feet from his bed to the bathroom, one more time. I did not want him to do it, but he had to prove to himself that he still could. My instructor's words during the first night of training echoed in my ears: "The patient is driving the bus, you're just along for the ride."

We struggled for more than an hour to make the journey. Every movement of his pain-wracked body brought tears to his eyes and sapped his strength. But he refused to give up. Everything in me wanted to plead with him to stop, to let me get the wheelchair. But I knew this was something he *needed* to do so I remained silent.

We eventually made it to the bathroom, but at a tremendous cost. The slightest movements caused Benito excruciating pain, draining all of his strength. His fear and grief hung heavily in the air. We were both forced to accept that he would die very soon.

I sat quietly on the bathroom floor, watching Benito wrestle with his fears. When he was finally able to speak again he asked, as he had so many times before: “Are you ready for this?” I knew what he meant. He was certain that death was upon us.

“What have I been telling you?” I asked with a smile. He acknowledged that I said that I was there for him, no matter what. He then let out a long, heavy sigh and squeezed my shoulder with a trembling hand. “You haven’t let me down yet,” he said. “And I’m not going to start now,” I promised.

Consumed by our thoughts, fear and sadness, neither of us spoke for several minutes as we waited for Benito’s pain and fear to subside. Benito finally broke the silence with a most unexpected gift that I will cherish forever. “A month ago I didn’t even know you existed,” he said. “But now you are my family.”

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When I met Benito, he had good days and bad, like a roller coaster. Early on, there were more good days than bad and he quickly bounced back from the bad days. As the cancer rapidly spread throughout his body, however, Benito had fewer and fewer good days, and even those were bad. Then came a day, about one week before his death, when there were no more good days. He was in rapid decline. Benito’s condition reminded me of an airplane, shot out of the sky in an old war movie. He was plummeting to the earth below. I was helpless to do anything but watch him fall, knowing the deadly impact was about to occur. The only remaining question was when.

As I walked onto the infirmary ward Sunday, June 27, 1999, a nurse told me that the doctors expected Benito to die within 48 hours. They wanted to initiate a hospice vigil and asked me to help Benito understand what they wanted to do and why. I knew it was coming, but I was not ready for this. Not yet.

A hospice vigil signifies the final death of the hope of recovery that the patient and his loved ones desperately cling to. After a gut-wrenching, tearful three-hour discussion with Benito and his family, he reluctantly agreed to the vigil and we moved him to a private room in the infirmary where his parents and I would stay with him until he died.

Prison rules allowed only two family members to stay throughout the entire vigil. So Benito's brother and sister were forced to wait until the next day's visiting session, desperately praying that he would live long enough to see him again; fearing he would not. My heart ached for them. It seemed so incredibly unfair and wrong, that I – a complete stranger just weeks earlier – was allowed to stay with him around the clock, but his brother and sister were permitted just four hours a day with their dying brother.

Even as his death drew closer, Benito tried desperately to ease his family's grief. He told them all that he loved them and that he didn't want them to worry about him. He assured his mom that he would see her again in heaven.

Sunday night the room was dark except for a small desk lamp glowing in a corner. Benito's father napped in a chair. His mother cradled Benito tenderly in her arms like a small child, softly singing Spanish lullabies to him until dawn. I silently wept as I witnessed such a beautiful and sacred expression of a mother's love and grief. I felt like I was intruding on a profoundly intimate moment that I had no right to witness. I felt angry that she was forced to share it with anyone but him.

I desperately longed to express my own love and grief for Benito, but I did not want to intrude upon the family's precious remaining moments. This was their time, not mine. I stayed in the background, watching for anything Benito or his family needed. I reminded myself that I was there as a hospice volunteer and I could grieve later. Of course, that did nothing to ease my own unremitting deep pain and sorrow.

As Benito and his family said their goodbyes Monday evening, he called for me to join them. His family graciously welcomed me and each of us hugged him and cried, thanking him for all that he had given us. We told him how much we loved and would miss him. It was a tremendous relief to finally share my feelings for him in the presence of his family. I truly felt a part of them.

At about 1:00 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon Benito's temperature spiked. His breathing became labored, each breath a loud gasp and wheeze. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he called for his brother and sister, in what proved to be his final words.

Throughout the afternoon, Benito's breath grew softer, even undetectable at times, as he gradually slipped into unconsciousness. He finally looked pain free and peaceful for the first time in weeks. We all knew that he was about to die, but there was a deep calm among us. We spent the next hours gathered around Benito, fluffing his pillows, placing cool washcloths on his forehead, holding his hands, and touching his legs. We wanted him to know that all five of us were still with him. Each of us quietly said our goodbyes, and Benito took his final breath at 9:23 p.m. on June 29, 1999.

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Throughout the last week of Benito's life, I felt growing dread as it appeared certain that his death and the anniversary of my crimes were on a collision course. I was afraid that the dark,

painful memories and feelings associated with my crime would destroy everything loving and beautiful that I shared with Benito and his family; that it would not be possible for such diametrically opposed memories and emotions to co-exist within me.

I found myself praying to a God I did not know well to allow him to die on *any* day but that one. When it became obvious that Benito *would* die on the anniversary of my crimes, I was forced to accept that my prayer had not been answered. I did not know if God was punishing me, or easing my punishment somehow, but I had no doubt – for the first time in my life – that God was present and things were occurring exactly as He wanted them to.

This was not the first – or last – time that I was forced to acknowledge God’s undeniable presence at the end of life. On several occasions, I thought – feared – that God was talking to me more, and more loudly, than ever before. In hindsight, however, I think I was probably just listening more than I *ever* had before.

In the years since Benito’s death, I have come to believe that God was likely easing my punishment in some small way. Each anniversary since 1999 has been much less dark and painful than all that came before I met Benito. I have found it possible to embrace all of my thoughts and memories of my victims and Benito and his family. I am able to feel *all* the emotions that come rushing back.

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I was physically and emotionally drained during the vigil, which lasted more than fifty hours. Yet, strangely, I was not tired. I could not have slept if I wanted to. I did not want to leave, even for a moment. *Nothing* mattered to me except Benito and his family. Giving them so much more of myself than I had ever given anyone made me realize that I could have a meaningful life again, despite my past.

When I was with Benito and his family, I was no longer a prisoner. I felt more alive, and free, than I had in many years. As soon as he died, however, Benito's family was quickly escorted out of the prison – before we could even say goodbye – and I was returned to my cell and the life I had momentarily forgotten. I felt like I had been sentenced to prison all over again. I was devastated and alone.

In the days following Benito's death, I silent grieved losing him, his family, and the entire sacred experience. But I also grieved the loss of my new found value, purpose and identity. Now, I was just another prisoner – *Murderer* – once again. I was reminded that I am confined to a world where love and intimacy rarely exist. I'm here because I killed someone, and *nothing* will ever change that. Nothing ever makes up for taking someone's life. There is no "redemption" or "atonement."

For the family of my victims, and most everyone else, *nothing* will *ever* matter but the crimes I committed. My life will *always* be defined and limited by my senseless, life-altering teenage choices and actions. I will *always* be a Monster.

Before hospice I could see myself only through the eyes of my victims and everyone else who hates me. I was, and always would be, the Monster they see. Benito, and twenty-two other terminally ill prisoners after him, helped me begin to see myself differently, for the first time in more than a decade.

If I must die in prison I can do so knowing that at least for them, my life was not defined by the senseless murder I committed. I was not a Monster, in their eyes. The *only* thing that mattered to them was the difference I was able to make in their lives and deaths.

"Mark, you have been like an angel to us. You were there for him when we couldn't be," wrote Benito's sister the morning after his death. "He would always tell my mother with so much

amazement how incredible you were. He didn't understand how you could be so kind to him without knowing him. You are practically *familia* to us. You are always in our thoughts and prayers.”

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Benito left an indelible mark on my life. I miss him terribly, yet he is still with me every day and always will be. Remembering his life and death has given me strength in my darkest, most painful moments.

In the end, I am quite certain that Benito gave me *far* more than I ever gave him. He taught me more about life, love and myself in our thirty-six days together than most people ever learn in a lifetime.

I so wish that I would have learned those lessons long before hurting so many people. In my struggle to overcome my past and to put the needs of others before my own, my life has been dramatically altered.

“There are evil people in the world, and many of the inmates we meet have been guilty of vicious acts,” admits national hospice expert Ira Byock, MD. “But recognizing the presence of evil, I also recognize where it is not. Whatever they did and however wicked they may have been in the past, the patients and hospice volunteers I have met are far from evil now.”

I am a person who did things that caused tremendous suffering. I was undeniably a Monster when I did those things. Nothing will *ever* change that. But I am also a person who showed love and kindness to sick and dying people, in hopes of easing their suffering. Nothing will ever change that, either. Both aspects of my identity are objectively true. Both are, and always will be, a part of who I am. Yet, neither will ever be the totality of who I am, no matter how much I, or others, want to emphasize one, and deny the other, to define me. Benito and all

the other patients I was privileged to work with helped me learn to accept and embrace both aspects of my humanity.

Today, things that were once important to me no longer hold value, while things I once ignored are now of the utmost importance. Benito taught me that life is precious and so is what I do with it. In sharing his death with me, Benito taught me how to live, and to love. He made me understand that I can have a meaningful life, despite my crime and my sentence, by simply using my life to touch someone else's in a way that could not have otherwise been achieved. Despite serving life in prison, I now strive to ease suffering rather than cause it. I try to live a meaningful life of love and kindness toward others. In the end, nothing else matters.

* = Name changed to protect his family's privacy
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