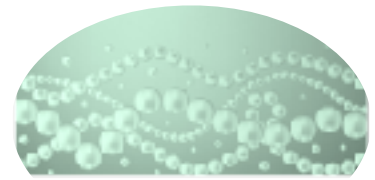


Carry It With You

A Modern Day Parable inspired by Matthew 13:44-52



Joey is confined to a hospital bed. He knows he will never walk again, and will most likely never leave this facility again. He accepts each new day as a gift and although it isn't wrapped in pretty paper, he has somehow reached a point in his life when he doesn't mind. He is OK.

He looks up at the clock on the wall at the foot of his bed. You would think the days feel longer than ever. You would think each tick of time feels like minutes rather than seconds. You would think it feels like several hours for the big hand to make its trip around the full stretch of just one hour. You would think it feels like an eternity for the time of each day to pass. But, for Joey, the days somehow seem to flow at just the right pace -- not so slow that sadness settles in, and not so quickly that regret invades.

It's 6 a.m. -- Marcus will be coming soon. Marcus is a good man. He is young and strong with deep, dark, caring eyes, and a broad, bright smile. He begins his work day tending to Joey. He bathes and shaves and dresses Joey as if he has someplace important to go. Marcus never rushes this routine. The two men have long, gentle conversations that take both of their minds off of the tasks at hand. Marcus listens intently as Joey retells different stories from his life. These tales are never filled with exciting adventure, but Marcus is truly interested. They are the pieces of one man's perspective on living life well. Memories of seemingly ordinary events that touch the heart and reveal extraordinary wisdom buried within. These are not confessions of shame, guilt, or regret like most of the other residents up and down the hallway. Joey has little to show for decades of labor and relationships, yet there is a sense of simple joy and peace whenever he speaks.

Marcus tends to 7 people every day, and opens his heart to hear what each one needs to share. Mrs. Johnston loves to relive her pageant days giving exquisite details of the elegant ball gowns she wore as she sashayed up and down the runway. Mr. Hardy had a long career in car sales and always wants to take Marcus on a virtual test drive. Ms. Angel doesn't quite live up to her name as she issues a long stream of complaints as soon as Marcus opens her door. She always wants to have someone fired for not doing their job correctly. Ms. Betty quit speaking long ago, but her eyes reveal a great deal of heartache and hurt, so Marcus does his best to make her feel worthy of being lovingly cared for. Mrs. Adams loved to cook in her younger days, so she and Marcus swap recipes and critiques of the daily dinner menu. And there's Bob, who has the corner room

with a view of the neighborhood park. He gives Marcus a report of all the comings and goings with a filter of sadness and longing to be out there.

Listening is a big part of Marcus' job as a caregiver. It's work that is both physically and emotionally draining. He has always tried to keep a positive outlook on things, but his perspective changed dramatically when Joey arrived 7 months ago. After the first week, Joey gave Marcus great insight into how he was learning to cope with his debilitating medical condition. Joey asked for one small favor -- that Marcus would help his feet touch the floor for a few moments each day. He explained that feeling the firm foundation beneath his feet connects him to the entire world. Joey explained that although the floor is made of cold, sterile tile and concrete, beneath the concrete is earth. He imagines his feet touching the dirt below the foundation. This brings an awareness that billions of people around the globe also stand on their inch of ground, and therefore, we are all connected. Joey invited Marcus to close his eyes and feel the presence of all the others who are touching the ground at that very moment. And that is why Marcus always visits Joey first. What a great way to begin his rounds!

Marcus gleans one little pearl of wisdom and beauty from their morning chat, jots it down on a scrap of paper, and tucks it in his pocket. He carries that pearl with him throughout the day. When Marcus feels his thoughts growing negative, and when he feels his burdens growing heavy, he pulls out the note and reminds himself there is treasure here. During the long commute back home at the end of his shift, Marcus sorts through all that he has collected in his net over the hours and minutes of that day. He stores what is good into memories. What is bad he lets slip away. Buried under the stack of t-shirts and work scrubs in his closet at home is a box with an angel on top holding all the treasured scraps of paper.