

Synchronicity: Meeting Mother Teresa

By Leah Curtin, RN, ScD(h), FAAN



IN 1981, I attended the International Conference of Nurses meeting in Los Angeles. I took this opportunity to visit a colleague who'd just been diagnosed with malignant melanoma. We spent a lovely day together, rounding it off with a lovely dinner at a nearby bistro. She was a former Navy nurse, and her husband was a Navy veteran currently captaining a merchant marine vessel. They'd met while doing volunteer work for Mother Teresa in Calcutta. They still volunteered; she collected medical supplies and her husband delivered them whenever his ship docked in India.

This subject came up while we were enjoying a cocktail and waiting for dinner. She was distressed because she hadn't been able to contact Mother Teresa, who always sent a delegation of nuns to the port to collect the supplies. It was her job to contact Mother Teresa about the shipment her husband was carrying. Innocently, I said Mother Teresa was in Cincinnati, Ohio. She asked how I knew; I replied I'd read it in the newspaper. "Wonderful," she said. "You are going home to Cincinnati tomorrow! You can get the message to her for me!" And with that, she flipped over a bar napkin and wrote a message for Mother Teresa. In a weak voice, I said, "But I don't know Mother Teresa...and Cincinnati is a big city, and..." Despite my objections, she thrust the bar napkin into my hand.

I got home in time for the 11:00 PM news, which showed Mother Teresa amid throngs of people. The next day I went to the office dejected. But when I saw Sr. Paula Gonzalez (one of my part-time editors), I thought I had a solution, as Mother Teresa was staying in her Congregation's Motherhouse. I tried to foist the bar napkin on Sr. Paula, but she was on her way to the airport and wouldn't be going back to the Motherhouse. However, she came up with a plan: Mother Teresa was giving a retreat for religious Sisters in the Archdiocese the following Friday. She would give me her ticket to the retreat and I would deliver the message myself. So now I had a note on a bar napkin for a world famous Nobel Laureate—and a ticket to a nun's retreat.

Obviously, I had to go undercover as a nun. I wore my most conservative black suit, turned my wedding ring around, and went to the retreat at the appointed time. As I entered, I handed my ticket to the sister at the door, half afraid a sign would start to light up on my back flashing,

"Not a virgin. Not a virgin." I sat through the whole retreat, remembering almost nothing in my anxiety to deliver the note, but I was unable to get within 5 feet of Mother Teresa. I tried to get other Sisters to take it to her, with no luck.

The day was over and Mother Teresa was exiting the hall, surrounded by bishops and Mothers Superior and so forth. I was in despair. Then Mother Teresa stopped halfway up the aisle, pointed to me, and said, "I understand you need to see me, young woman." And with that, one of her adjutants escorted me to her room, assuring me "Mother will be here in a half-hour." I told the adjutant I could just leave her this note. She responded, "Mother will be with you shortly."

Mother Teresa's room was small, containing only a bed, straight-backed chair, and sink. My hands were sweating as I perched on the edge of the chair. When Mother Teresa entered the room, I stood and spoke very quickly. I told her about my friend and the note, which she calmly took and put on her bedside table. Then she sat on the edge of her bed and asked me to sit in the chair. She spoke with me for about an hour.

Many people have asked me what she said. I will share some of what I can remember. She asked about me. She talked about families and love. She said it's hard to love people "close-up...It's easier to hand a cup of rice to a hungry stranger than to address someone in your own household who's feeling unloved. Yet we are called to be kind to the people in our everyday lives: the sister-in-law who talks incessantly; the coworker who irritates you... These are 'the poor' we are *all* called to serve." People were very real to Mother Teresa. "Look around. Do you know the names of your neighbors? Do you know what your neighbor needs?" she asked. "You aren't asked to be kind to everyone, only to those around you. Love is practical and do-able, and always starts with the people nearest to you."

I was the focus of Mother Teresa's attention for 1 hour, and my life has never been the same.

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