

A Healthy Attitude

Hank is not a showy guy. He's got a very good job that pays well but, based on what he has acquired, it doesn't look like he is putting all his money into "things". The house is in a nice neighborhood, nice enough. The car—well, the two cars: his is used and gets him back and forth to work; Karen's is the newer one, the family vehicle, enough seating for them, the two boys, the soccer stuff, the groceries, rhododendrons and whatever else for the garden. Hank is a hard worker, and reasonable, and balanced, a great dad and a loving husband. He also makes a mean gumbo, attesting to his New Orleans roots; and it was during a shared meal of his spicy shrimp gumbo that Hank shared the details of his newly discovered ulcer. He didn't have much of a choice since his taking a pass on his own signature dish begged for an explanation. He just needed to lay off the three-alarm cuisine, he said his doctor told him. Before I could ask for how long, he quickly returned to the dinner conversation about Karen's job responsibilities, both children having their own schedules about where to be when and about the challenge to fit in school and homework—not just the kids' but his own. He was working on his MBA with backing from his company.

That was a Sunday evening, and I didn't see them the next Sunday in church but I didn't give it much thought. The next evening Karen called me to say that

Hank had experienced a lot of pain over the weekend. I was figuring she was explaining the effects of his ulcer but she went on to say the doctors at Yale-New Haven Hospital quickly realized the pain was Hank's heart, not his stomach, and that Hank might need an operation. She'd get back to me, tomorrow.

She did call me later the next day, after what been a hastily scheduled, emergency surgery. You could hear the exhaustion of the three days in her voice but she said she was ok and that Hank would be fine too. The surgery came with perfect timing. "Thank God," she said, and then apologized for saying 'thank God', "that Hank had the ulcer. It made him sensitive to health issues and accounted for his getting to the doctor fast. What could have been a real heart stopper was averted."

Two and a half weeks later Karen still sounded exhausted. Hank had been home for about a week. I knew from having visited him that he was recovering according to schedule, so I was concerned about the load on Karen. "I will be OK," she said. "It's Hank." I wondered what she meant, he seemed fine to me. "Of course, he did." She laughed a little. "You are both guys, so with you he's going to tough it up. But he is not doing well, not emotionally. He's worried about his job and about whether he'll have to lose the semester, but mostly he doesn't want the boys worrying about him so he's decided he needs to worry about them. Mercy Lord, Tom, (*Mercy Lord* being a pet phrase of Karen's, I am guessing from

her Minnesota lexicon)... it's like he is trying to make up for the inactivity of his convalescence. Hank is even worrying about plans I didn't know he had, like building a deck off the kitchen. Jeepers! He's experiencing his mortality, Tom. That's a big deal. But he can't lose sight of the fact that the surgery was a complete success. He is going to be fine, but not if he keeps denying the experience".

Karen's back and forth monologue, seeing her husband's condition and dilemma from a variety of perspectives, certainly accounted for some of her exhaustion. She was using the tools she had to make sense of the situation. And she has some fairly impressive tools and talents because she heads up a large hospice network. "I see this often with client families but," she admitted, "it hits like a ton of bricks when it's your own family." In the background I could hear her sons cutting up a bit. "I better go, Tom. Scotty and Mike have decided to play hockey in the living room. I just wanted you to know what's going on. All this will settle down but I am smart enough to know that it's important to let someone else know, in case I start acting out too."

A few days later, right before the Vestry meeting, Karen filled me in on how things were proceeding. She recounted having tried to pray that night after the phone call and how each time she tried she kept hearing her mother's voice. "Now my mother is alive and well but God was putting her to work by putting her words

into my head. Because every time I asked God to help Hank, I heard my mother saying, ‘God doesn’t do windows.’”

I knew this phrase. I had heard Karen use it a number of times at Vestry meetings. It was her way of saying that people shouldn’t put their expectations on God, expecting God to do the work we are actually capable of; that it is good and right to pray but that what we hear could well be God’s request that we do something. “So, Mercy Lord, I had the heart to heart with Hank that I was asking God to have. I tried to be gentle with Hank, saying: Put away the deck plans for now, the snowy season is just about here. Take an incomplete on your semester courses. The college will give you time; it’s not like the dog ate your homework. The boys are fine, they love having you home from work. So enjoy them. Take this time as a gift. You’ll be back on your regular schedule soon enough.”

“Then, Tom, I asked him, does that cover everything? And he said, ‘No, it doesn’t. How can I take this time, this heart, as a gift? It almost took my time away and could have taken me away from all of you!’ And that Hank Minster, husband of mine, God bless him, made me cry. But through the tears I still said to him: instead of grappling for control, find yourself in your powerlessness. You are not in control, God is. People can help you—those who love you and even the perfect strangers in hospital whites. And no, it’s not going to be exactly the way it was but it still will be good, with some new good we didn’t know about before.”

“Then do you know what my man said to me, Tom? Hank said ‘I know. I feel it in a new way but it’s still scary even if it is wonderful. I love everything more, and that makes me more afraid of losing it.’ So I said to him it’s all about being connected—on the inside, to each other, as a family, with God, and with enough remaining for others. And he said, he knows, that his job, no matter how hi tech or hi finance it is, is supposed to be about creating conditions that can make life better for people, just as I work with all sorts of folk to help make death better for them and their loved ones.”

She and I had to stop right there; the Vestry was waiting inside for the opening prayer: (But as we walked in, Karen added, “You know what else I said to him? Hank, I don’t want a deck out the kitchen door. I’d much more prefer a stone patio down on ground level.)

O God of peace, you have taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: By the might of your Spirit lift us, we pray to your presence, where we may be still and know that you are God; through...the love and healing power of your Son....With the Holy Spirit, graciously continue in your Church this love and power to heal, to the praise and glory of your Name. Amen.

©Thomas F. Reese October 16, 2011