

## *Protagonist Corner*

### *All Kinds of Crosses*

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For three days we were one family. They are black and we are white. They were rural people come to the city at a time of crisis. We were city people lost for a time in a place we know well. The patriarch of their clan had suffered a stroke shortly after giving an address to his church district. The matriarch of our clan was not recovering from heart valve replacement surgery and was lingering somewhere between earth and heaven. During those three days our two families lived together as one family in the waiting room of the cardiovascular intensive care unit.

We came and went in one another's lives even as we came and went from that crowded, dimly lit hospital cell that was our temporary living room. In the daytime, between visits to our mother and father and occasional trips into the outside world, we answered the phone for one another and shared food and drink. We told stories and laughed together. In the lonely hours of the night we talked quietly about doctors' reports and healthcare reform, about loss and hope, about church and family relations. We held one another in tears and sometimes we just watched each other sleep. We waited together, and in our waiting the Norfleets and the Alsops assumed a certain unity.

Although my mother had nothing to do with orchestrating this post-operative vigil, it was fitting company to keep in her last days. She lived a life open to others. In the early 1960's, as a part-time author of children's books and church curriculum, she had written *Hand-Me-Down House* to help children better understand the integration of schools and communities. The book is about two families in a changing neighborhood and how black and white next door neighbors grow in love toward one another. Mom enjoyed human diversity. She loved being a Presbyterian in a Baptist retirement community, befriended international members of her church, read everything she could about Judaism, and enjoyed visiting my family in Atlanta in part because we have a number of gay and lesbian friends. In her last years, understanding sexual orientation was a new vista. Had she known about our experience in the hospital waiting area, she would have appreciated the Norfleets and the Alsops ceasing to see color and becoming one extended family, although she would have wanted to ease the burden of our shared grief.

This was not my mother's first trip to Saint Mary's Hospital. During an earlier stay several years ago, she had been much more cognizant of her surroundings. I called the evening she was admitted and she announced, "I got in trouble with the hospital chaplain today." When I asked her what happened, she told of settling into her room the day before surgery and removing the crucifix from the wall across from the foot of her bed and putting it in a drawer. The chaplain had noticed and inquired about the crucifix, to which my mother responded that she didn't want Jesus' bloody head, crowned with thorns and bent in pain, hanging over the foot of her bed. Mom was not one to mince words when it came to the stuff of faith and theology. The chaplain replied, "That's O.K., Ma'am, we have all kinds of crosses to suit all kinds of people!"

When she returned to the room later that day after some tests, she found an ascending Jesus, arms lifting him up, up and away, on the same hook in the wall. "It's not much better," she told me, "but I'll leave it there so as not to upset the chaplain."

"We have all kinds of crosses to suit all kinds of people." That is an odd commentary on Christian faith as we enter this season of Lent and a new millennium of Christian witness. Are we attracted to different crosses because of our own theological affinities, or their beauty, or because only certain kinds of crosses pierce our hearts with a particular revelation of who God is?

The James Avery Craftsman seasonal jewelry catalogue offers quite a variety of crosses. There's a Majesty cross, a Twisted Wire Lacey cross, a beaded Latin cross set with diamond, and an Archangels cross with garnet. The Adorned Chi Rho cross comes in silver or gold, as do the Tapestry, Celtic, Mission and St. Cecelia crosses. The Passion cross and the Christ the King cross are silver and gold together. La Primavera Cross was new to me. The square shaped Abundant Love cross is similar to a Jerusalem cross, and both are a bit more graceful than the Beacon cross with rays of light going out from a central source. If none of those suit your fancy there's a Greek cross with Heart and a Silver Heart with Gold Cross, and the Serenity cross is sweet. Indeed, there are all kinds of crosses to suit all kinds of people. Like my mother, I've always liked a very plain cross as a reminder of the unfathomable emptiness of the tomb.

When I made my last trip from the cardiovascular waiting room back to my mother in intensive care with my brothers and sister for our final good-bye and her death, I noticed for the first time what hung on the wall by her bed. It was not a cross at all but a statue of Jesus. His arms were down and outstretched in a sort of "come unto me" pose.

I realize now that all of the crucifixes and crosses, in their varied nuances of theological significance, are meant to remind us precisely of that, Christ's outstretched and welcoming arms. They remember a holy presence in suffering and death. They announce a sacred acceptance to all of God's children of every race, color, creed, and orientation. They proclaim a present hope. "We have all kinds of crosses to suit all kinds of people" may not be such an odd affirmation after all.