

Yaron Sidney Butterfield

The Blue Toque

ADVENTURES IN PERU

“He dead!” a woman screamed in broken English pointing to the floor above while handing Zac and I a pair of thin dish washing gloves. That explained all the mayhem we saw when we first entered the care home in the poor area of the city moments earlier. With people all around talking in Spanish, it was hard to figure out what was going on. Then a man motioned us to follow him.

I think he wants us to go help,” Zac, my fellow volunteer, says with a confused look on his face. There didn’t seem to be anyone taking control of what was happening in this rundown hospice for cancer patients. The flimsy gloves offered questionable protection and made things even more stressful. Zac’s tore while he quickly put them on.

“Upstairs! Upstairs!” the man yelled pointing up. Thoughts were racing through my head about what we might see as we squeezed up a tight spiral staircase at the back of the building. We entered a dirty room and I was hit by an awful smell. There was another man at the foot of the bed and dry blood on the floor. Partially wrapped in bloody sheets, a man in his 60s or so with his torso partially exposed was moaning. He was clearly not dead.

Zac and I stood there for second as the two men spoke frantically. They covered the ailing man with the blanket and put their hands under his stomach and shoulders. Realizing they were trying to carry the man, Zac instinctively grabbed the man’s feet while I quickly put my hand under his head and upper back. We lifted him and struggled to carry him down the stairwell, going slow as we were careful to avoid putting the man in any more pain than he was already experiencing.

The bed sheet ended up covering his face as we moved. I pulled it back so he could see as I awkwardly attempted to hold his head. His trembling eyes glanced directly at mine in fear and I'm sure he saw the fear in my eyes. Based on the look on his face, I imagined him screaming but clearly he had no energy for that. As our eyes connected, I sensed his plea for help. I put my hand on his forehead, closed my eyes and quickly said the Shema. The Shema is a Hebrew blessing of the infinite potential for healing and rectification of both the physical and spiritual bodies. I didn't know if the prayer would do anything but in my imagination, he felt comforted.

We got to the floor and turned into the main area where people were sitting in chairs on each side of the only other room in this building. I looked around for Nancy but she was nowhere. Lynn, one of the volunteers, was comforting a young girl, Yosmely who wore a toque to hide her bald head resulting from chemotherapy. Everyone appeared numb and emotionless as if this wasn't the first time they had seen this. And yet I felt a sense of comfort from them directed to the man. We carried the groaning man through the front door and placed him on the ground outside. There was no staff. No care team. Our volunteer leader was on the phone, perhaps calling 911.

We flagged a police car that was driving by that appeared as if it was not going to stop. The two officers seemed uninterested in helping as it wasn't until someone spoke to them that they got out of the car. The two officers walked to the man and slowly assessed things. They eventually agreed to take the man and with our help placed him into the back seat. Perhaps they noticed the volunteer tags Zac and I were wearing. I wondered, was the man's face covered up again? Did he have any idea what was happening? His feet were still sticking out of the car which I brought to one of the officers attention. The police car slowly drove away after.

I felt lost as if I was in some other dimension. I bent down with my hands on my head trying to grasp what just happened. Zac came up to me and put his hand on my back to comfort me.

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I had met Zac and a number of others from all over North America the week before. I certainly didn't know what I would experience when I landed in Lima, Peru. We had joined a program meant to give people who been through the cancer experience the opportunity to go to communities throughout the world to volunteer. We called ourselves a tribe.

I am a rare long term survivor of a devastating type of brain cancer. I was at the height of my career in 2003, heavily involved in the genome sequencing of the deadly SARS coronavirus which led to international headlines. Ten months later, I collapsed with a grand mal seizure and was subsequently diagnosed with glioblastoma. This was the same cancer that took the life of our beloved artist Gord Downie. I had survived almost 16 years.

I was excited to meet the group I'd be volunteering with, most of who were from the US. Our home base was in an artistic district of Lima called Barranco. I was lucky to be placed in a room with Duane, a cool dude from Chicago who always aimed to dress in style. We volunteered in the mornings and in afternoons had various healing and learning sessions, tours of the city and free time to explore Lima. I enjoyed especially enjoyed the Peruvian wine.

A few of us were assigned to a cancer care home, where patients all over Peru came to receive treatment. On the first morning, our leader helped us with basic Spanish but I wasn't able to concentrate. Perhaps due to a lack of sleep because of Duane's snoring all night, my stomach

was uncomfortable and my head felt strange. No more than 20 minutes after arriving at the home, I told our leader I needed to rest. I went to the van and tried to get into a comfortable position. My headache got worse; my stomach ached and felt a little nauseous. So they took me back to home base where I slept until late afternoon.

The next day I felt much better. At the care home, Zac, Lynn and I sat together with a few women and a couple young girls and knitted small pieces of art together. Lynn, perhaps infected with Yosemely's smile, spent much time with her. She was being treated for leukemia. Another older woman was dressed in many colours and I sensed a certain wisdom and love from her. She spoke the indigenous language, Quechua. I made sure to do a selfie with her.

At one point I sat beside someone who I found out was in the middle of treatment for brain cancer. She couldn't speak English so I pointed to my head to indicate I had had brain cancer also. She wrote down her name, Nancy, and her diagnosis: cerebral meningioma. She was knitting with blue yarn and she also helped me try to knit a circular design but I wasn't very successful.

At the end of the first week, overloaded with all we had experienced, we flew to Cusco and hiked in Machu Picchu. I continually took photos to capture every moment. I had picked up some altitude sickness pills for this part of the trip. Though I hadn't really intended to take them, I checked my bag just to see the pills and what the instructions were. To my surprise, there were only 3 of the 5 pills I was given. I was supposed to take half a pill twice per day. Then I noticed there were more of my anti-seizure pills than there should have been by that point. It hit me. I realized that I must have taken two altitude sickness pills by mistake that first week instead of the anti-seizure pills. I was sure that that was

why I felt the way I did that morning at the care home. I sighed. Things could have been much worse if I had a seizure.



I stood up slowly and looked at Zac. He looked at me shaking his head in confusion. I wandered back inside where other patients were and noticed Nancy wasn't there. I was hoping to comfort her. Or perhaps I was hoping for her to comfort me. Still on an adrenaline rush, I decided to walk back upstairs to the room from which we grabbed the man. The nasty smell hit me again and a man walked out with his hand holding his nose. There was a bunk bed on the other side of the room. Would people sleep there that night with a bloody floor all around them? There were a couple buckets of soap and a mop which I grabbed and tried to wash the floor as best I could. Perhaps this was the same soap used to wash the patient I wondered. My understanding was that he must have been there suffering for at least a day or more given the state of the room. Then I realized that he would have been that way when I was downstairs playing games with kids that had come to visit the day before. What kind of care home was this?

My sorrow turned to anger as we left in a packed van. How could something like this happen with no health care team around? What would have happened if Zac and I weren't there to help bring the man downstairs? I demanded that I be dropped off at a store where I could get medical supplies, blankets, fresh towels and cleaning supplies. Why should people have to be in these conditions during treatment? I realized how lucky I was to be in Canada when I needed medical care. I imagined staying longer in Peru and buying health supplies for all cancer care homes in Lima. When we got to home base, we were asked to take our clothes off to be washed. Mine and Zac's were partially stained with

blood. We decided we wouldn't go to the afternoon sessions. Lynn wandered around aimlessly in the city. Zac went to a restaurant, drank wine and beer and cried. I went to a coffee shop and numbly sipped the time away.

The day after the incident was the last day for volunteering but the cancer home asked us not to return. I was worried that we wouldn't be able to say goodbye to those we connected with. So we went to a nearby kitchen where they often had breakfast in the hopes of seeing some of them. Thankfully, Yosmely and Nancy were there. Nancy came to me with a silent smile and placed a blue toque on my head. When she gave me a hug, I had to hold back a tear.

The next day, I packed into the luggage of my brain all the beautiful experiences from the two weeks. I grabbed as much Peruvian wine as I could, hoping customs would not catch me, and I flew back to Vancouver the next day.

I wear the blue toque every now and then and often wonder how the sick man was doing. I think about one day returning to Lima. I should learn Spanish too.