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A Christmas Eve Story

by Shannon Adams

ONE OF THE HARDEST things to do as a nurse is work the holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years. Even though the basic personality of a nurse is to assist our clients back to their best level of health in all settings, clinic, community, hospital, it falls on the inpatient nurses to give up time with family and friends to care for those unfortunate enough to be stuck in a hospital during the time of year when all is supposed to be merry and bright.

Through twenty years of nursing, I've seen my share of holidays stuck in a place I didn't really want to be with a group of people who didn't really want to be there, either, but nonetheless, there we were. Hospital units are allowed to decorate to some extent, and patients' families will often bring in small trees, poinsettias, and string up Get Well/Christmas cards for their loved ones to see and help them feel they are still part of a family, a culture and a tradition.

Being a single person not living in the place I was born and away from the family I've made, this time of year

is bittersweet for me. Sweet in that I've been able to bear witness to the remarkable resiliency of humans and bitter in that I don't feel part of the everyday connection of families who live physically close together.

Sometimes I'm given small moments that make up for that feeling of being a watcher and observer. A moment when I realize that there are bigger connections.

Last Christmas Eve (2007) I was assigned an Hispanic gentleman who had been in a horrific car wreck. He had been the passenger, restrained, but his side scraped the guardrail and he had gotten banged up pretty badly. He had gotten through multiple Orthopedic surgeries and was recovering pretty well as the holidays approached. He still had some pain, but was eating well despite the cervical neck collar and was able to be out of bed during the day.

His English was better than my Spanish, but we managed to communicate. His family was able to visit during the evenings, but it was just he and I at night. As I was starting my midnight rounds, my patient kept

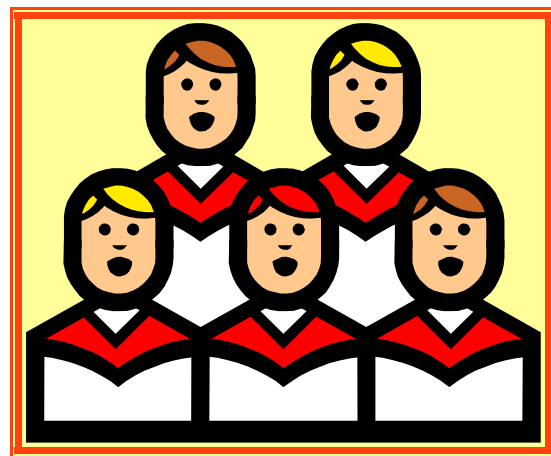
looking at my watch anxiously. Thinking he may be in pain and was waiting for the magic time when pain pills were due, I asked him, "*Tiene dolor, Senor?*" do you have pain? He shook his head no, and closed his eyes while I listened to his chest and tummy and checked his IV site. He opened his eyes again and reached for my watch to check the time. Ah, I thought, he's anxious for Christmas! I dawdled a bit, waiting so we could exchange greetings.

As midnight came, I touched him on the arm and said, "*Feliz Navidad, happy Christmas, Senor,*" His eyes popped open and he broke into a big bright smile, even with the collar around his neck. He looked at a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which hung on the overhead frame of his bed. He smiled at me again, and I could see tears in his eyes. "*Feliz Navidad, enfermera*" (nurse) he said softly. I started to sing the Jose Feliciano carol and he broke into an even larger smile and began to sing along, filling in the Spanish I didn't know. We carried on like this for a little while, smiling and giggling in the quiet of his room. He squeezed my hand and closed his eyes. I turned out the remaining dim light and closed the door until it was just a crack to let in just a little hall light.

The grumpy mood I'd been in before this sweet moment disappeared. How wonderful it had been to see this broken up man who'd endured pain for days find such joy in a minute of

time. On Christmas morning, a nursing unit has a different quiet than on any other night. It's a deeper, more peaceful, more relaxed quiet. As if a Hand had reached down and touched, whispered to the patients, "sleep, all is well." I don't know. When I checked on him an hour or so later, he was asleep, his face calm and showing every sign of comfort. Fortunately, the rest of my assigned patients were also having comfortable nights and that meant I had a good night, too. My long drive back to Kentucky on Christmas Day for a belated celebration was much easier.

While I am certain my patient has forgotten all about me, I will never forget the present he gave me last year. As I write this, I hear Jose singing "I want to wish you a Merry Christmas from the bottom of my heart!" **Feliz Navidad to all.**



Whippoorwill E-Comment, the sometime electronic journal of J. Hill Hamon, of Frankfort, Kentucky, a long-time member of AAPA.