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Words Save Lives



After my training to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) I was given an opportunity to further my learning. I would participate in a 120-hour unpaid internship riding with Chicago Fire Department Paramedics to learn further crisis intervention techniques in the field.

One of the paramedics who mentored me during my field internship said some things on my first day that I will never forget. “You are going to be seeing and meeting people who may be very different than you. They may not look like you, may not act like you, they may not share the same values as you, they may use foul language, and they may not have the same personal hygiene habits that you have. They may be homeless or living in poverty. They may have had horrible life experiences that have shaped the way they act and what they do. They may be deaf or blind. They may be from another country and not speak English. You must treat every person you come in contact with, regardless of who they are, with RESPECT.”

He continued, “The words you use and how you use them convey many things in this work. First, they must always

convey respect. Next, you must be able to communicate with others in terms that they use and understand. You will have to learn to be very flexible and change with the circumstances. In any situation, you must always protect yourself and protect your patient. When you take a person onto your stretcher, their life becomes your total responsibility. It makes no difference if you're in a hospital or in the projects; if a person is on your stretcher, that person is your responsibility.

"When you are here with us in the field," he said, "I want you to keep your mouth shut and watch everything we do, listen to what we say, and especially observe people's expressions as we interact with them."

During the months that followed, I watched hundreds of faces. Each transport provided a wealth of knowledge regarding human behavior, and taught me to choose my words with care. All that training prepared me for the day that was to change my life...

I had taken a job working for a private ambulance company that had contracts with hospitals and nursing homes all over the Chicago area. Each ambulance was assigned a two-person team that included a driver and an attendant, both certified EMTs. Long before the era of cell phone technology, the ambulances were equipped with stationary CB radios. (The only portable radios available were carried by the paramedics who staffed the four mobile intensive-care ambulance units.) This meant that when we left the ambulance to get a patient, we had no radio contact with dispatch.

My partner and I that day were assigned a routine transport that was dispatched as a "patient pick up" at one of the housing projects, Cabrini Green. The patient was to be transported to a local hospital for physical therapy. I had been to Cabrini Green many times during my internship with the fire department. As part of my training, I had a

crash course on gangs and gang violence. In effect, I had learned to “speak gang.”

The cement walls of the high-rise buildings were covered with gang graffiti, much of it dominated by The Vice Lords and The Latin Kings. Graffiti was one way the gangs claimed their territories, letting others know that this was their turf. The hallways were also cement and open to the air, being covered by chain-link fencing from the first floor to the top floors to prevent people from falling to their deaths. The elevators were in poor repair. We never knew beforehand if the elevator we needed would be working or not. Today we were lucky. The elevator doors opened. I pulled the stretcher in and my partner Joe pushed the button for the 14th floor. The doors closed. As we lurched upward the light in the elevator kept flashing on and off, and the elevator would stop all together and then jerk upward again. Perhaps the wiring had been gnawed on by rats, which were a common problem here.

When we arrived at the 14th floor we both cautiously stuck our heads out to see if the scene was safe. It looked clear so we pulled the stretcher out of the elevator and proceeded down the hall to apartment number 1407. Joe stood on one side of the door and I stood on the other side. We knew not to stand directly in front of the door because you never knew if there was a person on the other side with a gun. Joe pounded hard on the door. A voice came from the other side.

“What the hell you want?”

Joe said, “We’re EMTs here for Jessie.”

The door opened and a little boy of about 10 was standing there. “C’mon,” he said, “Jessie’s in here.”

We followed the boy with our stretcher in tow, passing through a small living room and into a bedroom. Sitting upright on the bed was a young man with thick white casts on both legs. He was wearing shorts that had been cut up the sides to make room for the casts that started at his hips.

“Jessie can’t move himself at all,” the little boy said. “You have to lift him up.”

“What’s your name?” I asked

“I’m Henry, Jessie’s my brother.”

Jessie told his brother to go next door and stay with a neighbor while he was at the hospital. After Henry left I asked Jessie what had happened to him. He said that the Lords had broken both of his legs with baseball bats because he would not join their gang. He and his family were Jehovah’s Witnesses. He said that due to his religious beliefs he would never join the gang. He asked that I give him his Bible so that he could read at the hospital while he waited for his physical therapy appointment. When we had Jessie safely secured on the stretcher, we headed back out into the hall.

I was at the front of the stretcher as we pulled Jessie along to the elevator. I pushed the down button and again the elevator doors opened. This time three men were standing there. The man in the middle was holding a gun. He looked down at me and said, “WHAT THE HELL do you think you’re DOING with MY BOY?”

I glanced back at Jessie and saw sheer terror on his face. In that split second I knew that these were some of the men that had done this violence to him. I straightened to my full height of exactly five feet, looked up at the man with the gun, and said, “He’s NOT your boy, he’s on my stretcher, he’s on MY TURF. He’s MY boy!”

Shocked, the man looked at the gun he was holding, looked back down at me, and said, “SAY WHAT?”

So I said, “Now I can see that you’re a man that demands RESPECT.”

“YOU GOT THAT RIGHT.”

“I give you that RESPECT.” I said. “Now let me tell you about my gang.”

He said, “YOU in a gang?”

“Yeah! All these EMTs and Paramedics that come here when you call 911 are all part of MY GANG. Now, let me

ask you, has there ever been a time when you called 911 and someone from MY GANG didn't come to help you?"

"No, they be there," he said.

"THAT'S RIGHT. If you mess with me or you mess with anyone on MY TURF," I pointed to Jessie, "or you mess with anyone in MY GANG, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK'S GOING TO HAPPEN THE NEXT TIME ONE OF YOUR BOYS IS BLEEDIN' OUT BAD AND YOU CALL 911?"

He looked back down at the gun, then looked back at me and said, "DAMN, YOU A BITCH!"

"YOU GOT THAT RIGHT," I yelled at him, "AND WHILE I GIVE YOU THAT RESPECT, I DON'T HAVE ALL DAY TO BE STANDIN' HERE SHOOTIN' THE SHIT WITH YOU!"

"Let the lady pass on by," he said with a nod of his head.

I pulled the stretcher into the elevator, praying that he wouldn't change his mind. Tears were streaming down Jessie's face as the elevator doors closed. Joe and I took some deep breaths, doing our best to prepare for whatever might meet us on the ground floor. Thankfully, when the elevator doors opened again the scene was safe enough to proceed to the ambulance. We notified our dispatcher that an incident had occurred but that no injuries resulted and we would call him from the hospital. En route, I asked Jessie who the men were. He said he didn't know their names. I asked him if they were some of the men that had broken his legs. He nodded and said, "If I tell anyone who they are, they will kill my family. I already talked to the police. What you don't understand is that I have to live there."

When I called my dispatcher, a meeting was arranged with the supervising field paramedic and the owner of the company to discuss what to do. Because the man with the gun did not actually point the gun directly at me and say he was going to kill me, and I did not know who the men were, filing a police report was not recommended. Thousands of people live in Chicago Housing Projects and many

have guns. Paramedics and EMTs across the country face dangerous situations every single day. They continue to do their job. We were there to safely transport Jessie to physical therapy and back, not try to hunt down gang members. Following the meeting, I was promoted to become one of the company's EMT trainers.

As a trainer, I went to pick up Jessie three times a week for the next six months with trainees under my charge. Every time I pulled up to Cabrini Green and got out of the ambulance, the gang scouts that were watching over their turf would say, "Hey, it's that little white MEDIC BITCH again!" And then the call would come back, "He says let the lady pass on by." I was never bothered by anyone there ever again.

Rosemary Lake-Liotta

This story is excerpted from *Sweet Fruit from the Bitter Tree: 61 stories of creative and compassionate ways out of conflict*, by Mark Andreas.

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Doggedly Determined

A couple came seeking couples counseling at the therapy group practice in which I worked. They were very embittered with one another, but couldn't get a divorce because they had a dog that was the center of their lives. Neither of them was willing to give up even partial custody of the dog.

When we worked with them, we discovered that the wife resented her husband's habit of not even acknowledging her when he came home from work. When he walked through the front door he would simply head straight upstairs to shower. By the time he arrived back downstairs, she would be livid, and they would get into a terrible argument.

The husband complained that the wife was not physically affectionate. He longed for her to sit next to him on the couch while they were watching TV, or to cuddle up and kiss him. He would complain sarcastically that he must have body odor when she sat some distance from him.

We asked what the dog did when the husband arrived home that was different from what the wife did. It turned out that the dog would run to the door, greet the husband and get a nice rubbing in return. The wife would wait in the

other room for the husband to seek her out, which he didn't do.

We discovered that the dog was very assertive when he wanted affection. He would come over and sit next to the person from whom he wanted affection. If they were distracted or unresponsive, the dog would put his paw over their arm or nuzzle them with his cold nose until they petted him or snuggled.

So we gave the couple this task: they were to study the dog, and make him their teacher and guru. When they each saw how the dog got what he wanted from the other, they were to copy that behavior and try it out for themselves.

They had great fun with this, and began to turn their relationship around. Soon they no longer wanted a divorce.

Bill O'Hanlon

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Closing Together

It was the summer of 1992, the last day of a residential personal change seminar in the Rocky Mountains in Winter Park, Colorado. The group of 75 people had bonded very strongly over the past 20 days, and one thing they did as part of their group process was to create a piece of visual artwork representing “our community” or “who we are.” The group started with a big 4’ x 8’ sheet of plywood which they covered with a collaborative painting symbolizing their experience together. It was painted with red, white, black, and yellow to symbolize all the peoples of the earth, and it was filled with a collage of handprints, spirals, a yin-yang, and the individual contributions of every participant. The finished piece was very meaningful to everyone.

Now we were at the very end of a packed three weeks and the group was about to finish their time together and head home. Only one thing remained to be done. The question before the group was, “What are we going to do with this piece of art that is ‘us’?” The group discussion started, and since I was the closing trainer I was somewhat involved with helping facilitate this process. Soon it became clear that most of the group’s opinion was that it should be kept

safe and given to somebody who would be the custodian. But the question remained, “How the heck are we going to do this?” We had people from all over the world, and it was not a small piece of plywood. Who was going to take it and how were they going to get it there?

Then one man spoke up.

“Well,” he said, “because this is so challenging, and because we’re spread out all over the planet—we’ve got people from Europe and Asia—my proposal is we destroy it. If we burn it, it will be like *everybody* has it.”

I could feel the tension in the room mount instantly. It was clear that the group was generally very opposed to the idea of destroying it. It was the end of 20 days, and everyone was tired and ready to leave. I could see in their faces that to most of them, burning the artwork would seem like a great offense to what it represented. The man who had offered the suggestion was thinking on a more abstract level, but almost everyone else wanted to keep this piece of art that represented the close-knit community they had formed over the past weeks. They did not want it destroyed.

I was trying to facilitate the conversation and I was not particularly effective. After about 15 minutes we hadn’t made any progress toward a solution. I had my eye on the clock because we were already going overtime, and I needed to get everybody out of the room. It was obvious to me that this was not going to resolve quickly. Even on the “keep it” side there were *many* different opinions, but that side was becoming more and more polarized against this guy who was saying, “destroy it.” People were getting frustrated and upset, and the prospect of a satisfying group closing was unraveling by the second.

At this point somebody in the group stood up and proposed to have a vote so that we could at least get past the “keep it” or “destroy it” alternatives. But before I could respond, a Native American from the Mi’kmaq tribe in eastern Canada stood up and faced me directly.

“Gerry, can I take over?” he asked. “I have an approach, and if you give me ten minutes by the clock, I’ll have it solved.”

I had *no* idea what he had in mind, but I was more than glad to let him take this problem off my hands. I was tired and the discussion wasn’t going anywhere useful, so I told him to go ahead.

He came up to the front of the room and first he asked, “Everybody’s agreeing that we’re ready to get a resolution?” People nodded, so he continued. “I have the solution if you’re all willing to go along.”

Everyone said, “Yeah, yeah, go ahead.”

Then he turned to the man who wanted to destroy the artwork, and gesturing to him he spoke in a soft, deep voice that seemed utterly unconstrained by time.

“In my Native American tradition, when we have a group which is all on one side, and we have one person who is on another side, we would never have a vote to overrule him, because it’s obvious that the majority will win, making him isolated.

“We would never do that to someone.

“The solution is we’re going to turn over the responsibility for the decision to you—the one who’s the isolated person. We’re going to let you decide for all of us.”

There was no mistaking that the words of the Native American were wholeheartedly genuine and sincere. He was really *completely* giving over the decision to this man.

I could hear people’s jaws hitting the floor, and as I looked around the room I saw eyes wide with surprise. It was an amazing thing to watch the wave of shock move through the room. But then very quickly I began to see that certain people started to understand the wisdom in what the Native American had done, and they relaxed a little.

The man who had been given responsibility to make the decision went through his own initial shock. Right at first there was a little bit of a glint in his eye, which I’m guessing was his self-interest side, but then I could see a

change taking place inside of him as well. His face went through several emotional swings, though I couldn't tell exactly what they meant. Pretty soon he stood up to speak.

"Well I think it's obvious that we need to find a way that satisfies all of us," he said.

I could feel the tension in the room disappear. Earlier it had been clear in the man's argumentative tone that he had set himself against the rest of the group, but as soon as the responsibility was completely in his hands, his opposition simply melted away. It was wonderful. He immediately started moving in the other direction.

"My objection was that there wasn't a place where we could put the artwork," he said, "And I want to honor the spirit of what we all did together. Is there a place where we could put this piece of art where everybody would have access to it, and it would feel fair to all of us?"

Very quickly someone who had not been involved in the earlier discussion spoke up.

"I have a place," she said. "It's a big barn in the central US where I could hang it. I also have a truck here; we could cut the piece in half to transport it, and once it's hanging up I can take a picture of it and send it to everybody, and anyone can drop by and visit it at any time."

Immediately it was done. The shift was profound. The emotional ripple through the room was huge. You can tell the difference between people who are just agreeing because they want an argument to be over, and people who are deeply satisfied. It was quite a wonderful moment. Everybody was really pleased, including the man who had originally objected. The whole group was suddenly aligned and there was a powerful sense of completion.

I think part of the reason it worked so well was because the guy who was given the responsibility had such a strong relationship with the group. The wisdom of the Native American in trusting so much responsibility with this one man made me imagine a culture in which that kind of approach was a common practice. That conception of

community would create a profoundly different way of working together.

My Mi'kmaq friend glanced down at his watch. Looking up again he met my eyes and said, "Seven minutes."

Gerry Schmidt

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