

## Communion

By Richard Chisolm

Every year now I receive a birthday card that reminds me of a day I spent at Johns Hopkins Hospital that changed my life forever.

In 2007, I worked as a field producer/cameraman on a prime time documentary television series for ABC called “Hopkins”. It was the second iteration of “Hopkins 24/7”, a show I’d once worked on 8 years earlier. For both, I was part of a team of 15 video journalists. We followed the real stories of doctors, nurses and patients for four months around the clock.

My assignment was to follow the story of Stephen, the only child of Nancy and Bruce Brown who presided over a church in a small town in Maine. Stephen Brown was 35 and for the last 17 years had struggled with an extremely rare liver disease (primary sclerosing cholangitis). Despite his illness, Stephen had been able to go to college, work, and make the most of life. But now his liver had deteriorated to the point where his life depended on a transplant, which is what brought him to Hopkins. Stephen, now bed-ridden, on machines and medications, was able to speak in a soft language of moans and grunts that only his parents could understand. Because of his relative youth and the urgency of his condition, Stephen was at the top of the eligibility list for a new liver. And so, for about two weeks I spent hours each day with Nancy and Bruce, waiting for an available organ for their son.

During that time, I shot multiple interviews with nurses, anesthesiologists, and surgeons, but mostly I filmed Nancy and Bruce. The doctors updated them daily on Stephen’s condition and reiterate the cumbersome politics of organ procurement. They reminded them of how many thousands of patients die each year waiting for transplants and how great the need is for organ donations. They told them that without a new liver Stephen had zero chance of survival and that every day his prognosis worsened. I vividly remember one interview with Stephen’s transplant surgeon, Andrew Cameron, a champion of hope and compassion (and not much older than his patient at the time). While Dr. Cameron was gravely worried about Stephen’s condition, he told me that he had seen many patients just as unwell and failing as Stephen came back to life within weeks after receiving a new liver. He said “Richard, you will be blown away by his recovery if we succeed. I’ve seen it over and over again. It’s what makes me so committed to this work.”

Capturing a successful transplant story was a major goal of the TV show’s producers. Stephen, his parents, and Dr. Cameron were the perfect documentary “characters” to star in this gripping narrative of human transformation. But I was painfully aware that, if things didn’t go well, Stephen’s story would end up on the virtual cutting room floor, as the series already had one transplant segment that ended in tragedy. For balance, this one had to be a story of success and survival.

By this time, I had grown very close to Nancy and Bruce. While nurses, doctors, and visitors would periodically spend five to about thirty minutes at Stephen’s bedside, I had the freedom, permission, and autonomy to spend hours each day with the patient and his family. I

would occasionally shoot for a few minutes, documenting changes in Stephen's condition and recording moments of love, reflection and prayer on the part of his parents. But mostly I put camera aside and just sat with Nancy and Bruce, who wanted to tell me everything about Stephen who was now mostly unconscious. Stories of his childhood, his obsession with sports, his wry sense of humor, and his faith amidst illness flooded from these sixty-something parents. They also wanted to know everything about my life; my work and travels, my wife Meg, a Hopkins psychiatrist, and especially about our only son Jasper, then 15 years old. I had no trouble keeping them company with these conversations and it was a privilege to spend time with such loving people. Sometimes when I'd leave them to go to lunch or to another shoot, Nancy or Bruce would anxiously grab my arm and ask: "You're coming back, right?" I always did.

On Thursday March 7, 2007, news came to the surgical intensive care unit that a liver would be available within a day or so, one that matched the criteria for Stephen. Nancy and Bruce were ecstatic and the medical staff was exhibiting their highest level of "guarded optimism." I left the hospital that day with profound hope and braced myself for what might be 12-15 hours of shooting surgery the next day.

But when I arrived with my camera early the next morning, things had changed. At 4AM that morning, Stephen's heart had stopped for a matter of minutes after an esophageal bleed. He was heroically resuscitated but now on full life support with little or no measurable brain activity. The sadness and sense of medical defeat in the SICU was palpable and monstrous. After a debriefing interview with Dr. Cameron, who was visibly frustrated and disappointed, I retired my camera to the floor in the corner of the room.

Amidst the deafening drone of equipment, and the somber robotic movement of hospital staff, I spent the entire surreal day with Nancy and Bruce Brown as they waited for neurologists to officially declare brain death. They prayed, spoke softly to their dying son and to each other, and periodically clutched my hand. As an observational cameraman and journalist, I knew my professional assignment with the Brown family had ended. Although technically useless, I felt deeply needed as a companion and witness. It was a sacred honor to be with these two lovely people as they said goodbye to their only son.

At 6 PM, the time finally came. All consents had been signed and a nurse was invited into the room to remove the tubes and switch off the equipment including the overhead lights. She did these tasks with the slow grace and poise of a dancer, and when she finished there was the most profound silence I've ever experienced in my life. Stephen Brown's heart beat gently on its own for a few minutes and then it rested for good.

I hugged Nancy and Bruce and left them in this now peaceful space lit only by the fading afternoon daylight from a single window. They somehow managed to have serene smiles on their tear-soaked faces as they prayed. I've never seen human beings closer to a higher power.

I picked up my camera and walked down the hall to a thankfully empty elevator. As it descended I let loose my own stoically held tears. I then stopped by our makeshift production office to drop off the camera and get my coat before going home.

When I opened the door, there to my surprise were a dozen of my production colleagues. They had assembled to wish me a happy 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, a milestone that I had completely forgotten. They were as shocked at the sight of me in my emotional state as I was of them with their joyful expressions and cupcakes. I was stunned and speechless but did my

very best to emulate the smiles I'd just seen on the faces of my new dear friends Nancy and Bruce Brown.

I remember my realization: this is what God does to atheists.

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Richard Chisolm is an Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker and cinematographer with thirty years of production experience. He recently directed and shot "Cafeteria Man," a feature documentary on school food reform currently in national festival circulation. Based in Baltimore, he has shot films and television programs on a wide variety of subjects in the US and abroad. Chisolm is deeply committed to the value of real stories and the adventures of real people. His piece, "Communion," appeared in the Spring 2013 *Intima*.

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