

## Ghost Story

Scott Janssen tells this story:

"For months, as I've visited Evan as his hospice social worker, he's been praying to die.

In his early 90s, he's dealing with colon cancer for more than four years, and he's tired.

His long days of illness have turned his life into a tedious, meaningless dirge with nothing to look forward to other than its end.

He often talks about killing himself.

But today, his depression is lifted.

He's engaged and upbeat — and this sudden about-face arouses my suspicions.

Has he decided to do it?

Is he planning a way out?

"You seem to feel differently today than on other visits," I say casually.

"What's going on?"

He looks at me cryptically.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asks.

It's not the first time a patient has asked me this.

People can have unusual experiences when they reach the end of life.

Out-of-body experiences.

Visits from spiritual beings.

Messages given in dreams.

"There are all kinds of ghosts," I respond seriously.

"What kind are you talking about?"

"You remember me telling you about the war?" he asks.

How could I forget?

He traces his long-standing depression to his time as a supply officer for a World War II combat hospital.

The war soured him on the idea that anything good could come from people.

It left him feeling unsafe and alone.

"I remember."

"There's something I left out," he says, as he describes one horrific, ice-cold autumn day.

Casualties are coming in nonstop.

He and others scramble to transport blood-soaked men on stretchers from rail cars to triage, where those with a chance are separated from those who are goners.

"I'm hustling all day.

By the time the last train arrives, my back feels broken, my hands are numb."

He swallows hard.

"What happened when the last train got there?" I ask softly.

"We're hauling one guy, and my grip on the stretcher slips."

Tears roll down his face.

"He hit the ground, his intestines oozing out.

Steam rises up from them as he dies."

"Later that night I'm on my cot crying.

Can't stop crying about that poor guy, and all the others I'd seen die.

My cot's creaking, I'm shaking so hard.

I'm thinking I'm going insane with the pain."

"Then I look up," he says.

"There's a guy sitting on the end of my cot.

Wearing a World War I uniform, with one of those funny helmets.

He's covered in light, like he's glowing in the dark."

"What's he doing?," I ask.

Evan starts crying – and laughing at the same time.

"He's looking at me with love.

I can feel it.

I've never felt that kind of love before."

"What's it like to feel that kind of love?"

"I can't put it into words."

"I guess I just felt like I was worth something.

Like all the pain and cruelty isn't what's real."

"What is real?" I ask.

He replies, "knowing that no matter how screwed-up and cruel the world looks, on some level, somehow, we're all loved, we're all connected."

The ghostly visits continue, with the same message of love and connection, but stop when the war ends," he says.

"Years later, there I am cleaning out Mom's stuff after she died, and I find this old photograph.

It's the same guy.

I look on the back.

Mom's handwriting says: 'Uncle Calvin, killed during World War I, 1918.' "

We talk some more, then I ask, "What's this have to do with your better mood?"

"He's back," he whispers, staring out the window.

"Saw him last night at the foot of my bed.

But now, he's talking."

"What'd he say?"

"He says he is here with me.

He's going to help me over the hill when the time comes to go." S. Janssen, Pulse – Voices From the Heart of Medicine, modified.

My mom recently had hip surgery after she fell and broke hers.

Coming out of the operation, her face is filled with peace and joy, as she recounts a visit with my dad, dead now nearly 20 years, who came to see her, along with his mom and dad.

She knew from that visit that all will be well - but it took a busted hip to get there.

Fred Buechner tells of a friend who dies in his sleep, unexpectedly.

Not long after, that friend pays Fred a visit, in a dream.

The friend is wearing a blue knit sweater.

The next morning when Fred wakes up, there, at the end of his bed, is a blue knit thread.

Did it fall off the sweater his friend was wearing?

A young man sits in a Kahalu'u church late at night, wracked with guilt for ending his marriage — leaving behind his precious little girl.

The marriage was a disaster, but the guilt is nevertheless all consuming, and nearly overwhelming, because he was raised with the notion that divorce is the worst thing in the world.

Until in that dark church, a gecko laughs — and the young man does too.

Why tell you these stories on a Sunday devoted to the baptism of our Lord?

Perhaps because the whole point of baptism is to help us come to see that heaven and earth, life and death, aren't separated by the Great Wall of China, as we usually think.

I share these stories with you because heaven and earth, life and death, are separated only by gossamer.

By mere spiderwebs.

Or, if you like, perhaps the sheerest of silk.

Baptism symbolizes death, by drowning.

And the death by drowning that baptism symbolizes is intended to help us see that all of the beloved, who've gone before, and the great cloud of witnesses among whom they now stand, are as near to us as our nose.

As close to us as our fingertips.

And I wonder, if when Jesus came up out of the water that day, I wonder if he laughed?

Having seen the great truth that tears and troubles are a necessary tool to crack us open.

I don't know why that's true, but it does seem to be true.

That the agonies of this world, while brutally real and most definitely painful, are also not the last word.

That while this life can sometimes seem like a zero sum game, full of absurdities and pointlessness, the rose still blooms from among the thorns.

The sky is still painted anew every morning — with colors Matisse himself must envy.

And joy, as rare as it sometimes seems to be, still pokes her mischievous head out at the most unexpected moment.

Baptism invites us to at long last see, if only at a glance, if only by overhearing whispers off-stage, that all of life is wrapped tightly in a loving God.

Who knows every hair on your head.

Who holds you in the palm of her hand.

Baptism invites us into that "too good to be true" hope that everything is connected.

That we are, with one another, and with God, united, even if for now we see that truth only dimly, as through a smoky glass.

That forgiveness and healing and peace is the common destiny of every human being, even if that news comes upon ears that can barely hear it.

Isn't that why Mark tells us that at Jesus' baptism, the sky is torn in two?

Isn't that why Mark tells us that the Spirit appears, in the form of a dove?

Isn't the Spirit's main task all about connecting heaven and earth, the sacred with the profane?

I leave you with this:

"Listen to your life.

See it for the fathomless mystery it is.

In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness; touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it — because in the last analysis all moments are key moments.

And life itself is grace." F. Buechner, Now and Then.



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