

A NON-FAIRY TALE ABOUT A SMALL AND THIN HEROINE

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I remember stories told to me as a boy about the great heroes of the past. They were usually kings or warriors, or at the very least courageous men who sacrificed themselves for big and important causes, giving "their all." They stood so tall in my mind, fearless and determined and twice as big as life. Gideon of the Bible, and Samson, the vulnerable giant, and others. I also remember a few women among them, like Hanna who was willing to let her seven sons die in front of her eyes rather than compromise her principles. But, I don't ever remember a story about a heroine that was small and frail and dying. That story I discovered only lately.

I believed that I knew what heroism was since I have directly been witness to many acts of bravery and courage in my own lifetime. I remember vividly, for instance, standing on a balcony and looking down into open trucks that carried a few mutilated bodies each, Jews murdered by Arabs between 1956 and 1939. The plain white sheets were always stained with many dark red spots, some so big that little white was visible. I remember the caravans moving slowly through the streets of Tel Aviv in mass funerals held for as many as twenty or thirty white "packages." I still remember my silent horror. Life and death were so stark, and I was so little. The eulogies always extolled the heroism of the fallen, and we were always told that if their death was not to be meaningless then their dying must command us, the living, to continue in their struggle. These were pretty big words for a small boy, and perhaps that is why they remain alive in me even now. But, I did not really understand their full meaning until recently, when Barbara died.

She was a slight woman, and she was only 37 years old when she died of cancer. I knew her for many years, and during that time she appeared as hardly a heroine. But near the end she gradually grew in stature, until it assumed truly heroic proportions. And then she died, and I looked and saw a real heroine.

I am not so sure anymore if all those who died in Palestine in the 1930's were really heroes. Some probably were, while others were no more than innocent victims trapped in a bloody web. Among the dead surely many had known how great the danger was, and yet they had consciously chosen not to retreat from it but to attend to the tasks of living in spite of all. A hero is one who knows what's ahead but who proceeds anyway because more than survival alone is involved.

Not all soldiers who pay their debts do so as acts of self-sacrifice. Some die because they are merely self-destructive. Death is just as real in either case, but only one kind is imbued with meaning and value. Self-giving is always a conscious act, and like all free gifts, it is precious because it is given freely. The Jewish martyrs killed by the Inquisition could have saved their lives by converting to Catholicism, but they refused to. I used to picture these men in my mind's eye, and with a child's innocence would almost see the flames enveloping their long beards as they were uttering the "shema" with their one last breath. Now I know that dying for a cause was not the point, their readiness to do so consciously was.

But Barbara died of cancer, and she did not have any choice about dying. Indeed, she very much wanted to live. How was she a heroine? Let me tell you the story.

Barbara was an attractive, dark-eyed young woman with very fine hair and with delicate features. What struck me when I first saw her was that her eyes seemed not to have been lit, they were deep but dull and very, very sad. Perhaps their light was dimmed long ago, I thought. I cannot remember much about this first encounter, seven years have passed since then, but the forlorn, sad look and her resemblance to a frightened doe remains clearly imprinted in me even now.

She was a patient of mine, individually and in a group, where I charge patients by the month, whether they attend all sessions or not, since their place is not transferable to others. She struggled tenaciously, at first passively, as she always had done, eventually more openly and actively. The issue of payment for missed group sessions was also one of the battlefields in which she experimented with ever increasing strength to assert her power. Although she eventually accepted my rationale for such payments and went along with me on the issue, it was neither easily nor quickly that we reached this point. But, when we finally did, it was more than a resolution of an administrative or financial disagreement. Her agreement was a clear sign that some of her enormous fear and distrust had begun to yield. She did not dare previously even consider a wish to belong, and she feared being "sucked in." For a long time she refused to commit herself to really being a member in an on-going therapy group in which real, intense, but not always pleasurable relationships tied the members to each other. She did not know such relationships in her past, and she did not trust them now. When, at long last, she not only paid for missed sessions, but also accepted the rationale for such payments, I knew that she was relinquishing some of her life-long distrust. She began to seriously doubt her deep conviction that she would surely be damaged if she ever became involved in intimate relationships with other human beings.

She and I struggled hard for a very long time, and it was not always easy to stay with her. God, how many times she almost practically quit, and how often was she on the verge of doing so? Her life-long chronic depression and her profound sense that nobody was trustworthy had such stubborn and tenacious holds on her! She felt strongly that she had very good reasons to avoid taking further risks. For years she existed as if she almost believed that there was no point looking again, that surely the world was not a location, but a noxious condition best avoided. She was hurt too many times, too deeply, to try again. But mostly she

was very, very scared. She barely moved when we first met. She used to look straight ahead as if into an eternal nothingness, and she would speak with a very soft voice. Underneath the glacial calm, I knew, a storm was brewing, one that had never found any expression since very early in life.

What scared her so? We shall never know. Some of it, like always, probably was the subjective residue of being vulnerable and insecure as a fragile newborn, some may have stemmed from her body perceiving her mother as a frightened person, perhaps meaning well but too clumsy and too cold and too busy with other things. Barbara was the middle of three children, and Mother helped her husband in the store. Subjectively at least she grew up as an orphan, experiencing herself often as forgotten and as not sufficiently cared for. In any event, she lacked a sense of being firmly yet tenderly held, of things being steady, warm and comforting. Mostly, she did not know the world as reliable. For a very long time she would sit with arms folded and legs folded, as if to warm herself, she would be cold but would not complain about it. I remember sitting with her in a rather warm room, but she was still cold. She was so cold inside.

There is no point recalling the details of her agony, but in addition to all else, she was the host to a low-grade malignant growth feeding upon her since she was fourteen. By the time we first met she already had had ten or eleven operations, and each time a small and usually insignificant part of her body was removed, once a rib, another time a small lump just below the skin. All along, the predator continued to feed itself upon her life-blood, plundering her strength. But she fought back heroically, finding enough strength even in the last couple of years to run six to ten miles daily. She also rigorously disciplined herself and finished the requirements for an advanced professional degree and eventually adopted a son. Neither she nor her physicians knew for sure how malignant her illness was, it was so slow growing, yet so persistent. But, it remained a constant companion who never

deserted her. Some things in life are reliably there the next day as they are the day before. She was discouraged, but she did not give up the struggle.

How many tests did I, my co-therapists and members of her psychotherapy group have to pass over the years? At least several hundred, coming in every conceivable way. She was tenaciously looking for proof that her view of the world was indeed true. One day, a couple of years after she had started therapy, I unexpectedly received a Western Union telegram with only five words on it: "I have quit therapy," and her name. Intimacy seemed the greatest threat, and the closer and more involved we got with each other, the more urgent became her push to leave. She almost tested beyond the limits of human tolerance, but never quite exceeded those limits. I remember someone telling her once to leave already, that enough was enough, "and don't let the door through which you pass hit your behind on the way out."

But, she didn't really want to go away. This was the first real, safe, "home" she had ever had. She experimented cautiously with the new kind of relationships she found here, and she wouldn't let go. Then, one day, she brought me a book, a gift. The ice was indeed beginning to melt, some subterranean movement was obviously taking place.

At the beginning when she experienced bodily discomfort, Barbara was unable to define its exact nature. When she was tired, she might eat and even binge, but when she was hungry she might simply drink water or go to sleep. But she knew and I knew that the bringing of the gift was no longer an expression of the confusion. She slowly learned to differentiate between her various feelings, and this was one concrete sign of her growing trust and of her growing love in relation to me. I was deeply touched, not because I was the object of her loving but because she was finally expressing a real capacity to love, an act always requiring courage.

A few months before Barbara died her condition worsened to the point where the growth was no longer removable. She did not stay in the hospital, however, but

wanted to be and was cared for at home. As she weakened she became confined to the house without the ability to go to work or even to come to her group therapy sessions. But her physical absence only increased her presence, and both her therapists and members of her group talked a lot about her and talked a lot to her, by phone and in person.

No one knew at first that she was dying, that this was the end. She, and we, still hoped that she would return. Her place in the group was kept open with that understanding and she continued to be charged for all the sessions, as usual. But as one week followed another it slowly became evident that she might never come back. Do we now stop charging her? How is this to be done without implying that the charges have stopped because all hope is gone? We agonized, wondered what was right and then agonized again. Barbara's membership in the group was clearly her single most important link to a productive life and to hope. We finally told her that we would keep her place in the group open for three months without a fee, expecting that by then it would be clear whether she was miraculously to regain her strength or die.

She refused adamantly and unequivocally. She insisted on paying her share as before, and she was unwilling to accept a rules' change which would be a special dispensation because of her special condition. Where did she find the strength to object so strenuously? She insisted that it was very important for her to keep her place in the group legitimately, by paying for it. She wanted to continue belonging by right, not by grace, carrying her own weight. She was not giving up on herself and nobody should have the right to give up on her!

We reluctantly agreed. I knew that the illness burdened the family with much additional expense, and although far from destitute, money was not in over-abundant supply. Should I secretly send the checks back to the husband and swear him to silence? Dare I contaminate their last few weeks or days together with a lie coming

between them? I did not find easy answers. It was painful to cash a check from someone so alive and yet so dead. Her spirit was sparkling with recently found vigor and with enthusiasm for every sunrise and for every flowering tree, seen through her second floor window, her only view of the universe. How much life is contained in a frail body, weighing less than 70 pounds? Slowly, it was yielding to the patient but very persistent enemy within her.

Another month had passed, but she was hanging on. With what? We finally insisted that we simply would no longer accept the customary fees, she had been away for so long. We would, however, comply with her wishes and carry her in the group for a fee, a reduced one, sufficiently large to make it more than symbolic. She agreed.

Barbara died on April 29, 1983. Late in the afternoon on that Friday she became very cold and could no longer be warmed. Finally the struggle was over, she lost consciousness, and died peacefully in her bed, in her own room. "The Lord hath given and the Lord hath taken away. May the Name of the Lord be blessed "

The monthly statements for April were not ready until the 5rd of May. Among them was a \$90.00 statement made out in her name. Barbara, by then, was not only dead but also buried. Should it be mailed to her estate? Should we simply ignore it?

Then the envelope arrived, and it contained a check. It was for \$90.00. It was dated April 29, 1983. It was signed by Barbara's hand.

After the initial shock I looked at it closely. The signature of her last name was trailing off since she apparently did not have sufficient physical strength to hold on to the pen for as long as it took to write her name once more. Signing the check must have been one of the very last acts of life, as the last morsels of strength were literally ebbing out of her. In the last few hours she mustered the will to attend to her real relationship with us, and knowing her well, I am certain

that she felt the joy of satisfaction and possibly even of pride at that moment. Nothing of life is to be wasted anymore. Life must be lived to its utmost. In the waning minutes before all disappeared she found remnants of power to assert herself, and for one last time she still issued a command for a bank to do her will. Did she sense that the check might reach me long after she was gone? Did she mean this as one last good-bye?

Her life-long, deep, and black depression had really begun to lift a year or two before, and each day since, her push to live had become stronger, even as her body had steadily weakened. Since life began so late, her appetite for living was so full of zest and vigor that it defied all medical odds. She held on longer, and more tenaciously, than any of her physicians had expected. The signing of the check was merely one of the many conscious acts of living that kept her alive, and even joyous, as life was squeezing itself out of her existence.

A photocopy of the check appears below. Rarely does Man have a chance to have such a direct view of the greatness of his spirit.

With much pain I cashed the check. How could I do otherwise? Dare I thwart the conscious will of a heroine?

