

In the Eyes

Eyes have always fascinated me, but it was in Vietnam that I first became aware of the stories they contain.

When I landed in Camh Ranh Bay in 1968 the soldiers coming in mixed with the soldiers leaving. Across from the bunk I was assigned was a Sergeant waiting for his flight back to "The World." The look in his eyes held a distance I had not seen before. I was to see that look again and again, and later to be found in the mirrors I would pass or sometimes stare into, trying to find the eyes that used to be there. I was told it was the "thousand yard stare," and was a mark of men who had been in combat and seen too much.

Walking onto the locked ward of Six Center for the first time I was struck by the eyes. Most eyes were guarded, some wild, some empty, some seeing things I couldn't see.

The eyes of the staff of Sutter Memorial's psychiatric wards were not that dissimilar from those of the patients; guarded, vacant, dismissive of another new recreation therapy intern. Yet there was one set of eyes that was different. Eyes that looked back at me and twinkled, eyes that showed depth, eyes that greeted mine. This all in a glance as Dr. John Robinson, Clinical Psychologist looked up momentarily from the chart in which he was writing.

Most of the staff were glad to see me as someone who was a diversion for the patients, and more importantly an opportunity for the staff to relax their vigilance for an hour or so. John however saw this as a time to join in and observe the patients in a different setting. A time when the eyes were less guarded. A time when the eyes focused on the game or whatever activity I brought to them, a time when the eyes might break through the clouding of medication, if only for a few moments. His eyes seemed to get it, the reason behind what I was doing.

I came to love those eyes on the day we released a group of patients from the locked ward.

The windows of the sixth floor of Sutter Memorial Hospital look down on the picnic area and volleyball court. I had spent the previous hour playing volleyball with the patients of the day treatment program. John had observed the patients on the locked ward watching us having fun on that warm late spring day. When I came in to do my activity on Six Center John said, "Why don't we take a group of the patients from the ward down to play volleyball?"

"Because they are on the locked ward?" I asked.

As if on cue we both looked through the windows of the nurses station to see if Nurse Gates was there. Nurse Gates is the person for whom the character of Nurse Ratchet could have been written in the movie One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

She wasn't there.

I looked in his eyes, and John looked in mine. We turned and said, "Anybody who wants to go down and play volleyball come with us."

John, about eight psychotic patients, and I went through those locked doors, down the elevator and out to the volleyball court. We played and we laughed and at the end of the hour we all went back up to the sixth floor.

The eyes of Nurse Gates met us as we stepped through the doors. "These patients are not to leave this ward without the written permission of their doctors. I am reporting this incident to Dr. Stroud." Smiles faded away, eyes clouded back over, steps that had been lively returned to a shuffle as the patients returned to their rooms or the chairs in front of the windows.

A month later I had finished my internship and spent the summer working as a

recreation director, part time at a Yogi Bear recreation park and part time at a nudist camp outside of Bakersfield. At the end of the summer I was offered a job as a full-time recreation therapist back at Sutter.

I worked with John for a few more months before he left Sutter. He left before his eyes changed, but not before mine started to twinkle once again. I thank him for the part he played in that.

*Nolan Pepperdine
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