

Finding Life and Losing Faith

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I can no longer view life the same way as before.

When Etairay introduced me to Storiesspace, I began to search for my diary to look up my writeup about the one month experience with the disabled and the dying. Back then I was a teenager and my language and reflection were raw. I decided to stick to my unexamined and unreflected experience and chip in a few dialogues to make a story.

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/musings/-finding-life-and-losing-faith-.aspx>

As we sat down sipping our tea from our teacup around the dining table, the sister superior welcomed and thanked us for volunteering to help them. The three of us were handed the guidelines, explaining to us the work we could help out with. I went through the list quickly, as the sister of the Missionary of Charity continued to explain to us the things we could help out with. After having spoken for half an hour she finally concluded by saying, "See dear, We appreciate that you volunteered to help us out, but don't exert yourself. Remember, you are all here for a month and it's my responsibility to take care of you. If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask us. You can join us for the morning prayer at five. God bless you." It was afternoon when we reached the house and it was teatime for the inmates. We changed our clothes and rushed to the kitchen where I was handed a kettle of tea while my companion was handed a tray of biscuits. As we served the inmates, we introduce ourselves and were responded with a smile by the one who was deaf and dumb while the other introduced themselves in return. That evening, we were seated on the table, having our supper when Jayson, my companion, commented on how blessed he felt in serving the people. Immediately one of the workers who had joined us for supper said, "Wait till you finish your prays in the morning." The other workers giggled leaving us confused. "Stop that! They have volunteered to help us out. They are new here. Be kind to them," the elderly helper said. Looking at us he continued "We are grateful for joining us. And don't mind them. It's their way of including you in their company." Our doubts and confusion were answered the following day when we were appointed in cleaning the disabled inmates. Savio, my other companion, and I were sent to, Ward three, while Jayson was sent to, ward one, with another worker. Upon entering the ward, I was greeted with a foul smell; a smell that instantly made me cover my nose. I looked around to see some inmates still in bed while the few others, already awake. The workers asked one of us to help out in bating the handicap and without hesitation, I volunteered. 'Anything to get away from this stinky place.' Since it was my first day, the elderly helper, who was

kind to us the previous night, with a kind smile welcomed me and thanked me for joining to help him again. Repugnant that I was, I stood back and helped him in passing the soap, water, towel, and clothes. 'What have I signed up for? Cleaning their shit?' The rest of the day included talking to the inmates, feeding the disabled and helping the sisters in dressing the wound of the injured. I was not physically tired, but I was mentally exhausted by seeing the things which I dreaded. Little did I know that what I had seen was only the tip of the iceberg. But at the same time, I also knew that I had the freedom to walk out whenever I wanted to, but my ego was too high to chicken out. 'I hope I can make through this.' In the evening we were called for an evaluation by the superior and we didn't hesitate to share with her our difficulties. The sister looked at us, smiled and said, "I understand the difficulty. If you wish you can help the workers in feeding and help us dressing of wounds. cleaning and bathing, keep it optional. As I said, don't push yourself too much. God is happy with you." It was Jayson's idea to carry on working and he convinced us that it would be an experience we would never forget. In my mind, I cursed him for letting go of an opportunity. Not only were we cleaning and bathing the inmates, but we were told to dress their wounds, feed and interact with them.

As the days passed by, we got more time to interact and play with them which immediately attracted some of the attention-seeking inmates. Sam was one of them. Sam was confined to his wheelchair as his body was in no shape of any movement. He would manage to strike a conversation with me and often tell tales of his past. He was a cheerful young man with a dream in mind which was still not shattered despite his disabilities. Having lost his parents, he was sent there, at a very young age, to be taken care of. "When I am well again, I will grow up, study and hire all these men in my company." He pointed out to the person sitting in the wheelchair next to his and said, "Antonio will be my co-manager as he is my best friend." "Sure, you will. But for that, you have to eat well and get back on your feet," I said reassuring him. We had to be patient with all the inmates and most of the time I had to entertain them by listening to them and the stories they created. Despite all the work which we did, I was happy enough to carry on when things changed leaving a lasting impression on me. Antonio, whom Sam considered as his best friend fell sick. The sickness was not disclosed to us yet. We were told that he was suffering. Given the fact he had an impediment in speech, I was requested to spend the night in his ward watching over him. I had a hard time sleeping as Antonio was moaning and uttering strange noises which he often did during the day. I was irritated by the lack of sleep yet I decided to sit beside his bed and requested him to go to sleep. Reluctantly, I gave him my hand which he held tightly and continued groaning.

The bed was messed up and I tried to hold my breath to avoid foul smell. When I knew I was losing my patience, I placed my hand on his shoulder and told him to sleep. But Antonio continued moaning, grunting and I knew that this would continue the entire night.

I was tired and my patience had worn out from the heavy work and I headed to my bed. It was at four that Antonio stopped groaning. Early in the morning as we went about cleaning the bed and bathing

the inmates, the workers informed us that Antonio passed away. Leaving aside the bedsheet, I rushed to his ward only to find the ward sister and other few workers at surrounding his bed.

The sister was uttering some prayers while the workers joined it. After the prayer ended I approached sister and narrated her the incident. She smiled at me and said, "There was nothing we could do. He was suffering from a tumour; final stage. We did our best, but ultimately it is God who makes the decision." I silently walked to the chapel and took my place in the pew. I was not there to pray but to seek a silent place to recollect what had just happened. 'What have I done? I should have been more patient. 'Why did he die? Why did he suffer?' As the questions flashed in my young mind, tears began to roll down my cheeks. I cried. Antonio was not the only one to die. I witness three more death and in no time, I felt my heart grow numb to the events around me. I began counting my days to move out of the place and I grew intolerant to the people around me. I yelled at the inmates at silly things, stopped entertaining them and focused on getting my work done. "Are you angry with me," Sam asked me as I trimming his hair. "No," I replied. "Did I do anything wrong?" "No." "You have stopped spending time with me." "I have other work, Sam. Unlike you, I don't sit in the chair and go around talking about my dreams." I did not regret what I said at the moment. I was mentally exhausted and I didn't care about others. That day, Sam remained silent in his wheelchair just like the other silent lot. It was impossible to avoid him and I felt it was best to talk to him the next day. "Hey buddy, I am sorry about yesterday. I was a little irritated with others and you ended up taking the brunt of it," I said. "You can get angry with me. And I am sorry if my other friends have hurt you," he replied. "So, that big company of yours, can I join it?" I said trying to cheer up the mood. "I wish I could. But I don't think I will ever be able to walk again. Why just walking, I was even told that I won't live long." Before I could say anything, he said, "Wish I was never born." "Hey, stop it," I said interrupting him. "What can I do but just sit here in the wheelchair doing nothing. I am useless." He said as tears welled up in her eyes. "Well, you make me laugh with your jokes, you make others smile, the people here love you..." "You are trying to make me feel better. But the reality is, I will never be able to do anything in life. I don't deserve to dream, it's useless." I was running out answers. I felt guilty for making him sad and discouraged. All the while, I thought Sam was a cheerful person, but it was then that I realized that he was trying to be happy so that people could give him attention. "If I never laughed or appeared to be happy, no one, no one would even talk to me." Sam's question and comments made me think about my way of going about for the remaining days. Even though I felt repugnant when I had to clean or bath the inmates, I still attempted to smile and wish them a good day. Yet, I was never quite satisfied with what I did. The day to depart finally arrived and I still remember the sisters helping the inmates sing a thank you song for the three of us. There was no gratitude in the eyes of the inmates as we were one of the many volunteers who had come and gone and they were used to it. It was Sam who had tears in his eyes. "Will you be coming back?" he asked. "I will try my best to come back," I replied with a smile. "But, what if you don't? I don't know how long I will be alive. And once I am dead, I will be all forgotten." "Now, if you talk about your death, I won't come back. Promise me that you will be good. I will always remember you." "I promise, but please

come back. Once you are gone, I will be all alone." I wanted to console and assure him, but my other two companions called me. I had to leave immediately. "Next time I meet you, I want to see a smile on your face," I said as I headed to join my two friends. It has been six years since my one month experience with the disabled and dying. I could never go back to visit any of them. Whether the ones I know are still alive or not, is still a question. I've heard the story of famous personalities and how their lives changed when they saw people dying. But for me, it made me question the world, God and myself. I did change