

I am human and nothing  
human is alien to me.

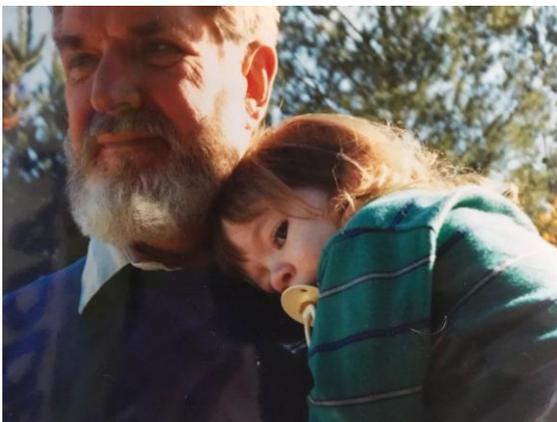
*Terence (185 BCE-159 BCE)*



## VISITING A “GHOST HOSPITAL”

I want to share with you a surprising story about a lot of stories.

Go back to 1987. Ronald Reagan was president. The Iran–Contra affair was occupying our attention. Scientists were working on atomic weapons and space travel. Politicians and evangelists were having

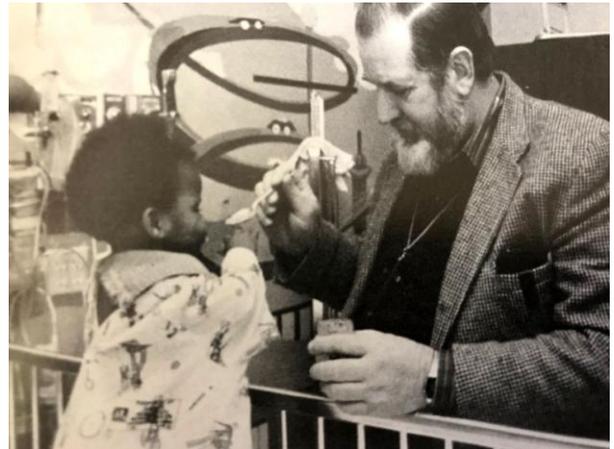


extramarital affairs. Mikhail Gorbachev was the Soviet premier and moving toward a freer Russia. There were severe hurricanes. Although the AIDS pandemic was growing rapidly, President Reagan never mentioned the word AIDS. Some children were found to be HIV–positive — and the lives of those associated with the Starcross Community were forever changed.

We began providing a home for HIV–positive children who needed a family. That necessitated frequent visits to a hospital. We had an auxiliary house in the city of Santa Rosa which was almost a two hour drive away from Starcross. At least one of us stayed there all the time when a child needed medical attention. In this area medical care for people with AIDS was centered around the county hospital.

I am told the original 19th–century name was the hospital on “Hernia Hill.” To us it was simply

“Community Hospital”, built in the 1930’s and pretty worn out at the seams. The elevators didn't always work and neither did the plumbing. To me it always seemed to have a particularly unpleasant orange look to the exterior walls. But, this decrepit building was very much a part of our life for 10 years. We sometimes even had to meet our visitors there. On one occasion the famous Swiss–American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler–Ross (1926–2004), author of *ON DEATH AND DYING*, and I spent an afternoon with three children in our family who were at the hospital so she could ask me about our experiences.



There were stories in all the folks who walked the hospital halls, day and night — patients, families, doctors, nurses, Medical Residents, mothers making responsible plans before giving birth to



children they knew they would not be able to care for, staff, jail inmates, and others. All cried and all laughed. They all had stories and all of us became involved with each other. This truly was a “Community”— a human library of stories!

In time, the pandemic took me to Romania and Uganda and finally back home to the land on which we live. My memories of the hospital had begun to fade. Then last week, a quarter century later, Gaye LeBaron, a journalist, historian, and good friend, wrote a column about the long history of Hernia Hill. The old hospital may now be torn down for lack of proper earthquake retrofitting. 650 agencies and organizations are suggesting ideas for what to do with the property.

Much to my surprise a multitude of stories about the people I had interacted with at the hospital came flooding back into my consciousness. They were tremendously poignant. Perhaps we all have these dusty memories in our mental library. It just takes a trigger to check them out again. Gaye’s writing about what she termed a “ghost hospital,” was my trigger.



OK, stream of consciousness time. These are just a few of the random but powerful thoughts that rose to the surface and overflowed my mind. It was the middle of the AIDS epidemic and everybody who came in and out of Community Hospital threw away the rule books. In my experience, they were mainly compassionate humans and there were no walls. You walked into my sorrow, and I walked into yours.

Our main link to Community Hospital was Marsha, the infection control nurse. She was a person who got things done. Once when she thought people were “too busy” to get flu shots she set up a card table at the entrance of the parking lot. When I rolled down my car window she simply said “Stick out your arm.” I think everyone at the hospital that morning had flu shots!



I remember Dr. Frank running down the hall eating a hot dog, sprinting to get back to the pediatric ward and a very ill child. A lot of people were always running or standing very still.

I remember Dr. Marshall. In this county he was at the epicenter of the response to the AIDS pandemic. I saw Marshall standing between two doors, both of which led to men living with AIDS and now seriously ill. There were families in each room. Marshall was getting himself prepared. He always did the right thing. Everybody always tried to do the right thing.

One time Sister Julie took Nicki, one of our kids, for a routine checkup. Julie wasn't feeling too well herself. The doctor quickly noticed and led her immediately to the ER. She had a collapsed lung. They wouldn't let Julie take Nicki home. The nurses all knew Nicki and took care of her until Sister Marti could get to the hospital. Later another doctor brought Julie a bunch of good books from his



office. He didn't want her to get bored because she had to stay in the hospital over the weekend.

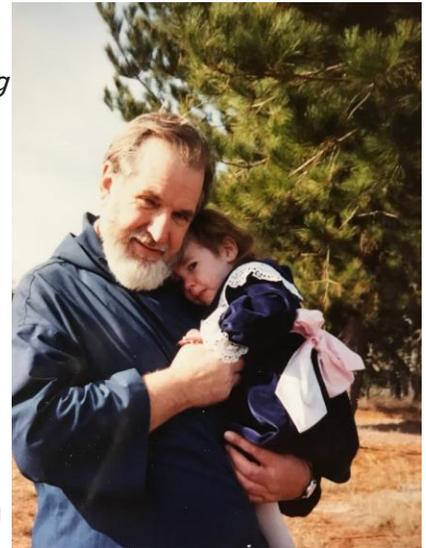
I remember going to the elevator as a young nurse came out of a patient's room. She was trying to hide her tears. An older man with a decidedly military bearing followed her out of the same door, where I gathered he had been visiting his grandson. Walking over to the nurse he said in a firm but kindly voice, “You are in a war but you can do what you have to do.”

The elevator came and I stepped back to let him enter. He turned and whispered to me, “Can you

take care of that young woman?” I nodded. She and I walked out onto the fire escape and watched the people coming and going down below. After a while she said, “I’m okay now.” And we went inside. The nurse was Asian, the old man was African American. There were no divisions in the AIDS pandemic nor in this hospital.

Our friend Marsha trained the nurses and was proud of them. In a nursing text book on care of people living with AIDS she wrote,

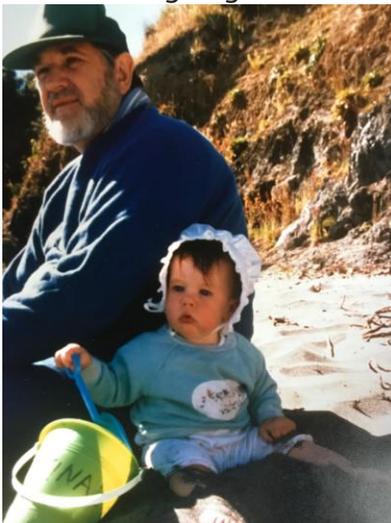
*When the first child from Starcross arrived at the hospital I felt a tremendous amount of joy, personal as well as professional, watching staff members cooing, cuddling, and babbling with that child. She was treated as a person, not a disease.*



On our little Josh's last day, the nurses brought in a big bed and took him out of the crib so that we could lay with him until the end. Whenever one of us had to stay in the hospital for a long time with one of our kids, they would move in a cot without our even having to ask. Also there was a special IV nurse who knew each of our kids and was very quick and efficient in finding their tiny veins without hurting them.

I remember going out to a little garden for a breath of fresh air and finding a discouraged young resident who was wondering if he was really cut out for the medical profession. He has gone on to care for many people in a rural area.

I remember going out an unused door and finding an elderly woman sitting and crying on a bench. She looked up and said, “I just need to have someone with me.” I sat down.



I remember discovering a frightened young woman standing in the rain looking like she was at the end of her rope but afraid to go into the hospital. We went in together. Before long our paths separated but many years later I received a notice of her graduation from college.

I remember a seven-year-old girl living with AIDS. She was in a room with a lot of helpless family and medical people. She knew what was coming and was remarkably at peace. Later, I was asked to say something at the graveside. I simply shared her last words, “Remember me at the parties.” I have every reason to believe everyone will.

I've only scratched the surface of these memories. Now it is your turn to take down those dusty old volumes of memories in your life and let them live in you once again.



An ancient Macedonian proclaimed that all places of healing and of grief are sacred and should never be forgotten. She or he was right and one of those places for myself, and many people will always be the dilapidated "Community Hospital" atop Hernia Hill.

***Brother Toby***