

Disempowerment and Healing

An experience of hospitalization

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By Paul Beasley-Murray

Two days ago I returned home after having spent my very first three nights in hospital. Grateful as I am for the care shown to me, I confess that I returned home questioning one aspect of that care, namely: is disempowerment a necessary part of the healing process?

In one sense I guess that disempowerment is inevitable. Ill-health inevitably renders one physically weak and so one is physically disempowered. While we are unwell, we can no longer do everything we used to do.

That sense of disempowerment is reinforced by limitations linked with treatment. For some, disempowerment takes the form of being confined to bed, with the result that they are no longer able to be 'self-caring' and instead have to allow others to wash and toilet them. Others, as in my own case, may be able to care for themselves and yet because of various pieces of equipment being attached to one's body, one is never able to have a decent wash, let alone a shower. What a difference it made when I got home and was able to have a proper shower - I felt a real man again!

However, the hospital system appears to take disempowerment to unnecessary levels. Certainly my experience was that instead of being respected as a person with a mind of my own, I was simply a 'patient' there to be treated.

The medical consultants, for instance, when they did their daily rounds, did not 'consult' with me, but with their entourage. Not one of the doctors I saw introduced themselves properly to me. True, they wore name tags, but I could not always read the name tag, nor did the name tag make it clear whether I was seeing a consultant, a registrar, or just a houseman. I had no idea who came where in the pecking order, nor did I know at the time why I was transferred from one consultant to another. Indeed, had it not been for a surgeon friend who followed the ambulance and then spent three hours with me in casualty, I would have had no idea as to what was concerning the medical staff. At no time in the course of my treatment did the doctors volunteer any explanation. Instead I had to tease it out from them.

This sense of disempowerment was reinforced by the way in which almost everybody presumed to call me by my Christian name. I felt already robbed of my dignity by having to go around in pyjamas which could never do up properly because of protruding wires. Why should I undergo further indignity by being treated like any Tom, Dick and Harry? Don't get me wrong: I am not the kind of person who insists on formality. In my church, for instance, I am glad to be known by my Christian name. However, in a hospital

setting the failure of people to address me formally was a clear sign of disempowerment. Nobody dared to call the consultant by his Christian name. For him there was respect, but not for me, the patient!

And of course, for a first-time patient, there was the sense of disempowerment of having to adapt to a very alien world. The nurses were busy, but surely not too busy to explain the ropes to a 'new boy'? For instance, it took me two days to discover that there was a day room where there were books to borrow and a television to watch. At the very least I would have expected to have been given a booklet dealing with life in hospital, but if there was such a booklet, it certainly was not made available to me

I wish I could say that the chaplaincy team 'empowered' me at this time, but alas this proved not to be the case. True, on my very first full day I was 'visited' by one of the chaplains together with a lay-visitor, but that was a patronizing experience. For just as the consultant and his team had stood over me, so too did they. No doubt their time was limited, but it would have been nice if one of them had sat down in the chair beside my bed and been 'alongside' me. Instead of enquiring how I was coping with this somewhat frightening experience, they asked how I came to be there and how long I thought I would be in for. Communion was promised if I was to be a long-term patient, but no prayer was offered in the short-term. With no Gideon's Bible in the hospital locker, I wondered whether I might have been given some uplifting card, but this proved not to be the case. So, although I was not further disempowered by the chaplains, I was in no way empowered by them to deal with my time in hospital!

Thank God, I am now back home, and I trust will soon be fully fit again. However, the question remains: is disempowerment necessary to the healing process?

Paul Beasley-Murray