

How I Survived My Halo

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(Philadelphia Yearly Meeting)



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Last March I received a halo, though not the kind the angels wear. I awakened from a delicate spinal cord operation to find a halo brace screwed firmly into my skull. This heavy, awkward contraption would not allow my head to move a millimeter to the left or right. Like old Dobbin with his blinders, I could look only straight ahead. On that devastating evening I didn't dream that I would wear this halo for three months, nor did I suspect what lessons of the spirit I would learn from my stay in the hospital.

Recovering consciousness after the surgery was the most terrifying experience of my life. I felt as though I were rushing out of a tunnel and about to crash into a television set. My left hand was paralyzed, I couldn't speak, and tubes and wires were attached everywhere. Worst of all was the hateful halo.

Before the operation, my doctor predicted that I would be in the hospital for three to five days. It turned out to be seven weeks. So many things went wrong! A breathing tube inserted into my mouth damaged one of my vocal cords so that I couldn't speak or swallow. My usually sound, reliable heart developed a crazy beat that took a week or two to regulate. The incision across the back of my neck failed to heal properly, which eventually sent me back to the operating room. Then I got pneumonia.

Underlying these physical problems was another wound that was even harder to bear. My husband, Mel, died less than a year before the operation. Now, for the first time in 41 years, he was not there to help me through a crisis. It was a devastating loss.

Ground Rules

When I realized that I would be in the hospital for a great deal longer than five days, I set up two ground rules for survival. First, I would not regard each day as something terrible to be endured and checked off with relief when it was over. "How many days do you have left?" I asked myself. "Can

you afford to write off a chunk of them as not worth living because they're not as pleasant and comfortable as you've come to expect as your due?" I could not.

I promised myself that I would find something in each day for which I could sincerely thank God. Sometimes it wasn't much, no more than a tidbit, but as one of my psychiatrist friends used to say, "We must all learn to celebrate the tidbits." I called this the "Giving Thanks" rule.

On some days giving thanks was easy, as flowers, books, cards and letters streamed in from all over the country. "You're in my thoughts... I'm praying for you... Hang in there" read the messages. Friends drove miles to visit me, even though I couldn't speak a word to them.

On the days when I had no visitors, I depended on the daily routine of hospital life to provide some small moments of amusement or pleasure.

The second rule I called the "Lighting a Candle in the Dark" rule. If there was the smallest thing I could do to help myself, I was obliged to do it. Sometimes all I could do was to pump my ankles up and down or give someone a smile.

Filling the Hours

One of the biggest challenges during recovery was keeping my mind occupied. What do you do when you can't read, can't talk, can't work a crossword puzzle, can't push the buttons on a tape recorder, can't even turn your head? Fortunately, with all these losses, some things remained; memories, for instance. I decided to mine my memory lode for all the treasure it might hold. During those seven weeks I sorted through every decade of my life, reliving the happy experiences. I remembered events and people I hadn't thought about for years.

Another thing I did was to develop little fantasy games, which I played over and over like favorite videos. In one, our country was in a depression. I had inherited a big, shabby but comfortable home with a fireplace and a spacious dining room. I decided that my contribution to the general welfare would be to serve a low-cost but delicious supper to 12 down-on-their-luck people every evening.

First, I arranged the dining room, debating whether to have round or oblong tables, plastic tablecloths or placemats, self-service or family-style. Then I imagined the people who might be my guests: a refugee from Bosnia, a couple of migrant farm workers, a single mom from Minnesota. They would all become good friends, and after dinner we would sit around the fireplace for a while and talk. Magda might play the piano while Jose and Carlos played dominoes at a table in the corner.

I spent hours planning the menus, which had to be economical, nutritious, and taste fantastic. When my mind was occupied in deciding between serving chocolate pudding or jello for dessert, I wasn't entertaining anxious thoughts about my future.

After exhausting all the possibilities of this fantasy, I'd invent a new one.

Religion and Psychology

In the interest of surviving with the fewest scars, I drew on the resources of both psychology and religion. Before my operation, a therapist friend loaned me some tapes developed for people facing surgery. One of the tapes advised listeners to repeat frequently the words, "I can't afford a negative thought." This was to become one of two mantras that helped me through. The other was "Whatever it takes," an abbreviation for "I'll do whatever it takes to get well." If a nurse offered me a really nasty pill, I'd mutter under my breath, "Whatever it takes."

Early on I decided to divide my psyche into three parts, with a special job assigned to each. First there was Little Sister. She was to be the Healer. Little Sister had plenty of work ahead of her. The second part was a strong, super-ego fellow whose job was to stand at the gate and keep the barbarians of fear, anxiety, self-pity, and loneliness from slipping in. I named him Big Paul. The

third part was the Comforter. The Comforter was a combination of God, Jesus, happy memories, and loving friends.

The seedbed of my religious life was the Southern Baptist Church. Though I am grateful to the Baptists for a grounding in the Bible, by the time I was in high school I realized that I no longer fit in. I began a long search, knocking on many doors. Some doors never opened while others opened too quickly, but when I entered a Quaker meeting and sat down with the Friends, I knew that I had come home.

I learned to sit in silence, Sunday after Sunday, for almost 40 years. At first it was hard to harness my galloping thoughts, but gradually it became easier to sink to a deeper level of quiet. An appreciation of silence is a good thing to take to a hospital for the lonely, wakeful hours of the night.

Each night after the nurse had administered the last pills and arranged the pillows, she switched off the light, and darkness settled over the great Philadelphia hospital. Getting as comfortable as my halo would allow, I would issue orders for the night.

“Little Sister, it’s time to begin your healing work. There’ll be no interruptions for a while. Big Paul is on duty at the gate and won’t let anything distress us.”

Then I summoned the Comforter, which signaled the beginning of prayer.

The Comforters

A part of me is skeptical of people who claim to have been spoken to directly by God. I know that it happens. It has happened to me. Nevertheless, like Scrooge, I believe that the appearance of a ghost or spirit is often only the result of a bit too much mustard on the roast beef. So I never expected to see Jesus curled up at the foot of my bed or to hear God delivering messages from the ceiling. And indeed, these were not a part of my spiritual experience in the hospital. What I did experience, from time to time, was a sense of Presence, a feeling that despite the miseries of the moment, everything would eventually be okay. In the hospital I found it easier to turn things over to God, maybe because there wasn’t much I could do for myself.

One lonely night during my first week in the hospital, I suddenly felt something squeezing my arm, though no one else was in the room. “Is that you, God?” I asked, “giving my arm a comforting squeeze?” There was no reply.

The next morning the nurse explained that the hug came from a device for measuring blood pressure that had been attached to my arm. For several weeks it continued to deliver squeezes at unexpected intervals, a little like grace. I was sorry when they removed it.

A sojourn in a modern hospital is an experience of living in the middle of plastic disposables and machines that whirr, buzz, rattle, and bang all day and night. The natural world is still there, of course, but days went by when I had no contact with it, not so much as a glimpse of tree or sky. Nevertheless, one night after lights were out, I heard a bird singing somewhere in the vastness of the hospital. My heart leaped up, just like Wordsworth’s.

“What a brave little bird you are,” I thought, “finding your way through the bars of this fortress and singing your little heart out.” I drifted off to sleep, smiling through my halo.

The next morning I asked a nurse, “Did you hear that little bird singing last night?”

“I didn’t hear anything,” she answered.

I asked another nurse, “Did you hear that little bird singing last night?”

“No,” she answered.

“It was about ten o’clock,” I persisted, “and it seemed to come from somewhere in the vicinity of the third floor.” The nurse thought a moment and then replied, “Oh, I think I know what you heard. There’s a little machine on the third floor—I forget what it’s for—but you can’t hear it until the louder machines shut off. It does sound a little like a bird.”

While in the hospital, I meditated about the place of Jesus in the Christian view of things. I believe in God as bedrock, the always-there Something that holds the world together. But this God may be equally the God of the Muslims, the Hindus, and many others. Jesus, however, is the unique treasure of Christianity.

I came to think of Jesus as the part of God most accessible to humans. I can relate to Jesus with all his divinity because he was once human and subject to all forms of human suffering. He seems uniquely suited to be a kind of ultimate friend to us, compassionate, understanding, and nonjudgmental. I don't pray to Jesus as some people pray to saints or icons, but I do believe that a Christian's prayers may be routed through Jesus. Who knows? In my helplessness I claimed Jesus as my friend.

On Good Friday I thought especially of Jesus and of his wrenching cry "I thirst," for it happened that every single day I was in the hospital I thought I would die of thirst. Despite hundreds of ice chips, my mouth and throat remained as dry as the Sahara. It helped to think that Jesus really could understand that particular bit of suffering. I pictured Jesus, triumphant over his earthly tribulations and now in heaven, preparing a place for us. I hoped he was arranging for big pitchers of lemonade.

Prayer

My nightly prayers began with thank-yous: thanks for the years I'd been allowed to live, thanks for family and friends, thanks for the arrival of spring (though my only glimpse of it this year was a jar of daffodils brought by a friend from her garden). Then I moved on to blessings. Since I couldn't reply to the friends who wrote so faithfully, I sent blessings to every one of them. I also blessed the doctors, the nurses, and especially the nurse's aide who dived into the depth of a freezer to find me a cup of Italian ice. Sometimes I even blessed the machinery.

The Big Three

There were occasional hot, uncomfortable nights when Extra Strength Tylenol wasn't working and I couldn't seem to get into my prayers. Then it was time to call out and repeat over and over the Big Three, the three prayers that have sustained me through the years.

The first is the Lord's Prayer. Many of us cut our teeth on this prayer. Simple and basic, it tells us what to ask for, what is important, and what is not. When we say the first two words, "Our Father," not *my* father, but *our* father, we claim God for all of us. In this inequitable and divided world, here is one place we can all stand together.

The second prayer is a universal favorite, the Twenty-third Psalm. I would guess that this is the prayer recited most often by people on their way to the operating room or the gallows. The imagery is lovely, the green pasture and the still waters. When I come to the line "He restoreth my soul," peace settles over me. If my enemies are racing towards me like an army, I picture God stretching to his full height, extending his arms, and shouting, "Don't come a step closer!" Then he prepares lunch.

The prayer of St. Francis comes next. When I recite it, I think about what it would really mean to allow myself to be a wholehearted instrument of God's peace. In this prayer St. Francis looks unflinchingly at the darkness of the world, the hatred, the ignorance, the despair, the cold unwillingness to forgive, and offers a solution to all the problems: Sow love.

Family and Friends

I'm at the age when my family have become friends and my friends family. I like it that way. When the going gets rough, it's our family and friends who finally pull us through. I knew that before, but in the hospital I really knew it. The amount of love and support I received was overwhelming. At different times, my son and my brother and his wife flew from distant parts of

the country to be with me. Friends from all over telephoned, sent letters, cards, flowers, books, and sweet-smelling lotions. They held my lifeless hand and massaged my feet.

They also prayed. Episcopalians, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Friends of several meetings in their various ways placed my situation before God. I imagined their prayers woven into a beautiful mat that was floating up to heaven. When I was too tired or sick to pray for myself, I just climbed up onto the mat and let it carry me.

There is a story about an old prospector sitting glumly in a bar in Alaska. "What's the matter?" asked the bartender, "You look like you've lost your last friend."

"I've lost my faith," the prospector scowled. "Wandered off the trail last week and got lost. I prayed and prayed for God to come and rescue me, but he never showed up."

"Well, you did get rescued," observed the bartender.

"Yeah, finally an old Eskimo came by and showed me the way out."

I am profoundly grateful for all the Eskimos God sent me.

I'm now almost fully recovered from the surgery and back into most of my former activities. Only a tiny scar or two remain to remind me of my halo.

Someone recently asked me, "In view of the crucial role of family and friends when we are in desperate situations, could we survive without them?" After much thought I answered, "Yes, though with great difficulty, for there would still be the little bird singing at night in the vicinity of the third floor." ♦

About the Author

In the author's own words:

"When my husband and I were newlyweds in 1957, we searched for a religious path that both of us could embrace wholeheartedly. We found it in the Religious Society of Friends. My husband's job involved a number of moves around the country. One of the first things we did when settling into a new location was to search for the nearest meeting. Our true formation as Friends took place in the context of South Central Yearly Meeting.¹ SCYM takes in a large area and consists mostly of small meetings located far apart, but the love and enthusiasm of these Friends offers everything a young family needs to get started.

"My husband died eight years ago and I am now living in Crosslands Retirement Center, right in the middle of historic Quaker Country.² I'm glad for this experience, too."

About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

The Wider Quaker Fellowship program of Friends World Committee for Consultation is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows number approximately 2,700, in nearly 100 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and even active members and attenders of

¹ South Center Yearly Meeting encompasses the US states of Arkansas, Louisiana, southern Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas.

² Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia.

Friends meetings and churches. The Fellowship does not charge a subscription fee, but depends on donations from its readers and other supporters to cover costs.

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*a program of the
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