

## Behind Daniel's Door

*By Penelope Thoms*

I am a hospital chaplain. Throughout my many years of serving patients and staff, I have been called upon to solve some tough theological/medical conundrums, some, not all of them, successfully. I have been with children as they died gently and in peace, somehow knowing that they were returning to a place they knew. I have attended older patients with issues of forgiveness and guilt, waiting until their children, siblings, parents, spouse, arrived from great distances to die reconciled to their family and their God. The bedside is a holy place of wonder and of prayer. I know that what I do is a gift, albeit a difficult one to receive sometimes. More often than not, the right words come to me from some source that continually surprises me with joy. My time spent with Daniel was one of those joyous moments filled with the "tough grace" that is part of my vocation.

My pager woke me late one evening when I was on call in a small hospital in Sonoma County, California. I was told by the nurse on duty to go to the Cardiac Care Unit, where a middle-aged man was to undergo emergency bypass surgery. The doctor explained to me that this gentleman had been flown in from a small town because of massive heart failure and the procedure would effectively save his life. However, the medical team couldn't proceed with the operation because the patient, whom I will call Daniel, refused to sign the consent forms, saying he didn't deserve the operation. Having reached an impasse, the staff called me in to talk to him.

Daniel was in his late sixties. A large man, with a face that had seen both rough weather and rough times, Daniel was a noncompliant diabetic as well as a cardiac patient. In other words, he was given a health program and medicine that would keep him alive, which he chose to ignore. After I

introduced myself as the hospital chaplain, his response was immediate: "No God talk, Chaplain, I left the church—or it left me—a long time ago. God isn't part of my life anymore". With some effort, he turned his back to me, dismissing my presence with a grunt. What Daniel didn't know was that he had just presented me with the perfect chaplain challenge: To get to the heart of his ecclesial divorce and theological pain.

"Daniel, it's part of my job to get to know a patient's religious background," I fibbed. "Maybe you'd like to tell me why you, the Church and more importantly, God, aren't speaking to each other anymore." Daniel turned back toward me, his blue eyes challenging me to a spiritual dual. I met his look and his challenge and so he told me his story.

"My family have been members of our local (conservative mainstream Christian denomination) church for three generations. My grandfather helped to build the original building. My father and mother were part of the choir and active in the community. When I married and had children, my family all joined in the activities and educational groups that were offered." Daniel paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. His eyes left mine, wandering up to the ceiling, as he searched for the right words. I held my breath, trying to disappear, not wanting him to retreat into his silence and animosity towards God.

"Things went pretty good. When I fell sick, after my first heart attack, the ladies brought casseroles and the men helped by doing any heavy chores that needed doing. My wife became a Sunday School teacher and the kids seemed okay hanging out at the various socials and picnics that we had together. It was a large congregation and there was plenty of opportunity to meet other young people. So I was glad about that. I was keeping pretty much to my medical program then and I felt that I was part of a larger family and that God was watching out for all of us." I nodded, not knowing what rug would be pulled out from under him. Over the years, I have come

to acknowledge that in any church community, as in any family, the possibility of disappointment, fear and loss lies as close to the surface as the moments of affirmation and comfort. Once we recognize this truth, it is easier to live together.

"As I said, we always went to the education classes, at least I did." At this point, Daniel's eyes misted and he took a deep breath. "One class we were asked to visualize that God was standing behind a door and we were supposed to open it and describe what we saw. That's when it happened. I really screwed up. I'm almost too embarrassed to tell you what I saw."

"Daniel, there's nothing that surprises me when it comes to how people see God." Although this is essentially true, I did briefly imagine some kind of demonic possession!

"Well, this will", he chuckled. "I saw a dog."

"A dog?"

"Well not any dog. My dog. My dog Molly, who had just died. The teacher didn't think that was the right answer and I guess it wasn't; but that was what I saw and I told him so. He suggested I go home and think about how I saw God. I went home. And I never went back." Daniel sobbed silently, his big shoulders shaking.

I waited until he could breathe again. "Tell me about Molly."

"Well, she was a collie mix. I found her at the pound and she was the best dog our family could have had. She protected the children when they were little—herding them all over the yard, worrying over them and keeping them from harm. I traveled a lot then and she was great company for my wife, who never felt alone when Molly was with her. And she loved me unconditionally, although I wasn't always the best father or husband. No matter what I looked like or how my day had been, Molly always greeted me with love, wagging her tail, jumping around like I was some sort of star, which I guess I was to her. And another thing, when I sat on a rock with

Molly, I always felt full—if you can understand that. I didn't crave anything bad for me like I do now. Strange, but she just about filled my stomach as well as my heart!"

I thought about what Daniel had just told me. I too have had many dogs who "filled me" with their love. "Let me see. Molly gathered and worried about your children, comforted your wife in her loneliness, and loved you unconditionally, while keeping you "full". Sounds like Molly and God had a lot in common. In fact, it sounds like Molly is always with you in your heart, just as God is. And she would want you to have your operation and go home to your family. Well, Daniel, so does God. I think what was behind your door was absolutely perfect."

Daniel looked at me in wonder and smiled. "You think so? Well I guess I better have that operation then."

And so he did. He came back to see me once and brought "Molly Two" with him along with his family. He had lost weight and looked fit. I asked him if he felt "full" these days and he laughed and told me he did.

As I write this, my collie Rosie is beside me. I look in her big brown eyes and see love and trust. She places her paw on my knee as I place my hand in that of the One who created all creatures, great and small. And yes, I often see the love of God in her eyes as I have in the eyes of Spec, Buck, Moose, Clare, Max, Cindy and Trina.