

METAMORPHOSIS

A Caterpillar to a Butterfly

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I was hired by the Office of Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities (OMRDD) of New York State as a Habilitation Specialist at a state institution for mental retardation and developmentally disabled persons. The cottage I was assigned to was a locked building that housed thirty of the most severely impaired residents, and had a high ratio of staff to clients for support of a new and progressive program. This is the story of one of the female residents under my care. Her name was Odelva.

Odelva had been institutionalized since the age of five due to severe seizures. Her records indicated she was baptized Catholic, but little else about her history was available except recent behavioral activity. Due to the seizures, she developed a head banging disorder which caused a hydrocephalic condition. Her head was quite swollen and the flesh was very soft. The seizures eventually caused her speech to become garbled to the point of being unintelligible. Her inability to communicate caused her to withdraw and become isolated from social contact with other residents and staff. She became an angry and aggressive person causing other residents to avoid her. In the dining room she refused any help to eat. The food ended up in her hair, her ears all over her face; some eventually ended up in her mouth. When she became aggressive it took two or three staff members to restrain her until she calmed down. It was necessary to replace staff working with her every six to nine months due to burn-out or injury. Over time there were hundreds of staff members who knew her that took assignments in other cottages. Due to the many seizures, she lost her ability to walk. When she wanted to go somewhere she slid to the floor and rolled to where she wanted to go and then pulled herself up. To move from room to room she was supported by two staff or rolled in a wheel chair. She had a very short attention span. When psychologists tried to administer an I.Q. test, she was so uncooperative that they listed her as "0" I.Q. This was an unfortunate labeling which caused state inspection officials to insist on seeing this "animal" caged in our cottage. Among themselves they would discuss the need for laws to euthanize such individuals as a social burden; of what value are they? This was the thirty five year old Odelva that was one of my assigned clients.

One of the harshest battles in her behavior was at bed time. She

absolutely refused to sleep in her bed. She always fought to sleep under the bed. State regulations required all residents to sleep in a bed. When staff wasn't looking she would slide under the bed to sleep. This caused a constant confrontation. This was the Odelva that I inherited. To prevent further injuries to Odelva and staff, I instructed staff to place the mattress on the floor under the bed and to be sure she was covered by the necessary bedding. I worked with her for five years and gradually built up a trust relationship, for no one had been able to work with her for this length of time. It was a very gradual process but I began to understand her babbling. It was like trying to learn a difficult foreign language, but we managed to untangle a basic communication. One day I asked her why she didn't sleep in her bed; "Why do you sleep under the bed?" She tilted her head back and gave me a look as if to say, don't you know! She said: "**So the devil can't find me.**" I was awestruck; I couldn't believe what I heard. Where did she get this idea, this fear? I didn't know how to answer. Possibly over the many years some frustrated staff may have made a negative comment to her and caused this internal fear. How could someone with a reported I.Q. of "0" have such a profound feeling? There was more to Odelva than anyone could have imagined.

On my way into work every morning I would stop and have a cup coffee with the Catholic Chaplain, Father Gallagher. This one morning he told me that the Bishop was coming to confirm a few of the residents from other cottages. I told him I had two Catholic clients, Odelva and Freddie, who should be confirmed. We contacted the Bishop for approval to include my two clients, and the Bishop was agreeable. The staff chipped in and bought Odelva a beautiful white dress for the occasion. Knowing what a short attention span Odelva had, I waited to the last possible moment to bring her to the Chapel in a wheel chair. Sure enough, the Bishop was a half hour late. Odelva became upset and started to lose her composure and began to rip off her clothes. I had to move her back to the cottage, and then return to the chapel to be with my other client. After the ceremony the Bishop asked me where Odelva was. I explained to him what happened and he said he would come to the cottage to confirm her. I called ahead to the cottage and had them get Odelva cleaned up for the Bishops arrival. Odelva was confirmed.

My schedule called for me to have three weeks at day shift and one week at night shift. The week of my night shift arrived and in making my rounds I found Odelva sleeping in her bed. I was surprised and I complimented the staff on duty. I asked one of the staff: "How did you do

it?” She replied that she didn’t do anything. Odelva just got into bed by herself. Every night she was in her bed. When I was back on day shift I couldn’t wait to ask her how come she was sleeping in her bed. “Odelva, how come you are sleeping in your bed?” She gave me a very quizzical look and simply said: “**The devil can’t touch me now!**” There was a certain amount of peace within her. Her simplistic comprehension of confirmation was awesome. Gods’ grace and the Holy Spirit were astounding. Sadly, three months later Odelva choked to death during a seizure and died in her sleep. Staff tried to revive her with mouth to mouth resuscitation, but to no avail. This was very depressing to the staff and to me.

Normally when a resident died only the staff and members of that cottage would show up for the funeral. At Odelva’s funeral, the chapel, which seated five hundred, was filled to overflowing. Seeing the large numbers, Father Gallagher said to me: “Deacon, you knew her best, you are preaching!” Looking out over this large congregation it struck me how many lives were touched in a positive way over the years by having been associated with Odelva in one way or another; otherwise they wouldn’t be here. What had we learned from our experiences with this person? She had influenced the lives of so many people. The first thing we learned was a deep compassion for a person whose soul was locked in the solitary confinement of her infirmed body. We all learned to show patience when faced with impatience. We learned to forgive our hurts and injuries as she could not be responsible for her inability to react normally. We learned true empathy, to personalize her feelings and apply them to other clients which made us better caretakers. The only gift she received from God was life, and very little amenities that go with life. Yet in her misery she made us better people for having had the opportunity to know and work with her. We knew her as a **caterpillar**. Someday I pray to have the opportunity to see her in heaven as a **butterfly**, the way God truly created her. In her nothingness she influenced us to be better people. Her life was not useless or wasteful, for because of her, we all had a **metamorphosis** of attitude and received some special gifts that made us better people to one another and to the disabled. Gods’ plan for life is a mystery but Odelva’s life was meant to teach us how to love. There are no markers or grave to remember her passing through this life except what we carry in our hearts.

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