

## May 6 Message from Mary Lou

**Kindness** n. the quality of being kind.

**Empathy** n. the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

This story comes from “a short course in kindness” by Margot Silk Forrest

The young man sitting a few tables away in the deserted hospital cafeteria looks about nineteen. It's 1:30 in the morning, and he's not wearing a hospital uniform. He's clearly a visitor. Being in a hospital this late means something serious is going on, and for him it must be more than serious. He is crying.

A woman in her early thirties watches him and frowns unhappily. Her name is Katy James, and she doesn't want to have to help this kid. She's hungry and tired. She doesn't particularly like teenagers. She just wants to be left alone with the Coke and Doritos she got from the cafeteria vending machine – alone, where she can blank out the image of her sister-in-law's head, wrapped in bandages that have left her unable to see, speak, or hear. Vicki has just come through twelve hours of brain surgery. Once she recovers from the operation, she'll be fine - for awhile. Until the tumor starts putting pressure on her brain again.

The thought of the future sits in Katy's stomach like a lump of coal. She knows that upstairs, her brother Jim is talking softly to his wife while their Great Dane, Milo, is probably trying to climb into the hospital bed. Vicki's first voluntary movement after surgery was a faint smile when Milo nuzzled her hand. Katy felt good when she and Jim were talking the interns into letting them sneak Milo onto the ward. Like she was part of their little family. But down here, she's all alone again. The story of her life.

Katy looks out of the corner of her eye at the young man. He's still crying. The rest of the dimly lit cafeteria is empty. She eats another couple of Doritos. She's not one for talking to strangers. What would she say? Besides, there must be somebody here with him. She takes a swallow of Coke.

Buy her mind won't let go of this kid. What if there isn't anyone with him? What if he's as alone as she's feeling? That makes her stomach hurt, too. But this is pain Katy can do something about.

She waits a few minutes to get up her courage, then takes the plunge. She pushes back her chair, walks over to the young man's table, and asks if he wants to talk.

He does. His mother is in a coma. She was in a catastrophic car accident three weeks ago and has been unconscious ever since. The family doesn't know what they're going to do.

The young man asks Katy why she's there. She tells him about Vicki, Jim and Milo. Then she mentions how Vicki responded to Milo's touch. The young man's face lights up. He asks Katy if she'll bring Milo to his mom's room? His mom had a Great Dane when she was a kid, he says,

and named her Betty Blue because sometimes her fur looked blue.

The next night, Katy gets Milo on a long leash and takes the dog to the mother's room. Milo seems to know why he's there. He walks up to the woman's and nuzzles her hand. When there's no stroking in return, Milo sits back. It's like he's evaluating the situation. Then he stands up, puts his paws over the bed railing, and nuzzles under the woman's chin. Still no response.

So Milo gets down off the bed and thrusts his nose under the woman's arm, lifting it a good three inches. There's a small but discernible petting in response.

From then on, every night that Katy and her brother visit the hospital, she takes Milo to see the young man's mother. Within a week, the woman has come out of her coma.

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Did a miracle happen? I think it did. But which miracle are we talking about? I see two extraordinary events in this story. The woman coming out of her coma, that's the obvious one. But what about Katy, who steps out of her sadness and isolation to offer help to a young man who's crying. Without Katy's miracle, the comatose woman would never have had the chance to feel Milo's huge muzzle lifting her apparently lifeless arm.

The seeds of kindness cannot sprout unless they are planted in the rich soil of human empathy. When Katy noticed the young man crying in the cafeteria, she felt empathy for him. She knew what it was like to feel that bad. She had walked a mile in his shoes, and they had hurt her, too.

Empathy is the starting point for every act of kindness. Without it, not much happens. With it, miracles of connection are possible. C.S. Lewis expressed this when he wrote, "Friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another,

What, you too? I thought I was the only one."

I think we have all had this experience, when a stranger becomes our brother or sister, when we recognize our kinship because we have been through the same hell.

That is why support groups, whether for kicking alcohol, surviving breast cancer, or other disease, works so well. All the participants discover they are not alone and other people *care* about their struggles because they've been there themselves.

***Guide me in your truth and teach me, my God, my Savior.***