

Change of Shift

A Time to Embrace... (Ecclesiastes 3-5)

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I shall never forget that evening, when my brother was lying in the hospital on the eve of his biopsy. I came to see him after my day's work, at 7:55 PM (visitors allowed until 8 PM). He started to talk, with obvious difficulties. My training in emergency medicine had not helped in making an early diagnosis of his brain tumor. Like any other member of the family, I had been thinking for many months that he was feeling depressed.

He was clutching his diary and had been writing down everything that was happening to him. It was his only way to force his will on his slipping mind, the mind of a top mathematician. So, he opened his diary.

"Today, I had a visit from the head neurosurgeon. He stayed for less than 4 minutes. He asked me what an island was. That simple thing, an island. He was in such a hurry, I just could not tell him what it was. Of course, I *knew* what it was. I just could not *say* it. There were 15 of them waiting. When I started to draw an island, they were already leaving." He made gestures. "A piece of earth surrounded by..." He stopped. He could not find the word. I said for him: "Water." "Yes... water."

While he was talking and gesturing, a nurse peered in, then left. Now, she was back with the head nurse, a small man in his 40s. He said to me: "You are here after hours, leave him now."

"I just came in. I would like to stay with my brother for a moment longer."

"He's tired; he needs some rest," the nurse said.

"I understand he was in bed all day long. Now that I am here, we want to talk together. Please leave us alone for a while."

But they did not move. Instead, another nurse arrived, followed by two men who certainly were stretcher bear-

ers. You usually call on them when you need strength to deal with someone.

"I tell you that I have things to discuss with my brother. Certainly, you have many other patients to take care of, instead of wasting your time here."

"You do not tell me what we have to do. I am the head nurse, it is 8:20 PM, and I am in a position to make you get out of this room," he said in a high-pitched voice.

At that point, my brother interfered to calm us down with a twist. "He is my family physician, you know."

But the little man jumped at that: "Can you prove it?" And, to me: "Can you produce a document that proves it?"

I refrained from smashing the face of the stupid b... . He sensed it. The stretcher bearers took a step forward. They were waiting for a sign from him to kick me out. However, he also could feel that I would fight them and that it would not be right if he made the first move. What made me particularly furious was the fact that they were intruding into our family intimacy. They were robbing us of the last minutes of close brotherhood. Both my brother and I suspected that he would soon die. They were preventing me from helping him to calm down the turmoil of his thoughts (and mine) on the eve of a major neurosurgical diagnostic procedure. Outside of my hospital, I was as defenseless as any passerby.

Suddenly, I had the idea of talking to him in Russian, the language of our childhood. At least, they would not understand.

But they would not let it be. Although they could not reasonably throw me out, they could make my stay useless. They did not stop talking, interfering with every sentence we said. One of the nurses did not say a word. I spotted a cloud of shame in her eyes. The other two went on talking.

"He is so funny with his diary. He wants to know everything, he never stops asking questions, writing down the answers. As if he were lost without his notebook."

"Yes, he makes jokes, he behaves as if he were strong, but take his notebook from him and what would he be without it?"

"He doesn't want to rest tonight, it is his choice. But does he understand that tomorrow morning he'll undergo a terrible operation? No, he doesn't. If he did, he wouldn't behave like that."

"He won't smile tomorrow; he will understand the hard way that he was wrong not to listen to us."

"We'll see tomorrow who is strong and who is weak..."

My brother told me, in Russian: "Leave me, please.

Otherwise, they'll make it bad for me..."

I left.

I still shiver at the implication of his terrible words, which are a warning to all of us. Indeed, you yourself may be compassionate, but how is it around you, and what about your own staff?