

God's anonymous ones

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

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As I enter through heavy wooden doors, I encounter a hush that is understood rather than enforced. I sign in; the woman sitting at the desk looks up and smiles pleasantly, asking me who I am there to see. The smile gives way to a look of recognition as she points me toward the hallway and tells me the room number.

I pass a nurse's station that is more bustling than I am used to. Maybe I never wanted to notice the amount of noise that exists here. Maybe I'm the only one who thought that such a place deserves as little conversation as possible. I pass through the midst of another family standing in the hall, members gathered in groups. They pay just enough attention to allow my passage.

I arrive at the room, but am told to wait outside for a moment. I lean against the wall, not feeling hurried. It is while here that I begin to catch snippets of conversation from the other family. I don't look at them directly in an effort to minimize my voyeurism, but I inevitably gain a better understanding of what has just occurred: their slumped shoulders, vacant stares, pithy phrases exchanged about a "good long life." I've been a part of many of these scenes. There are certain commonalities, but each is still unique: reality altered, disorientation sets in for a time, a treasured companion gone.

A nurse emerging from the room interrupts my reflection, and I am allowed to enter.

At this juncture, her disease has overcome her ability to speak. She strives and strains, but it takes tremendous concentration to understand. I've brought along a Bible, and read a few passages to her. We allow the silence to interrupt us often. I pray for her. We hold hands for a while. Then it's time for me to go.

In this place, as in many, nobody really notices visitors. Staff and other guests understand that there's some relationship, some reason for being there, but we don't say unless we're asked. There's always an understanding: you're here for your thing and I'm here for mine. We'll share an elevator or stand in line for coffee or sit in waiting rooms with a chair or more between us if we can manage it.

We certainly have something on our minds, of course. After all, some situation has brought us together. It might be cancer or a surgery or a broken bone or an aneurysm. We won't tell unless prompted. We won't be prompted except by someone we trust or with authority, or both. In the meantime, we'll catch brief phrases on the way past each other or notice the body language. Noticing what we can from the non-exchange, each of us continue on our divergent paths.

I once attended a lecture by a noted author and speaker. I couldn't tell you the exact content of her talk that day, but we were all riveted by her personality if not the subject matter. We'd read her books and many had no doubt heard her on prior occasions. I brought along one such book for the occasion, hoping that I could get it signed if I had a chance.

I was thankful to see that I would have such an opportunity. As she signed it, she made small talk about where I was from and maybe something about what I did. I don't really remember much about that either. The only thing I do remember is the terseness with which the conversation ended: a beat of silence, followed by a single "Goodbye." There was a line behind me, after all.

I'm sure I took some notes from that lecture. I could root around and find them if I wanted to revisit them. I'd read her written words and jotted down thoughts from words spoken, but my words to her would be forgotten as soon as I walked away. It's easier for many listening to one than the other way around. No, whatever I said to her was like two passing in a hallway, picking up just enough, then forgotten.

I return to that same hushed space a week later. I pass through another hallway vigil of weary phrases and step into a room that had seen dozens of occupants and hundreds of interactions just like ours. I read and pray and am silent, without fanfare or celebrated wisdom. No crowd gathers to hang on our words; no one records our conversation for posterity. We are the other's only audience.

This is how it is among God's anonymous ones.

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