

Conversations at the hospital

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This week I've spent some time with my five-month-old daughter in the lounge outside a hospital's intensive care unit. It looks like the person we're here to see will make a full recovery. But hanging out here means rubbing shoulders with other people whose loved ones are not so fortunate.

The default position is to respect other people's privacy, but some people want to talk. One man hadn't seen his daughter in years but showed up to visit her when she got hurt. When her employer returned his call, he had some questions for them. For starters: what kind of company are they? What kind of work does she do? I handed him a pencil and a notebook.

When he got off the phone, he thanked me. "I haven't talked to her in so long," he said. Now she's right down the hall, and he can't.

Another family came and went as a group all day. But one elderly woman sat there alone each time the others left. Like a lot of people, she would turn and smile at the baby from time to time.

At one point it was just the three of us in there. She got up and walked over to us, and the conversation began as it always does.

"How old is he?"

"She's five months."

"Oh, a girl! Five months? She's so little!"

"Yeah, she was a preemie. But doing well now."

Then her voice started to shake. "My daughter-in-law had a baby recently."

I smiled. "Do you want to sit down?" I figured I'd let her hold the baby if she wanted.

"I shouldn't," she said, stepping away. She started to cry. "My son is dying."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I replied. She went back to the other side of the room.

I'm not sure what connection she was making between her family's tragedy and my daughter and me. Maybe she was remembering being a young parent. Maybe it made her even sadder to see a dad spending time with his baby, time her son didn't have any more of. We didn't talk after that.

There's so much anxiety and sadness at a place like this. It's heartbreaking just to share space with it, even without anything I'm supposed to be *doing* about it. I have friends who are chaplains and many others who regularly put on their collars and head to the hospital for other people's crises. I know that it's a very different experience to be here routinely, and in a professional capacity. But it's an experience I can't even imagine.