

Matthew 20: 16

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."



HE IS IN MY ARMS

Anthony's Story

***The Lord lifts up
the humble and
downtrodden...***

Psalm 147: 6

In a perfect world, God's commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself", if followed, would definitely change the landscape of society that currently includes many individuals that are in the category of being labeled as downtrodden. Certainly, given this utopian environment, the challenge of nursing home residents being left without family support would cease to exist.

Unfortunately, since this is currently only a dream at best, often times this volunteer is asked to walk beside residents lacking contact from family members until their earthly life comes to a close. Thus, before Anthony's story of a journey between two strangers begins, it is important to become acutely aware of exactly how high and thick the wall of self-protection has been built in the hearts of people that are simply trying to survive in a cruel world with manmade rules.

Hence, Anthony's story will not only stress the dire plight faced by the downtrodden in this world, but also show how the Almighty views their importance as members of his creation. Above all, it is the writer's greatest hope that lessons are learned and positive action taken on behalf of those finding themselves in the same situation as Anthony.

Anthony's Story

This special man's heartwarming story began after the nursing home activity director quickly noted Anthony's lack of visitors and the enormous number of hours each day he spent in bed. Therefore, out of concern for his mental state of mind, he immediately requested the writer to accept the enormous challenge of walking beside Anthony for the duration of his life. Prior preparation regarding his state of mind set the stage for facing a man that, although very lonely, would strongly resist interacting with a stranger.

Therefore, feeling a “wee” bit nervous, this volunteer gingerly entered Anthony’s room discovering a very large bedridden man peering back through direct, piercing, enormous brown eyes. Thus, when his greeting of, “What do YOU want” loudly vibrated off the empty walls, it resulted in the volunteer literally shaking in her shoes and redefining the word “CHALLENGE”. In no uncertain terms, he sent the message that he did not intend to cooperate with anyone. Support? No way! Be gone! Off with you! And...don’t come back!

Having deeply internalized Anthony’s message of rejection the week before, when Thursday’s volunteer day rolled around once again, needless to say, this writer had an abundance of trepidation regarding the scheduled visit with him. In fact, an absurd visualization of the wolf in the story “Little Red Riding Hood” moved into a place of prominence in the writer’s brain. The words, “All the better to eat you with, my dear,” suddenly became a reality.

Consequently, after forcing two reluctant feet down the hallway toward his room, the writer found herself standing out of sight beside his door talking out loud to herself using words of encouragement as to why it was important to face the large, abrasive personality waiting to devour all visitors. Thus, after a deep breath of fresh air, an entrance was made! Folks, not only was Anthony’s response the same as the previous week but was even delivered in a more ominous manner. Given the abrasive tone of this resident, the writer’s shoes probably left tracks on the floor that appeared not only deep but also glowed with the appearance of white lightning. Oh, how proud of himself he must have felt! Are you picturing his sinister smile at this point?

Considering the two overpowering meetings above, are you placing bets on the writer’s actions for the following scheduled visit with Anthony? Don’t be so quick to judge this old girl! After all, having neglected to tell you that her father’s favorite comment to his children was, “I did not raise any quitters” will come into play! That parental teaching, plus being endowed by the Creator with an overabundance of tenacity must be considered as a part of the equation.

So, on Thursday the following week, finding herself in the same position outside Anthony’s door in deep contemplation as to all possible options, she surprised herself by stating out loud, “I have nothing to lose. If he kicks me out this time, three strikes, the game is over. Get creative. Do the unusual and take him off guard!”

For that reason, this writer made a grand entrance into his room by breaking into a soft shoe dance from his door all the way until she reached his bedside. Stopping with a grand gesture of hands held high in the air, she quickly noted a tiny smile playfully tickling his left lower lip. GOT YOU! And...that was the beginning of a wonderful friendship between two very unlikely characters.

Ladies and gentlemen, the description of Anthony you just read above was totally inaccurate. The individual that roared like a lion turned out to be that of a sweet, gentle little lamb. He had a tender heart and loving spirit that will always be a part of this writer’s life. He absolutely

adored classical music because of having heard the city orchestra at his school during his 6th grade year; feelings that would stay with him for his entire life.

Over time, he described living in the “projects”, low income housing for the poor, as being extremely dangerous; causing him to develop his loud and dangerous demeanor as a weapon against the enemy. However, in spite of this upbringing, he never voiced a complaint against his parents or circumstance.

In fact, Anthony would smile great big as he told about being a young boy and riding the rails to watch his “St. Louis Cardinals” play ball. Then, with his voice becoming more dramatic, he would relay that on one particular night, the game had gone into extra innings causing him to miss the last train to his connection toward home. Realizing he was in trouble, his words were, “Being a sissy, I stood there and cried like a baby.” Then, his expression became animated as he revisited the story of a large pink Cadillac pulling up and hearing the voice of his hero, Stan Musial, ask if he could drive him to his missed connection. What a night for a little boy! And...the result of that incident propelled him to become a security guard for those Cardinals as his career. Out of pride for his successful career, the one possession he kept in the drawer of his bedside table was the badge he used to wear proudly on the left shoulder of his uniform each and every day.

Folks, getting to know this intelligent man allowed the writer to explore a wide range of topics; such as hundreds of insects and animals that made their home in Missouri, as well as a thorough understanding of the cities where lightning strikes the most frequently. When he listened to stories penned by the writer, his tender emotions would cause his eyes to be filled with tears.

Then, when Christmas rolled around one year, the activity director and writer conspired together regarding the decorating of Anthony’s bare walls. Thus, as a very Merry Christmas celebration for him, Santa, the writer and activity director entered his room singing and rejoicing while weighted down with an abundance of gifts. Without his knowledge, the badge he had worn as a security guard had been removed from his room and returned after having been mounted on red velvet and framed for hanging on his wall. Later, it was such a treat to watch him direct the nursing home staff member as to the exact location the other purchased decorations were to be placed.

Over the course of being together on many Thursdays, the writer told him a story about her father using a very unique way of telling his daughters to behave themselves. As each teenage girl left for an activity, he would smile and say, “Keep your nose clean and your socks pulled up!” In short, that meant think before you act.

After hearing the tale, Anthony laughed heartily at the strange humor and would mention it at the end of our time together each week. Therefore, since he loved this expression so much, before departing his room, the writer would say, “Keep your nose clean”and Anthony would reply, “And my socks pulled up!”

Unfortunately, as time passed, it was obvious that Anthony's health was rapidly declining. Although he tried to be his usual sweet self and participate in a meaningful conversation, he would drift off into sleep. Not wanting to leave him alone, the writer would simply sit by his bed as a way of just being present in case he awakened.

Then, one Thursday upon entering his room, it was obvious to the writer that it would be our last shared moments together as friends in his life on earth. Letting her know she was recognized, he softly murmured, "Hi friend!" Thus, as a way of comforting him, the writer sang softly, prayed quietly and began a hushed exit, fully cognizant it would be the final curtain call of his earthly life.

However, before reaching the door, a faint whisper flowed from his parched lips through the air delivering the words, "Keep your nose clean..... (Pause) Yes folks, this departing saint had reversed the procedure we usually followed. It was his way of saying goodbye until we meet again in heaven.

Thus, with salty tears streaming down the writer's face, she called out in a quivery voice, "I will! I promise! I will!" And....so it was!

A few days later, when a celebration of his life occurred at a small chapel close by that was attended by friends and family members, the last words spoken by a family member still haunts the writer today. The remark was made that Anthony was always relegated to the position of being "LAST" throughout his life. And...he seemed to like it.

Ladies and gentlemen, those words caused the writer to recall the story in Scripture when Jesus turned the tables of the money changers over in the Temple out of righteous indignation. Fighting the desire to follow suit required tremendous will power. After all, can you think of any human being that wants to always be "LAST?" Oh, how this writer's heart was breaking for her friend.

Then, fighting hard to keep composure, a quick exit was made for the parking lot; a safe place for emotions to erupt. Thus, while resting her head on the car steering wheel, experiencing intense feelings of rage and turmoil, a voice from the Unseen Real (Holy Spirit) whispered, "The last will be first, and the first will be last. I have Anthony now in my arms."

Folks, the voice was so clear that the writer looked toward the passenger seat fully expecting to find someone there. All anger was defused and replaced by feelings of peace. Hearing the sweet voice of God offered assurance that the downtrodden are truly precious to the Lord. The Almighty had bestowed blessed assurance that Anthony would never be alone, lonely, or "LAST" again. He would be "FIRST" for all eternity. Amen!