Why Iâ€™m not a Hospital Chaplain by

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My colleague, Father Elias, began his sermon on the Sunday I was in hospital by saying, â€œI think if it had appeared in the paper that a priest had threatened to beat up a fellow patient in a Sydney Hospital, the most common response would have been, â€˜I didnâ€™t know Dave was in hospital!â€™â€•

Iâ€™ve never pictured myself as having any aptitude for hospital work.

I appreciate that hospitals are an ideal context in which to offer care and compassion to persons in need, but such relationships are always short-term, and hence seem somewhat artificial to me. Certainly I could never see myself as a hospital chaplain â€“ managing a constant turnover of such intense, short-term relationships.

Even so, when I found myself in hospital, not through any deliberate planning on my part but through the unpleasant workings of providence, I figured Iâ€™d have to make the best of the situation and take whatever opportunities the Good Lord put in my path. I was sorta hoping though that Heâ€™d give me a bit of a break.

Maybe it was that desire for a break that led me to introduce myself to the other blokes in my ward as â€˜Dave: fight trainer and former pro fighterâ€™, rather than as â€˜Father Dave: Parish Priestâ€™. Wha the difference anyway? I had â€˜Father Daveâ€™ written on the label above my bed in case anybody care to look, and, in truth, the other blokes didnâ€™t really seem to be overly interested in anybody elseâ€˜s business anyway (God bless them).

Most of the other blokes werenâ€™t overly forthcoming about themselves either â€“ a quiet but decent bunch. The exception was the guy in the bed immediately opposite me â€“ a guy who increasingly showed himself to be neither quiet nor decent â€“ a guy named â€˜Homerâ€™.

I wonâ€™t mention his surname, as I want to respect some confidentiality, but I will say that it wasnâ€™t â€˜Simpsonâ€™. In many ways though it should have been. As time wore on, Homer gave an increasingly clear impression that he was as rude, lazy, unintelligent and as all-round self-obsessed as his three-fingered counterpart but had few of his animated namesakeâ€˜s redeeming features.

Homer would start his whinging early in the morning, and it seemed that the less people listened to him, the louder he became. He would complain about the food, the service, the bedding, the medication, the heat, the cold, and the lack of meaningful viewing alternatives on the television.

For the most part I was happy enough to just let this wash over me, but it was when he started honing in his attacks on a particular member of the nursing staff that I really started to lose my patience.

It started at 4am one morning. All of us in the ward were woken from our slumber to hear Homer loudly scolding Nurse Lee because she wouldnâ€™t give him more pain-killers.

â€œBut Iâ€™m only allowed to give you 2 tablets every 6 hoursâ€• the nurse said.

â€œNo!â€• Homer would reply. â€œThe doctor told me that I was allowed to take them every two hours!â€

â€œHe couldnâ€™t have possibly told you that, Mr Homerâ€•, the nurse replied.

â€œI know what I heardâ€•, Homer shouted in response.

And in such manner the stoush continued, with the unfortunate nurse holding her ground while Homer became increasingly obnoxious in his use of language. At one point he even suggested that the good nurse should go and re-read her Hippocratic oath â€“ â€˜that the customer is always right!â€™

Homerâ€™s knowledge of Hippocrates pretty well summed up the wisdom of his position as I saw it. He neither understood manners, history, nor what was good for him. Even so, if it were possible to compensate for a lack of substance with an increase of volume, he was the guy to do it!

Eventually the supervising doctor was found and the moment of truth arrived. â€œYou told me I could take these every two hours!â€• Homer exclaimed. â€œI most certainly did not. You can only take them every six hours!â€• replied the doctor. â€œOhâ€•, said Homer. â€œâ€¦ I thought you said every twoâ€•

Now you would have thought that this would have spelt the end of the conflict. What other options were there at this point for the defeated Homer except to apologise to the doctor, the nursing staff and his entire hospital audience, and to walk away quietly with his tail between his legs.

If Leonidas, king of Sparta, had found himself in this position at Thermopylae he would have apologised to the rapacious King Xerxes, rounded up his troops and returned home. If Luke Skywalker and his mates had found themselves in this position at the Battle of Endor, they would have surrendered to the nearest storm-trooper and sworn loyalty to the Emperor. If the Devil himself â€¦ ok, you get the idea. My point is that Homer was no ordinary human being. He didnâ€™t know the meaning of the word â€˜defeatâ€™ (or many other words for that matter), so instead of backing down and apologising he upped the attack.

Homer found new reasons to criticise the middle-aged Asian nurse who had done so well in putting up with his vitriolic assault. He focused on the multiple personality defects that he had detected in her. He attacked her lack of fluency in English. He even tried to report her to the supervising nurse for having shoes that he was sure didnâ€™t meet Occupational Health and Safety standards!

Long after Nurse Leeâ€™s shift had ended Homerâ€™s tirade continued to be broadcast to anybody and everybody that would care to listen to him, and his comments became increasingly sleazy and racially orientated.

On reflection Iâ€™m not sure why it took me so long to make a meaningful response. My only defence is that I was rather ill â€“ running a temperature, on high levels of medication and attached to a drip. Even so, Iâ€™m not proud of the fact that it took me half a day before my tolerance ran out.

I canâ€™t remember now the specific Homerism that set me off, but I do remember calling over one of the nursing staff and asking her to pass on a message to Homer from me: â€œwill you please tell Homer that if he makes one more sleazy or racist comment about Nurse Lee that Iâ€™m going to detach my drip and walk over there and break his nose?â€•

Happily the nurse was saved from the predicament of having to actually pass on the message as Homer overheard most of what I had said. He responded with some mild, low-volume swearing that indicated to me that he hadnâ€™t really got the message. I repeated my plan more audibly and added: â€œItâ€™s entirely your call, brother. Keep you mouth shut and youâ€™ll be fine. One more sleazy or rac comment and youâ€™ll find yourself in a pool of your own blood!â€• This colourful P.S. proved rather effective, and an ominous silence then descended on our room.

The silence was broken by the arrival of a mate of mine who had come to pay me a visit. As providence would have it this particular brother (who Iâ€™ll refer to simply as â€˜Bugsyâ€™) is an enormo bloke with a face that tells a story of a thousand pub brawls. Heâ€™s recently found God and is a big-hearted guy, but heâ€™d still make a fantastic standover man. Heâ€™s the sort of guy that mob bosses lo to have accompanying them when they go to collect debts â€“ â€˜rough him up a bit for me, Bugsy!â€™

Anyway, Bugsy had come to see how I was going and there was no avoiding explaining to him the tangible air of tension in the ward. Bugsy thought it was great fun, and he did consider walking over to Homerâ€™s bed and just confirming with him that heâ€™d got the message, but he hesitated on the grounds that he was still on parole, and I think that was a wise decision.

At any rate, I think the mere appearance of this Caucasian version of Mr T helped enormously to reinforce my message to Homer. I didnâ€™t hear a squeak out of him from that moment on, right up until they moved me to another ward about an hour later. Moreover, I was told that the next morning he had bought a big box of chocolates for all the nurses!

And things only got better for me from that moment on. I was moved to a much quieter room and I was the darling of the nursing staff for the remainder of my hospital stay. Best of all, I received a visit from Nurse Lee at the conclusion of her next shift. She said to me in her lovely broken English, â€œYou are my knight in shining armourâ€•.

The whole experience has cast hospital work in a new light for me. I still canâ€™t see myself as a chaplain, but maybe I could be on call for certain special cases that suit my particular style of ministry?

Back at home no one was surprised when they heard what had happened. Indeed, my colleague, Father Elias, began his sermon the following Sunday by saying, â€œI think if it had appeared in the paper that a priest had threatened to beat up a fellow patient in a Sydney Hospital, the most common response would have been, â€˜I didnâ€™t know Dave was in hospital!â€™â€•

Iâ€™m not entirely sure whether I should feel pleased or horrified by Eliasâ€™ analysis, but it did make me laugh.

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Fighting Father' Dave - Parish Priest, Community Worker, Professional boxer, Martial Arts master, Father of three. Dave's goal is to offer an alternative culture for young people, based on values of courage, integrity, self-discipline and teamwork. He is available to help work your corner as you fight the good fight. Visit a http://www.fatherdave.org for more information.

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